



# Defective heroes

## Why is Lithuania honoring perpetrators of the Holocaust?

**HUMANITY IS** capable of honoring the most abhorrent of heroes. A glaring example of this frailty is playing out in Lithuania.

Prior to 1915, for approximately 700 years, Jews lived in Lithuanian territories and enjoyed relative peace. After a Russian expulsion of Jews, independent Lithuania realized its loss of human resources and invited economically active Jews to return to Lithuania, with promises of autonomous communities and full equal rights. This honeymoon period lasted until 1924, when Lithuania abolished the post of minister without portfolio for Jewish affairs.

After a coup in 1926, the Lithuanian Voldemarist movement arose, conflating hatred of Jews with Lithuanian patriotism. A subsequent Jew hate movement arose called Verslas, so that by the 1940s, hatred of Jews and Lithuanian patriotism were synonymous in many circles. Protectionism was legislated to suppress Jewish businesses, and Jews were denied civil service jobs and were limited in university enrollment.

Lithuanian pogroms against Jews began prior to the arrival of Nazis. Lithuanians actively participated in the slaughter of their Jewish neighbors and joyously reaped the economic benefits of looting them.

Lithuania's Jewish population did not survive the Nazi occupation. It is estimated that 23,000 Lithuanians actively participated in persecuting their Jewish neighbors, and hundreds of thousands participated in the sharing of Jewish loot.

Since Lithuania regained independence in 1990, not a single perpetrator has been brought to justice by the Lithuanian govern-

ment. In fact, just the opposite has happened as noted perpetrators have been transformed into revered heroes.

Kazys Skirpa, the Lithuanian representative to Germany and an architect of the Holocaust who first proposed ethnic cleansing of Jews to Hitler, has streets named in his honor in two major Lithuanian cities. Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius justifies the honor with the claim that Skirpa marched on the eponymous street in 1918 with the flag of independence. On October 10, 2017, on Lithuanian National TV, Conservative MP Laurynas Kasciunas said Skirpa simply "miscalculated" in his attempt to curry favor with Nazi Germany by advocating for ethnic cleansing of Lithuania's Jews.

In 2012, Juozas Ambrazevicius Brazaitis, who was prime minister of the interim Lithuanian government that promoted the persecution of Jews, was reburied in Lithuania with full state honors. Brazaitis claimed that Jews should not be murdered so publicly and was also editor of the newspaper *I Laisve*, which equated Jews with Bolsheviks, thereby justifying the slaughter of all Jews, including babies. This slander exists in Lithuania to this day.

Many other examples of defective heroes also exist.

The grave of the genocidal murderer Bronius Norkus is considered a national cultural monument because in 1941 he posted a flag on a hill at the Resurrection Church in Kaunas. No mention is made of the tens of thousands of Jews he butchered.

The Lithuanian government's response to protests against one Holocaust perpe-

trator memorial in particular offers insight into the relationship between patriotism and antisemitism in contemporary Lithuanian society.

In 1997, a memorial plaque for Jonas Noreika was affixed to the facade of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences Library in Vilnius. A Holocaust collaborator, Noreika ordered the detention and concentration of Jews from several communities, in addition to the plunder of their possessions.

Even though the plaque was erected without a permit, protests and appeals to Simasius to remove it have been met with evasive and dismissive responses. He declined responsibility and deferred the matter to the library. The library, in turn, declined to act, so an appeal for action was then submitted to the Heritage Department, which owns the building.

Simasius also referred the matter to Lithuania's ill-named Genocide Center. This center has repeatedly demonstrated that no amount of proof of culpability is sufficient to condemn a Lithuanian Holocaust perpetrator.

An appeal to Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė followed. She claimed that her office checked with the Genocide Center, the Lithuanian Supreme Court and the Lithuanian State Security Department, none of which expressed concern with honoring Noreika. A follow-up request to the president was met with the response that investigating the war crimes of Noreika was beyond the jurisdiction of her office, despite her protestations that she sincerely cares about the Holocaust.



An appeal to the legislative branch of the government was also politely sidestepped. An inquiry made to the ombudsman of the Lithuanian parliament was again referred back to the Genocide Center, which declared on Noreika's behalf the infamous Nuremberg defense asserted by Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, "I was only following orders." Even though that defense was rejected by the War Crimes Tribunal, in Lithuania, it seems, it remains an acceptable defense.

After the failure of legal and moral appeals to the executive and legislative branches of government against the Noreika memorial, an appeal was lodged that focused on aesthetic values given that the Lithuanian Department of Cultural Heritage has specific aesthetic criteria for monuments. But the request for review was submitted and denied.

A legal suit was then filed to determine whether or not the Heritage Department's refusal was lawful. This suit was rejected on a technicality by the court and declined. The declination was appealed to the Lithuanian Supreme Administrative Court, which overruled the lower court and returned the case for reconsideration. The lower courts then invented a new technicality in order to dismiss the case once again. Lower-level Lithuanian courts have historically demonstrated a lack of independence and a susceptibility to political pressure. The result: the memorial remains.

**FUNDAMENTAL TO** any democracy is an honest and thorough examination of its past. Lithuanian politicians strive to keep the

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population in a perpetual state of fear. Their pervasive method appears to be the threat of a possible impending Russian invasion (Russian mischief-making in the Baltics certainly appears to be a genuine concern). Any dissension from their ideological orthodoxy is labeled as a Russian plot. It's understandable, then, how one who questions the honoring of Holocaust perpetrators is considered an enemy of the ideological state.

A recent example is Dr. Darius Udrys, a Lithuanian-American currently living in Vilnius. Udrys is outspoken in his criticism of Lithuanian officials who honor Nazi collaborators and war criminals, and has been a continual irritant to Lithuania's historical revisionists.

In a recent online discussion, Udrys questioned the propriety of the killing of civilians during Lithuania's partisan war against the Soviets, and, as a result, was forced out of his position as head of the city's develop-

ment agency. His ousting was preceded by a public slander campaign led by Vilnius city council member Adomas Buzinskas and his ideological colleagues.

An appeal for redress was presented to the City's Ethics Committee, which ruled against Udrys, claiming that the slanderer was simply being "patriotic."

Eerily evocative of the trend in the late 1930s, it seems that patriotism and the honoring of Holocaust perpetrators in Lithuania have become synonymous – a trend condemned by the Western world, the very audience that Lithuania hopes will come to its defense in the event of a Russian invasion. ■

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