Nazi and Soviet Informants: Worthy of Condemnation, or Pity?

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The Nazi and two Soviet occupations forced some Lithuanian citizens to seek security from both occupiers, which is the reason why some people informed on their neighbors during the Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944, and and then when the Soviets occupied Lithuania they provided the same services to them. The director general of the Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of Lithuanian Residents Teresė Birutė Burauskaitė spoke about these things.

"This shows the psychology of a certain group of people. These people attempt to survive at any cost and to make themselves safe, but they bring many troubles to all communities and societies. Sadly, there are people of this mentality and thinking in all countries, among all nations," the Soviet regime researcher said, speaking at a discussion prepared for unveiling American historian Timothy Snyder's new book "Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin."

Lithuanian History Institute director Rimantas Miknys was also there and in turn said historical matters can't be judged categorically, for example, there is a story presented in the book about a Jewess who escaped the ghetto and then fell in with Soviet partisans. But even perceiving the evil of her choice, the girl sums it up simply: "They saved me."

"If the Jewess escaped from the ghetto to a partisan unit where there were also Jews, she said: 'I didn't have any other choice, I chose evil. They call me and other women whores. Life was simply insufferable, but the partisans saved me.' That means she also perceives the evil, but chooses it. What do I want to say? Historians have to personalize research, and then additional motivations become apparent: on different behaviors, on explaining collaboration, on what seem illogical actions," Miknys said.

Soviets Sought to Turn Former Nazi Collaborators as the War Front Shifted

Snyder's "Bloodlands" analyzes the regional experience of Eastern Europe as it came between the Nazi hammer and the Soviet anvil, addressing the experience of the countries of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states up to 1945.

The [Lithuanian] Foreign Ministry utilized the occasion to hold a presentation/discussion of the book where political scientist Kęstutis Girnius, Lithuanian History Institute director R. Miknys, his colleague Algimantas Kasparavičius and Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of Lithuanian Residents director general T. B. Burauskaitė took part. Two of the discussion participants admitted they hadn't read the book.

Girnius said the author discussed double collaboration, among other things, in Eastern European states that experienced several occupations, where people initially sought Soviet favor, had to offer their services to the Nazis later, and finally again to the Soviets.

As is well known, Lithuania was occupied three times during World War II: from 1940 to 1941 by the Soviets, from 1941 to 1944 by the Nazis, from 1944 to 1990 by the Soviets.

"Yes, there are cases where a former Nazi collaborator who reported on his neighbors begins to do the same thing, only for a different master. I don't know how much the different cases form a rule, because our work is factography, but we have a lot of statistics and a certain portion of people went from cooperation with the Nazi occupation to cooperation with the Soviets. This is reflected in criminal cases and agency employment. Because as soon as the front passed there was very active recruitment among those

who were suspected of cooperation with the Nazis, it seems they needed to have a network [of informants]," Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of Lithuanian Residents director Burauskaitė said.

She said this type of behavior reveals the psychology of a certain group of residents: some people tend more to seek security at any cost. In turn historian A. Kasparavičius says that collaboration in general could be connected with a multitude of motivations: sometimes people find themselves in poor circumstances, sometimes they lack will, sometimes they are broken emotionally and psychologically.

Does Ideology Change a Person's Thinking Too?

Kasparavičius said the experience of Kazys Škirpa, first a volunteer of the Lithuanian military and a colonel and diplomat, in the inter-war period is interesting. He said from 1933 to 1934 the colonel didn't hide his leftist orientation, he was a member of the Socialist People's Party, and in summer and autumn of 1926, with his knowledge, then-prime minister Mykolas Sleževičius signed a gentleman's agreement in Moscow between Lithuania and the USSR.

The senior researcher at the Lithuanian History Institute said Škirpa himself, who was then the chief of staff of the Lithuanian military, faithfully carried out the articles of this interstate agreement and provided the Soviets information about the military forces of Poland, Latvia and Estonia.

"No one forced Skirpa, Škirpa had a certain idea," the historian said.

"But by 1934 there were reports flowing out of Berlin, where Škirpa was posted as military attaché, to Kaunas to the effect that the only salvation for Lithuania, especially after Hitler came to power, is closer and more intimate cooperation with Germany. Germany is a powerful power, its military potential is growing, and Škirpa's dynamism or transformation reached its apogee in January and February of 1939 when he proposed that Lithuania become a protectorate of Germany and in this way retain Klaipeda as well as statehood in this entire mess, as he put it," Kasparavičius continued.

The historian [Kasparavičius] said that the older generation of diplomats went directly to the foreign minister to [get Škirpa fired], but the essential thing in this case is that Škirpa's views changed dramatically.

"I want to bring to your attention how a person can change his views depending on one or another ideology," the historian said, adding that personal characteristics can have an influence on this way of behaving.

For example, Škirpa was characterized in reports by Polish diplomats as an ambitious, vain, attention-seeking person often breaking ranks because of his initiatives and indecision. Kasparavičius said he couldn't swear an oath that everything the Poles said about Škirpa was true, but he said his opinion was that such a description didn't arise out of nothing.