

On Barry Rubin's  
"Unfinished Business and Unexplained Opportunities:  
Central and Eastern Europe, Jews and the Jewish State"

Sir,

Barry Rubin's article is an interesting, though hardly novel, analysis of potential ways to improve understanding between the Jews and the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. Rubin suggests that Jews (and Israelis) tend to gloss over the catastrophic consequences of Communist rule for the region and for its peoples. Were Jews (and above all, Jewish historians) to see this situation not exclusively through the prism of the Holocaust, in which the Nazis are the all-important and only evil, they would be better positioned to understand the "local" (whether Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, etc.) point of view.

The problem with Rubin's reasoning is two-fold: it implies, without concrete evidence, that Jewish historians are guilty of such a misperception. Secondly, it suggests that shifting the focus of study and stressing the nefarious sides of Communist rule would in some way endear the Jews to the skeptical local audience. I am not persuaded, and in any case, the evidence to support such a thesis is not presented in this piece. As far as "endearing" oneself to the Central and Eastern European public, I am even more skeptical. What is needed is thorough, multifaceted research that does not shy away from unpleasant truths. Moreover, the people who today denounce the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe and who subscribe to various theories about the evil role of the Jews in the past will certainly not be moved by such "objective" studies by Jewish historians and the questionable "*mea culpa*" suggested by the author.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the author is completely correct in suggesting that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are Israel's natural allies in today's world. I am just not persuaded that singing other peoples' songs is the best way to expand and reinforce that alliance. Let us simply do good work—wisely and openly confronting the ghosts of the past, in the genuine hope (and with the knowledge) that historical distance will produce the desired changes in popular perceptions.

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Sir,

Barry Rubin is right: there is much “unfinished business” between the Jewish community and the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. These nations constitute a virtual pro-Israel lobby in the European Union and other organizations—a particularly valuable asset these days. For too long, we have failed to grasp the full complexity of an admittedly painful common history.

In the first place, it is time to revisit honestly the crimes committed by the Soviets against all the populations under their control, which have included the Russians themselves. Rubin is absolutely correct that calling the atrocities committed against entire national groups “genocide” in no way imperils the sacred memory of the Shoah: It behooves us as Jews to commemorate the lives and suffering of innocents persecuted by any totalitarian regime. Our solidarity with the survivors of Soviet terror should not be diluted by resentment against those among their neighbors who did not do enough to save the Jews during the Holocaust. (Why, did the West ?...) For one thing, many did help—indeed many more than we know, since their identities were often impossible to document.

We need to sort out the truth in all its messy complexity. A good example is my native Romania. To be sure, Romanian Jews suffered greatly at the hands of home-grown fascists, the Iron Guard. According to the 2004 report by the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, chaired by Elie Wiesel, “Romania bears responsibility for the deaths of more Jews than any country other than Germany itself.” And yet, there were individual acts of great courage, too, which are much harder to document. Auschwitz survivor Ida Iagnyatinski, a dear friend who passed away earlier this year, repeatedly reminded me of the many kind Romanians who risked their lives by bringing her food and clothing while she was being held in a ghetto near Cluj, prior to being sent to Auschwitz. Ida did not know their names, but never forgot their kindness: “I would never have survived without them.” And my own father, who spent the war years in forced labor in Transylvania, told me stories of small, but highly risky, kind gestures that immeasurably helped him in his struggle to survive.

Equally important is that Jews acknowledge the resentment felt toward those Jews who joined the Communist Party, as so many did. My father explained that, for a Jew, sympathizing with the left was practically inevitable in those days. His own sympathy evaporated soon enough, and he never joined the Party; but the same was not true of virtually all of his friends. What is more, in Romania, unlike Czechoslovakia or Hungary, there were only a mere handful of Communists, hence the percentage of Jews in the government was, at least

originally, disproportionately high. The fact that a few were soon purged, imprisoned, or even killed, with more to follow in the 1950s, and that antisemitism increased as time passed, cannot erase that reality.

Rubin notes that since prior to 1991 much of the terrible oppression of Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, etc., was suppressed, these people now want to highlight what happened to them and elucidate the full horror of their suffering. He asks, “And why should we Jews, of all peoples, oppose this trend so long as it does not bring with it a denial or justification of the Shoah?” Indeed, opposing that trend would be worse than unconscionable; who knows better than we do that the best—indeed, the only—way to deal with a past atrocity is to make sure it is not forgotten? I wouldn’t worry about setting up a “competition of suffering”: Jews are not likely to lose the dubious honor of holding the world record. Again, Rubin is absolutely right: “It is never a good idea to conceal history.” The Jewish people, along with all innocent victims, can only benefit from the truth.

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Sir,

It is precisely because of our esteem for Barry Rubin’s enormous erudition in Middle Eastern affairs that we should grant credence to his potent arguments about the desirability for Israel to forge meaningful and long-lasting alliances with the Central and Eastern European countries that are now part of the European Union, NATO and hence, the Western alliance. In his article “Unfinished Business and Exploited Opportunities,” Rubin takes the bold step of going right to the heart of the problem: the complex of Holocaust- and antisemitism-related issues. Where his argument does not stand up to scrutiny is not on the need for developing these relations, but rather on the conditions and underlying assumptions.

The proportions of the Jewish populations annihilated in the Baltic states—some 95 percent in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—were the highest in Europe. This fact can partly be attributed to the overwhelming role of thousands of local volunteers (now often portrayed as “anti-Soviet freedom fighters” in these countries). These locals cheerfully killed their neighbors and plundered their property and

possessions. So adept were the Baltic killers that the Germans imported Jews from far afield for extermination there—and exported these murderers to serve as executioners of Jews in other parts of Europe (including, for example, in the Warsaw Ghetto).

But none of that is cause to blame further generations, to assign collective guilt to entire nations, or to forget for one moment the inspirational courage of those noble Balts who risked everything to just do the right thing and hide a Jewish neighbor. What, then, is the problem?

After some years of post-Soviet democratic freedom to explore and investigate the painful Holocaust history in the Baltics—a cause admirably taken up by bold individuals and NGOs alike—the Baltic governments embarked on the shoddy path of Orwellian-grade “One View of History Imposed by Law.” In this they were aided by politically ambitious and disreputable “local show Jews,” who played their roles in return for political advancement. The old antisemitic canard about all Jews being Communists and getting what they deserved (“the 1940 Soviet occupation came before the 1941 German occupation”; in shorthand: “1940 comes before 1941”) has remained vital for maintaining popularity with the far-right electorate, which plays an important role in politics in these countries.

Before the turn of the millennium, all three Baltic states set up government-funded “red-brown commissions”—in effect, truth commissions that sought to persuade the EU to accept the notion that Nazism and Communism were absolutely equal.

Among the means employed to achieve this end were:

- legislated redefinition of the idea of genocide to include just about any Soviet crimes;
- intrigues against individuals and NGOs who did not agree with that policy;
- campaigns of defamation against the Wiesenthal Center’s Efraim Zuroff for daring to ask that Nazi war criminals stand trial in their own country’s courts and that Holocaust history be taught accurately; and
- expensive campaigns to hoodwink the entire European Parliament into promoting documents like the 2008 Prague Declaration, which would write the Holocaust out of history and replace it with a cunning paradigm of the “Double Genocide” theory (exposed for what it is, *inter alia*, by Yehuda Bauer, John Mann, Heidemarie Uhl, and Efraim Zuroff, and fervently protested by Holocaust survivors’ groups).

I have referred to the East European state-sponsored movement to distort the Holocaust even while (or especially while) studying and teaching it, as “Holocaust

obfuscation.” It is financed to the degree that it can easily manipulate and even deceive distinguished (but in Eastern Europe—naive) representatives of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, Yad Vashem, the International Task Force, and some Western diplomats. I have seen this repeatedly during my eleven years of residence in Vilnius (most recently when a Holocaust Museum emissary appointed researchers who have obfuscated and minimized the Holocaust as local Holocaust instructors funded by the West).

Lithuanian authorities went even further than the rest. After tricking founding Yad Vashem director Yitzhak Arad (born 1926) into joining their country’s red-brown commission, in 2006 he himself was pursued by prosecutors in a kangaroo war crimes investigation. This was based on the fact that after surviving the ghetto, Arad fled into the forest where he joined the Soviet-sponsored anti-Nazi partisans. After an international outcry, “part” of the Arad “investigation” was dropped in 2008, in an embittered prosecutors’ statement calling on the public to supply new evidence. As if that were not enough, in 2008, police came looking for Dr. Rachel Margolis (born 1921) and Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky (born 1922) on similar grounds. To this day, the two women, heroes of the free world who helped defeat Hitler’s forces in their native country, have neither been charged nor cleared, a veritable stain on justice in the European Union. One of them, Dr. Margolis of Rechovot, who first brought to light the Sakowicz Ponary Diary, is prevented from returning one last time, as she wishes, to her native Lithuania.

Since 2008, in all three Baltic capitals there have been regular city-center police-protected pro-Nazi marches sporting fascist symbols. Some of these marches were supported by major political parties in adulation and commemoration of Nazi collaborators. Moreover, the “Genocide Museum” in the center of Vilnius does not mention the word “Holocaust,” but it merrily displays 1950s antisemitic cartoons without curatorial comment.

In late June 2010, Lithuania’s president shamefully signed into law a bill that would impose jail sentences of up to two years upon those would deny Soviet or Nazi genocide. In other words, they would jail those who would say that there was one genocide in Lithuania—the Holocaust—and that Soviet crimes, while horrific, did not amount to genocide in Lithuania, where the population actually grew during Soviet misrule. With the magnificent exception of Leonidas Donskis, a Lithuanian patriot of multicultural heritage and his country’s most brilliant philosopher (and now Lithuania’s lone Liberal party member in the European Parliament), the dissident voices in the country concerning Holocaust revisionism and antisemitism have virtually all gone silent. It has been painful to see the feeling of freedom of speech sink right through the floor when it comes to these issues. Some Lithuanian truth-tellers have been intimidated into silence by

career destruction or job loss. Some have turned and now work with government agencies. Others opt for westward migration.

In May 2010, a Lithuanian court legalized public displays of swastikas on the grounds that the swastika is a symbol of the nation's historic legacy and not a Nazi symbol. This is emblematic of what is happening in Lithuania today. In 2008, Nazi and Soviet symbols had both been banned by law. (In reality, the ban on the hammer and sickle only affected aged anti-Nazi war veterans who used to enjoy their annual celebrations.) In 2010, the ban on the Soviet and Nazi symbols was "slightly modified" so as to exclude "just" the swastika. This is the actual result on the ground of the activities of the red-equals-brown movement in Eastern Europe. Period.

Today, there are three possible options that Israel has in dealing with the Baltic states:

One: "We will not develop our Baltic relations until these issues are resolved." In adopting such a stance, Israel, a country that did so much to retrieve remains of two citizens from Lebanon, would be demonstrating that it was willing to defend the honor of two living aged Israeli citizens. Arad and Margolis, both Holocaust survivors, and heroes of the anti-Nazi resistance, are being condemned to eternity as suspected war criminals by a far-right antisemitic prosecution service in an East European country as part of a plot to downgrade the Holocaust in European history. Not one of Israel's current "partners" in Lithuania has publicly condemned these kangaroo investigations by antisemitic prosecutors.

Two: "We will develop relations, tourism, commerce, and other productive contacts while making clear that we do not accept Holocaust revisionism or legalized antisemitism or persecution of survivors. Whoever said that tourists of country x have to agree with all the policies of nice-country-to-visit y?" That is the position that should emerge from Rubin's own solid arguments about Israel's need for alliances in this part of the world, and one to which I can readily subscribe. Verily, only good could come from many more Lithuanians and Israelis visiting each others' countries and building new personal, commercial, and strategic relationships. (Full disclosure: In my eleven years as a resident of central Vilnius, I have found its residents to be delightful, open, and good-humored; I do not blame them for the vicious campaigns of antisemitism and Holocaust obfuscation being run by an elite establishment of government, academic, and media figures. Israelis and Lithuanians have much to see, do, learn and enjoy in each others' countries.)

Three: the stance that Rubin takes, in effect, is, alas: "To the deuce with survivors, accurate Holocaust history, and antisemitism; let us sign on merrily to the Baltics'

every last wish and whim: Let them accuse survivors, legalize swastikas, make illegal the view that the Holocaust was the genocide in their country, and wow, once they have us on board for their Prague Declaration, Israel will have fantastic new support.”

Such friendships, based on the surrender of the integrity of one partner, are doomed to rapid demise and bitter disappointment.

Prof. Dovid Katz  
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Sir,

Barry Rubin makes a strong case for closer cooperation between Israel and the states of Central and Eastern Europe. He rightly argues that it is never a good idea to conceal history, and it is worth noting that in Poland, the country that once hosted the largest Jewish community in the world, much has been done to remedy what under the Communists was state policy.

Researchers, once shackled by censorship, are free to investigate the tangled and tortured past. NGOs such as the Forum for Dialogue among Nations are active in fostering Polish–Jewish dialogue, which was nonexistent for so many years. A museum of the history of Polish Jewry is under construction and is scheduled to open in 2012. Its late patron, President Lech Kaczyński, was active in promoting Polish–Israeli and Polish–Jewish relations. It is no secret that many Holocaust survivors who fled Poland after World War II—or those who left Poland as a result of the ant-Zionist campaign of 1968—were reluctant to visit their native land. President Kaczyński’s chancellery encouraged and facilitated visits by such Jews, who were greeted by the president with a sincere “Welcome Home,” and he elicited much warmth and understanding. The world has changed and Poland with it.

Rubin’s call for “an open dialogue in which we respect their [Central and East European] historical experience, which is also that of many Jews,” dovetails with Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski’s remarks in his April 2010 address to the Polish Parliament, in which he spoke of continuing to develop a friendly dialogue with Israel, and of closer cooperation with other countries in the region. While Polish–Israeli relations are not a focus of that address, security policy is, and Sikorski emphasized that the pillars of his country’s security policy are cooperation within NATO and within the European Union. With Poland set to assume the presidency of the EU in July 2011, and its announced intention to

prioritize the Common Security and Defense Policy, now is the time for Israel to engage Poland and its neighbors to take advantage of parallel interests.

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**On Aharon Klieman's  
"Herzl's Zionist Statecraft"**

Sir,

Prof. Aharon Klieman's article is admirable and written in superb style. Its weakness, however, is that it presents certain general information on Herzl's multifaceted diplomacy without going into the specifics. Moreover, I cannot subscribe to Klieman's thesis that "Herzl found few takers... his ceaseless lobbying notwithstanding."

Herzl's basic premise was that Zionism constituted an effective antidote to antisemitism and this led him to the conviction that the countries most plagued by this problem were his best potential allies. In this assumption he was correct, although ironically philo-semites were the ones who first lent him support. The Grand Duke Frederick of Baden was a pillar of strength and encouragement while Count zu Eulenberg introduced Herzl's case to Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Herzl impressed Eulenberg as "an unusually gifted man" of striking appearance with a head like that of King David...without any trace of a *Handelsjude*" and became convinced that supporting Zionism might be in Germany's interest. Eulenberg's ideas, molded by those of Herzl, had a dramatic effect on the Kaiser. In a letter to the Grand Duke, his uncle, the Kaiser wrote, "The fundamental idea of Zionism has always interested me and even aroused my sympathy... I am convinced that the settlement of the Holy Land by the healthy and industrious people of Israel [*Volk Israel*] will bring unparalleled prosperity and blessing to the Holy Land... In addition, the energy and creative powers and abilities of the tribe of Shem should be directed to more dignified purposes than the exploitation of Christians... I know very well that nine-tenths of all Germans will be deeply shocked when they hear, at a later time, that I sympathize with the Zionists and even that I place them under my protection when they appeal to me."