Lithuania's Jewish history

Old wounds

Clashing versions of Lithuania's history and how to treat it

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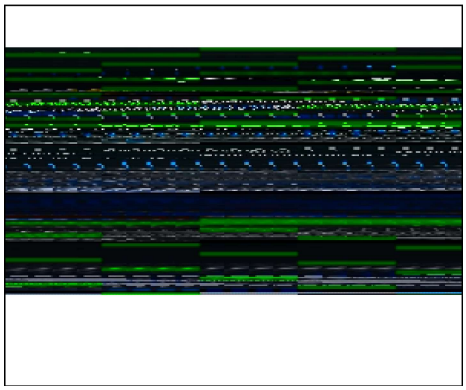
FOR many Lithuanians a short-lived uprising against Soviet occupation in June 1941 was a fine thing. Although it was soon crushed by another lot of occupiers, the Nazis, the efforts of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) were a valiant flicker of statehood before five decades of renewed foreign rule. Fans of one of the leaders of the LAF, Juozas Ambrazevicius, who died in exile, are planning to rebury him in Vilnius amid celebrations of the uprising's 70th anniversary.

Yet for many Jews and Poles, the uprising was not heroic, but the harbinger of death. Although later dumped by the Germans, the LAF was ferociously anti-Polish and anti-Jewish: thousands of Lithuanian Jews died in pogroms even before the Nazi killing machine was fully in place. A five-cornered fight followed, with reprisals and alliances among Jewish, Lithuanian-nationalist, Polish, Nazi and Soviet forces. By its end, most of the 160,000-plus pre-war Jewish population was dead, and most of the Poles had been deported.



Since 1991 scholars from all sides have been unravelling the murderous details, meticulously comparing sources and providing a nuanced account of its interlocking causes, including prejudice, outside incitement, revenge and cowardice. But for some campaigners, mostly from abroad, the historical reckoning

cowardice. But for some campaigners, mostly from abroad, the historical reckoning has been both too slow and too soft. They detect a sinister pattern of neglect of Jewish sites, foot-dragging over restitution, harassment of Holocaust survivors in an investigation of alleged atrocities by Jewish partisans and an ultranationalist approach to history that belittles the Holocaust.

This discontent led to a public protest and bitter exchanges at a recent academic conference in London sponsored by the Lithuanian embassy (part of a year of official commemoration of the Holocaust). The campaigners read a letter denouncing both the Lithuanian government and international efforts to put Nazi and Soviet crimes on a similar footing.

That prompted a spirited rebuttal from historians and other conference participants, and not least from Irena Veisaite, a Holocaust survivor and leading member of Lithuania's small Jewish community. She found herself in the unusual position of being berated by a campaigner against anti-Semitism, a British-born film-maker and academic called Danny Ben-Moshe.

Ms Veisaite and her allies deplore the glorification of the LAF. They ascribe more blame to clumsiness than to malice in the Lithuanian authorities' actions. What worries them is hardening attitudes on both sides. Some Lithuanians feel that over-zealous foreign Jewish critics put too little store by reconciliation. “We are squeezed between two Talibans,” says Sarunas Liekis, a Yiddish-studies professor from Vilnius. The same obstinacy that plagues Lithuania's relations with Poland, he says, lies behind politicians' refusal to reverse their mistakes on Jewish issues.

A wider question is over growing efforts to rejig Europe's approach to history. A declaration in Prague in 2008, backed by such luminaries as Vaclav Havel, demanded a Nuremberg-style reckoning for victims and perpetrators of communist-era crimes. Goran Lindblad, a Swedish politician who helped to draft the text, says the aim was not to downgrade the Holocaust but to “upgrade” Soviet misdeeds. It has attracted support in bodies such as the European Parliament. But it has infuriated some, if not all, Jewish activists; left-wing politicians (mostly from western Europe); and inevitably, Russia.

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "Old wounds"

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