



VIEWPOINT

Danny Ben-Moshe

Lithuania Obfuscates the Holocaust

IMAGINE IF IN GERMANY today a law was passed that said German suffering in Dresden at the hands of the Allies in World War II was equivalent to the Holocaust and that anyone who challenged that could be guilty of a criminal offence.

Imagine if in Poland today a court ruled that a swastika was not a Nazi insignia but an ancient cultural symbol that could be openly displayed without racial implications. Imagine if in France today Jewish partisans who fought against the Nazis and their allies were accused of war crimes. The international community would be justifiably outraged if any of these events happened. Yet, largely unnoticed and unchallenged, all these things are happening in Lithuania.

Unlike others in the European Union, the Lithuanian government has not only failed to recognize and apologize for its unprecedented role in the destruction of its Jewish community, but it actually formally celebrates and lauds the local killers. This is particularly evident now in the run-up to the 70th anniversary of the rise of the Provisional Government of Lithuania (PGL) on June 23, 1941. Rather than it being a day of official state mourning for the onset of the Holocaust, it is being marked as a day of official state celebration. The reason for this lies in the intersections of historical experience.

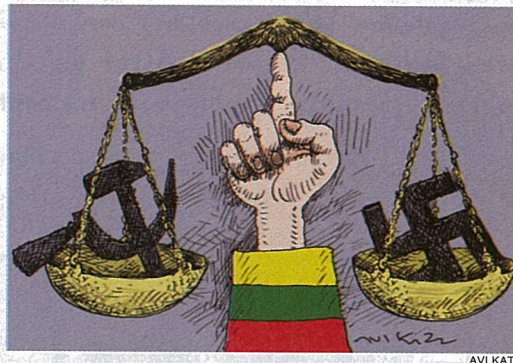
From 1940-1941 the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania and as the Soviets fled the advancing Germans in June 1941, the Lithuanians seized their moment with the short-lived PGL coming to power. The PGL was an ally of the Nazis and, while the Germans were still days away from arriving in Lithuania, lethal actions against Jews were among the first steps enthusiastically taken by its armed personnel and local allies.

More than six months before the Nazis adopted the Final Solution, the armed wing of the PGL, the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), made clear in published leaflets its premeditated plan for the elimination of Lithuanian Jewry.

This creates a major obstacle to Lithuania's acceptance of its past, because the same LAF fighters who unleashed murder on the Jewish community also led the struggle against Soviet occupation and, as such, are lauded as national heroes.

If the LAF's active voluntary leadership and participation in the murders of the Jewish community were to be recognized, then these national heroes would become villains. Such an admission would mean turning people the Lithuanians perceive as victims of the Soviets into perpetrators of genocide.

Instead, it is easier to turn their victims into perpetrators. This is the context in which the Lithuanian State Prosecutor has commenced pre-trial investigations against Jewish partisans who joined the Soviet-led fight against the Nazis. This turning victims into perpetrators is



fuelled by longstanding anti-Semitic prejudices in which Jews are widely regarded as committed communists.

But there is also a historical theory behind it. The Soviets returned in 1944 and imposed over four decades of tyranny. As a result, the Lithuanians tend to see themselves as victims and are unable to recognize their role as perpetrators. Indeed, they have actually changed the legal definition of genocide to promote a pernicious agenda of "double genocide," which propagates the notion that European

nations and peoples experienced two "equal" genocides, the Nazi and the Soviet, a theory promoted in the 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism.

While Soviet rule was far from benign, to blame it for the annihilation of 96 percent of Lithuanian Jewry, the highest proportion of any Jewish community killed during World War II, is, in the words of Prof. Dovid Katz formerly of Vilnius University who has led the campaign against these developments on his website www.defendinghistory.com, to obfuscate the Holocaust.

Now the Lithuanian government is formally leading a campaign to have its obfuscation policy adopted by the European Union. They have had some success, such as the European Parliament adopting a resolution for a day of joint commemoration of all the victims of Nazism and Communism, an occasion that could logically replace Europe's Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Lithuanian government is also campaigning for a revision of European history textbooks to reflect its "double genocide" approach.

Opposing "double genocide" is not to say that Lithuania and other nations did not suffer under the Soviets or that this should not be acknowledged. Of course it must be. Jews are not the only people to have suffered in history. However, no justice is done to any of the victims if all narratives are blurred and the uniqueness, significance and lessons of each are lost.

The Lithuanian experience of oppression under the Soviets has to be properly addressed as a separate issue, but it cannot be used as a pretext to distort the Holocaust and fail to recognize the unprecedented local role, both with and independent of the Nazis, in the extermination of a community once known as "Jerusalem of the North." The Lithuanian obfuscation is a crude attempt to rewrite the past, and the time has come for the international community, the Israeli government, international Jewish organizations and Holocaust commemoration bodies such as Yad Vashem to make clear that it has no place in history.

Danny Ben-Moshe, an Associate Professor at Victoria University in Melbourne, is making a documentary film about the rewriting of the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania www.identify-films.com