

History wars

◆ By Kestutis Girmius

The history wars are heating up once again. Several weeks ago the French Senate passed a law, making the denial of the genocide against the Armenians a criminal offense. An enraged Turkey roundly condemned the French decision and threatened to take appropriate countermeasures.

In Lithuania a new dispute has flared concerning the classification and comparison of Soviet and Nazi crimes. A group of Socialdemocrat politicians asserted that the Holocaust is demeaned by claims that it is equivalent, similar or equal to the crimes committed by the Soviet regime. The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry was quick to respond, pointing out that the claim by the Socialdemocrats contradicts the resolution adopted by the European Parliament urging that August 23 be declared a day of remembrance for all the European victims of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. A ministry spokesman stated that the only difference between Hitler and Stalin might be in their moustaches (Hitler's was shorter).

The response of Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius was measured. He pointed out that the Holocaust is unique, as are Stalin's crimes, although both occurred at roughly the same time and in the same place, namely the 'blood lands' of Eastern Europe, which the historian Timothy Snyder has analyzed in his recent book.

There is much wisdom in Kubilius' suggestion. It makes sense to emphasize the unique aspects of Soviet crimes and their defining features, without rushing off to compare them

with the Holocaust. Such comparisons invariably lead to rather futile polemics that divert attention from the crimes themselves and their moral evaluation.

The world knows little of Stalin's crimes, as it knew very little about the Holocaust until about 1980-1990. Many apologists have been eager to justify Stalin's crimes, arguing that the Soviet Union was a noble effort to build a more just world that went horribly wrong, or that many of Stalin's depredations were necessary in a desperate effort to industrialize and arm the Soviet Union before the expected Nazi onslaught. In the first case the killings seem to be an accident, almost a Betriebsunfall; in the second case a necessary defense measure for the greater good of the USSR and eventually the world.

Such shameless apologetics are no longer in fashion, but there is still a failure to appreciate that Stalin's regime killed systematically, rather than episodically. At least two, perhaps as many as four million died in the Ukrainian Holodomor. More than a third of the inhabitants of Kazakhstan died as a result of an artificially induced famine, when Kazakh nomads were forced to adopt a sedentary life still. While it is possible to try to justify the mass deportations of Volga Germans in 1941 as a precautionary measure, the deportation of Chechens, Ingush and other nationalities of the Caucasus took place in 1944, when victory over the Nazis was assured. The occupation and Sovietization of the Baltic States was marked by mass deportations. Millions of others Soviet citizens were condemned as 'class enemies'

or 'traitors' and executed, sent to the Gulag or exiled with their families to the special settlements.

In his book 'Stalin's Genocides' the eminent Stanford historian Norman Naimark suggests that some of Stalin's crimes should be classified as genocide. Although there is a justified concern that the concept of genocide not be cheapened by overuse, Naimark believes that the expansion of the concept to include crimes against social and political, rather than confining it exclusively to national, ethnic, racial or religious groups would make the concept more robust, particularly since often social and national/ethnic categories overlap.

Naimark analyzes claims by the Baltic States that they were victims of genocide. Although legal codes in the Baltic States recognize that it is difficult to prove the intention of the perpetrator to commit mass murder, local courts have argued that intent can be determined from the events themselves, the number of victims, how the actions were carried out, whether they were in accord with existing legal procedures, were accompanied by hate speech or egregious brutality and other such indicators. The Baltic, Ukrainian and Kazakh cases show that mass violence directed against a class can have strong ethnic or national elements.

I have no idea whether any of Stalin's crimes, much less those in the Baltics, will be classified as genocide. Bet even if that were to happen, it by no means implies that all genocides are the same, that one can insert an equal sign among them. Some historians have asked how a Ukrainian child starving to death in the famine differs from the Jewish child starving in

the Warsaw ghetto, how does Kolyma differ from Auschwitz. Naimark points out that we need to compare the fate of these children rather than their deaths. Ukrainian children had a chance to survive, while Jewish children were condemned to be sent to Treblinka or some other Nazi

extermination camp. The disparity is very significant. The length of their moustaches is not the only difference between Hitler and Stalin. Kubilius is right in urging that we concentrate on the uniqueness of each crime. Facile comparisons generate more heat than light.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Reality check

Dear *TBT*,

Let's call them 'Aussies on holiday!' (*TBT* no. 787, Outlook "Lifestyle trumps wealth in Latvia"). Latvia can provide a stimulating, adventurous environment for foreigners; the local population might call it something different. Since re-independence some 20 years ago, they keep coming. Most ex-pats aren't here for the culture, arts, nature. Some are escaping something, real or imagined, from home. It's not surprising that a common question from a native to an ex-pat is: "What are you hiding from?"

They complain, ridicule, laugh at the local ways, the food, the often surly service, don't appreciate the music and culture. They don't learn the Latvian language. They don't bother to learn the history, or understand the problems. Many don't leave the ex-pat community, except to date the local girls, or chat with the bartenders. All girls are fair game: 60-plus-year-old foreign men are known to follow provocative young specimens in the street like hungry dogs following butcher boys delivering meat. With business, many are doing good work here. There have also been plenty of dodgy outfits and scam artists, outwitting even the locals.

It's a playground for ex-pats. A minority knows why they're here, and disappear into the background. Some are even more Latvian than the locals. But most are misfits back home, while their outrageous behavior is overlooked only here. One can find 24/7 excitement almost anywhere in the world (but isn't there more to life?), even in boring places like New York and London. They don't live a local's life, wouldn't submit themselves to the local health-care system, send their children to the mediocre university system, live in the Imanta or Plavnieki suburbs. It's more exciting living in the center, where one doesn't have to commute in, sitting in traffic across Vansu bridge, or put up with the smells of daily struggle on the tram. When the fun runs out, it's time to get back to reality: just get on the plane and you're out, back to better opportunity and security. The locals too are working for a chance on that same ladder these ex-pats have happily gotten off.

To these ex-pats: imagine throwing away your passport. Then see how much of a paradise Latvia, with an average yearly salary of 7,500 euros, is, without an easy exit. Those here for a while may find they don't fit in at home, when they finally return.

Stephan Eberhardt, Valmiera

The week in weather