

The Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe

## **+** Tanks in the Partisan Forest

The German Armed Forces are tasked with defending NATO's eastern flank against Russia in Lithuania—but their training area is located on land historically littered with landmines. Jews who fought against Hitler there are considered enemies of the state in Lithuania.

Photo: Solveig Grothe / DER SPIEGEL

**Solveig Grothe** reports from Vilnius

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Aušra Mikulskienė knows the way. The Jewish history tour guide has led foreign visitors to the earthen caves in the forest near Rūdninkai, south of Vilnius, on several occasions. They are located in marshy terrain, about 30 kilometers from the Belarusian border. It is one of the few places in Europe where Jews once actively fought against their own extermination.



“The first time I was there,” the 52-year-old Lithuanian woman recounts on the drive south from Vilnius, “was as a schoolgirl in the mid-1980s. Back then, my country was still part of the Soviet Union. We were taken by bus to the sites of World War II. ‘It was the usual Soviet propaganda about the heroic struggle against the German fascists.’”

Now the Germans are back—as Lithuania’s NATO partners. Since the start of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, concern about the eastern flank has been growing within the Western defense alliance. The so-called Suwałki Gap—a narrow, sparsely populated strip of land in the Polish-Lithuanian border region—is considered a strategic weak point. It is the shortest route between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus.





Tank Brigade 45 in Lithuania: A historic mission for the Bundeswehr Photo: Kay Nietfeld / dpa

Ever since former Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a “turning point” in 2022, the Bundeswehr has been preparing for alliance defense. With the Lithuania Brigade, it plans to permanently station 4,800 soldiers abroad for the first time since World War II—up to 3,000 of them, of all places, at a military training area in the forest near Rūdninkai.

It is the same forest where Jews from the ghetto of Wilna—as Vilnius was then called—once fought alongside Soviet partisans against the German occupiers. In the forest where Aušra Mikulskienė guides her visitors, two fundamentally different interpretations of history are currently clashing within NATO.

## **Jewish partisans are regarded as enemies in Lithuania**

While the German government “strongly” supports the preservation of the former Jewish partisan camp, the Lithuanian government would prefer to tear down this relic of Soviet propaganda.

In Lithuania, Jewish partisans are not regarded as heroes, but as enemies. This is because they fought alongside the hated Russians during the war, under orders from Moscow. In August and September 1939, Joseph Stalin had signed treaties with the Nazi “Führer” Adolf Hitler. In these treaties, the two dictators divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, as if they were cutting up a cake. The Red Army occupied Lithuania in 1940.

The German occupiers, who brought death and terror to the country as part of “Operation Barbarossa” beginning in the summer of 1941, are often romanticized in Lithuania to this day as “the good guys”: In the collective memory, they are seen as having been less brutal than the Soviet rulers, who reoccupied Lithuania in 1944 and, like the other Baltic states, turned it into a constituent republic of the Soviet Union.





Troops marching into Vilnius during "Operation Barbarossa": Lithuanians as Hitler's henchmen Photo: Michael Nicholson / Corbis / Getty Images

To Germans, this Lithuanian perspective on history sounds like a reversal of perpetrator and victim roles. But it is not only there that memories of World War II are less clear-cut than they appear from a German perspective. The question of who is considered a hero and who a criminal has long been a subject of debate not only in Lithuania, but also elsewhere between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea—that “death zone” created by Hitler and Stalin, in which, according to U.S. historian Timothy Snyder, some 14 million people were murdered by both regimes: 10 million by Hitler’s henchmen, 4 million by Stalin’s.

Ever since Russia attacked Ukraine—a move that, in the view of many Eastern Europeans, echoes Stalin’s policies—disputes over the past have flared up repeatedly, with “Barbarossa” casting a shadow over current politics. And now the Bundeswehr is entering historically fraught territory with its military training area.

Yet the facts are clear: Approximately 200,000 Lithuanian Jews were killed in the Holocaust, accounting for about 95 percent of the country’s Jewish population. Numerous Lithuanian collaborators in police and militia units played a key role in the mass murder.

## Holocaust Collaborators as National Heroes

In response to a parliamentary question in the Bundestag, the federal government stated back in December that it had asked the Lithuanian government, when establishing the military training area, to “examine whether the area in question warrants protection.” In a statement to *\*Der Spiegel\**, the Bundeswehr pointed to the jurisdiction of the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense.

But the ministry has since done a complete about-face. As recently as March, the ministry stated in response to an inquiry that it was “fully aware of the historical and emotional significance of this site.” It represented “an important part of the history of Jewish resistance during [redacted] weeks later, however, the ministry suddenly emphasized that, contrary to previous claims, [redacted] would not be protected.

For further information on this matter, officials referred inquiries to historian Arūnas Bubnys, director general of the State Research Center for Genocide and Resistance. In recent years, the Genocide Research Center has faced international criticism on several occasions. It has been accused of downplaying the Holocaust and Lithuanian involvement in it in its publications.

The online journal “Defending History,” which has repeatedly documented revisionist views on the Holocaust in [the Baltic states](#), reported six years ago on an appearance by Bubnys—who was then the center’s chief historian—during which posters of Holocaust collaborators Jonas Noreika and Kazys Škirpa, revered as national heroes, were held aloft.



Historian Arūnas Bubnys at a rally in 2020 featuring posters of Jonas Noreika and Kazys Škirpa: Hero worship for Holocaust collaborators Photo: DefendingHistory.com

Originally, the Genocide Research Center had even presented Noreika as a rescuer of Jews. But in 2021, it became widely known that the former head of a district administration under German Nazi occupation had [Involved in the expulsion and murder of thousands of Lithuanian Jews](#) .

## “When the Neighbors Suddenly Put on White Armbands”

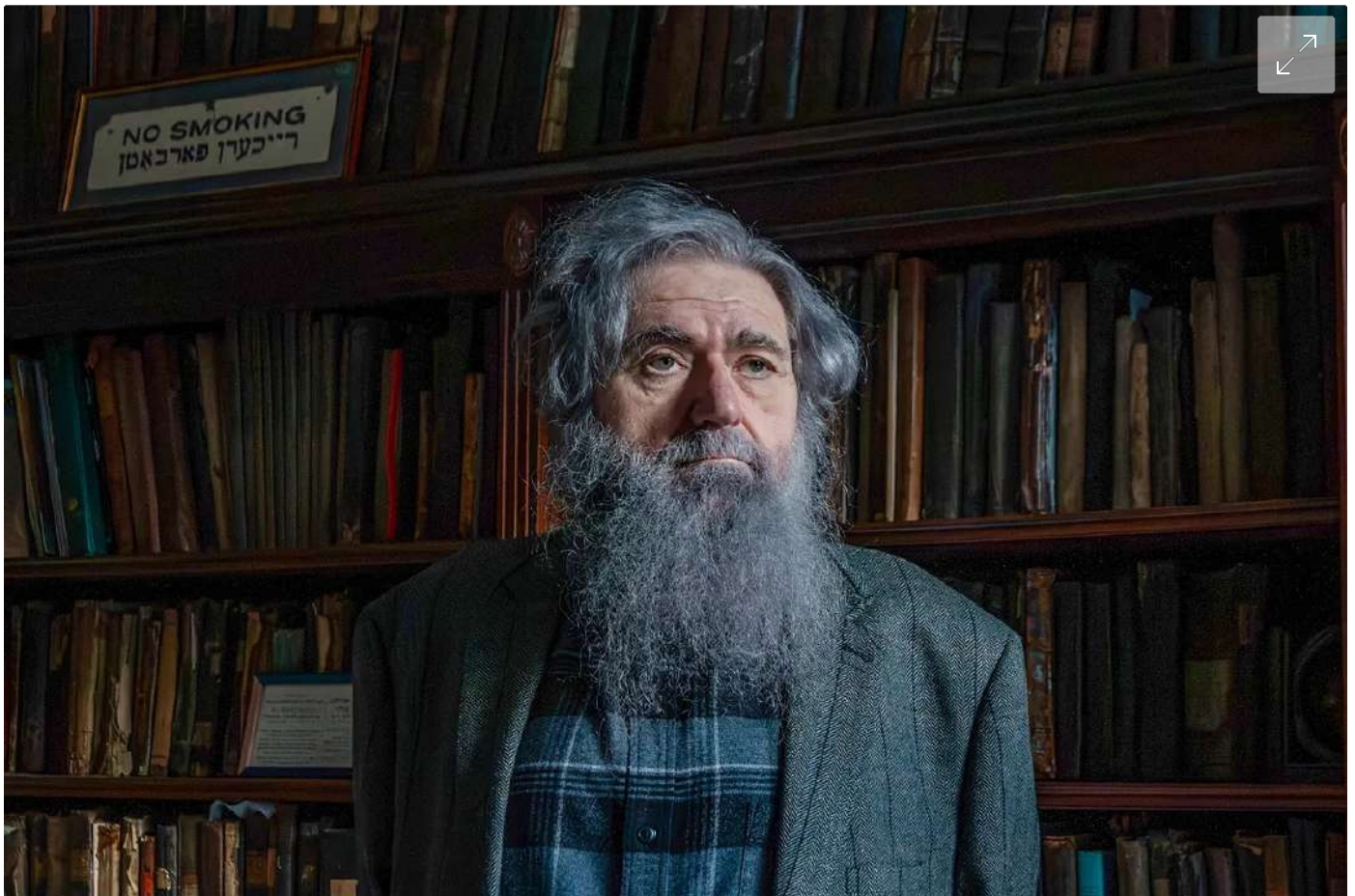
Lithuania’s history during World War II is marked by a series of dramatic upheavals. When the Soviet Union occupied the previously sovereign country in 1940, many politicians fled abroad. In Berlin, some of them—including Kazys Škirpa—founded the “Lithuanian Activist Front” (LAF), which fought for Lithuania’s independence. Even before the Wehrmacht arrived, the LAF seized power in Lithuania on June 23, 1941.

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The event at which historian Bubnys spoke six years ago was dedicated to commemorating that very day, June 23, 1941. Ultrationalists celebrate it as the “June Uprising.” But for Lithuania’s Jewish population, the day took on a very different meaning. Members and sympathizers of the LAF killed thousands of Lithuanian Jews—in some cases even before the first German troops arrived.

It is thanks to Holocaust researchers like Dovid Katz, 70, that these massacres have not been forgotten. Katz, an American, taught as a professor at Oxford and Yale. In the 1990s, he traveled to the Baltic states to study Yiddish and the culture of Lithuanian Jews. Over the past decades, he has repeatedly conducted interviews with survivors.



Yiddish scholar Dovid Katz: Concealment of the Holocaust Photo: Solveig Grothe / DER SPIEGEL

“Almost all of them remembered that very Monday morning when many of their neighbors suddenly put on the white armbands of the LAF and murdered women, children, and the elderly,” he says. “They simply couldn’t comprehend it, because those who were killed weren’t communists. Jewish communists had long since fled with the Soviets by that point.”

For them, June 23, 1941, marked the actual beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Vilnius, once known as the “Jerusalem of the North,” had been a spiritual center of Judaism for centuries. In his interviews with eyewitnesses, Katz says, survivors repeatedly described how 600 years of tolerance “turned into mass murder overnight in dozens of places.”





Courtyard of the old Jewish synagogue in Vilnius: "Jerusalem of the North" Photo: Arkivi / IMAGO

Yet in Lithuania today, people remember above all the Soviet occupation. Beginning in 1944, the non-Jewish population also once again experienced intensified terror. Lithuanians were arrested, deported, and died in camps and prisons. Because of this experience, people in Lithuania speak of two genocides.

## **Criminal Investigation Against the Last Female Partisan**

In the Rūdinkai Forest, tour guide Aušra Mikulskienė turns off the country road onto a paved path that soon becomes a wide, muddy track. On both sides of the forest edge, signs on red-and-yellow-striped posts warn of a "dangerous area." Without a guide familiar with the area, visitors would quickly get lost.

A large sign by the roadside explains the rules for visiting the military site. However, the barrier shown in the sign has not yet been installed, so Mikulskienė simply drives on and turns onto a narrower forest path. After a curve, she stops the car in a clearing. "From here, we have to continue on foot."

All around are grasses, bushes, and trees. Mikulskienė walks purposefully in one direction and pushes a large branch aside. A boulder as tall as a man comes into view. A small silver plaque gleams on the moss-covered stone: "In memory of the Jewish partisans who fought from these forests against the Nazi occupiers and their collaborators." The German educational organization Stanislaw Hantz e. V., which is committed to remembrance work and organizes study tours, installed it here in 2024.





Partisans of the Vilna Ghetto: Resistance Against Their Own Extermination Photo: Hebrew University of Jerusalem / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

As early as 1974, the former partisan forest camp had been converted into a kind of open-air museum. Since then, rough concrete slabs have supported the partisans' shelters, which were originally stabilized only with wood. Soviet propaganda, however, made no mention of the fact that they once served as hiding places for Jews who had fled. It preferred to portray the war as a nameless victory of "Soviet citizens."

Mikulskienė says she only learned about those who had lived and fought there about ten years ago, when guests from Israel wanted to visit the site. She then began to study Jewish history more closely and discovered that she herself had a Jewish great-grandmother. "It was kept secret in the family." Through an acquaintance, she eventually met Fania Brancovskaja, who was likely the last surviving Jewish partisan from Rūdninkai at the time.

Mikulskienė continues to make her way through the underbrush and points to a dark opening framed by wooden beams and concrete—the first earthen cave, overgrown with moss, grass, and trees. Through the opening, rubble, stones, and dust are visible. "When I think about it," says the tour guide, "my daughter is just 27 ... and Fania was only 21 back then—still just a child—when she came here and had to fight. But she had no other chance of survival."





Partisan camp as an open-air museum: a relic of Soviet propaganda Photo: Solveig Grothe / DER SPIEGEL

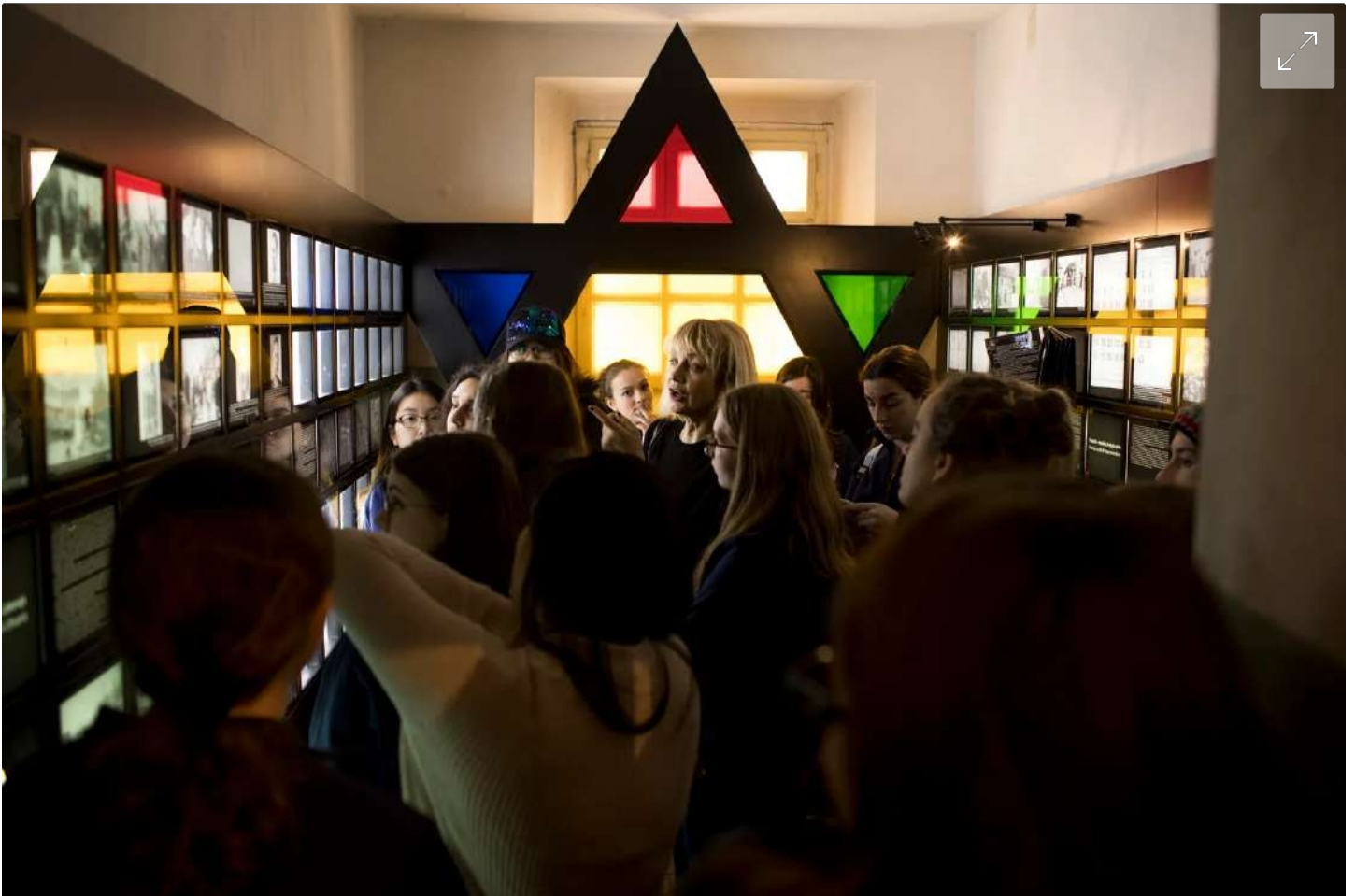
Brancovskaja (1922–2024) had worked briefly as a teacher after graduating from high school when World War II reached Vilnius. In September 1941, like all Jews, she was forced to move into the ghetto established by the German occupiers. Just before its liquidation in 1943, she managed to escape with a friend. Her family was murdered.

The secret Fareinikte Partisaner Organisatzije (Yiddish for “United Partisan Organization”) had already been formed in the ghetto. Members and their families fled to the Rūdinkai forest area, where Soviet partisan units were already operating. They sabotaged telephone lines and blew up railroad tracks. In early July 1944, dozens of Jewish fighters took part in the liberation of Vilnius. Brancovskaja survived.

Holocaust researcher Katz met her. And her story would make him one of the most persistent critics of Lithuanian remembrance policy—to this day. Brancovskaja was working as a librarian at the Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, which Katz had co-founded, when the police suddenly began searching for her in 2008.

At the initiative of the state-run Genocide Research Center, the Lithuanian public prosecutor’s office launched an investigation into alleged complicity in war crimes. Former partisans were accused of having participated in the murder of Lithuanian civilians. Brancovskaja was also to be questioned. Only after international protests were the investigations finally dropped due to lack of evidence.





“Museum of Genocide Victims” in Vilnius, now the “Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights”: Until a few years ago, the Holocaust was not mentioned there. Photo: Daro Sulakauri / The New York Times / Redux / laif

Yet the massive smear campaign that had been launched in the public sphere continues to smolder even after Brancovskaja’s death. A video is still available on YouTube that insults the Jewish woman and claims she admitted to massacring civilians.

For decades, Fania Brancovskaja told her story during guided tours of the former Vilnius ghetto and the Rūdninkai Forest. But now, only a few people still know about the wooden bunkers in the forest. Someone has placed red carnations and a bottle of vodka in front of one of the earthen shelters.

Mikulskienė is aware of the conflict and tries to explain her compatriots’ perspective. “You know,” she says on the way back to Vilnius, “Germany had decades to engage in these debates,” which is why Germans today can talk about the Holocaust more or less calmly. “We, too, experienced the Holocaust, followed by 50 years of Soviet rule during which it wasn’t discussed. And then it turns out that we were not only victims but also perpetrators.”

For many, it’s simply unimaginable that their heroes—the Lithuanian freedom fighters, of all people—could bear some responsibility for the genocide of the Jews. “Anyone who says something like that today is labeled a ‘Soviet agent’ or ‘They’re called ‘Putin’s agents,’” says Mikulskienė. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine is fueling this popular narrative. “The official discourse today is precisely this: The Reds—that is, the Soviet partisans—were evil; they were murderers. And we don’t talk much about the Nazis. The Soviets were bad—that’s the story being told.”

## Hoping for the Bundeswehr



Back in Vilnius, the conflict is also evident in the museum landscape. The Genocide Research Center operates a building on a boulevard formerly known as the “Museum of Genocide Victims,” now called the “Museum of Occupations and Struggles for Freedom.” It focuses primarily on crimes of the Stalin era and largely omits the Holocaust. Only in a basement room is the murder of the Jews commemorated—the chronicle there begins with the ghetto, not with the mass murders of June 1941.

A few minutes’ walk away, a green wooden house tells a different story: As early as 1944, survivors opened a Holocaust exhibition in the former library of the ex-ghetto, but it was forced to close as part of Stalin’s anti-Semitism campaign. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jewish survivors made a new attempt. Their Holocaust museum openly acknowledges the involvement of Lithuanian perpetrators. Katz, however, fears that this perspective will soon disappear within the state-run museum complex.



Holocaust exhibition in Vilnius: The Green House tells the story of the survivors Photo: Solveig Grothe / DER SPIEGEL

“I can imagine,” Mikulskienė had said at the end of the tour, “that the partisan stronghold will be preserved despite everything. After all, cemeteries of Soviet and German soldiers from the world wars are still maintained in Lithuania.” The problem, she said, is a different one: “There are almost no relatives left of the people who lived in these bunkers.”

Mikulskienė does not believe “that it will do any good if we call on the government to protect the site. No one will want to do that. But perhaps we can set a good example by showing it to people and lighting a candle there from time to time.”

The tour guide is probably right: the government is unlikely to take any action on this. In response to an inquiry, the director of the Bubnys Genocide Research Center wrote in an email: “The Soviet partisans in Lithuania were part of the Soviet armed forces in the fight against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945. Their activities are regarded as hostile to Lithuanian statehood.”

Bubnys describes the fight against Hitler as Mikulskienė “Soviet reoccupation” of Lithuania. The word “liberation” does not appear in his email. Nor does the Holocaust or the extent of Lithuanian

collaboration.

When asked, the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture emphasized that the partisan fortress does not qualify for protection. The structures were “reconstructed” for propaganda purposes during the Soviet era and are therefore “not authentic.” As a propaganda structure, the fortress falls under the Lithuanian ban on the “promotion of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes and their ideology.” Accordingly, “it could potentially be removed as a public structure.”

For Holocaust researcher Katz, this is part of a larger problem: the widespread theory in Lithuania of a “double genocide,” which equates the crimes of the Soviets with those of the Nazis and thus obscures the Holocaust. He says he is now pinning his hopes on the Bundeswehr and its Lithuania Brigade. Germany has already done a great deal to educate the public about the Holocaust. **S**



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