

Opinion

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Halting Holocaust obfuscation

David Katz

The Baltic ultranationalists rewriting east European history as an equal Nazi-Soviet 'double genocide' must be stopped

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Britons who are proud of a parent or grandparent who fought in the second world war, proud of the Allies' defeat of Hitler, of Britain's valiant defence of freedom when Europe buckled and crumbled, have ample reason to be wary now. Wary, and disappointed, that one of this country's major political parties has entered into a rash alliance with the new far right of eastern Europe.

One of the eastern far right's priorities, notwithstanding the current economic challenges, is to rubbish the Allies' triumph, and rewrite the history of the war to suit local ultranationalism. It boggles the mind that those who lead the party of Churchill and, yes, of Thatcher, would be duped into joining the far-right European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), led by the controversial Polish MEP [Michal Kaminski](#). If Cameron's Conservatives want your vote, they need to show the minimum courage required to exit rapidly from the ECR, and to utter the words that politicians in general have so much trouble with: "We made an honest mistake, we realise it, and we are today setting things right."

This is not just about the ECR group and [Kaminski's equivocation about the Jedwabne massacre](#), or its Latvian and Estonian ECR partners who proudly endorse Waffen-SS celebrations. (It was, let's not forget, a Republican US secretary of state, Colin Powell, who once told them such behaviour must stop if they want to join Nato and the EU; of course, with membership in the bag, Nazi nostalgia re-emerged rapidly.) It also entails [the ongoing campaign to rewrite second world war history](#) by mitigating Nazism, insisting that communism's evils be proclaimed "equal" to Nazism by all of Europe, and trashing the Allied war effort as one that did nothing but replace one tyranny with another "equal" one in the east.

Make no mistake, the peoples of eastern Europe suffered enormously under communism for decades after the war, while we westerners were enjoying unbridled freedom and prosperity. It is absolutely right that they should now call for thorough investigation of the crimes committed by communist regimes. But the demand that the entire EU declare Nazism and communism to be "equal" is something else entirely.

Perhaps you must actually live in eastern Europe to appreciate the nuances. Let it be stressed that none of this is about the fine, tolerant, welcoming and hardworking people of the region, among whom I have lived happily for over a decade, in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. It is rather about the abuses of power elites, in government, academia, media, the judiciary and so forth, whose agendas are often opaque even to locals, and all the more inscrutable to unsuspecting foreigners.

The new ultranationalists are neither skinheads nor toughs. On the contrary, the elites are suave, silver-tongued, charming and highly educated, especially about history. But not in the openminded sense of relishing civic debate between competing ideas, but in the sense of insisting upon a single, uniform history as a product for export.

In 2009, the Lithuanian parliament actually debated proposals to impose two- or three-year prison sentences on people who would disagree with [the "double genocide" model](#) of the second world war and who would question, for example, whether Soviet misrule constituted "genocide". Even if it is never passed into law, the debate itself has intimidated citizens from speaking their minds freely in this part of the European Union.

But what actually is the ultranationalist version of history?

In the case of the countries in the far east of the [European Union](#), the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), there is a reluctance to own up to any complicity with the Holocaust. The percentages of their Jewish populations killed (mid-90s) were the highest in Europe. Further west, collaboration had meant ratting to the Gestapo or taking neighbours to the train station to be deported. In these countries, it meant something different. Many thousands of enthusiastic local volunteers did most of the actual shooting of their country's Jewish citizens, whose remains lie scattered in hundreds of local killing pits. In Lithuania and Latvia, the butchery started before the Nazis even arrived. Of course we acknowledge, too, the exceptions and honour the inspirational courage of those Baltic citizens who risked their and their families' lives to rescue a Jewish neighbour.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of democratic states in the region, individual citizens hailing from each country's majority made spirited strides toward unearthing the truth. Some remarkable NGOs were set up. But near the turn of the millennium, the three Baltic governments colluded to set up state-financed commissions to study "as a single topic" the Nazi and communist legacies (known informally as "red-brown commissions"). The most notorious of these bodies has been Lithuania's [International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania](#). Built into the name of the inquiry are the foregone conclusions: first, the desired equivalence of Nazi and Soviet crimes; and second, the limitation to consider the crimes of "occupation regimes", leaving little scope for investigation of the genocide committed by local forces, in some cases before the occupation began. The commission is cosily housed in the prime minister's office, turning history into a PR department of the government.

To "fix" the region's unfixable [Holocaust](#) history, an array of cunning ruses was brought into play. The very definition of "genocide" was broadened by local legislation in this part of the world to include wrongful deportation, imprisonment or attempts to rid society of a certain class, thereby "legally" placing communist oppression in the same category as Nazism. The state-funded Genocide Museum on the main boulevard of Vilnius does not mention the word "Holocaust"; it is all about Soviet crimes; and even flaunts antisemitic exhibits. It is widely repeated locally that the Soviets and their Jewish supporters committed genocide first, in 1940 (when the Baltic states were wrongfully incorporated into the USSR, less than a year after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact), and that this was followed by some kind of opposite and equal reaction in 1941, when the German invaders and Balts began their genocide of the Jewish population.

According to this narrative, all is equal; everybody is even. All that remained was to sell this new history to the naive westerners whose mind is on other things these days.

But here in Lithuania, the process went further. State prosecutors, egged on by the antisemitic press, opened "[war crimes investigations](#)" against [Holocaust survivors](#) who are alive today only because they managed to flee the ghetto and the murder awaiting them, to join up with anti-Nazi partisans in the forests who were, yes, supported by the Soviet Union (there were, alas, no US or British forces in these parts).

One of the accused survivors, Dr Yitzhak Arad (born 1926), a gentle scholar who was founding director of Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust museum, was duped into joining the Lithuanian red-brown commission (to give it legitimacy) before being absurdly accused himself. Then, in May 2008, at the lowpoint of modern Lithuanian history, armed police came looking for two incredibly valorous women veterans: Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky (born 1922), librarian of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, and Rachel Margolis (1921), a biologist and Holocaust scholar. Margolis is especially loathed by proponents of the "double genocide" industry because she rediscovered, deciphered and published the long-lost diary of a Christian Pole, Kazimierz Sakowicz. Sakowicz, witness to tens of thousands of murders at the Ponar (Paneriai) site outside Vilnius, recorded accurately that most of the killers were enthusiastic locals. Now resident in Rechovot, Israel, she is unable to return to her beloved hometown in Lithuania for fear of prosecutorial harassment.

Why would prosecutors, who have yet to level a single charge, go after the victims instead of the perpetrators? In fact, this has been all about defamation and manipulation of history, not prosecution. When it comes to perpetrators, there is no initiative or energy. As Dr Efraim Zuroff, director of the Wiesenthal Centre's Israel office, puts it:

Since they obtained independence in 1991, the Baltic countries' record vis-a-vis the prosecution of local Nazi war criminals has been an abysmal failure. Not a single such person has ever been punished for their crimes.

But worse, with unbridled audacity, the Baltic states, working closely with far-right parties in other "new accession states" (Poland and the Czech Republic among them), have found "useful idiots" in the European parliament for spreading their underlying view that the Nazis were, in effect, liberators of their countries from the yoke of communism.

The east European cabal's greatest success to date is the [Prague Declaration](#) of June 2008, which demands that the entire European Union recognise communism and fascism [Nazism] as a "common legacy", and that "all European minds" think that way. Its practical demands include a new Nuremberg-type tribunal for trying the criminals of communism and, unbelievably, a demand for the "overhaul of European history textbooks" to reflect the revisionist history.

One of the reasons that all this progressed without scrutiny can be found in the Prague Declaration's list of signatories. They include some major anti-Soviet icons who stood up bravely for their nations' independence as the USSR crumbled, and subsequently helped forge solid democracies. The heroic roles of Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic and Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania in their nations' re-emergence remain undiminished. But that does not mean that, two decades later, we must be afraid to disagree with them when, following the general political trend in the region, they veer rightwards or unwittingly give succour to the ultranationalists.

These cardinal questions of 20th-century European history, and the current issues to which they are intimately related in eastern Europe - 21st-century racism, antisemitism and homophobia - should not have to become a party-political issue in Britain. It was the valiant Conservative MEP, Edward McMillan-Scott, who stood up to the east European heirs to fascist thinking and defeated Kaminski for the vice-presidency of the European parliament. But instead of getting the medal he deserved, [he was expelled from the Conservative party](#).

Nor has the British Labour party been wholly immune to this Baltic virus. Last summer, at the parliamentary assembly of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the east European far right slipped two phrases into the [Vilnius Declaration](#) of 3 July 2009. The first was the affirmation of "two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought

about genocide". The second was the now routine demand that all member states introduce a mandatory "Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism". The British government delegation, along with the other western members of the OSCE, acceded and voted for the resolution. In the never-ending carousel of Eurospeak, the red-equals-brown agenda is now being slipped into the "Stockholm Programme" of 2010-4.

There is a real need now for the main political parties in Britain to disown the eastern far right, admit these mistakes and disassociate as necessary, sink the Prague Declaration, and move forward. By denigrating the Allies' war effort against Hitler, the easterners go beyond whitewashing their own Holocaust histories. The entire "red-equals-brown" movement within eastern Europe panders to base instincts, which can be politically useful in hard times. It has hit upon a convenient way to stigmatise not only "Russians" (often a cover term for Russian-speakers of many ethnic backgrounds, including Roma), but also today's [Russia](#). These nations have every right to fear Russia and they deserve firm western support for their permanent security and independence. This legitimate concern must not be compromised by the attempts of some at historical falsification and the peddling of contemporary racism and antisemitism.

Each state may preach and teach with it likes within its borders. But the unseemly revisionism promoted in some eastern EU states must not be granted entrance to the west via the back doors of Brussels and Strasbourg.

The time has come to say no.

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