

You are now entering the *Jewish Currents* archive.

Writings Grid

Blog-Shmog

When “Putin” Becomes an Excuse for Hitler-Glorification

Dovid Katz

October 10, 2016

Caption for photo above: A typical East European whitewash in the text on this museum panel that tries to cover for the widespread outbreak of murder of Jews by Lithuanian nationalists (particularly those affiliated with the Lithuanian Activist Front or LAF), in many cases before the arrival of German forces, in the days following the onset of the Nazi invasion of June 22, 1941. The text also attempts to “fix” the collaboration of the “provisional government.” This display board is from the main building of the state-sponsored Jewish museum in Vilnius, Lithuania. Photo: DefendingHistory.com.

by Dovid Katz

A RECENT *Washington Post* [editorial](#) rightfully takes Russia and China to task for persecuting those who dare challenge the state’s distortions of history. In the case of Russia, there is mention of the disgraceful prosecution of a citizen for pointing out that the September 1939 dismemberment of Poland was a joint venture of Germany and the USSR codified by the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

But wait a minute.

We know already that Russia's and China's autocratic, dictatorial regimes engage in constant history-fixing. Sure, the news pages should continue to cover these cases, with ever-more prominence, and highlight the heroes who stand up to the regime. But Western editorial pages make a grave mistake when they repeat what we already know ("water is wet" as the old Yiddish saying goes) -- that Putin's regime commits grave human rights violations -- without so much as mentioning the dangerous far-right rewriting of history that is coming out of the West's allies in Eastern Europe. Among these allies are a number of the new EU/NATO member states, and in recent years (non-EU) Ukraine, where authorities recently [named](#) a street in Kiev, the capital, in memory of a major Holocaust criminal, Stepan Bandera. Where I live in Lithuania, the capital city continues to boast a street named for Holocaust collaborator [Kazys Škirpa](#), an enthusiast of the country's "ethnic cleansing," and sundry memorials to perpetrator [Jonas Noreika](#). [Latvia](#) and [Estonia](#) continue to honor their countries' Waffen SS units. [Hungary](#) builds monuments to the wartime leaders who helped deport its Jews to the death camps. Just this year, [Poland](#) began abusing state power to distort history. These countries' willful distortions are much more dangerous precisely because they are being successfully exported to the West, largely under the radar of the very forces that exist precisely to stand up for truth in history, most emphatically so when it comes to the Holocaust.

What is going on? The EU countries in play here (all except Ukraine) are successful democracies with proud records of remarkable achievement since the collapse of the Soviet empire. As a native -- and obviously Jewish -- New Yorker, I can report being treated splendidly by the terrific, humorous, tolerant people of Lithuania for the last seventeen and a half years. The problem is with some nationalist elites (government, academia, media, arts, and more). Especially in the Baltics, they can be obsessed with having a perfect history (no country does). They do not want their massive collaboration with the Nazis, which included providing thousands of actual killers, in the history. Many are also anti-Semitic. But in the higher spheres of "history," they want their rank rewrite in the ultranationalist spirit to be their prime export to the rest of the world in the realm of ideas. That rewrite includes reconceptualizing the Nazis as liberators of the eastern nations from Soviet yoke, as well as the postmodernist mush of confounding perpetrators and victims in a world of mental toffee.

So they have come up with a new [theory](#), "Double Genocide," which posits that Stalin and his Jewish lackeys committed genocide against them, and then came the opposite

and equal reaction known as the Holocaust. The anti-Semitic origins of the theory were [exposed](#) years ago by the brilliant Lithuanian philosopher Leonidas Donskis, who tragically passed away last month, aged 54. Nowadays, precious few scholars stand up to point out the close nexus of “Double Genocide: and good old anti-Semitism. Among the most courageous are Randolph L. Braham (New York), Clemens Heni (Berlin), and Michael Shafir (Bucharest).

To export the theory to the West, its East European promoters proclaimed the [Prague Declaration](#) in 2008, which boasts the word “same” five times in reference to Nazi and Soviet crimes, even insisting on what “all European minds” must think. In Lithuania, prosecutors proceeded with years of kangaroo accusations and [defamation](#) (never the slightest actual charge) against Holocaust survivors, accusing them either of “war crimes” (for joining the anti-Nazi resistance) or “libel” (for telling the simple truth). In the absence of written apologies, the defamation now takes on a life of its own, and grows by the year on the web and in history books.

Three of the accused are Israeli citizens, but Israel [fails to speak](#) up, howsoever mildly, for its wronged citizens on this occasion. Meanwhile, in Lithuania, streets are named for perpetrators, and even a university lecture hall in [Kaunas](#) gets named for the [Nazi puppet](#) prime minister ([reburied](#) with full honors in 2012) who signed papers consigning his city’s Jewish citizens to a ghetto.

WHILE WE are no longer surprised by the abuse of legislatures, laws and courts to intimidate historical truth-tellers in Russia and China, we must, as champions of democracy, be quick to call out our own East European allies who have, alas, criminalized the Western (and empirically accurate) narrative of World War II. New laws in recent years threaten punishments for disagreeing with aspects of the “Double Genocide” theory. These include sentences of up to two years of imprisonment in [Lithuania](#), three in [Hungary](#), five in [Latvia](#), and ten in [Ukraine](#). One patriotic Lithuanian journalist, [Evaldas Balčiūnas](#), has been lugged into court for years for asking that his beloved country not honor Holocaust perpetrators.

Holocaust collaborators are honored in Eastern Europe for being “anti-Soviet.” Indeed, virtually all the Hitlerist murderers in Eastern Europe were “anti-Soviet.” From the outbreak of genocide per se, with the Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941 until war’s end, every fascist dreamed of a Hitler victory, and every Jew (and all the other victims, and opponents of fascism) prayed for a Soviet triumph. There were no American or

British troops in those parts. Moreover, millions of Soviet soldiers had to die in the east before the West could contemplate D-Day in the west, three years later. One of the main foundations of East European anti-Semitism, little understood elsewhere, is that local Jews are hated for having a historic narrative that recalls the Allies/Soviet victory over Hitler, and in a clear majority of cases, pride in family members who fought valiantly in the Red Army to free their country of the Nazis.

If not for the Soviet war effort, virtually all these nations would have become part of Hitler's *Lebensraum* park in the east. The Baltic states would not have been there to become independent in 1991. The Anglo-American-Soviet alliance cannot be knocked out of history because of our Eastern European allies' ultranationalist whims -- which are not, incidentally, unconnected to the region's lingering racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia. Shamefully, the U.S. State Department has at times been [complicit](#) in covering it all up with sugar and spice.

Of course we must vigorously oppose Putin's evils and protect existing NATO allies, but trying to rewrite World War II history is not the way forward on either score.

SOME WESTERN (mostly Jewish) [scholars and communal leaders](#) have become fellow travelers. Famous Jewish organizations (AJC, WJC, Yad Vashem's "[political department](#)," and [YIVO](#)) have sometimes caved on these central issues of ethics, truth, and loyalty to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, and the need for the truth about the Holocaust to survive our generation. Occasionally some even slip into trying to prove that the Soviets were actually co-responsible for the Holocaust (often in the spirit of [Timothy Snyder's works](#)).

But it was rather shocking to read in the Huffington Post an obsequious [follow-up](#) to the *Washington Post* editorial signed, somewhat shockingly, by a very high official of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. That opinion piece subscribes to this revisionism that has flowed from East European capitals right to Western editorial pages, not seldom via the State Department: that "the horrors of the Holocaust almost certainly would not have unfolded as they did" if not for Soviet actions. This is not much ameliorated by the perfunctory and half-hearted tack-on, toward the end, of comments about non-Russian East Europe, with quotes from the heroic Jerusalem-based Nazi-hunter Dr. Efraim Zuroff, who had been battling the East European history-fixers for years.

For years, the Wiesenthal Center had been the last holdout for integrity on these questions among major American Jewish organizations. Indeed, if the Center found it at all necessary to follow up on the *Washington Post* editorial, it should have been primarily to point out the obvious about what was *missing* in that editorial. While the Soviets' 1939 invasion of eastern Poland was one of thousands of disgraceful and contemptible invasions in world history, it was not "the same" as Hitler's 1939 invasion of western/central Poland. In the German sector, Hitler's forces unleashed the Holocaust, the worst genocide in the history of humankind. In the Soviet sector, all of the various peoples were granted full equality to live equally under (lousy, autocratic, freedom-stifling, wealth-stealing) Soviet law. Any Jew that could flee to the Soviet sector was quick to do so. Many thousands of Jews today exist on the planet precisely because their parents, grandparents and others fled to the Soviet sector.

Sure, the bona fide rainbow of ancient religious and modern Jewish secular cultures was replaced by the imposition of the monolithic and often quite boring Soviet Yiddish culture. But many Jewish memoirs of the period recall also the Soviets making it illegal (and punishable by a fine) to use ethnic slurs such as *zhyd*. To try, against every elementary reasoning, to compare and equalize this state of affairs with what was happening in the Nazi sector is attractive to today's East European anti-Semitic Holocaust trivializers. It should be pure and unadulterated anathema to everything the Wiesenthal Center stands for.

We must resolutely support our allies in Eastern Europe, but when it comes to the pro-fascist tilt in their heavily-financed campaigns of history-fixing, we can be better friends still by Just saying NO. But if the international Jewish organizations continue their policy of tacit collaboration, shrouded in a policy of hush-up, suck-up, cover-up and come-along, there is little hope for change. Meanwhile, East European countries continue to invest in everything from "Holocaust commemoration" PR stunts to "Yiddish song and culture" as their own gleeful cover for the ongoing policies of glorifying the collaborators, blaming the victims, and working to write the Holocaust (as such) out of history via the "Double Genocide" theory -- without having to bother denying a single death. This is tied to a strange East European incarnation of [anti-Semitism](#) that despises the local Jews, dead and alive alike, while embracing today's naive Western Jews and Israelis as god-like giants.

It is time for a counter-current of ideas to rise to the fore, and for a rapid end to the de facto embargo on discussing these topics openly and with dignity. Let this be

something for the powerful American Jewish (and other) organizations to reflect upon in this Yom Kippur season of solemn and frank reflection.

Dovid Katz is a Brooklyn-born, Vilnius-based independent Yiddish studies and Holocaust scholar. He edits [Defending History.com](http://DefendingHistory.com). He founded and led Yiddish Studies at Oxford for eighteen years, and after a stint at Yale, was professor of Yiddish language, literature, and culture at Vilnius University (1999-2010). Katz is a leading critic of the "Double Genocide" Holocaust revisionist theory. His personal website is www.DovidKatz.net. **JC**

Dovid Katz is a Brooklyn-born, Vilnius-based independent Yiddish studies and Holocaust scholar, and the editor of Defending History.com. He is at work on his *Yiddish Cultural Dictionary*.

Recently Featured



REPORT

The Hindu Nationalists Using the Pro-Israel Playbook

Inspired by Jewish groups that cast criticism of Israel as antisemitism, Hindu American organizations are advancing a concept of “Hinduphobia” that puts India beyond reproach.

Aparna Gopalan

Also in “Writings Grid”

Also in “Blog-Shmog”

BLOG-SHMOG

JEWDAYO Rocks: Jewish Rock and Roll Dates for August

Lawrence Bush

WRITINGS GRID

The Homeless: Disparaged and Scorned

Actually, we don’t have the slightest idea what the homeless need.

Allan Lichtenstein

Also by Dovid Katz

EUROPE

Poland's New Holocaust Law Is Bad, But Not the Worst

The law is an overreaction to some common mischaracterizations of Poland's role in the Holocaust, but it's far from the worst example of legal revisionism in Europe.

Dovid Katz

ARTICLES WRITINGS GRID

The "Double Genocide" Theory

Dovid Katz

Sign up for our email newsletter, featuring exclusive original content

EMAIL ADDRESS

SIGN UP!

Founded in 1946, *Jewish Currents* is a magazine committed to the rich tradition of thought, activism, and culture of the Jewish left.

[Donate](#)

[Subscribe](#)



[About](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Podcast](#)

[All Articles](#)

[Events](#)

[Contact](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Careers](#)

[Magazine](#)

[Shop](#)

You should follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#). And listen to our [podcast](#).