

# THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE CRIMES OF THE NAZI AND SOVIET OCCUPATION REGIMES IN LITHUANIA: SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES, PERSPECTIVES

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The article summarizes the history of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania and outlines the work it has accomplished to date. The author reviews the problems and controversies surrounding the Commission's research into the post-1940 period of Lithuania's history and describes the clashing perspectives inherent in the starkly different Lithuanian, Jewish, Western and Soviet wartime narratives.

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**Keywords:** Lithuania; World War II; Nazi occupation of Lithuania; Holocaust; Soviet occupation of Lithuania; War crimes; International historical commissions

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### **The Commission Established**

In May 1998 the three Baltic presidents approved the creation of international commissions to investigate the Soviet and Nazi occupations of their respective countries. In Vilnius, the new body took on the cumbersome title of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania (henceforth referred to as the Commission).<sup>1</sup> This body was formed on the basis of President Valdas Adamkus's decree of 7 September 1998. The Commission was justified with the argument that "due to the repressive legacy of Soviet rule painful problems of the past, such as the Holocaust and other issues, had never been subjected to uncensored public discussion". The government

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recognized “that for the sake of future generations such historical issues must be addressed, researched and evaluated in compliance with accepted international standards”.<sup>2</sup> The Marxist canons and the highly politicized institutions of history education and research of the Lithuanian SSR not only masked the crimes against humanity carried out by the Soviet regime, but also drastically curtailed any analysis of the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish tragedy which since the 1960s had become one of the central themes in research and commemoration in the West (Staliūnas 2010, 124–33).

Emanuelis Zingeris, the only Jewish member of the Seimas, was named chairman of the body. Invitations to join the Commission were issued to a number of Lithuanian, American, German, and Russian scholars and public figures. Of the latter, most had academic credentials but were not necessarily historians. The research was to be accomplished by Lithuanian and foreign experts appointed and hired by the Commission, which would approve the work, disseminate the studies, and draw general conclusions. The makeup of the body was intended to provide international credibility in the search for the truth about Soviet and Nazi crimes.

From a juridical and historical point of view the period between 1940 and 1991 comprised an easily understandable and legitimately distinct framework for research. The Commission’s mandate encompassed the years during which crimes were committed as a result of foreign (Nazi and Soviet) aggression, that is, under conditions of occupation. However, since the two totalitarian regimes in question acted for different ideological reasons and employed distinct methods, the Commission established separate sub-commissions during its first meeting on 17 November 1998, one for the evaluation of the Soviet period and another for the assessment of Nazi rule. On several occasions, the Commission reiterated that, as both a practical matter and a point of principle, research on the Nazi and Soviet periods would be treated separately, in order “to clearly distinguish between the crimes committed by the two occupation regimes and to avoid superficial analogies during their analysis and evaluation”.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the project came under criticism. The Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel, as well as other Jewish groups in the West, complained that the very name of the Commission constituted an offensive conflation of Nazism and Communism, a cynical “façade-painting” gambit intended to facilitate Lithuania’s political stature as a candidate for the European Union and NATO.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, some Lithuanian émigrés, suspecting (correctly) that the Commission would address the issue of native collaboration in the Holocaust, insinuated that the President’s initiative was a Jewish-financed plot or, at best, was undertaken as a result of American pressure.

An ambitious work plan for the comprehensive study of the history of the loss of statehood and the consequent period of extended foreign occupation was presented in detail at the third meeting of the Commission in Vilnius on 29 August 1999. It comprised an introductory study of the crisis of the late 1930s, especially the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as well as research on the four distinct periods of foreign rule: the first Soviet occupation of 1940–1941, the German occupation of 1941–1944, the “first phase” of the second Soviet occupation (1944–1953), and the post-Stalin “second phase” of the Soviet period (1953–1990). Eight

plenum meetings and one Nazi crimes sub-commission meeting were held between 1998 and 2005. During the fourth plenum meeting of the Commission in June 2000 the expert groups and researchers were appointed. Following extensive negotiations, a working arrangement was initiated with representatives from Yad Vashem. Drs. Yitzhak Arad and Dov Levin participated in the Commission's meetings. Arad served as a member until 2007.<sup>5</sup> The Commission's web-site ([www.komisija.lt](http://www.komisija.lt)) contains a comprehensive listing of its work: publications, both print and electronic as well as the formal conclusions of the Commission adopted at meetings, historical documents, accounts of conferences, various reports of the researchers and members of the Commission.<sup>6</sup>

### **Publications, Research, Community Outreach**

The sub-commission on Nazi crimes undertook a number of investigations: anti-Semitism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a “precondition of the Holocaust” (before June 1941); the mass murder of the Jews during the summer and fall of 1941 as well as the role of Lithuanian police battalions in the Holocaust; the genocide in Lithuania's provinces; the looting of Jewish assets and property; Nazi persecution and murder of non-Jews, including Lithuanians, Poles and Roma; and the fate of Soviet prisoners of war on Lithuanian territory. Further research was to explore the problems of forced labor, the history of the ghettos, and other aspects of the German occupation. Before the suspension of its formal meetings in 2007 (see below), the Commission published three volumes in its series, “The Crimes of the Totalitarian Regimes. The Nazi Occupation”. Another four studies have been posted electronically [Appendix A]. It is important to note that some of the research material originally financed by the Commission has appeared in publications outside the purview of the Commission itself. For example, a considerable part of the most recent substantial study of the Holocaust in Lithuania (Bubnys 2011) was largely the result of such “work product”.

In addition to the organization and promulgation of scholarly research, the Commission initiated a series of conferences, as well as Holocaust education and commemoration programs. “The Holocaust in Lithuania in the Focus of Modern History, Education and Justice” conference convened in Vilnius on 23–25 September 2002 was the largest scholarly gathering ever held in the Baltic, bringing together delegates and scholars from Israel (including the recognized authority on the Holocaust, Yehuda Bauer), the United States, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Poland and other countries. The Commission has initiated a number of agreements with Lithuanian government agencies and higher education institutions, including the military academies and police academies, to facilitate instructional programs on genocide.<sup>7</sup> During the past decade the Commission signed agreements for cooperation with the Holocaust Centre Beth Shalom, the International School for Holocaust Studies of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority (until 2005), the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, and other institutions. In 2002 Lithuania became a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The Executive Director of the Commission participates in the annual Task Force meetings. The Commission also cooperates with the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. 115

From the very beginning, Chairman Zingeris had stressed that exposing the crimes of the totalitarian regimes was an important avenue for promoting civil society and strengthening democratic values. The Commission established a program for schools which embraced teacher training, tolerance education and the construction of a national curriculum emphasizing the period of the occupations. Some 3500 teachers attended conferences and seminars, of whom 223 traveled to Yad Vashem to participate in educational programs between 2003 and 2013. In association with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the Commission implemented the program “Memorial Sites as a Key for the Future Education”, which brought together 50 teachers, museum specialists and educators from Poland and Lithuania to share experiences and methodological insights.<sup>8</sup> 120

To reach out to pupils in the schools, the Commission’s Deputy Director for Educational Projects created a Tolerance Education Network (TEN) which sponsors 86 centers throughout the country to foster Holocaust education and the commemoration of Nazi and Soviet crimes. A 2004 survey found that students involved in the TEN programs “have better knowledge of history, ... [a] more developed culture of remembrance and understanding of crimes against humanity, and more positive attitude toward minorities and ethnic groups”. The TEN program is closely related to the development of a national curriculum on the period of foreign occupations. The Holocaust curriculum now contains a “methodical program” of 16 lessons targeting different age groups. There is a separate program on Jewish Vilnius which seeks to introduce students to Jewish life and culture. The Commission has encouraged the participation of students, especially in secondary schools, during days of commemoration, such as 13 January (Freedom Defenders’ Day), 27 January (International Holocaust Remembrance Day), 14 June (The Day of Mourning and Hope), 23 September (The Day of the Genocide of Lithuania’s Jews), 16 November (International Day of Tolerance), and other anniversaries.<sup>9</sup> 135

In considering the work of the sub-commission on Soviet crimes one should note the conference held on 30 August 1999, the 60th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which focused on the consequences of German-Soviet diplomacy for the states of Eastern Europe. Since denunciation of the Pact had been one of the most important political weapons in the arsenal of the Baltic independence movements during the late 1980s, the historical context of 1939 has been seen primarily through the prism of Stalinist aggression and its consequences for the peoples of the region. Thus, the focus on the Pact served as a prelude to examination of Soviet rather than Nazi crimes.<sup>10</sup> 140

Between 2006 and 2009 the research group for Soviet crimes produced five volumes in the series, “The Crimes of the Totalitarian Regimes in Lithuania: The Soviet Occupation”. Three volumes dealt with the first Soviet occupation and two addressed the postwar period. Aside from the published volumes, the majority of material produced by the Soviet working group dealt with the first Soviet occupation of 1940–1941 [Appendix B] The researchers divided their examination of this period into two parts. The first dealt with the actual crimes of the occupying authorities: the 145

Sovietization and annexation of the country, the system of arrests and other repressive acts, the suppression of cultural, religious and economic life, the mass deportations of 14–18 June 1941, and the massacres carried out by the retreating Soviet forces at the onset of the Nazi-Soviet war. The second part of the research outlined the role of the military, security and political agencies of the occupation as well as that of the collaborators with the Soviet regime. The post-Stalin period of the Soviet occupation remains to be addressed. 165

In addition to the reports and conclusions, the Commission sought to elucidate the history of the Soviet occupation for a broader audience. In conjunction with the “Europe for Citizens” program of the European Commission (Action 4: Active European Remembrance), three scholarly programs were initiated for scholars and the wider public: the “Red Year” program on the first year of Soviet occupation of the Baltic States held in 2011, the “History and Memory: the Soviet Case” organized together with Czech and Romanian institutions which resulted in an international conference in Vilnius on 28–29 November 2011, and the “United Europe-United History” Forum organized at the Seimas in Lithuania, on 15–16 November 2012.<sup>11</sup> 170 175

### Research Interrupted: The Arad Case

On 18–20 April 2005 the Commission held its eighth plenum meeting in Vilnius. It concluded by approving the continuation of research on the Holocaust and work on the Stalinist phase (1944–1953) of the second Soviet occupation. Commission members who attended could not know that this would be their last official meeting until 2013. Following a series of press accounts concerning the activities of Soviet partisans in eastern Lithuania during the final phase of the Nazi occupation, the Lithuanian procurator’s office formally opened an investigation into the matter in June 2007. As part of the inquiry, the procurator sought to question Dr. Yitzhak Arad, former director of Yad Vashem, and a member of the Commission. The investigation centered on the massacre of 38 villagers in the hamlet of Kaniūkai (Koniuchy) by a Soviet partisan unit in January 1944 (Zizas 2002). It is clear from Arad’s own memoir that his account of a partisan attack on a village in which he had taken part was not connected to the killings at Kaniūkai (Arad 1979, 158–59). However, the images of embattled Lithuanian communities in eastern Lithuania during the particularly violent 1944–1945 period raised a hornet’s nest of memories. 180 185 190

The probe evoked foreign protests, outrage among Jews everywhere, even criticism from President Adamkus. The Lithuanian judiciary had conspicuously failed to press the investigation of pro-Nazi collaborators and this gave rise to charges of hypocrisy concerning the motives behind the investigation of Jewish partisans. One effect of the inquest was that the procurator’s office derailed the Commission’s research on Nazi war crimes. On 5 September 2007, Avner Shalev, the Chairman of the Directorate of Yad Vashem, protested the “groundless judicial procedures” against a “victim of Nazi oppression” and suspended Israeli participation in the Commission. Chairman Zingeris wrote to Shalev expressing his own dismay at the actions of the Lithuanian judiciary and expressed his “public support” for Dr. Arad. In the meantime, Zingeris promised to “not reconvene any meeting of our 195 200

Commission until the General Prosecutor's investigation is closed and the matter is put behind us".<sup>12</sup> 205

The motives behind this politically oblivious investigation are difficult to comprehend, but the prosecution created an insoluble tangle for the authorities. Any attempt by the executive branch to halt the proceedings risked charges of unwarranted, perhaps even unconstitutional, interference with the judiciary. On a more subjective but no less important level, the Arad controversy thrust clashing Lithuanian and Jewish historical imaginations into the open. In the memories of many ethnic Lithuanians, the Soviet guerillas are forever linked to the Stalinists, who were, of course, the only "anti-fascists" they had ever met in real life. Thus, this particular label does not evoke the warm feelings that it does in the West. Naturally, the impoverished peasants of the eastern Lithuanian woodlands resented forced requisitions regardless of the uniforms of those seizing their food. In any case, the history of the resistance is complicated in the extreme: the Communist-led partisans battled the German and collaborationist forces, but also fought the Polish Home Army, the largest anti-Nazi resistance movement of an Allied government in all of Europe. 210

Whatever the nuances, the procurator's further attempt to question as witnesses Fania Brantsovskaya and Rochl Margolis, two elderly former survivors, partisans and well-known members of Vilnius's Jewish community, came across as a witless and cruel exercise in blaming the victims. According to Efraim Zuroff of the Wiesenthal Center, the process was a "deliberate campaign ... to discredit the brave Jewish heroes of the anti-Nazi resistance and help deflect attention from the infinitely more numerous crimes by Lithuanians against Jews during the Holocaust" (Liekis and Sužiedėlis 2013, 339–42, 350, fn. 54,55). In September 2008, the procurators closed the case in an awkwardly worded press release, bringing the embarrassing episode to an end. At the very least, the case against Arad, a ghetto inmate faced with an existential choice, who had fled to the forests as a teenager to battle the fascists who had murdered his family, revealed an appalling dearth of historical sense, human sensitivity and understanding of the uniquely desperate circumstances of Jews under Nazi occupation. 220

### Prospects: Clashing Memories and the "Devil in History"

On 1 September 2008, leaders of the Lithuanian Jewish community addressed an open letter to the "leaders of the Lithuanian state" complaining of anti-Semitic manifestations within society and criticizing the "persecution of Jewish antifascist partisans". The choice of language was interesting, unwittingly revealing the contrasts on how the Soviet role in World War II is remembered, or, in some cases, celebrated. "Does Lithuania recognize the victory of the anti-Hitler coalition during the Second World War? Does the Republic of Lithuania recognize the decisions of the Nuremberg trials?" the authors asked.<sup>13</sup> The wording recalls the air of statements emanating from official Russian sources which tend to criticize any questioning of "the outcome of World War II" and which emphasize the role of the USSR in "liberating Europe and the entire world from Fascism".<sup>14</sup> 240

Of course, most Lithuanians know who won the war. The problem is that the Grand Alliance, or, if one prefers Soviet-style verbiage, the “anti-Hitler coalition”, includes a state responsible for the deaths of the vast majority of the thousands of ethnic Lithuanians who perished during the exceedingly violent period between 1940 and 1953. Not surprisingly, when the Soviets drove out the Nazis in 1944, the subsequent conscription of Lithuanian men into the Red Army met with widespread resistance. There was little enthusiasm at the prospect of dying for Stalin even if this meant joining the campaign against fascism. A number of ethnic Lithuanians served in the 16th Lithuanian Division of the Red Army, which had been formed in Russia in 1943, but the unit had a majority Jewish and Russian contingent. The aging veterans who served in the Red Army, and part of the rural populace mired in nostalgia for the Soviet period, still find comfort in the Great Patriotic War, but these groups and their wartime narratives have been significantly marginalized.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuanians and the other Baltic peoples have shaped their own narratives of the war. For many if not most Baltic citizens, the German occupation of 1941–1944/5 does not automatically evoke images of destruction, heroism and redemption. Simply put, for many elderly Baltic citizens the Nazi years were not the worst experience of their lives. The outbreak of the war in June 1941 meant death for the Jews, but for many Lithuanians it represented a reprieve from deportation if not outright liberation (of course, Soviet exile meant, in hindsight, salvation for Jewish deportees). Thus, the Grand Alliance chronicle, with its emphasis on the positive role of the Soviet Union, has limited resonance in the Baltic States. It is important to note that the victorious Allies also experienced a significant sense of redemption in the face of horrendous sacrifices. Soviet victory transformed the USSR into a superpower; Israel rose out of the ashes as a home for a people once destined for death; Poland could claim compensation with its “regained” western lands. Recently, the iconic elevation of America’s “Greatest Generation” and the films of Steven Spielberg (“Private Ryan”, “Schindler’s List”) delivered to audiences upbeat moral lessons about the most destructive war in history.

For most Lithuanians the war did not produce a redemptive outcome. In their despair at war’s end, Baltic refugees who fled to the West, as well as the victims of the postwar violence at home, found comfort only in illusion. One fantasy which provided relief from a bleak future was the hope that Western intervention would compel a Soviet withdrawal. This creates difficulties in confronting the legacy of Nazism. The fact that the “outside world’s” imagery of World War II does not reflect the experience of most ethnic Lithuanians encourages a tendency to see the Holocaust as a Western obsession, making it harder to appreciate the gravity of the Shoah and its centrality to the nation’s history. The problem is not that the Allied narrative is wrong, but that it is unconnected to the collective memory of a large part of the populace whose most violent experience in modern times encompassed the decade which began in the summer of 1944. Many more ethnic Lithuanians died in the years following V-E day than during the Second World War. In a few locales with small Jewish populations, total violent deaths after May 1945 exceeded those incurred during the preceding years of conflict. Stalinist repression and the armed anti-Soviet insurgency of those years is defined by the Lithuanian word *pokaris* (literally, “the post-war”), a term widely understood to denote violent struggle rather than peace.

Following Germany's capitulation, the anti-Soviet guerilla war resulted in some 30,000–40,000 civilian and combatant deaths, while mass deportations and other repressive measures affected another 130,000 victims, mostly ethnic Lithuanians.

One should stress that this experience is not unique to Lithuania. Historian Olaf Mertelsmann reports that in Estonia the German occupation resulted in the death of some 8000 inhabitants. Only Norway and Denmark suffered fewer civilian deaths under the Nazis. Estonia is an exceptional case in the region described by Timothy Snyder as the “bloodlands”: it is the only place where Jews did not constitute the majority of indigenous civilian victims during the German occupation. As Mertelsmann notes, “for most of the inhabitants of the country postwar Stalinism was a worse experience than the German occupation” (Mertelsmann 2012, 363–66). Such a conclusion needs no ideological predilection; a grasp of arithmetic suffices.

The comparative scales of suffering which enhance divided memories have affected the international community of historians. Eva-Clarita Pettai has described well the way in which Western historians and their Baltic colleagues have often failed to find common ground amid “mutual accusations of ignorance”. Baltic historians (in this case Latvian scholars) resent “Western ignorance of local peculiarities”, while Western scholars attacked their Baltic colleagues for a lack of interest in “broader comparative discussion” (Pettai 2011, 263–65). It is no secret that many Baltic historians consider their Western counterparts insufficiently sensitive to their societies' experience under Soviet occupation.

Considering the political importance which the governments of Russia, Poland, Israel and the Baltic States attach to the history and memory of the Second World War, it is no surprise that the historical commissions to evaluate the crimes of the occupying powers find themselves pressed to consider conflicting historical memories. The politicized nature of disagreements about a contentious past is further complicated by the activities of constituencies interested in furthering their own, sometimes highly selective, historical interpretations. The Bronze Soldier riots of April 2007 in Tallinn show that memory wars can indeed turn fatal (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008). The history wars took a nasty turn at the OCSE Parliamentary Assembly in Vilnius in July 2009, when the Lithuanian delegation proposed a resolution “On Divided Europe Reunited”, condemning both Stalinism and Nazism and designating 23 August as a “Europe-wide Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism”. The Greek Communist representative, Costas Alissandrakis, ridiculed the notion of a Soviet occupation of Lithuania and termed any talk of Soviet mass deportations as “folk tales”, which provoked an angry retort and walk-out by Arūnas Valinskas, the speaker of the Seimas. The Russian delegation protested the resolution and boycotted the vote, while Russia's foreign ministry angrily denounced the remembrance resolution as an insult.<sup>15</sup>

In May 2009, Dr. Dovid Katz, an American scholar of Yiddish literature living in Vilnius, published an attack on what he termed the official Lithuanian “genocide industry”, including the Commission chaired by Lithuania's best-known Jewish politician, which he claimed had the sole aim of “Holocaust obfuscation”. The major point of departure for the controversy was the so-called Prague Declaration of 3 June 2008 signed by Vaclav Havel, Vytautas Landsbergis, Emanuelis Zingeris, Joachim Gauck, and a number of other East European politicians, former dissidents and public figures.

The Declaration called on European institutions to evaluate and condemn the crimes of Communism based on the Nuremberg Trial model and to educate the public on the crimes of both Nazism and Communism. Katz claimed that the purpose of placing an “equal sign” between the two systems was none other than a crafty attempt to obscure the collaboration of local populations in the Holocaust. Jewish Lithuanians who disagreed with Katz’s position were dismissed as obsequious “show Jews”. Efraim Zuroff also attacked the Prague Declaration in the *Jerusalem Post*, citing it as a threat to the “unique status” of the Shoah and warning against “a new and distorted World War II historical narrative” (Zuroff 2009). Both authors claimed that Soviet crimes were not genocidal in nature.<sup>16</sup> The attack on the alleged conflation of Communism and Nazism made no mention of scholarly literature comparing totalitarian systems, nor did it explain why the work of prominent and respected scholars on the subject should be considered suspect or illegitimate.<sup>17</sup> Katz has dismissively referred to the Commission as the “Red-Brown Commission” and has launched a web-site (DefendingHistory.com) devoted in large part to attacking the Prague Declaration, as well as alleged attempts to equate Communism and Nazism.

In February 2009, the Russian Duma began considering legislation which would criminalize the questioning of the Soviet version of World War II. On 15 May 2009, President Medvedev issued a decree creating a 28-member Commission to Counteract Attempts at Falsifying History to Damage the Interests of Russia. This attempt at “defending history” evoked widespread derision and protests, including a letter to the Russian president from the American Historical Association (AHA) objecting to limitations on the “basic principle of intellectual freedom”.<sup>18</sup> The embarrassing decree was abrogated in February 2012. The AHA, the French association *Liberté pour l’Histoire*, and other scholarly groups have opposed legislating history through so-called “memory laws” and have argued that the historical profession has sufficient means to marginalize scholars who distort evidence without reverting to legal sanction. In their view, the methods of free inquiry are based on rules of evidence that have been developed by the discipline as practiced in liberal democracies. Most historians who have something new to say are inevitably “revisionists”, otherwise their work and analysis of the past would be without purpose. Advocates of “defending history” are actually seeking to shield a narrative which, for some reason, should not be challenged or modified. In any case, history, as any other social or physical science, is a dynamic and constantly evolving field; in effect, defending history makes no more sense than protecting chemistry or physics from new trends in research.

Government-sponsored institutions, such as the Lithuanian Commission and those of Latvia and Estonia, thus find themselves inevitably entangled in ongoing controversies regarding the evaluation of the two totalitarian systems which nearly everyone agrees have carried out the most extensive crimes against humanity in twentieth-century Europe. The emotional debates which have swirled around such events as the publication of the Black Book of Communism and the issuance of the Prague Declaration will continue to rile emotions concerning the “Devil in History”, the title of Vladimir Tismăneanu’s recent work on the evils of the twentieth century (Tismăneanu 2012, 30–38). The sensitivities surrounding the issue are reflected in the most recent attempts to revive and expand the Commission’s stalled research apparatus. On 28 August 2012, President Dalia Grybauskaitė issued a decree renewing the

Commission's mandate and appointing a new group which included a number of previous members as well as new representatives. In the preamble, the decree acknowledged "the unique and unprecedented nature and scope of the Holocaust, other crimes of the Nazi regime and the painful consequences of the Soviet regime to Lithuania's people". Paragraph 2 of the text stipulated that "the Commission shall be made up of two separate and independent sub-commissions". On 16 October 2012, the president reissued the decree with new wording in the second paragraph, emphasizing that the purpose of creating two sub-commissions was to "seek to mark the dividing line between the crimes of the Nazi and Soviet occupation regimes" and appointing a new member from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.<sup>19</sup> This was a strange twist since the new formulation added little to the initial document, which had already underlined the unique position of the Holocaust and had clearly separated the responsibilities of the Nazi and Soviet sub-commissions. The fact that the second decree was publicly welcomed by the US Embassy in Vilnius may give some clue that the Commission's work was never far from being the subject of back-room international politics.<sup>20</sup>

With the authorization of the President's decree the Commission met in Vilnius after an eight-year hiatus on 12–14 October 2013. The sub-commissions on Nazi and Soviet crimes were reconstituted with a broadly international membership and preliminary research goals were formulated. The distinct nature of the Soviet and Nazi crimes and the autonomy of the two sub-commissions were reaffirmed. The members of the Commission expressed their "strong anger and disappointment at the unwarranted accusations against Dr. Yitzhak Arad which had led to the suspension of meetings in 2008". In a letter to Dr. Arad the Commission condemned "the unwarranted attacks" which had led to the suspension of the Commission's research program. The Commission expressed the hope that the "President and Government of the Republic of Lithuania would provide adequate support for [the Commission's] activities for the purpose of creating a pluralistic, democratic and open society".<sup>21</sup>

It is an inconvenient reality that the Western perspective of the Second World War remains largely irrelevant to most Lithuanians. While serious scholars have argued that Soviet Communism was the lesser evil of the two totalitarian systems in question, which is doubtless true for Poles,<sup>22</sup> Jews, Gypsies and western Europeans, this proposition would hardly convince ethnic Lithuanians whose encounters with recent history, in terms of both past experience and the very statistics of death, were quite different.<sup>23</sup> Little is to be gained in challenging Baltic wartime memories which inform popular sentiment. Addressing the genocide committed by the Nazis and their collaborators in Lithuania would likely be facilitated if the public perceived an approach to the wartime past which did not automatically treat all critical research on the Soviet role in the Eastern Front as a sacrilege.

Clearly, if the Commission is to succeed in its task of fostering civil society while at the same time exploring Lithuania's troubled past, then it must steer clear of overly politicized conclusions and allow the research to proceed in a spirit of academic integrity and freedom of inquiry, even if this means producing narratives which reflect divided memories. This is no easy task considering that there is always the temptation

to produce “officially sanctioned” history. On the ambitious task of promoting civil society, the Commission’s main challenge is not so much the Soviet past as the strategy of confronting the highly emotional subject of the genocide of the Jews. While Lithuanian elites, the academy, and society have made progress in engaging with the Holocaust, it is clear that much still remains to be done. The acceptance of the Holocaust into the historical imagination of Lithuanians requires a reorientation of national history to include three essential narrative elements: recognition of Jewish life and culture as intrinsic to Lithuania’s past; the understanding, acceptance, and commemoration of the Shoah as a central event in the modern history of the country; and a thorough examination of the behavior of the Lithuanian people during the destruction of the Jews. None of this requires Lithuanians to reject their own historical experience of Soviet terror or internalize narratives, such as the Red Army liberation story, which violate their collective memory and historical common sense. The integrity of the research into Soviet and Nazi crimes against humanity must meet high academic standards while at the same time acknowledging that some experiences and memories of the war may never be reconciled. It would be stating the obvious that this is a daunting task.

## Notes

- 1 Recently the agency has styled itself in English with the shorter designation of the International Historical Commission without abandoning its formal title. In Lithuanian it is now often referred to as *Istorinio teisingumo komisija*, which can translate as the Commission for Historical Justice, or also as the Commission for Historical Truth. 450
- 2 “The Decree on the Establishment of the Commission” <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1150456073> (accessed 19 September 2013).
- 3 “Outline of the Work Plan” in <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1173548714> (accessed 5 July 2009). 455
- 4 Letter of Joseph A. Melamed, Chairman of the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel to President Valdas Adamkus, 6 November 1998. Available at <http://defendinghistory.com/lithuanian-holocaust-survivors-release-1998-letter-on-the-red-brown-commission/45227> (accessed 12 August 2013). 460
- 5 The list of sessions is available at <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1150461040> (accessed 10 August 2013).
- 6 In particular, see the Commission’s “Data Base” in <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1194863084> (accessed 13 August 2013).
- 7 See <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1150465846> (accessed 5 July 2009). 465
- 8 See the comprehensive account in “Education” available at <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1150465846> (accessed 18 November 2013).
- 9 More on the TEN program available at (<http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1175682167>) (accessed 30 August 2013). 470
- 10 Conference papers are at <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1194863233>. One should note here the interesting paper by Natalya Lebedeva based on newly accessible documents, “The Politburo of the Central

- Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) and Sovietization of the Territories Annexed in 1939–1941”. 475
- 11 Information available at <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1345723520> (Europe for Citizens).
- 12 Shalev to Zingeris, 5 September 2007; Zingeris to Shalev, 28 September 2007 (letters courtesy of Emanuelis Zingeris). However, the Commission’s educational and commemorative activities in fostering Holocaust education have continued. 480
- 13 Letter of Simonas Alperavičius, the Chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, and Tobijas Jafetas, Chairman of the Association of Former Ghetto and Concentration Camp Inmates, to Lithuania’s President, Prime Minister and General Procurator, 1 September 2008, “Lietuvos žydų bendruomenė išplatino viešą laišką Lietuvos valstybės vadovams”, available at <http://www.bernardinai.lt/index.php?url=articles/84192> (accessed 10 November 2008). 485
- 14 Press Release of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN, 27 January 2009, available at <http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/press/090127eprel2.htm> (accessed 15 September 2013). 490
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- 16 Dovid Katz, “Prague’s declaration of disgrace”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 22 May 2009, at <http://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/prague%E2%80%99s-declaration-disgrace> (accessed August 1, 2009), and more in *Irish Times*, 30 May 2009, “Genocide Industry Has Hidden Agenda”, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2009/0530/1224247744866.html> (accessed 1 August 2009). Cf. Efraim Zuroff, “A combined day of commemoration for the victims of Nazism and communism?”, *Jerusalem Post*, 12 July 2009, available at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1246443787714&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed 3 August 2009). See the text of the Prague Declaration at <http://praguedeclaration.eu/> (accessed 1 August 2009). 500
- 17 For example, see the massive volume of the well-known specialist of the history of the Third Reich, Gellately (2007).
- 18 See the 17 June 2009 letter of concern to President Medvedev by the American Historical Association, available at [http://www.historians.org/press/Medvedev\\_Letter\\_June\\_17\\_2009.pdf](http://www.historians.org/press/Medvedev_Letter_June_17_2009.pdf) (accessed 2 August 2009). It should be noted that only five members of Medvedev’s commission had any scholarly credentials. 510
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- 20 Report by the Baltic News Service (BNS), 17 October 2012, “Prezidentė išryškino takoskyrą tarp nacių ir soviet nusikaltimų”, <http://lzinios.lt/lzinios/istorija/> 520

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21 [http://www.komisija.lt/download\\_file.php?id=638](http://www.komisija.lt/download_file.php?id=638) (accessed 20 March 2014);  
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22 On some recent views of right-wing Polish scholars who argue that Communist occupation was as evil, or worse, than Nazi rule, see Joanna B. Michlic (2007).

23 A more nuanced discussion of conflicting memories concerning Soviet and Nazi atrocities in contrast to the polemics is in Kai Struve (2007). Cf. Timothy Snyder (2009). Snyder provides a complex view of the relationship between the Nazis and Soviets and how they interacted within the same geopolitical space in Eastern Europe, but is careful to distinguish between the two regimes as in his *Bloodlands* (2010).

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