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HOSTAGES TO AN ILL-BEGOTTEN THEORY

In the name of justice, some who claim to serve the Lithuanian nation are bringing it into disrepute

by **Leonidas Donskis**

Posted on 10 October 2008

Editor's note: Lithuanian authorities in late September closed their two-year investigation into the wartime partisan activities of Yitzhak Arad, a Lithuanian-born Israeli historian and a former head of the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, reportedly on the urging of the European Union and the United States. Prosecutors said there was insufficient evidence to link Arad to possible war crimes committed by Soviet partisans during a 1944 fight with German forces that left many Lithuanian civilians dead. The authorities are still considering whether to put two Lithuanian Jewish women, Fania Brantsovskaya (Brantsovsky) and Rachel Margolis, on the witness stand in connection with the killings.

A disturbing tendency has recently appeared in Lithuania. In the words of the eminent scholar of Yiddish Dovid Katz, this tendency may best be described as the "Holocaust Obfuscation movement." Its essence lies in subversion of the logic and evidence of the Holocaust, whitewashing or at least selectively reading the history of the Second World War and drastically shifting the roles of victims and evil-doers.

The criminal prosecution of former Soviet partisans of Jewish background, in present-day Lithuania, on the grounds of war crimes allegedly committed against Lithuanians, can be described in no other way than as a morally repugnant attempt to blame the victims of the Holocaust for war crimes by manipulating historical facts, images, and stereotypes of the Second World War. When Holocaust survivors, who had no other option during the war than to join the Soviet partisan movement, become suspected of war crimes, we reach the climax of the innocence and victimization syndrome, a new variety of blaming the victim – the grimace of a modern amoral culture.

An older relation of the Holocaust whitewashing tendency is something we might term the "theory of the two genocides." In truth, this pattern of thinking is mere prejudice, called theory inasmuch as conspiracy theory is also so termed. The notion of two genocides was conceived during World War II; afterward, it reappeared first among emigrants (in Soviet

Lithuania, one was not allowed even to mention any specific relations between Lithuanians and Jews, any beautiful moments or tensions between them: There were neither Lithuanians nor Jews as nations, there were only Soviet citizens). It was a kind of attempt to explain the relations between Lithuanians and Jews and why those relations came to such a tragic pass. After all, there had to be some reaction to the uncanny fact that two totalitarian ideologies and the world-destroying regimes hatched by them excavated a fateful gulf between Lithuanians and Jews, between peoples who had seemed inseparable for more than six centuries.

BEYOND CAUSE AND EFFECT

It is flat nonsense that Lithuanians have always hated Jews and have been waiting for an occasion to obliterate them, as is sometimes blatantly asserted. Leaving aside isolated cases of pathological hatred for Jews, those Lithuanians who good-humoredly banter Jews and at the same time themselves are imbued with Jewish humor or even manners make to me the best argument that there is not, and never was, a Kafkaesque chasm of unnameable, mutual horror between these two nations. The two nations were fatefully separated not by nameless and anonymous forces of the modern world, but by very definite social upheavals of the 20th century: World War II and the ideologies behind it as well as the criminal regimes that institutionalized them.

Horror, the feeling of insecurity, war-deformed relations between people are matters that cannot be explained rationally. As the Lithuanian poet and literary scholar Tomas Venclova has aptly remarked, in any crime there is a transcendent vestige that obstinately resists being wedged into a rational theory. I would not need much convincing that some of the Lithuanians who saved Jews might have been, if not modern anti-Semites, then at least traditional religious Judeophobes, but being Christians they saved people whose lives were in danger. And the converse: I have no doubt that a person who sympathized with Jews in the presence of war and of the collision of two forms of terrible evil could, if not murder them, then at least round them up, confine them in a ghetto, and deliver them for killing. I repeat, I would not be surprised at that a bit, because schemes of cause and effect are fruitless and explain nothing in times of social upheavals.

An eminent émigré Lithuanian political thinker, Aleksandras Shtromas, himself a near-miraculous survivor who owed his life to a Christian couple, remarked that in Lithuania during the Holocaust the same thing happened as in any other country: one minority killed, another saved, and the remaining majority simply observed silently and in fear, pretending that these events were no concern of theirs. Finally, there were also shocked and traumatized Lithuanians who refused to believe the evidence of their own eyes that their neighbors and classmates might be murdered so promptly and horribly.

To be at a loss and not to know what to do are not instances of reprehensible or criminal weakness. Unfortunately, this is part of human reality. The few who act differently are the exceptions to the rule. Shtromas was certain that in such a situation in which the Lithuanians found themselves – in the confrontation of the two totalitarian regimes, and thereby in the

situation of open and non-punishable political terror – the members of any other nation, including the Jews themselves, would have acted more or less in the same way. After all, very similar events happened in Latvia, Ukraine, and other countries that suffered parallel fates.

WHEN FACT FALLS VICTIM TO THEORY

The first genocide – proponents of the theory of two genocides say, taking up and slightly modifying certain gems of Goebbels’ propaganda – consisted of the mass killing of Lithuanians in 1940, instigated by the Jews who themselves took part in it in large numbers. I shall not initiate another argument over what has already been proved by historians: The number of Jewish members in the underground Lithuanian Communist Party was ridiculously small, and if we compare the putative special role of the Jews at the top of the party with that of leading lights Antanas Snieckus, Mecys Gedvilas, or the former social democrat Justas Paleckis, such a role would turn out to be simple fiction.

According to this theory, the disloyalty to, and betrayal of, Lithuania by the Jews became that last straw that broke the patient back of the otherwise tolerant and noble Lithuanian nation. The aggrieved and revengeful Lithuanians then took part (though in single and isolated cases) in the killing of the Jews that had been organized by Nazis. By the way, I could present quotes and references in which our famous and practically canonized philosophers bluntly explicate this position. What, then, to expect from those who but clumsily and belatedly have picked out a few pearls of this wisdom?

In other words, one genocide, carried out by the Bolsheviks (first of all Jewish) and whose victim was the Lithuanian nation, triggered the other genocide, carried out by the Nazis and a few Lithuanians in collaboration with them. But if we bring the inner logic of this construction to the ultimate limit, we would have to admit that the Holocaust was merely Germany’s revenge upon the Jews for Bolshevism, world domination, and conspiracy against the European nations. The foundations for these beliefs are stoutly laid in Mein Kampf.

Tomas Venclova has called the theory of two genocides troglodytic; indeed, only moral troglodytes can believe in their hearts that the killing of old people, children, and women is punishment for the actions of the Jews, who happened to dwell in a multinational state and acted together with the members of other nations – Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, and others.

MERE MENTAL BLOCKS?

Let us look now at a pathetic echo of this theory which has already sounded in today’s Lithuania. Legal harassment (which was later called by the prosecutors “an invitation to testify”) of former ghetto prisoners and Soviet partisans is nothing less than a follow-on of the theory of two genocides. I can hardly believe that our prosecutors can be so deeply and hopelessly caught up in it, but it seems that is precisely the case. If the ghetto survivors and

partisans Rachel Margolis and Fania Brantsovskaya after this still are called to testify, several simple questions offer themselves.

What, then, were those young Jews, whose parents were murdered in their presence, supposed to do? Join the Nazis and their local collaborators, who methodically exterminated them? Or perish themselves, thus unraveling that complicated dilemma? If at that time Soviet partisans were the only power fighting the Nazis, who else then could the Jews join in their fight against their killers? If the moral logic of our prosecutors implies this problem, it seems the only solution would have been to have died. It turns out that these people have complicated their lives and committed a crime precisely by managing to stay alive. If every legal action rests on a certain moral logic and system of values not explicitly declared in legal documents, can it really be that the theory of two genocides is such a moral and value base for the persecution of the former ghetto prisoners and partisans who fought the Nazis?

One would be hard pressed to find a way of bringing Lithuania into greater disrepute in the world than by such actions against the victims of the Holocaust. It is difficult to believe that thinking people thus could degrade Lithuania's reputation and demoralize its society, especially the younger generation, no matter how much they may dislike the Jews (that is their right; they are not obliged to like Jews). Is it a sheer provocation, soon to be taken up in Russia's repulsive and aggression-filled anti-Baltic and anti-Lithuanian propaganda, the "Baltic fascists" card that country always plays? Or are these simply mental clots suffered by several of our prosecutors – an inability to interpret reality other than through the prejudices of two genocides, symmetry of suffering, and Jewish disloyalty? Do we really see here Goebbels's post-mortem smile?

When The Economist recently ran a commentary on the damage to Lithuania arising from these legal actions, a few Lithuanian journalists hastened to denounce the magazine's blackmailing and threats against Lithuania. I would wish upon ourselves as many such enemies and blackmailers as possible, be they inside or outside Lithuania. I can understand the nonconformism of some journalists and their unwillingness to agree mechanically with everything written. Provocation and nonconformism are undoubtedly good things in journalism, but not at the expense of truth, morality, and humanity.

In fact, the logic is very simple here. If your country or a country you sympathize with is wrong, and wrong perniciously, then it hurts, and you do whatever you can to stop it or at least to sound a warning. The moral and political byroads of other countries concern us less urgently. To tell the truth, I am not so sad about anti-Semitism in Russia, Poland, or Germany – it has always been there, and there have always been those who bravely, intrepidly, and nobly took up the struggle against it. But I am sad and hurt that my homeland, as it happens, is still intoxicated with hatred for the vanishing Lithuanian Jews.

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