Contemporary Attitudes toward the Holocaust in Lithuania

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The Holocaust is still an unresolved issue in Lithuania. Such was the conclusion of the largest circulation Lithuania daily Lietuvos rytas when it recently summed up the history of the 20th century. Discussion of the issue has involved not only historians, but also writers, journalists, and political figures.

It is clear that the Holocaust in Lithuania, as well as in the whole of Europe, was devised, planned, and executed by the German Nazis. Nevertheless, thousands of Lithuanians, directly or indirectly, shed Jewish blood. The Holocaust is unquestionably the darkest page in the history of Lithuania. Therefore, Lithuanians are now faced by the following important moral and political questions: Are they now ready to honesty evaluate the events that took place in their country 60 years ago and assign guilt to those who took part in the atrocities or will they continue to justify the murderers and blame the victims?

This problem is not only closely tied to Lithuanian national egotism or nationalism or to traditional economic, religious, or racial antisemitic stereotypes but also to the myth, that is widespread among various segments of the Lithuanian population, of Jewish disloyalty to Lithuania in 1940-1941, when the country was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union. The Jews were viewed as the most active collaborators of the Soviets and considered responsible for all the crimes committed by the Soviets against the Lithuanian nation. The pseudo-scholarly expression of this myth was the so-called theory of the interdependence of two varieties of genocide. This myth proposed that in 1940-1941 the Jews, together with the Soviets, carried out a Lithuanian geno-

1. "Holokausto Lietuva nepavyks nei užmirštų, nei nutylelių" (Lithuania will not succeed in either forgetting or silencing the Holocaust). Lietuvos rytas, Jan. 15, 2000.
cide while the Nazi invasion began the Jewish genocide, in which some Lithuanians who had suffered from the Jews joined the Nazis.

As noted by Alfredas Bumblauskas, the Lithuanian mind-set has been more affected by the narratives, of parents and grandparents than by the works of historians. "Stereotypes are deeply ingrained in the minds of the people and nations" stated Irena Veisaitė, who believes that dialogue does not seem feasible based on such misconceptions.

Before directly dealing with contemporary interpretations of the Holocaust by members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia and the significance of these interpretations for ideology and politics in Lithuania today, it will be useful to briefly clarify the events that took place during the Soviet occupation of 1940-1941 and the role of some pro-Nazi Lithuanians during World War II.

Historians of Lithuania have devoted particular attention to the period of sovietization of the country and the role of various ethnic groups, including Jews and Lithuanians, in it.

4. Irena Veisaitė (born 1928) – has a Ph.D. in philology and serves as chairperson of the Open Society Foundation.
The following historical survey of this period is based on the sources just cited. Lithuania's occupation was a consequence, first, of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Moscow and Berlin and that responsibility for the Lithuanian capitulation of 1940, the unconditional acceptance, without any protest against Moscow's ultimatum, should be assigned to the contemporary Lithuanian political and military leadership which, it should be noted, did not include a single Jew. In the "people's government" established by the Soviets on June 17, 1940 there was only one Jew, the minister of health services. This government, which allowed Moscow to create the impression of Lithuania's voluntary and legal annexation to the USSR, was recognized by the majority of Lithuanian institutions, parties, and organization but not by a single Jewish organization.

Furthermore, in 1940 Jewish institutions did not make any anti-Lithuanian or pro-Soviet statements. The July 21 session of the People's Seimas, which proclaimed Lithuania a Soviet republic and applied to Moscow to accept Lithuania into the Soviet Union, included 67 Lithuanians and only 4 Jews (at that time Jews comprised 8% of the total population of Lithuania), plus 7 representatives of other nationalities.\(^7\)

Major support for the occupier's regime was provided by the Lithuanian Communist Party. During the interwar period of independence, people of Jewish origin made up a considerable proportion — about 1/3 — of its members. However, in 1940, when Lithuanians started to join the Party on a large scale and the USSR sent many Russian-speaking cadres to Lithuania, the ratio of Jews in the Lithuanian Communist Party dropped to 12.6%. In the spring of 1941, there were five Jews among the 47 members of the Central Committee of the Party and only one Jew\(^8\) among the eleven members of the Bureau of the Central Committee. Not did the Jews play a significant role in the Soviet punitive bodies, the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs)

\(^7\) L. Truska, "Ar 1940 metais žydi nusikalto Lietuvai?" (Were the Jews Guilty before Lithuania in 1940?) \(,\) \(A\)\(k\)\(i\)\(nas\)\(š\)\(ai\), 7, 1997.

\(^8\) See notes 6 and 7.
or the NKGB (People’s Commissariat of State Security). At that time Jews comprised approximately 10% of their personnel.

Later, in the spring of 1941, the central NKGB headquarters for conducting deportations consisted of seven members, only one of whom was Jewish, while among the 77 members of the county headquarters there were five Jews.9

In the summer of 1940, many Lithuanians, believing that the new regime would improve their living conditions, took part in meetings organized by the Communists and in the elections to the People’s Seimas.10 Over 200,000 landless peasants and small farmers appealed to the Soviet regime to give them land formerly owned by their wealthier neighbors, the so-called kulaks.11 Soviet policy, however, soon dispelled people’s illusions and the search for culprits began. As often happened in history, Jews were scape-goated. Lithuanians soon forgot their own collaborators, while they remembered then and on into the future Jews who aided the Soviets and generalized from them.

In addition, research has now demonstrated that in the same years, 1940-1941, the Soviet regime caused greater harm to the Jews than to the Lithuanians. The Jews sustained incomparable losses in property nationalized since the majority of industrial and business enterprises, as well as large housing complexes, had been in their hands. Of 1,600 enterprises nationalized, as many as 1,300 had belonged to Jews and only 147 to Lithuanians. In 1940-1941, the number of Lithuanian schools increased significantly while Jewish ones decreased by half as the Soviets closed all schools where Hebrew was the language of instruction, leaving only Yiddish schools. The closure of synagogues had also begun while the Soviets did not yet interfere with Catholic

churches. In June 1941, 15,500 Lithuanians and 2,100 Jews were deported to the USSR. Although the Lithuanian victims were numerically seven times more, proportionately the Jewish loss was greater.

At the same time, extremely hostile attitudes developed toward Lithuanian Jews (as well as toward others considered Soviet collaborators), possibly affected by Nazi antisemitic propaganda. In the autumn of 1940 the Lithuanian Activists Front (hereafter LAF) was established in Berlin. This group included representatives of the whole range of political forces, from the nationalist voldemariliki and tautinikai to the Social Democrats. Article 16 of the LAF program denounced the 14th century privilege of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas that granted the Jews the protection of person and property. The LAF viewed the Jews as beyond the protection of the law. In all the LAF leaflets distributed in Soviet-occupied Lithuania the Jews were identified with the Communists. The Jews were declared to be traitors to Lithuania, collaborators with the occupiers, and responsible for all the misfortunes that befell the country. LAF leaflets urged the Jews to flee Lithuania for Russia before it was too late because “there would be no place for them in the new Lithuania.”

The anti-Soviet uprising, which started on the first day of the German-Soviet war (June 22, 1941) was aimed at reestablishing Lithuanian statehood. The leaders of the LAF cherished the hope of obtaining German support for

13. Data from Lietuvos gyventojų genocidas (The Center for Research on Repression in Lithuania), Vol. 1 (Vilnius, 1992), pp. 782-783; According to Dov Levin, 7,000 Jews were arrested and deported (op. cit., p. 143).
15. Instructions issued by the LAF in Berlin in the spring of 1941 stated that, while routing the Red Army from Lithuanian territory, “it would be a good idea to use this opportunity to get rid of Jews. Therefore, unbearable conditions should be created for them in Lithuania so that no Jews would even dare think that in the new Lithuania Jews would have even the most basic rights or the possibility of making a living. The aim is to force all Jews to flee Lithuania, together with the Communists and Russians.” (Lietuvos visuomeninių organizacijų archyvas [Archive of Public Organizations of Lithuania] F. 3377, Ap. 58, B. 805, pp. 3-21).
this cause, but in fact obtained a Berlin-controlled puppet government instead. A number of Lithuanian nationalist partisans participated in Nazi-inspired or Nazi-instigated pogroms against Jews. The provisional government set up by the partisans functioned for six weeks (until August 5) and issued several anti-Jewish laws (one of which established a ghetto in Vilijampole, a suburb of Kaunas).  

Furthermore, many Lithuanians took part in the looting of the property of their murdered Jewish neighbors. Armed Lithuanian formations (the so-called “self-defense” or police battalions) participated in annihilation operations not only in Lithuania but also in neighboring countries, especially in Belorussia. Among the documents presented at the Nuremberg Trials, there is a report from Slutsk district commissar H. Carl, dated October 30, 1941, addressed to the General Commissar of Belorussia. It describes an “action” against the Jews carried out with brutality bordering on sadism by a police battalion from Kaunas. The Commissar expressed concern about the economic impact of the action since the killing of Jewish specialists would harm factory production for the front. The report ended with the phrase: “Please fulfill my sole desire: in the future protect me from this police battalion.”

At issue, however, is not only the number and identity of Lithuanians who took part in the murder of Jews although, as discussed below, this is one of the most contentious of the questions in regard to the Holocaust in Lithuania. An even more serious matter is the issue of the arousal, by pro-Nazi and antisemically oriented segments of the Lithuanian intelligentsia, of antisemitism that led to the murder of Jews. In the summer of 1941, the Lithuanian press contributed significantly to encouraging the growth of such antisemitic sentiments. Almost every issue of the newspapers I laisvė (Kaunas), Naujoji Lietuva (Vilnius), and, in particular, Tėvynė (Šiauliai), Islaisvintas


 Supporters (Pakruojis), and Žemaicių žemė (Telšiai) contained materials that fostered hatred for the Jews. At the same time, not a single Lithuanian institution or social organization denounced the mass murders that had started to take place in the country. In contrast to the behavior of public Lithuanian bodies, however, it should be noted that a number of Lithuanian individuals and families risked their lives to save Jews by hiding them from the Nazis and the Lithuanian police.\(^\text{18}\) 

Overall, one has to stress that the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania has not yet been subjected to comprehensive analysis. Even the exact number of its victims is not known. Some researchers cite the figure of 200,000, others – 230,000, or even – 250,000. This amounts to between 90 and 95% of the total Jewish population of pre-war Lithuania.\(^\text{19}\)

Yet, despite this horrifying fact, the topic of the Holocaust often arouses the ire of Lithuanians. While in the West the Holocaust is basically perceived as the gravest crime ever committed, one that can never be justified, in Lithuania the interpretation of this phenomenon has been different. For one thing, the Holocaust has been considered less important than the repression, deportations, and incarcerations carried out by the Soviet Union in the early 1940s. These have been referred to as a genocide committed against the Lithuanians.

\(^\text{18}\) The number of such “righteous among the nations” officially recognized (as of Jan. 1, 2001) by Yad Vashem was 488 (this includes all ethnic Lithuanians regardless of their place of residence during the Holocaust).

This perspective continues to be expressed. In 1997, member of Parliament and leader of the Center Party Romualdas Ozolas (born 1939) asked: "What about the million Lithuanians killed or exiled [this figure is highly inflated—L.T.], has anyone honored them?"20 From the same perspective, the well-known writer Jonas Mikelinskas (born 1922) posed a more surprising question: "Where was it more horrible – in Vorkuta, where Lithuanians were deported under Stalin or in Oświęcim [Auschwitz]?"21 Mikelinskas’ question was clearly rhetorical since the majority returned from such locations as Vorkuta in the Gulag, while very few survived the Nazi death camps, such as Auschwitz, Maidanek, or Treblinka. In a shocking way Mikelinskas was trying to draw attention to the suffering of his people.

Psychology has taught us that often a victim, whether an individual or a people, is concerned with his own grief and rarely understands the suffering of others. Many Lithuanians believe that the attention of the world to the tragedy of the Jewish people has been exaggerated and that too little attention has been paid to the suffering of the Lithuanians.

In the light of such an attitude, Egidijus Aleksandravičius22 was evidently right when he stated that the annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry in the Second World War has not been comprehended as a tragedy by the collective Lithuanian consciousness.23 In 1999 a meeting took place at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas that was attended both by historians and witnesses of the bloody events in the Lietūkis Company garage, where on June 27, 1941. (i.e. before the Nazis established control) Lithuanians brutally killed scores of Jews. (An international commission estimated the number to be approximately 50.) During the discussion after the lectures, an elderly resident of

23. E. Aleksandravičius, "Nenoras žinoti blokuoja norą susikalbėti (The lack of a desire to know is blocking the desire for rapprochement), Kultūros barai, 12 (1998), p. 56.
Kaunas asked whether it was worth making so much fuss about some poor Jews “knocked off” by the Germans.

In Lithuania not only is the topic of the Holocaust not popular, but to many it has become tedious. For example one letter to the editor stated: “We Lithuanians have flogged ourselves enough with a 55-year old whip! Enough of riding the old nag – the topic of the Jewish genocide.”

In this general context, it is not surprising that the issue of Lithuanian responsibility for the mass murder of Jews has led to such different perspectives on the part of historians, writers, journalists, and political figures. Moreover, the attitudes of members of the Lithuanian intellectual and political elites toward the events of 1940-1941 and the Holocaust do not necessarily coincide with their general political orientation. For example, basically liberal members of the intelligentsia sometimes have quite defensive, even nationalistic attitudes in regard to Lithuanian culpability. For this reason, this topic has a special role in contemporary Lithuanian society.

The problem of the Holocaust in Lithuania has been an important one not only in the last decade or so. In the Soviet period that lasted through the end of the 1980s, official historiography disregarded the issue since it portrayed the victims of the Holocaust not as Jews but as Soviet citizens among others. However, during the same period works were published in the West that were relevant to the issue of the Holocaust in Lithuania.

Those Lithuanians who at the end of the Second World War fled Lithuania (among whom were those who bore responsibility for antisemitism and its

24. J. Aukštaitis, “Nebejokime ant nuvarto kuino” (We won’t go far on an old nag), Lietuvosaidai, Dec. 6, 1996.

25. In post-war Soviet Lithuania not only were conditions for serious research lacking, but the writing of history was politicized. In this case, the massive Jewish suffering that took place during World War II or, in Soviet terminology, “the Great Fatherland War,” was lost in the all-Soviet suffering. Even when there were exceptional and valuable works about Jewish suffering, (e.g. Mainės žudynės Lietuvoje. Dokumentų rinkinys) [Mass massacre in Lithuania. A collection of documents], Vol. 1 [Vilnius, 1965]; [Vol. 2, Vilnius, 1973]) their effect on society was insignificant since Lithuanians were prone to treat everything that bore the Soviet imprimatur as untrustworthy.
deadly results) and settled in the USA and other Western countries preferred to avoid the problem. Only in the 1970s, after the appearance of monographs and collections of documents in English about the extermination of Lithuanian Jews, did former Lithuanian leaders living in the West begin to speak out.

In 1973, the former LAF leader Colonel Kazys Škirpa published the book *Uprising for the Restoration of Lithuania’s Sovereignty*, in which he did not mention LAF’s anti-Jewish proclamations and claimed that article 16 of the LAF program was not antisemitic.

In 1978, the former head of the provisional government, Juozas Brazaitis (Ambrazevičius), published an article in which he claimed that the anti-Jewish regulations of the provisional government that were published in the West and in Soviet Lithuania were forgeries and that the provisional government and the whole Lithuanian nation had done their best to help the Jews.

In articles and books, A. Damušis, minister of industry in the 1941 provisional government, maintained that only the Germans were to blame for the Holocaust, while the Lithuanians had nothing to do with it. Damušis went so far as to claim that Lithuanians serving in the Nazi military units used help...


27. Kazys Škirpa (1895-1978) – military officer and diplomat. After the war, he lived in the USA.


29. Juozas Brazaitis (Ambrazevičius) (1903-1978) – a historian of literature, was minister of education and acting prime minister in the Lithuanian provisional government. He emigrated to the US after the war.


31. Adolfo Damušis (born 1908) by profession a chemical engineer. After World War II he lived in the USA, but returned to Lithuania in 1997. He writes on historical topics.

help Jews by passing food to ghetto prisoners, warn them about planned round-ups, etc., and that the majority of the Lithuanians who worked in the Nazi civil administration participated in anti-Nazi resistance.  

In his account of his World War II experiences Zenonas Ignatavičius (1908-1971), who served as chaplain with a Lithuanian battalion that participated in “punitive operations” in Belorussia, attempted to convey the impression that only German, Ukrainian, and Latvian policemen committed crimes while the Lithuanians were so different that the local people respected and loved them.  

The position of such émigré writing in regard to the Holocaust had a major impact on the formation of Lithuanian attitudes during the Soviet period and has, perhaps, even greater influence now in the post-Soviet period.  

In independent, post-Soviet Lithuania much has been said and written about the Lithuanians who collaborated with the Soviet occupiers. However, even serious historians (including authors of monographs) have not dealt with Lithuanians who collaborated with the Nazis. In addition to concern with their own suffering, another cause has prevented and continues to prevent Lithuanians from understanding the Holocaust. This is the popular heroic-masochistic conception of history that views the Lithuanian past as one that was composed only of great deeds and suffering, with no room for acts that people can not be proud of.  

Psychologically, for Lithuanians the most difficult aspect to deal with, one they simply avoid, is the issue of the participation of their compatriots in the killing of Jews. Recent mass media debates on the “Jewish topic” have shown that few Lithuanians, even the intellectuals among them, have perceived the scale and nature of the participation of their fellow citizens in the Holocaust. Even when some people acknowledge involvement of a number

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33. A. Damušis, “Kurio kelio.”  
34. Z. Ignorinis (Ignatavičius). Prasities kalba (Evidence of the past) (Brooklyn, 1980).  
After the war Ignatavičius lived in Latin America and Italy.  
35. P. Stankeras, Lietuvos policija 1941-1944 metais (The Lithuanian police force in 1941-1944) (Vilnius, 1998); A. Bubnys, op. cit.
of their countrymen, they limit its scope by focusing their attention on the "žudėtojai" or "Jew killers." Nearly all of those who have written on this topic claim that the number of killers was very small. (Adolfas Damušis refers to them as a handful, about 100 or 150, at most) and as the dregs of society, criminals who were allegedly scorned or despised by the vast majority of Lithuanians.

In contrast, the myth of Jewish guilt in regard to Lithuania is particularly popular, especially among older Lithuanians. Even leading intellectuals believe it. For example, Vincas Krėvé, a major figure in Lithuanian literature, stressed that, when soldiers of the Red Army marched into Kaunas on the afternoon of June 15, 1940, the Jews rejoiced while the despondent Lithuanian crowds wept. He obviously ignored the fact that the joy of the Jews could be attributed to their relief at being saved from the German threat.

Other intellectuals, such as the liberal diplomat Bronius Rutulis, who served as Lithuanian ambassador in London, and the Christian Democratic public figure Povilas Šilas, who was deputy minister of justice in the provisional government, also believed in the myth of the disloyalty of the Jews. Even the prominent Lithuanian historian Zenonas Ivinskas, who can be hardly accused of antisemitism, asserted that:

the Lithuanians found themselves bitterly disappointed and even betrayed by the Jews because they [the Jews] were involved in all kinds of...

36. A. Damušis, "Kuriuo keliu."
37. Vincas Krėvé-Mickevičius (1882-1954) – classic Lithuanian writer, he served as minister of foreign affairs and acting foreign minister in the People’s Government of 1940. After the war he lived in the USA.
38. V. Krėvé, Bolševikų invazija ir lietuvių tyriausybė; Atsiminimai (The Bolshevik invasion and the People’s Government: Memoirs) (Vilnius, 1992), p. 36.
39. Povilas Šilas (1910-1995) – after the war he was deported from Lithuania; he returned in 1957.
40. Bronius Rutulis’s letter to Antanas Smetona of July 5, 1941, published in Antano Smetonos korespondencija 1940-1944 (The Correspondence of Antanas Smetona 1940-1944) (Kaunas, 1999), p. 28.
41. Zenonas Ivinskas (1908-1971) – professor of Kaunas University from 1933 to 1943; emigrated after the war.
cooperation with the occupiers. Although the older Jewish generation and their Zionist movement opposed communism, they did nothing to dissociate themselves from the ravages of those no-longer Jewish, i.e. communist-minded, Jews who, thus, were responsible for all the Jews being blamed.42

Taking as his point of departure the view that “many” Jews had collaborated with the Soviets to harm Lithuanians, Adolfas Damušis stated:

It is a fact that many Jewish citizens of Lithuania were very zealous Soviet collaborators in compiling lists of [Lithuanian] deportees and actively participated in the deportation of innocent people (children, women, and old people) to certain death in the Siberia taiga.43

In the same year, member of the Seimas and leader of the Christian Democratic Union Kazys Bobelis44 incorrectly claimed in the same vein: “But you, gentlemen [Jews and their defenders - L.T.] must recall that in 1940-1941 85 percent of all the prosecutors who tortured Lithuanians were Jewish.”45 Jonas Mikelinkas wrote about the “destructive” role of the Jews in 1940-1941, their allegedly disproportional involvement in the deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia, and “traditional” Jewish ingratitude:

the Jews honor and love only the enemies of the Lithuanians and, if occasion arises, they betray those who have been peacefully and quietly living side by side with them for 600 years.46

42. Z. Ivinskis, “Lietuviai ir žydai istorijos šviesoje” (Lithuanians and Jews in the light of history), Aidas, 1, 1972, p. 28.
43. A. Damušis, “Kurio keliu.”
44. Kazys Bobelis (born 1923) - physician. After World War II he lived in the USA, since 1992 - a member of the Seimas.
45. K. Bobelis, “Nereikia ieškoti mesijų” (It is not necessary to seek messiahs), Respublikos varpų, July 8, 1997.
46. J. Mikelinkas, “Teisė likti nesuprastama, arba Mes ir jie, jie ir mes” (The truth will remain uncomprehended or we and they, they and we), Metai, 8-9, 1996, pp. 127-129; idem, “Ar yra atsakymas.”
A different, critical attitude toward Lithuanians' relationship to the Holocaust was first expressed by the writer Tomas Venclova, who emigrated to the US in 1975. In the same year he published the article “Jews and Lithuanians.” There he wrote that the annihilation of the Jews was carried out not only by Germans but by Lithuanians as well, and that many Jews were killed at the very beginning of the war, when the Germans had arrived but not yet established their rule in Lithuania:

What happened during the first days of the war was a catastrophe for the Jews, but was a far worse catastrophe for the Lithuanians.... We must always understand that the destruction of the Jews is the destruction of ourselves, the humiliation of the Jews is the humiliation of ourselves, the destruction of Jewish culture is an attack on our own.

Venclova was the first to speak openly about Lithuanian responsibility for what happened in the summer of 1941 because the nation includes everyone – both the righteous who saved Jews and the perpetrators who killed Jews. Present-day Lithuanians should acknowledge the guilt of the killers of Jews of that time because that is the essence of belonging to a particular nation said Venclova to his compatriots.

The first person in Soviet Lithuania to present this new attitude to the Holocaust was Antanas Terleckas (born 1935), a dissident and the founder of

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47. Tomas Venclova (born 1937) poet, scholar, and translator. He graduated from Vilnius State University in 1960 and taught literature and linguistics there from 1966 to 1969. In Lithuania he published collections of poetry, articles on literature, and books for the general reader. After leaving the USSR, he was deprived of Soviet citizenship. He continued teaching in the United States, at Yale University. For a translation of the whole article, see “Lithuanian-Jewish Relations in the Shadow of the Holocaust,” introduced and annotated by Sima Yelkas, JJT, 1(11) (1990), pp. 39-45. This publication also contains translations of other documents relevant to the present discussion.

Venclova's article “Jews and Lithuanians,” was first published in the samizdat journal Tarbut in 1975, a supplement to Evrei v SSSR. The article was reprinted by Nasha strana, a Russian-language newspaper in Israel, in 1976. In 1978, it was printed again in Akträchti, a monthly liberal Lithuanian-language journal published in the United States and reprinted in Evreiskii samizdat (Jewish samizdat), Series Evrei i evreiskii narod (Jews and the Jewish people), Jerusalem, Vol. 13. The article was eventually published in Lithuania in 1989, in Literatura i menas.
the anti-Soviet organization *Lietuvos laisvės lyga* (The Lithuanian Freedom League). In 1978 Terleckas wrote an article in which he agreed with Venclova. On the basis of facts, he rejected the argument that the Jews themselves were to blame for the Holocaust.

Both Terleckas and Venclova were bothered by the same question: Why did the Lithuanians, known for their centuries of religious and national tolerance, in the twentieth century lift their hands against their unarmed neighbors the Jews?

Terleckas rejected the hypothesis of collective responsibility advocated by some Lithuanians:

> Every people has its own Cains and its lost sheep. There is no court and there can not be such in the world that would dare try a whole nation, and the Jews do not need my defense. It is not the Jews who killed Lithuanians; on the contrary, the Lithuanian generation of the 1940s stands on trial. The annihilation of Lithuanian Jews is a tragedy of the Lithuanian nation as well.

The Lithuanian-American historian Saulius Sužiedėlis (born 1945) has made significant efforts to illuminate the Holocaust in Lithuania. Two of his articles take a new approach to the Lithuanian Activist Front, the 1941 uprising, and the provisional government. Previously, the anti-Soviet uprising of 1941 was presented exclusively in a positive vein. Sužiedėlis showed its dark side – the killing of Jews. He was the first historian to discuss the antisemitism of the LAF (even though he noted that there are no documents that indicate that the LAF leadership itself had been planning the annihilation of the Jews).

48. A. Terleckas, “Dar kartą apie žydus ir lietuvius” (Once more about Jews and Lithuanians), *Akiručių*, 8, 1989 (note: published over 10 years after it was written).
49. Ibid.
Sužiedėlis concluded that a relatively small number of people were able to murder so many Jews partly due to the participation of many local officials (in particular policemen) and Lithuanian partisans.

During the last decade, the new approach to the Holocaust and to Lithuanian-Jewish relations has been elaborated by three researchers who were living in the United States: Julius Šmulkštytys, Liutas Mockūnas, and Zenonas Rekašius. In Lithuania it has been represented, among others, by the historians Egidijus Aleksandravičius, Valentinas Bradišauskas, Vygantas Vareikis, and the present author; by the writer Marcelijus Martinaitis, and by the journalists and publicists Rimvydas Valatka, Linas Vildžiūnas, Laimonas Tapinas, Pranas Morkus, Rimantas Vanagas. Although this new trend, represented mostly by liberally-oriented intellectuals, is gradually having an impact on social consciousness, it has not yet become dominant in Lithuania.

In addition to its historical and moral aspects, the question about the responsibility of Lithuanians for the murder of Jews during the War has a foreign policy dimension. Even if the Lithuanians themselves would like to ignore the issue, they would not be allowed to do so by public opinion in the West, of which Lithuania now wishes to be considered part, not only cultur-

51. Julius Šmulkštytys (born 1930) has a Ph.D. in social sciences.
53. Zignas Rekašius (born 1935) — Lithuanian activist of a liberal orientation who lives in the USA and writes on politics and history.
54. Vygantas Vareikis (born 1965) — professor at Klaipėda University.
55. Marcelijus Martinaitis (born 1936) — poet and critic, member of the Science Council of Lithuania.
56. Rimvydas Valatka (born 1956) — first assistant ed. in chief of the daily Lietuvas rytas.
57. Linas Vildžiūnas (born 1949) — editor of the weekly Meno dienos.
58. Laimonas Tapinas (born 1944) has a Ph.D. in humanities, associate professor of the Institute of Journalism of Vilnius University and director of the Lithuanian Center of Journalism.
59. Pranas Morkus (born 1938) — journalist and publicist, section and supplement editor of the weekly Šiauris atėnai.
60. Rimantas Vanagas (born 1948). In 1995 he published "Nenusigražk nuo savęs" (Do not turn away from yourself), an essay on Lithuanian-Jewish relations.
ally but also politically and economically, as witnessed by its interest in joining the European community.

At the end of the 1990s a group of American experts, led by political scientist and former presidential security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and sponsored by the prestigious US Council on Foreign Relations, produced the report “United States Policy in North-Eastern Europe.” The document states that in helping Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to prepare for membership in NATO, the US government should encourage the Baltic states to discuss their pasts, including the Holocaust, openly. It was made clear that such steps as the acknowledgement of what took place in Lithuania during the Second World War, unconditional condemnation of the criminals, and admission of responsibility for those countrymen who were guilty of shedding Jewish blood, would enable present-day Lithuanians to alleviate the burden of the past and to move toward rapprochement with the United States and Europe.

This circumstance only serves to make the issue more acute. From the time of the establishment of Lithuanian independence, both the political leadership and the liberal intelligentsia of the country have sought international support for Lithuania in many areas and, in turn, have been attempting to demonstrate their country’s acceptance of the democratic and humanistic values espoused by the West.

This external orientation has run parallel to an internal reorientation that has positively affected both Lithuanian Jews today and the country’s attitude toward the suffering of its Jews 50 years ago. The fact that a number of Jews

61. R.J. Krickus, “Amerika įspareigoja Europai, bet galvoja apie Rusiją” (America obligates itself before Europe but really has Russia in mind), Lietuvos rytai, May 22, 1999.

62. For example, member of the Seimas Emaneulis Zingeris (born 1957), director of the Vilna Gaon Jewish National Museum; the writers Grigorijus Kanovičius (Grigorij Kanovich) (born 1929), who served as a member of the Seimas and who immigrated to Israel in 1993, and Icchokas Meras (Itzik Meras) (born 1934) who immigrated to Israel in the late 1970s; Prof. Aronas Gutmanas (1936-1999), a research biologist; Prof. Aleksandras Štromas (1931-1998) a lawyer with a Ph.D. in jurisprudence who emigrated to the West in 1973 and published many academic ar-
participated in the establishment of the newly independent state contributed to an atmosphere that encouraged a number of positive developments.

Not only do the Jews (whose total number in Lithuania is now less than 5,000) enjoy equal rights with other citizens of the Republic, but in one of its first acts, the Lithuanian parliament unconditionally denounced the Holocaust. On May 8, 1990, the Supreme Council of the Republic (as the parliament was called until the autumn of 1992) issued a statement on the genocide of the Jewish people in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation. The Council noted with sorrow that:

Among the executioners who aided the occupiers there were some Lithuanian citizens. For the crimes committed against the Jewish people in Lithuania and outside its borders there is not and can not be any justification or any statute of limitations on criminal prosecution. 63

This was the first official acknowledgement by a Lithuanian political institution of the participation of Lithuanians in the murder of Jews. Furthermore, the day of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto, September 23, was officially proclaimed Remembrance Day of the Genocide of Lithuania Jews. In addition, former prisoners of Lithuanian ghettos and Nazi concentration camps in the country have been accorded the same rights and privileges as Lithuanians deported by the Soviets.

Furthermore, several of the leaders of the Lithuanian Republic have apologized for those Lithuanians who took part in the killing of Jews. In 1995 Lithuanian head of state Algirdas Brazauskas 64 said in the Israeli Knesset:

I, the President of Lithuania, bow my head before the memory of the more than two hundred thousand Jews of Lithuania who were killed.


64. Algirdas Brazauskas (born 1932) – has a Ph. D. in economics. From 1977 to 1988 he was secretary for industry and the economy, and from 1988 to 1990 – 1st secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party. He served as president of the Lithuanian Republic from 1993 to 1997.
ask your forgiveness for those Lithuanians who ruthlessly killed, shot, deported, or robbed Jews.\textsuperscript{65}

One of the first acts of the newly independent Lithuania was a decision to put into order Jewish cemeteries and sites of killing fields (a total of 324) that had been neglected or damaged during the Soviet period.\textsuperscript{66} This was carried out by school children and university students, along with employees of local authorities and other institutions. On the initiative of the government also, all Jewish gravestones that had been removed and used as construction material under Soviet rule were replaced. Many Jewish street names that the Soviet authorities had changed were restored and memorial plaques were placed to mark sites of the incarceration or killing of Jews. The State Jewish Museum in Vilnius that had been closed by the Soviets in 1946 was reopened and commemoration of the Holocaust was given due attention there. The current president of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus,\textsuperscript{67} has been paying particular attention to the problem of Lithuanian-Jewish relations. He established the post of special advisor to the president on Jewish affairs. This post is held by Dr. Julius Šmulkištė, a political scientist of liberal views, who had lived in the United States where he lectured on the history of the Holocaust. An international commission was established in the president’s office to investigate crimes of both the Nazi and Soviet occupation regimes. (The commission is made up of well-known historians and lawyers from Lithuania, the United States, Germany, Russia, and Israel, and is headed by Emanuolis Zingeris, a Jewish member of the Seimas and chairman of the parliamentary commission on human rights.) Part of the mandate of the investigatory commission is to determine and make public facts about the Holocaust in Lithuania.\textsuperscript{68}

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\textsuperscript{65} Selection of documents, pp. 8-10, 23-25.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., pp. 17-23. Ibid., pp. 7, 10-11, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{67} Valdas Adamkus (born 1926), is a civil engineer by profession. From 1981 to 1997 he worked in the United States for the Environmental Protection Agency. He has been the President of Lithuania since 1998.

\textsuperscript{68} The author of this article is a member of the commission.
In 1998 Irena Veisaitė claimed that “from the beginning all issues have been successfully dealt with consistently and clearly on the official, government level.” She continued: “I would say that in this respect Lithuania compares favorably with other East European countries.”

One might basically agree with such an evaluation – except for one thing: during the ten years of its independence Lithuania has not punished a single person who participated in the killing of Jews. The cases of Aleksandras Liikeikis and Kazys Gimžauskas, who were deported from the USA to Lithuania, have been hopelessly entangled in legal complications. Furthermore, the Kaunas prosecutor’s office suspended the case of the mass murder of Jews in the Lietūkis Company garage during the first days of the war.

The old myths and stereotypes have retained their force among part of the Lithuanian political and intellectual elites. This was especially obvious after the visit of President Brazauskas to Israel. The President’s apology in the Knesset was condemned by member of the Seimas Juozas Turtėnas, who declared that Lithuanians can not be held responsible for what had happened in their country when it was under Nazi rule. Similar reservations were expressed by Seimas member Zita Šličyte, chairman of the National Progress Party (Tautos pakūnos partija), the physician Egidijus Klumbys (born 1952), former

69. Veisaitė, op. cit., p. 60.
70. Aleksandras Liikeikis (1908-2000) – chief of the Vilnius region security police force that served the Nazis from 1941 to 1944. He emigrated to the USA after the war but was deported to Lithuania in 1995 as a suspected war criminal. He died while his trial was being delayed.
71. Kazys Gimžauskas (born 1908) – deputy chief of the Vilnius region security police force. After the war he lived in the USA. In 1996 Gimžauskas returned to Lithuania, where he was tried for war crimes. Since he had Alzheimer’s disease he did not appear at his trial and, although found guilty on Feb. 14, 2001, he was not punished.
72. See p. 12. “Garsioji ‘Garažo byla’ nebaigta: aukos nutildytos, budelai tyli” (The infamous “Garage affair” is not over: The victims were silenced and the murderers remain silent), Lietuvos tytis, Nov. 16, 1996.
73. Zita Šličyte (born 1943) – has a Ph.D. in jurisprudence and is a member of the state and law committee of the Seimas.
Lithuanian ambassador to Germany Vaidotas Antanaitis, and many journalists. The writer and member of the Seimas Jonas Avyžius (1922-1998) even stated that Brazauskas was not his president.

The most frequently asked question posed by Brazauskas’s opponents was: “When will the Jews apologize to the Lithuanians?” They claimed that it was not Russia, the successor of the USSR, that was responsible for all the harm done to the Lithuanians, but rather Israel, some current citizens of which allegedly carried out genocide against Lithuanians in 1941.

After the visit of President Brazauskas to Israel, the speech of Israeli ambassador Ben-Hur to the Baltic States in the autumn of 1997, and the meeting of US Congressman and Holocaust survivor Tom Lantos with the Prosecutor General of Lithuania in early January 2000, the old stereotypes have been revived and reproaches are again being directed at the Jews. These attitudes have been expressed not only by common people, the mass media, and right-wing radicals, but also by well-known politicians and scholars. This group is being opposed by a handful of liberal intellectuals who stress the moral responsibility of the Lithuanian nation for shedding the blood of Jews.

However, there are signs that significant changes are occurring in the mass consciousness of Lithuanian society or may follow the steps now being taken. Lithuanian-Jewish dialogue is proceeding, albeit slowly. Government institutions, social organizations, part of the mass media, and some individuals are expressing a new view of the Holocaust. Several conferences devoted to burning issues of Lithuanian-Jewish relations and to the history of the Holocaust have been held. In many Lithuanian institutions of higher education courses are given on Jewish history, Lithuanian-Jewish relations, and the Holocaust. The Ministry of Education has modified the secondary school his-

tory syllabus: new history textbooks allot more attention than previously to the Holocaust.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice has officially registered the opening of a center for the study of the Holocaust and Jewish culture in Lithuania. The center aims to collect, study, and disseminate information about the Lithuanian Jewish community, its culture and tragic fate. One of the center's goals is to help Lithuanian society get rid of antisemitic stereotypes. Most recently, in December 2001, Lithuania officially marked the sixtieth anniversary of the transport of Jews from various locations in Europe to be killed in Lithuania. This is yet another step in the acknowledgement of the involvement of Lithuanians in the Holocaust.

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Finally, whether due to political or moral considerations or both, the political leadership of the Republic of Lithuania and the major Lithuanian political parties have indicated awareness of the necessity of a reconciliation with the Jews. Recently the Scimas adopted an amendment to the Criminal Code, permitting the trial of Nazi (as well as Soviet) collaborators in absentia. This, hopefully, will facilitate prosecution of some of the "Jew killers" whose escaping judgment until now has seriously undermined the prestige of Lithuania. Also, the old Lithuanian generation for whom nationalistic stereotypes and antisemitic myths have overshadowed history is now starting to be replaced by youth. The latter may have the opportunity to free themselves from racial, nationalistic, and other prejudices and to learn about painful aspects of their country's history. Such developments provide hope that the generally accepted Western view of the Holocaust as totally indefensible may become the predominant view in Lithuania as well.