

The New Deniers

With 202 mass graves scattered around the country, there is too much evidence for Lithuania to deny the reality that more than 90 percent of the country's Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. But efforts are under way there, and throughout the Baltic region, to redefine the term "genocide" and whitewash local participation in history's worst atrocities

Avi Friedman

At first glance, the Vilnius Declaration of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), adopted on July 3, makes a fine impression. Voted on by 213 parliamentarians from fifty OSCE countries, the paper contains twenty-eight resolutions on topics ranging from the global economic crisis to arms control to international energy policy and more.

Concerning human rights, the declaration "deplor[es] the violence perpetrated against those exercising their civil liberties and demonstrating peacefully" during recent protests in Iran, calls for "the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms" around the world, and recognizes the "potentially destabilizing effect" of a Taliban takeover of Pakistan's Swat Valley and the negative consequences of such a takeover for the area's nearly two and a half million residents.

On the whole, it's an impressive document.

Until the section on memorializing the Holocaust, that is. Although the declaration "acknowledg[es] the uniqueness of the Holocaust," this resolution also says that "in the twentieth century European countries experienced two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought about genocide, violations of human rights and freedoms, war crimes and crimes against humanity," thus drawing a parallel between the horrors of communism and the singularity of the Nazi attempt to annihilate the Jewish People.

Concerted Effort According to Professor Dovid Katz, research director at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute and professor of Yiddish history at Vilnius University, the attempt to distort the Holocaust by comparing the Nazi genocide to communist crimes is a worrisome phenomenon that is gaining currency throughout Europe.

"We're not talking about Holocaust denial in a 'traditional' sense," he said. With 202 mass graves in Lithuania alone, there is too much proof to deny what happened. The new trend is toward what I call 'Holocaust obfuscation,' where you don't deny a single death, but rather you say that the Nazi attempt to eliminate the Jewish race was one of many 'genocides' committed during the twentieth century."

Photos: Reuters, AP, Kiddush Hashem archives



Argentine protestors hold a sign saying "No to Holocaust denial"

Katz, a Brooklyn native who moved to Vilna ten years ago to study some of the last indigenous Yiddish dialects in the world, spoken by the few remaining Jews in the Baltic region told **Mishpacha** that efforts to redefine the notion of genocide are supported by all the Baltic states.

“For example, the Genocide and Resistance Research Center, in the center of Vilna, purports to ‘investigate all manifestations of genocide and crimes against humanity, the persecution during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the armed and peaceful resistance to the occupations. It also gives juridical evaluations of the perpetrators of the reprisals and genocide, and it immortalizes the memory of the freedom fighters and genocide victims.’ The center aims ‘to establish historical truth and justice; to investigate the physical and spiritual genocide of Lithuanians carried out by the occupying regimes between 1939 and 1990 ... and to initiate the juridical evaluation of the aftermath of the occupying regimes.’

“But out of the eighteen books on display at the center, just one suggests that any Jews were killed. The message is clear: Sure, many Jews died during the war, but genocide refers only to Soviet crimes,” Katz said.

Another example is the Museum of Genocide Victims, located in a former KGB building. A memorial plaque on the building tells all about victims of the KGB and its predecessor, the NKVD: “Thousands of innocent people were martyred and plans for mass deportations and arrests were drawn up here,” says the plaque. “Today, the names of KGB victims carved on the granite foundation stones record those terrors.” But there is nothing about Holocaust victims or genocide of Lithuanian Jewry.

Perhaps the most egregious use of Lithuanian state funds to distort the Holocaust supports the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, commonly known as the Red-Brown Commission (“red” refers to Soviet crimes, “brown” to Nazi ones). Through several initiatives in the European Parliament, the commission has pushed for parallel treatment of Nazi and Soviet crimes, including the establishment of a Europe-wide day to memorialize all “victims of tyranny,” to be held annually on August 23 (the anniversary of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement, which effectively ceded the Baltic region to the Soviet Union). Opponents of the measure say it would erase the January 27 International Holocaust Remembrance Day currently observed by the European Union and most other Western countries and challenge the Holocaust’s uniqueness.

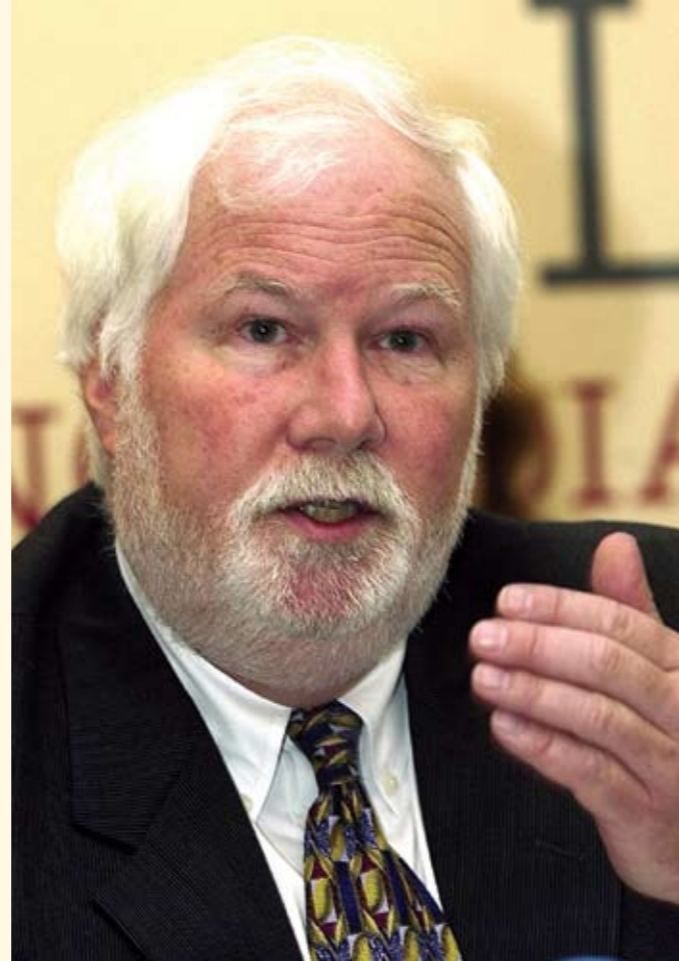
The Red-Brown Commission also used state funds to urge the European Parliament to affirm the June 2008 Prague Declaration, which calls for “adjustment and overhaul of European history textbooks, so that children could learn and be warned about communism and its crimes *in the same way* as they have been taught to assess the Nazi crimes” (emphasis added).

The Prague Declaration further asserts that “millions of victims of communism and their families are entitled to enjoy justice, sympathy, understanding, and recognition for their sufferings *in the same way*” and that “the crimes of communism should be assessed [...] *in the same way* Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg tribunal” (emphasis added).

On April 2, 2009, the declaration was adopted in a non-binding resolution by a plenary session of the European Parliament, meaning the document could be tabled for a vote to make it a binding law in the European Union.

Red-Brown Executive Director Ronaldas Račinskas admitted to **Mishpacha** that Soviet crimes against Lithuania could not be considered genocide, but he defended the inclusion of Soviet crimes in his commission’s mandate.

“Formally the Soviet crimes are not genocide as it is described in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948. The convention enumerates the



AJC’s director of international Jewish affairs Andrew Baker



Now being prosecuted: Soviet Partisans, c.1941

groups [qualifying as victims of] the crime of genocide — they are national, ethnic, racial, and religious groups. However, the definition of the very term *genocide* by its author, Raphael Lemkin, also involved attacks against political and social groups... It was only at the last moment that with efforts of the Soviet Union and its satellites — other puppet communist regimes — no place was left in the final text of the convention for repression against political groups.”

Račinskas believes the Holocaust was unique and said there are “significant differences” between Nazism and communism, but because they overlapped historically and geographically, sometimes it is difficult to separate them.

Jewish groups see the Holocaust as a singular event in world history: the premeditated murder of men, women, and children with the intention of obliterating the Jewish People. Can that be compared to Soviet crimes, as horrible as they were?

“It’s important to call a spade a spade here: If this program of obfuscation is successful, the Holocaust, and especially Holocaust education, will be marginalized in Europe. It is a program of relativism, of postmodernism. If the effort is successful, non-genocide will be elevated to the level of genocide”

— Professor Dovid Katz

“Of course the Holocaust was a unique event (or, in the words of Holocaust scholar Professor Yehudah Bauer, unprecedented), and I have no doubts. But if we are talking about any comparison (which is legitimate in terms of research method and is very popular among scholars in different fields of social sciences, and history is no exception) we cannot compare the suffering of victims. I very much agree with Bauer’s statement at the United Nations that ‘victim is victim, murder is murder, torture is torture, starvation, pain, disease, and humiliation are the same. No genocide is more important than another; no one is more victim than another...’”

Defenders of the Red-Brown Commission point out that several Jewish organizations (including the American Jewish Committee) and Yad Vashem are members of its executive, proving that the commission’s aims are “kosher.”

Dovid Katz rejects this contention out of hand.

“All I can say is that these organizations have been duped,” he says. “It’s as simple as that. I know it sounds absurd, but it’s the truth, and it’s hard for these organizations to admit they were wrong [to join the commission]. But it’s important to call a spade here: If this program of obfuscation is successful, the Holocaust, and especially Holocaust education, will be marginalized in Europe. It is a program of relativism, of postmodernism. If the effort is successful, non-genocide will be elevated to the level of genocide. That will fundamentally change the nature of Holocaust remembrance and education throughout Europe.”

Significantly, in the 1990s the American Jewish Committee lobbied in Washington for the Baltic states to be admitted to NATO and the European Union. According to Efraim Zuroff, the Jerusalem-based head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the AJC did a severe disservice to Holocaust victims and survivors by failing to demand that these independent countries prosecute war criminals, restore Jewish property, and create a strong educational curriculum to teach non-Jewish Lithuanians about the Holocaust.

“It is absolutely outrageous,” Zuroff fumes. “The AJC offered to support the Baltics states’ foreign policy objectives in Washington, but it failed to demand even the minimum in return. As a result, Lithuania is now a member in good standing of both NATO and the EU but has not prosecuted a single war criminal. The Baltic governments realized that once they had one major Jewish organization on board, it was enough to give them credibility. I’m sorry to say it, but I feel the AJC gave up the most important opportunity we had to pressure the Lithuanian government to prosecute war criminals.”

Andrew Baker, the AJC’s director of international Jewish affairs, retorts that Zuroff is oversimplifying the organization’s support of the Baltics. Baker claims the AJC lacked real power when dealing with the Baltics.

“It’s sort of hard to describe this as a quid pro quo,” he says. “First of all, we pushed US officials to raise the issue in any and all bilateral talks with Lithuanian, Estonian, and Latvian officials. If we enjoyed any leverage at all, that was it. US officials did look to the AJC for confirmation, but in all these cases we are talking about starting processes that continue for years.

“For example, take restitution — what actions should we have been prepared for? In 1998, under US pressure, the three Baltic governments created state historical commissions. Our goal was to get these countries to confront the history of the Holocaust, and they decided to give their commissions a wider mandate than just dealing with the Holocaust.”

But would you say that by expanding the mandate of these commissions, the Baltic states use them to blunt the unique nature of the Holocaust? Could the expanded mandate effectively preclude prosecution of Holocaust criminals and/or restitution of property, because “after all, there were two genocides”?

“As for the question of equating the Holocaust with Soviet crimes, yes, there is absolutely such an effort under way, and we are deeply troubled by it. Of course, we would always maintain that the Holocaust was a unique crime in the history of man and should be treated as such.

“At the same time, you’ve got to remember that terrible things happened under the communists. It is appropriate to bring those crimes to light and to recognize them, even if they are not the same thing as genocide. And if you look at the scholarly work the historical commissions have produced — I mean, read the papers they’ve produced. [These papers] are not widely available; that’s one of the shortcomings — but the state commissions in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all did serious work, they looked seriously at the Holocaust, and there is nothing in the scholarly writings that draws an equation between Nazi and Soviet crimes.”

Dovid Katz and Efraim Zuroff validate part of Baker’s claim: No one suggests whitewashing Soviet crimes in Europe. Both Katz and Zuroff say Soviet misdeeds should be studied and memorialized as a unique phenomenon in European history. “I have no problem memorializing Soviet crimes,” says Zuroff. “What the Lithuanians, Estonians, and Latvians endured during the war was nothing less than atrocious. The only problem I have with the whole story is the ‘equals’ sign.”

Prosecuting Heroes Another manifestation of the Baltic attempt to rewrite history in recent years has been a wave of accusations and investigations against Jewish heroes who escaped death by fighting alongside Soviet partisans against the Nazis. Particularly in Lithuania, prosecutors are combing the memoirs of several elderly Jews for evidence that they murdered Lithuanian citizens.



Now being prosecuted: Soviet Partisans, c.1941

One example is Rokhl Margolis, 89, a Vilna native who lives in Rechovot. Margolis was incarcerated in the Vilna ghetto in 1942–1943 before escaping deep into the forest outside the city to join the partisans. In the late 1990s, she discovered and transcribed *Ponary Diary, 1941–1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, non-Jewish Polish journalist Kazimierz Sakowicz's eyewitness account of the murder of more than 100,000 Lithuanian Jews, mainly by Lithuanian non-Jews. In 2006, Dr. Margolis published her own memoir of the war years.

Margolis has summered in Lithuania for years, but today she's afraid to return to that country, because the local media are calling for a probe of her wartime activities as possible crimes against Lithuanian civilians.

Fania Brantsovsky is another target of investigation. Also in her late-80s and a veteran of the partisan struggle against the Nazis, Brantsovsky was questioned by Lithuanian police in the spring of 2008 about her role in an alleged massacre of thirty-eight civilians in the village of Kaniukai, in southeastern Lithuania, in January 1944.

These inquiries apparently stem from a January 28, 2008, article in the mainstream *Lietuvos Aidas* newspaper charging both women with crimes: "And why does nobody put Fania Brantsovsky on trial? From the Internet we learn that she is the vice chairman of the Union of Former Ghetto and Concentration Camp Prisoners, she leads excursions around Vilnius and to Paneriai for foreigners, she participated in the international seminar 'Education about the Holocaust for Schools in Eastern Europe,' etc. Ms. R. Margolis should be questioned as a material witness as well," the newspaper wrote.

Prosecuting Yad Vashem The most well-known harassment of a former partisan concerns Dr. Yitzhak Arad, a founder and former head of Yad Vashem and a native of Świeciany, near Vilna. In 1941, Arad — the son of a renowned *chazzan* in the famous Moriah shul in Świeciany — fled to Belorussia with an older sister. He never saw his parents again. He believes they were killed in Treblinka in 1942, the year he was captured by the Nazis and forced to work cleaning weapons confiscated from Soviet partisans. Arad noticed that, at the end of their shifts, he and his fellow slave laborers were frisked for food (to prevent smuggling into the ghetto) but not for weapons, so he stuck a gun under his shirt. He got away with it and managed to steal twelve more weapons over the next two months.

The guns gave him and a group of young people the means to join a group of Soviet partisans in the Vilnius Battalion of the Markov Brigade, a primarily non-Jewish unit in which he had to contend with anti-Semitism. Apart from his infiltration of the Vilna



Standing up for truth:
Professor Dovid Katz

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ghetto in April 1943, he stayed with the partisans until the end of the war, fighting the Germans and their collaborators in the Narocz Forest of Belarus.

Fast-forward to April 2006, when the Lithuanian broadsheet *Respublika* ran an article entitled "Expert with Blood on His Hands." Two months later, the Lithuanian state prosecutor announced that Arad would be investigated for "war crimes" based on his 1979 English-language memoir *The Partisans*.

"I think they used my case as part of a general attempt to rewrite history," he said, "to show that Jews were not the only victims of World War II."

Arad, 83, is fluent in six languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, English, Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian) and reads a seventh (German), and he's one of the world's premier authorities on the war in Lithuania and the Soviet Union. He refused to speak to the Lithuanian prosecutor, saying he "doesn't trust them." He added that the accusations weren't a complete surprise.

"I knew the Lithuanians were angry with me," he said, "because of testimony I gave in the United States regarding several Lithuanians accused of war crimes. I served as an expert witness for the Office of Special Investigations in Washington, DC, during the 1990s, particularly during the deportation hearings for John Demjanjuk, and I also testified about Lithuanians who committed atrocities. After that, many parties in Lithuania were out to get me."

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Arad case is the muted reaction from Yad Vashem. Although Chairman Avner Shalev criticized the investigation in a letter to Lithuanian Foreign Minister Petras Vaitiekunas, and his organization "suspended" its participation in the Red-Brown Commission after the latter failed to condemn the accusations against Arad, Yad Vashem never withdrew from the commission. Indeed, as mentioned, some defenders of the effort to equate communist oppression in Lithuania with Nazi genocide point to Yad Vashem's continued participation in the commission as a seal of approval.

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Critical of Jewish establishment: Efraim Zuroff

Shalev and Yossi Gevir, his senior assistant, both refused to be interviewed for this article. Yet, when the investigation of Arad began, Shalev did call it a "dangerous perversion," saying, "It is clear that initiating criminal proceedings into Dr. Arad's involvement in Lithuanian partisan activity during World War II is tantamount to a call for an investigation into all partisan activity."

For this article, a Yad Vashem press liaison provided a statement that "efforts of some in Europe to equate Nazism and Communism [signal] a very worrying trend that we're seeing in some areas in Europe, and must be combated forcefully." The statement also



reiterated that Yad Vashem had suspended its participation in the Red-Brown Commission due to the investigation against Arad.

When the investigation was announced, Lithuania's deputy foreign minister, Jaroslavas Neverovicas, told reporters that Arad was wanted as "a witness, not a suspect," but the incident provoked a diplomatic row between Israel and Lithuania, including an Israeli refusal to extradite Arad for questioning. For his part, Arad told **Mishpacha**, "I've certainly got nothing to hide. On the contrary: I am proud to have fought against the murderers of my parents and my people."

Still, Efraim Zuroff doesn't mince words about the Arad case and the phenomenon it represents. "The case against Dr. Arad is only the tip of an ugly iceberg created in Vilna by government officials and institutions determined to hide the truth about the critical role played by local Nazi collaborators in the annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry and the mass murder of Jews in Belarus and Poland. Thus the Lithuanians did everything possible to avoid prosecution of their own Nazi war criminals, and when pressured to prosecute three cases, they made sure by devious legal tactics that none of the three would ever be punished, thereby reinforcing the myth propagated by the authorities that only a few local hooligans mistreated Jews."

"The latest campaign to prosecute Soviet anti-Nazi Jewish partisans is merely another link in this chain of historical duplicity and distortion. The truth about the Shoah must finally be told in



Skinheads march in downtown Vilna, March 2008

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— Dr. Yitzhak Arad



Proud to have fought back: Yitzhak Arad

Vilna. The investigations of Jewish partisans Rokhi Margolis and Fania Brantsovsky should be closed as well,” said Zuroff.

Both Margolis and Brantsovsky have received support from Western embassies in Lithuania, and no charges have been filed against either. According to Dovid Katz, there’s good reason for that.

“The Lithuanians know there is no basis for the accusations, and they wouldn’t want to expose the emptiness in court. We are talking about elderly people who have no energy or desire to fight to clear their good names in court. So it amounts to little more than character assassination,” he said.

Traditional Anti-Semitism According to Katz, the current attempts to distort the Holocaust stem from a noxious mix of classic anti-Semitism, ultra-nationalism, traditional Christian theology, and an appalling wartime record.

“Anti-Semitism thrived in the Baltics,” he says, “and it is still alive and well. That’s responsible for a lot of what you’re seeing. And then there is the Christian idea of ‘sins of the heart,’ meaning that Jews bear guilt for Soviet crimes because they preferred to fall to Stalin over Hitler. Of course, that is true, but the idea has been exploited by today’s fascists.”

Katz reports that many younger Lithuanians tune out local media and are more interested in traveling the world than in the issues raised here. On the whole, he says they disdain Lithuanian politicians and media, but older Lithuanians are susceptible to mass media and anti-Semitism. In addition, there’s a difference between large, cosmopolitan cities like Vilna and small towns in the rural areas.

“The main problem exists with establishment elites,” Katz said, “including government officials, academics, and the press, all of whom are supported by the state. For them, obfuscation and the effort to cover up the painful history of local involvement in the Holocaust is a major goal. This is done, in part, by hosting Jewish book fairs and Yiddish festivals in order to say, ‘Look! We’re hosting Jewish stuff. We can’t be anti-Semitic!’ And Jewish groups are buying it.”

Another reason for Lithuania to distort the Holocaust is the appalling record of Lithuanians during the Holocaust and since independence regarding the prosecution of war criminals and the restoration of community property stolen during the Nazi era.

Indeed, the numbers tell much of the story: Well over 90 percent of Baltic Jews perished during the Holocaust; in Lithuania alone, 155,700 people, or 92.7 percent of the pre-war Jewish population, were murdered. Furthermore, as opposed to most of Nazi-occupied Europe, where local collaborators sent Jews “to the east,” in the Baltics non-Jews enthusiastically participated in the roundup and killing of their Jewish neighbors.

“I don’t want to whitewash the Germans’ role in Lithuania or smooth over their plans to annihilate the Jewish People,” said Arad. “Without Germany, there is no Holocaust. But when the Germans arrived, locals were only too happy to help out. They

were the ones who pulled Jews out of their homes, sometimes physically pulling them out of bed. They forced them to march to the pits in the forest (pre-dug by earlier victims), they guarded the killing field so the victims couldn’t flee, and by and large they participated in the actual killing. Of course, I would never belittle the German role in the murder — Nazi officers did stand and watch the killings — but in the Baltic areas, the bulk of the actual killing was done by local people, not by Germans.”

Furthermore, since achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Baltic states have failed to comply with norms established in Western Europe for prosecuting war criminals and restoring stolen property. In Lithuania, not one person has been tried for Holocaust crimes.

Not surprisingly, both the campaign to distort the Holocaust and ongoing efforts to reclaim Jewish property have sparked a fresh wave of anti-Semitism, particularly in the press. In March 2008, hundreds of neo-Nazis marched through central Vilna shouting anti-Semitic slogans with full police protection, despite a Lithuanian law prohibiting incitement to racial or ethnic tension. More recently, on July 14, 2009, the *Vakaro Zinios* newspaper ran a doctored photograph of Dr. Shimen Alperovich, the leader of the 3,000-member Lithuanian Jewish community, hovering over an abacus, apparently counting the money he is expecting to come rolling in. One member of the community told **Mishpacha** on condition of anonymity, “It’s becoming quite impossible to keep track of the anti-Semitic barrage in the press here.”

As of this writing, no non-Jewish Lithuanian public figures have spoken out against these attacks, and the unnamed source added that “the atmosphere is worsening insofar as good people here who are in a position to speak out no longer feel comfortable doing so.”

Modest Goals In conclusion, Dovid Katz shakes his head sadly, with more than a touch of frustration in his voice, and admits that his goal is modest.

“I never endeavored to get into anything like this,” he says, looking out at the Mediterranean Sea. “I’m a professor of Yiddish. But here we are in 2009, less than seventy years after the end of the war. Survivors are still with us, and the efforts to equate their experiences with Soviet crimes are outrageous.

“At the end of the day, all I really expect to accomplish is to make sure there is a second opinion on record, so when the final account is written, no one can say, ‘Why didn’t the Jews stand up for themselves?’” ■