

Another Word for Uncertainty: Anti-Semitism in Modern Lithuania

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Summary

Lithuania can take pride in its historical legacy of ethnical, religious and cultural diversity during the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Union. Modern Lithuania departed from this tradition, turning into an increasingly homogenous political actor in the age of nationalism. However, the new Lithuanian state offered Jews extensive cultural autonomy from 1918 to 1926. The Second World War and the Holocaust caused the complete destruction of the Litvak community and culture. Anti-Semitism in Soviet Lithuania never differed significantly from official policies, adopted by the Kremlin. Some characteristically Lithuanian traits of anti-Semitism emerged within conservative and chauvinistic émigré circles. Yet the country was to revive the full scale of prejudice and hatred after 1990. This article explores the trajectories of anti-Semitic imagination and the dynamics of anti-Semitic politics in modern Lithuania.

Zusammenfassung

Litauen verfügt über ein historisches Erbe ethnischer, religiöser und kultureller Vielfalt zur Zeit des Großherzogtums Litauens sowie der polnisch-litauischen Union. Das moderne Litauen wich von dieser Tradition ab und wandelte sich im Zeitalter des Nationalismus zu einem homogenen Akteur. Der neue Staat gestand den Juden jedoch zwischen 1918 bis 1926 kulturelle Autonomie zu. Der Zweite Weltkrieg und der Holocaust bedeuteten die Zerstörung der angestammten jüdischen Gemeinschaft und Kultur. Der Antisemitismus Sowjetlitauens unterschied sich nicht wesentlich von der offiziellen Politik des Kremls. Charakteristische litauische Merkmale entwickelten sich indes in konservativ-chauvinistischen Emigrantenkreisen. Nach 1990 erlebte Litauen das gesamte Spektrum von antisemitischem Vorurteil und Hass. Der Beitrag untersucht die Entwicklungslinien antisemitischer Vorstellungen und die Dynamik antisemitischer Politik in Litauen.

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Innocence and Victimisation, or the Culture of Determinism

The phenomena of innocence and self-victimisation are instrumental in shaping what might be termed the *culture of determinism* and the *culture of poverty*. Victimised consciousness is moved by a belief in malevolent and sinister forces of the universe – allegedly manifesting themselves through secret and elusive human agencies, which come to manipulate and dominate the world through subversive activities, immediately targeting the single most fragile actor. The principle of evil is permanently ascribed to the big and powerful, while the principle of good is reserved exclusively for the small and vulnerable. This means that, by implication, I cannot err or sin if I belong to a small, vulnerable and fragile group; conversely, it means that I can never be on the right side if, by birth and upbringing, I happen to belong to the ranks of the privileged or powerful. My human value and merit are predetermined and can thus easily be judged in terms of my race, gender, nationality, or class.

Such reasoning, which takes all human beings as irreversibly shaped and moved by biological or social forces with no moral or intellectual choice involved, is a powerful element of conspiracy theory. Regrettably, this kind of modern barbarity, which deprives humanity of the sense of fellowship and tends to replace it with the concepts of natural animosity and everlasting struggle between irreconcilable groups or forces, tends to surface and extend its influence beyond underground consciousness. Far from being qualified as social pathology, it assumes the status of something normal and even progressive.

Conspiracy theory allows no room for critical self-reflexivity and critical self-discovery. At this point, it is a mortal enemy of moral philosophy. Whereas modern political philosophy, properly understood, is an extension of moral philosophy, the point of departure for conspiracy theory is a radical denial of theoretical reflection, critical judgment and moral accountability. Infinite manipulation and unlimited power are the ultimate ends that motivate evil forces. The world is too naïve, vulnerable and fragile to unmask the real masters and the sordid manipulations through which they keep that world in the darkness of ignorance, stupidity and self-deception – this is the message that conspiracy theory conveys to its adherents.

In his book *Moralizing Cultures*, Vytautas Kavolis, a noted Lithuanian émigré sociologist, suggests that this phenomenon is deeply rooted in a modern system of moralisation, which he terms the *culture of determinism*. Kavolis puts it thus:

A modern amoral culture, in the sense that it tends to eliminate the notion of individual moral responsibility without taking collective responsibility seriously, is the *culture of determinism*. In this culture it is assumed that individuals are shaped and moved by biological or social forces in all essentials beyond the control, or even the possibility of major choices, of the individuals affected by them. The four major intellectual foci of this culture are the theory that “biology (or racial inheritance) is destiny”; the belief that the human being is and should be nothing but a utility-calculating, pleasure-maximizing machine; the conviction that the individual is, in currently existing societies, only a victim of the “oppressive,” “impoverished,” “devitalizing,” or “traditionally constricted” social conditions of his or her existence (without the ability to become an agent of his fate and assume responsibility for her actions); and the notion that he can be helped out of such conditions solely by the “guidance of experts” who have a “rational social policy” at their disposal, in the determination of which those who are to be helped participate merely as instruments of the experts.¹

Kavolis’ concept of a modern, amoral culture sheds new light on why victimised groups or societies relate to ruling elites as patients relate to specialists dispensing diagnosis and treatment. At the same time, it takes us directly to the heart of the matter, by allowing us to understand how and why a victimised culture manifests itself as the culture of destiny and determinism, as opposed to the culture of freedom and choice.

The concept of amoral culture reveals the links between all kinds of deterministic theories, especially in the social sciences. Kavolis starts by quoting Sigmund Freud’s dictum “biology is destiny”, and then goes on to highlight other modes of discourse that speak out in favour of inexorable laws of racial inheritance, history, milieu, societal life, social organisation, and so forth. A modern, amoral culture denying individual responsibility and moral choice, or the culture of determinism in Kavolis’ parlance, is a system of moralisation, disseminated in the modern moral imagination.

Such a culture is characteristic of antimodernist reactions, including racism, technocracy and other forms of deterministic consciousness. It also includes a belief in inexorable historical laws, a phenomenon that Karl R. Popper termed *historicism*. It goes without saying that the culture and spirit of determinism are driving forces behind totalitarian regimes – totalitarianism without deterministic consciousness would merely be a contradiction in terms. At the same time, the culture of determinism penetrates all

¹ Kavolis, Vytautas: *Moralizing Cultures*. Lanham, Md. 1993, 48.

“minor” forms of organised hatred. It appears wherever the quest for enemies is in demand.

The culture of determinism is not only a perfect home for conspiracy theories of all shades; it is also another term for what I call modern barbarity. Indeed, it might be suggested that totalitarianism and the spirit of technology are both the offspring of such barbarity.² The culture of determinism not only informs modern anti-Semitism, but also many other manifestations of anti-modern sentiments. It has evidently incorporated the kind of medieval, quasi-animistic, and exorcist principles, which readily attributed adultery and even rape to the alleged presence of seductive and demonic powers in women.

Its symbolic (anti-)logic brings to mind the even older accusations of *maleficium*, which were levelled at the first Christians within the Roman Empire, but later reserved by Christians for the Jews. We would deceive ourselves by insisting on *maleficium* as the voice of the past and as something impossible nowadays: cases like the Beiliss ritual murder trial³ or the Doctors’ Affair in 1953, instigated by Stalin,⁴ easily destroy such naïve assertions like a house of cards. *Maleficium* still seems deeply embedded in East European popular consciousness – starting with the prejudice which holds that Jews use the blood of Christian babies for their rituals, and ending with political trials or manifestations that explicitly describe Jewry as a clandestine and treacherous force.⁵

² Leszek Kołakowski describes totalitarianism and the spirit of technology as forms of modern barbarity. For more on this issue, see Kołakowski, Leszek: *Modernity on Endless Trial*. London / Chicago 1990, 14–31.

³ In 1913, Mendel Beiliss, a clerk of Jewish origin, was tried in Kiev for the alleged ritual murder of a Christian boy. The Beiliss Affair caused an international scandal, and Mendel Beiliss was acquitted.

⁴ In the Soviet Union, the imperial Russian legacy of anti-Semitism apparently survived into the post-war period. After the Second World War, Stalin’s growing paranoia manifested itself in plans for another purge. In January 1953, Stalin ordered the arrest of a group of Kremlin doctors on charges of plotting the medical murder of high-level Soviet officials. Fifteen doctors, most of them Jewish, were arrested and charged with poisoning Party leaders on orders from the American Joint Distribution Committee, a Zionist organisation. The charges were withdrawn after Stalin’s death in the same year. Yet, the Soviet campaign against Jews intensified.

⁵ For more on *maleficium*, see Cohn, Norman: *Europe’s Inner Demons. An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt*. London 1975; idem: *Warrant for Genocide. The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Chico, Cal. 1981; Don-

Needless to point out, perhaps, such a culture of determinism is deeply embedded in Lithuanian culture. Over the last 15 years, Lithuania has gone through a profound transition: old certainties have vanished or faced de-legitimisation, which makes it just too tempting for some people to search for scapegoats, who can be held responsible for the hardships of post-communist transformation and for the uncertainties of globalisation.

Out of Touch: The Parallel Existence of Two Cultures

Lithuania enjoys a fine and extensive history of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural co-existence, steeped in Renaissance and Baroque Europe. Whatever separates political imagination from the realities, or whatever gap there is between historical facts and selective memory, the truth is that Lithuanian political culture since 1990 has demonstrated a renewed political willingness and ability to accommodate minorities, their languages and cultures. Lithuanian mainstream politics has had much success in embracing – or at least not alienating – the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian minorities. Lithuania has even become a refuge against censorship and political persecution in neighbouring states. Moreover, the presence of small groups, such as the Karaims and Roma, is not causing tensions.

Yet, the parallel existence of Lithuanian and Jewish cultures is something far more problematic, and it has been so for centuries. “Anti-Semitism” is by no means the only attitude towards the Jews that accurately can be assigned to Lithuanians. The predominant attitude may better be described as insensitivity to – and defensiveness about – certain “inconvenient” aspects of the past. It should, however, be stressed that exclusion and alienation became the fate of Jews throughout Central and Eastern Europe, and should consequently not be seen as confined to Lithuania.

One of the most puzzling and even disturbing phenomena in modern Lithuania is the parallel existence of Lithuanian and Jewish cultures. These two cultures may never have achieved mutual understanding, to say nothing of achieving an interpretative framework within which to embrace, or critically question, one another.

Prior to the Second World War, Lithuania was famous for its very large Jewish community (about 240 000 Jews lived in Lithuania; only 20 000 survived the Holocaust).

skis, Leonidas: *Forms of Hatred. The Troubled Imagination in Modern Philosophy and Literature*. Amsterdam / New York 2003.

The Lithuanian capital, Vilnius – occupied by Poland from 1920 to 1939 – was known around the world as the “Jerusalem of the North”, and many internationally eminent Jews lived in or were from Lithuania, among them the philosophers Emmanuel Lévinas and Aron Gurwitsch, the painters Chaïm Soutine (a close friend of Amedeo Modigliani in Paris), Pinkus Kremegne, Michel Kikoine, and Neemija Arbitblatas, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, the violinist Jascha Heifetz, and the art critic Bernard Berenson, one of the most sophisticated twentieth-century students of the Italian Renaissance.

Yet, none of these individuals were ever considered to be significant actors in Lithuanian national life – despite the fact that it was they who inscribed Lithuania’s name on the intellectual and cultural map of the twentieth-century world. Why? The answer is very simple: the Russian-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jewish community in Lithuania was always alienated from the Lithuanian inter-war intelligentsia, which, for its part, cultivated linguistic and cultural nationalism both as a means of self-definition, and as a way of distinguishing rurally oriented Lithuanian compatriots (the organic community, or, in Ferdinand Tönnies’ terms, *Gemeinschaft*) from “rootless”, cosmopolitan and urban professionals (the mechanised, fragmented, diversified society, i.e. *Gesellschaft*).

Despite the fact that quite a few Lithuanian intellectuals and common people were sympathetic to them, Jews and other “aliens” were excluded from the Lithuanian cultural and intellectual mainstream. The explicitly Lithuanian intelligentsia decided who belonged to the nation, which they perceived as the embodiment of a historical-cultural project rather than as an empirically identifiable social reality.

Dilemmas of Historical Memory: A Victim or an Evil-Doer?

The problem for Lithuanian Jews is that quite a large sector of Lithuanian society – including not a few representatives of the intelligentsia – is still inclined to consider the Jews as collectively responsible for the mass killings and deportations of civilians, as well as for other atrocities committed during the Soviet occupation on the eve of the Second World War. This tendency represents a disgraceful adoption of the Nazi rhetoric that equated “Communism” with “the Jews”. In an effort to modify the charges that

Lithuanians participated in the mass killings of Jews in 1941 and after, some Lithuanians have spoken of “two genocides”, or – as some Jewish writers have called it – a “symmetry” in the suffering among both peoples.⁶

This notorious theory of a “historic guilt” of Lithuanian Jews, which up to now has been deeply embedded in Lithuanian political discourse and popular consciousness, claims that the local Jewry was disloyal and unpatriotic towards Lithuania on the eve of the Second World War, and ultimately was instrumental for the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Hence, the derivative theory of “two genocides”, which provides an assessment of the Holocaust and of local collaborators of the Nazis in terms of revenge for the Soviet genocide of Lithuanian nationals. It is little wonder, then, that the theory of “two genocides” – which is just another term for the theory of “collective guilt of the Jews” – has been qualified by Tomas Venclova, an eminent Lithuanian poet and Yale scholar, as “troglodytic”, thus characterising people who are still inclined to practice it as “moral troglodytes”.⁷

Regrettably, after 1990 Lithuania has failed to bring war criminals to justice and to provide an unambiguous legal assessment of those Lithuanians who were active in the Holocaust. Unrepentance and lack of sensitivity are hardly the only reasons for that. The point is that many Lithuanians are still inclined to portray their country as an absolute victim of the twentieth century, without giving much consideration to the political faults and moral evils committed by their compatriots to their fellow Jewish citizens.⁸

Unequipped with more “sophisticated” forms of anti-Semitism, such as Holocaust denial or revisionist versions of Second World War history, Lithuanian anti-Semitism remains deeply grounded in a sort of ideological and political demonology that was characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the

⁶ For more on this issue, see Venclova 1999, as footnote 3; Shtromas, Aleksandras: *Totalitarianism and the Prospects for World Order. Closing the Door on the Twentieth Century*. New York 2003.

⁷ See Donskis, Leonidas: “The Vanished World of the Litvaks”. In: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 54 (2005:1), 80–85.

⁸ For more on this issue, see Silbajoris, Rimvydas (ed.): *Mind against the Wall. Essays on Lithuanian Culture under Soviet Occupation*. Chicago 1983; Donskis, Leonidas: *Identity and Freedom. Mapping Nationalism and Social Criticism in Twentieth-Century Lithuania*. London / New York 2002.

twentieth century – or, sociologically speaking, in the all-too-familiar dilemmas and uncertainties of modernity.⁹

Adding Insult to Injury: Anti-Semitism in Lithuanian Politics and Culture

On the eve of the Second World War, Antanas Maceina – now a towering figure in modern Lithuanian philosophy, but then a young docent of philosophy at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas – simultaneously leaned toward Bolshevism and National Socialism, which both, in his terms, embodied the spirit of Prometheanism that was incompatible with that of the bourgeoisie.

What lay behind such an intellectual and moral stance is unclear, though Maceina's conscious acceptance of the Nazis' ideological idioms and propaganda was surely pivotal. Maceina himself was the architect of the *Lithuanian Activist Front's* (LAF) ideological program, which inspired the provisional government of Lithuania and stood behind the June 1941 anti-Soviet uprising. Indeed, this contribution to the ideological platform of the LAF was acknowledged by Kazys Škirpa, the Lithuanian ambassador to Nazi-Germany before the Second World War, under whose supervision the LAF was established.¹⁰

In the 1941 the LAF's program for the liberation of Lithuania from the Soviet Union, Maceina identified the following priorities:

1. The preservation of the Lithuanian nation's racial purity;
2. the encouragement of Lithuanian women in the accomplishment of their paramount mission – to provide the nation with as many healthy new-borns as possible;
3. the promotion of Lithuanian ethnic domination in the country's largest cities;
4. and the strict and uncompromising battle against trends within Lithuanian culture that are insufficiently loyal to and respectful of "Lithuanianness", and

⁹ For more on this issue, see Nikžentaitis, Alvydas et al. (eds.): *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*. Amsterdam / New York 2004.

¹⁰ See Škirpa, Kazys: *Sukilimas Lietuvos suverenumui atstatyti [The Uprising for the Restoration of Lithuania's Sovereignty]*. Washington, D.C. 1973, 573.

which do not hold the nation and national cohesion to be the first priority in all matters.¹¹

Maceina was most explicit on the latter issue in his article “Tauta ir valstybė [The Nation and the State]”, which appeared in the journal *Naujoji romuva [The New Sanctuary]* March 19, 1939:

The most important feature of the state is its cohesion [...] The existence of the new state is founded not on the citizen, but on the Lithuanian compatriot [...] The state, being the reification of the nation, cannot treat foreigners, or so-called ethnic minorities, in the same way that it treats Lithuanian compatriots.¹²

In terms of his doctrinaire stance and his spread of reactionary ideas, Maceina was far from unique in the context of inter-war Europe. We might recall developments in Europe prior to the Second World War, when such forms of ideological influence and mass indoctrination were widespread throughout Western and Central/Eastern Europe.

At this point, it would be useful to take a closer look at some stereotypes that the noted Lithuanian émigré philosopher Juozas Girnius made use of. In his post-war essay “Lietuviškojo charakterio problema [The Problem of the Lithuanian Character]” Girnius employed a theory to shore them up. These stereotypes have, at the very least, quite unpleasant political and moral implications. For example, after commenting on Niccolò Machiavelli’s famous lion and fox metaphors, Girnius states that Lithuanians are not sly as foxes nor fearsome as lions – in other words, the Lithuanian human material is too noble to confirm to Machiavelli’s cynical theoretical claims. Hence, Girnius’ insight into Lithuanians’ particular tolerance of foreigners, especially Jews:

It is impossible for our human character to be the first, or the second, neither lion nor fox. We cannot be lions not only because we are not a large nation, but, first of all, because in cherishing our freedom, we cannot refuse to cherish the freedom of others. Our

¹¹ See *ibid.*, 567–572.

¹² “Pirmas tautinės valstybės bruožas yra josios totalumas [...] naujoji valstybė savo egzistenciją grindžia ne piliečiu, bet *tautiečiu* [...] Valstybė, būdama tautos objektyvacija, negali vienodai traktuoti ir tautiečius ir svetimų tautybių piliečius arba vad. tautines mažumas”. Cited in Kavolis, Vytautas: “Centrai ir apytakos kultūros dirbtuvėse [Centres and Exchanges in the Workshops of Culture]”. In: *Metmenys [Patterns]* 68 (1995), 36–37. In this article, Kavolis compares Antanas Maceina’s views to those of the “1927 Generation” in Romania. For more on this issue, see Tismaneanu, Vladimir and Dan Pavel: “Romania’s Mystical Revolutionaries: The Generation of Angst and Adventure Revisited”. In: *East European Politics and Societies* 8 (1994:3), 402–438.

country's politics of minorities undoubtedly testifies to the fact that our 'un-lionness' does not spring only from our nation's smallness and the weakness of our state's power. Even if we lacked enough power to attack our neighbours, we still had enough to abuse our minorities. However, not for a single minority group (albeit the loyalty of some for us was very problematic) did we deny the right to live an individual life freely. Our political tolerance is especially well testified by our relationship with the Jewish minority. Although this minority group had an unequivocal stranglehold on the practical spheres of economic life (trade and industry) and could have been a strong basis for anti-Semitism, however, not even during the most passionate period of anti-Semitism in the neighbouring Reich did anti-Semitism find any stronger reverberations in Lithuania. The Jewish minority lived freely. True, during the first period of occupation, many people of this minority did not pass the exam of loyalty to the Lithuanian nation, becoming the invader's collaborators in devastating the Lithuanian nation. However, when, one year later, the second invader began its inhumane terror against Jews, the Lithuanian nation met it with a deep feeling of disgust, because, in our understanding, what is inhumane is inhumane, be it done to one of us, to a stranger, or, in the end, to an enemy.¹³

After such reasoning and such a demonstration of tolerance, only one question remains: should we be taken aback that this position regarding Jews became almost universally accepted in Lithuania and among its émigré community, since it was enunci-

¹³ “Mūsų žmoniškam charakteriui neįmanoma būti nei vienu, nei antru – nei liūtu, nei lape. Negalime būti liūtais ne vien dėl to, kad nesame didelė tauta, bet visų pirma dėl to, kad, vertindami savo laisvę, negalime nevertinti ir kitų laisvės. Kad mūsų „neliūtiškumas“ neplaukia vien iš mūsų tautos mažumo ir kartu jos valstybinės jėgos silpnumo, nepaneigiamai liudija mūsų valstybės vykdyta mažumų politika. Jei ir nebūtų pakakę jėgų kaimynams pulti, bet mažumoms prievartauti būtų jos užtekę. Tačiau nė vienai mažumai (nors kai kurių jų lojalumas mums buvo labai problemiškas) nepaneigėme teisės laisvai gyventi savitą gyvenimą. Ypatingai mūsų politinį tolerantiškumą liudija mūsų santykiai su žydų mažuma. Nors šitos mažumos vienašališkas įsiviešpatavimas praktinėse ūkinio gyvenimo srityse (prekyboje ir pramonėje) ir būtų galėjęs būti antisemitizmo pagrindu, tačiau net ir pačiu antisemitinės aistros kaimyniniame reiche siautėjimo metu antisemitizmas nerado Lietuvoje jokio ryškesnio atgarsio. Žydų mažuma gyveno laisvai. Tiesa, pirmosios okupacijos metu daugelis šitos mažumos žmonių neišlaikė lojalumo lietuvių tautai egzamino, tapo okupanto pagalbininkais lietuvių tautai niokoti. Tačiau kada po metų antrasis okupantas pradėjo nežmonišką terorą prieš žydus, lietuvių tauta tai sutiko giliu pasibaisėjimo jausmu, nes, mūsų supratimu, kas nežmoniška, yra nežmoniška, ar tai liestų savąjį, svetimąjį ar pagaliau priešą”. Girnius; Juozas: “Lietuviškojo charakterio problema [The Problem of Lithuanian Character]”. In: *Metai [Year]* (1991:12), 140–141. The entire text is published in: Idem: “Lietuviškojo charakterio problema [The Problem of Lithuanian Character]”. In: *Metai [Year]* (1991:11) and (1991:12).

ated – in black and white – by a celebrated Lithuanian philosopher and cultural hero? After all, Girnius' logic is transfused with a few stereotypes, which were used in constructing this public text, laying out a theory of Jewish disloyalty and treason against Lithuania.

In short, it claims that in Lithuania there had never been anti-Semitism; there were only disloyal Jews, who betrayed their country and *en bloc* went along with the Bolshevik occupation. The Jews failed the loyalty exam and betrayed their country, but even this did not give rise to a wave of anti-Semitism in Lithuania. Nevertheless, the massacre of Jews that took place during the years of war brought on great anguish for Lithuanians and awakened a deep sympathy in them (though Jews were enemies, and, at the same time, economic exploiters).

Unfortunately, this interpretation of twentieth century history, suggested by Girnius, reads like a compendium of Joseph Goebbels' propaganda gems and Lithuanian anti-Semitic stereotypes. What causes astonishment is how it entered the field of Girnius' discourse. Could it be that Girnius sincerely believed what he was writing? Or was it just his articulation of a secret feeling that a mass annihilation of the Lithuanian Jews – rationally inexplicable, and strikingly rapid, as well as technically “effective” – had raised fears in Lithuania and among émigrés that Lithuanians' collaboration with the Nazis could have destroyed any kind of sympathy for Lithuania among the Western allies, as well as compassion for the tragedy that had befallen it?

The following passage shows the descent into national self-congratulation, one-sided propaganda, a biased worldview, and, finally, an unconditional defence of one's nation and country – even as it blatantly ignores facts and historical, as well as political, realities:

What we hold to be just, we defend in open battle, even though an opportunistic flexibility would let us hope to avoid one or several victims. *We do not know how to be “realistic”*. We did not go red and did not hide in brown as the “realistic” countries did. We did not know how to bow our head to injustice. Our heads stand too erect for them to be swayed by every gust of wind. Our hearts are too sensitive to injustice for us to tolerate injustice with closed eyes and plugged ears. Our chests have always been stripped bare to the blows of invaders. Are we not, besides Poland, the only country oc-

cupied by the Nazis, from which even the brown terror has not been able to squeeze out even a single SS legion?¹⁴

Today such a historical interpretation would provoke a smile among Lithuanian or other European historians. At any rate, this interpretation of the turmoil of the twentieth century, suggested by Girnius, has completely transfused the popular consciousness and has become an almost universally accepted (often even *official*) position of Lithuanian society when evaluating the Second World War and the social and political turmoil it brought. Any attempts to assess the Lithuanian moral and political attitude during the occupation and the Second World War differently are deftly condemned as expressions of disloyalty: if, unfortunately, the facts tell another story, so what, too bad for the facts! Thus, it is hardly surprising that instead of having an open and critical interpretation of the twentieth century it has become acceptable to rely upon half-truths and selective historical memory: a defensive mythology presides over factuality. Undoubtedly, Girnius played a significant part in constructing this do-or-die paradigm which sought to protect the country from an unfavourable or “unpatriotic” (and, hence, hostile) historical interpretation. If Lithuanians, according to Girnius, never reddened or darkened, then it is clear that all the social and political turmoil that took place in twentieth century Lithuania was the outcome of activities conducted by hostile forces and fifth-columnists. It only remains to name those disloyal and treacherous forces: needless to say, they were Jews. What remains unclear after reading “The Problem of the Lithuanian Character”, however, is why so many supposedly ‘innocent’ Lithuanians happened to lend their support to Antanas Smetona’s dictatorship or, for that matter, totalitarian ideologies of different shades.

This aspect sheds new light on Girnius’ attempts to expose prejudices, superstitions and taboos deeply embedded in modern Lithuanian politics and culture. One of these

¹⁴ “Tai, ką laikome teisinga, giname atviroje kovoje, nors galbūt oportunistiniu lankstumu ir būtų galima tikėtis išvengti vienos ar kitos aukos. *Nemokame būti „realistiški“*. Neraudonėjome ir nerudėjome, kaip „realistiškesnieji“ kraštai. Nemokėjome lenkti galvos prieš neteisybę. Mūsų galvos per daug tiesiai iškilusios, kad pajėgtume pagal kiekvieną vėją siūbuoti. Mūsų širdys per daug jautrios neteisybei, kad galėtume, užmerkę akis ir užkimšę ausis, neteisybę toleruoti. Mūsų krūtinės visada buvo atviros visiems okupantų kirčiams. Ar nesame šalia lenkų vienintelė nacių okupuota tauta, iš kurios nė (!) rudasis teroras neišspaudė nė vieno SS legiono?”. Ibid, 140. For more on this issue, see Donskis, Leonidas: *Loyalty, Dissent, and Betrayal. Modern Lithuania and East-Central European Moral Imagination*. Amsterdam / New York 2005.

taboos is the role and place of the *Lithuanian Activist Front* (LAF) in the 1941 uprising to restore Lithuania's independence and in the spread of anti-Semitic propaganda in Lithuania. In 1941, the provisional government of Lithuania started playing a complicated game with the Nazis, sincerely hoping to restore Lithuania's independence.

The game, as Tomas Venclova noted, was inexorably doomed to failure. It is difficult to imagine something more dubious than choosing between Stalin and Hitler. The point to be stressed here is that the provisional government undoubtedly took its cue from the LAF. Unfortunately, though, members of the LAF also launched anti-Semitic propaganda, employing the usual repertoire of Nazi rhetoric, like "the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy", "a plot of Jewish bankers and communists", "the Jewish yoke and exploitation", and the like.

Venclova quotes from an editorial in *Naujoji Lietuva* [*The New Lithuania*] July 4, 1941:

The greatest enemy of Lithuania and other nations was and in some places remains a Jew [...] Today, as a result of the genius of Adolf Hitler [...] we are free from the Jewish yoke [...] A New Lithuania, after joining a New Europe of Adolf Hitler, must be clean from Jews [...] To exterminate the Jewry and Communism along with it is a primary task of the New Lithuania.¹⁵

This is not to say that the entire 1941 uprising should be regarded as an overture to the Holocaust. But its fallacies and grave mistakes have to be admitted. Venclova was the first to do this. In his articles, he openly challenged the romanticised and patriotic version of Second World War history, which tends to glamorise both the LAF and the 1941 uprising, thus calling for a transvaluation of those values.

Quoting from editorials in wartime Lithuanian papers, Venclova showed – in black and white – that some Lithuanian politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens were influenced by Nazism on the eve of the Second World War. Moreover, Venclova implied that they, by choosing and joining Nazism, betrayed Lithuania and also turned down the values of the democratic world.

¹⁵ See Venclova, Tomas: "A Fifth Year of Independence: Lithuania, 1922 and 1994". In: *East European Politics and Societies* 9 (1995:2), 365.

Needless to say, the conservative and ultrapatriotic circles, particularly among émigrés, reacted noisily to Venclova's devastating criticism of Lithuanian anti-Semitism, thus adding insult to injury.

Soviet Anti-Semitism and its Legacy

In the Soviet Union – trailing in the footsteps of Tsarist Russia, with which Soviet legislation closed ranks; sharing the exclusionary, discriminatory *numerus clausus* rule and practice – anti-Semitism was lifted to the status of a state policy, starting from constant denial of the Holocaust and a fixed Soviet interpretation of Second World War history, which described Jews exterminated by the Nazis simply as “Soviet citizens”, and ending with outright hostility towards the Israeli state and an active support for its foes.

This should not come as a surprise to anyone more or less familiar with the history of the Soviet Union, especially bearing in mind Stalin's anti-Semitism and the political persecution of Jewish rabbis and intellectuals in the 1950s. Recalling the infamous principle of *numerus clausus* of imperial Russia Stalin curtailed educational opportunities for Jewish youths. Even after the Holocaust, the Soviet Union and its satellites brutally destroyed a significant part of Jewish culture in Eastern and Central Europe, abolishing Jewish schools, synagogues, and cultural institutions, in addition to exiling and even murdering rabbis and Jewish intellectuals.

The Soviet republics could hardly escape the Kremlin's hard-lined approach and brutal treatment of Jews. Even so, Soviet Lithuania was known for its comparatively soft approach towards Jews: it was, for instance, an open secret that it was easier to repatriate to Israel from Lithuania than from anywhere else in the Soviet Union by the 1970s. The story of Icchokas Meras, a Holocaust survivor saved by a Lithuanian family, may shed some light on this factor. Meras is a Lithuanian writer of Jewish background and, most probably, the only Israeli writer to write his short stories and novels in Lithuanian. He emigrated to Israel in 1972 and was followed by many others.

Sadly, there were very few Litvaks or their descendants left in Lithuania, but many Russian-speaking Jews settled in Lithuania in the 1960s and 1970s precisely because of a more humane attitude towards them. A curious detail could be offered as an illustration of this: when the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt broke out in 1967,

many ordinary Lithuanians openly supported Israel, thus showing sympathy for a small state so intensely hated and demonised by the Soviet regime.

Although anti-Semitism remained a burning issue in neighbouring Poland – a country that bears much resemblance to Lithuania in terms of historical-political sentiments and culture of remembrance –, overt anti-Semitism never manifested itself in Soviet Lithuania. In spite of many quite similar social and cultural developments in both countries, anti-Semitism was never as intense in post-war Lithuania as in Poland, where it reached a climax in the late 1960s when Jews were purged from high-ranking positions (as also happened in Soviet Russia in the 1970s). It had little, if anything at all, to do with moderate or ferocious forms of anti-Semitism or generosity. In this respect, the difference between Poland and Lithuania laid elsewhere. Lithuanian anti-Semitism was restricted by its Soviet forms, whereas Polish anti-Semitism was considerably more reminiscent of typical modern European anti-Semitism.

What happened in the Soviet Union after the Second World War was that all Jewish history, including the *Shoah*, disappeared from public life, leaving very few traces. Jews were stigmatised everywhere, the term “Jewish” became pejorative, and the entire Jewish life was marginalised and uprooted. It is small wonder, then, that many Lithuanians were, and continue to be, ignorant of the Second World War and of the Jewish catastrophe – in particular the younger generations. Even worse, in Lithuania this ignorance is systematically being used and cynically being exploited by some unscrupulous media persons. This disturbing tendency is illustrated best by the example of Vitas Tomkus, editor-in-chief of the daily *Respublika*, which I will return to shortly.

After the declaration of independence in 1990, a new era began for Lithuania – with all its joys, hardships, and burdens. The political and moral enthusiasm of the late 1980s gradually gave way to political apathy and frustration. At the same time, the aggravation and anger felt by many people who were ignorant of the Holocaust and the tragic history of the twentieth century in general were fuelled by political debates and information, which for most people emerged out of the blue, and which insisted that some Lithuanians participated in the mass extermination of their fellow citizens, Lithuanian Jews.

The Unholy Trinity of Modernity: Uncertainty, Unsafety, and Insecurity

In addition to a complex and sometimes painful experience of socio-economical and political transformation – a process that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union – Lithuanian society is, to a great extent, suffering from what Zygmunt Bauman called the *unholy trinity of modernity* – uncertainty, unsafety, and insecurity. The arrival of independent Lithuania in an uncertain, unsafe, and insecure world of modernity was also accompanied by the loss of old certainties, embodied in the failed Soviet project.

In 1996, Vytautas Kavolis asked rhetorically whether a *culture of poverty* – in Oscar Lewis' terms – exists in Lithuania.¹⁶ In fact, there is ample evidence that such a culture is well-established: recent sociological polls suggest that a strong sense of helplessness, fatalism and failure is accompanied by a growing hostility to liberal democracy and democratic institutions. A good proportion of Lithuanians would favour authoritarianism above parliamentary democracy, deeming rule by a strong leader as preferable to the rule of law, representation, and divisions of powers. Powers of association have deteriorated considerably, while growing social atomisation and fragmentation point to the existence of new forms of cultural colonisation, isolation and marginalisation.

The Soviet regime seems to have transformed Lithuania into a low-trust nation, where lack of faith in existing institutions threatens the fragile foundations of civil society, yet where people – oddly enough – place enormous trust in the media, and TV in particular. The bewildering pace of economic and socio-cultural change has exacerbated such trends over the past decade and a half. People of the older generation often feel that their lives have been ruined, if not totally wasted. Many of them have lost their jobs and savings. Their children may have left the country and settled in Ireland or Spain, while they have had to stay behind and live on a meagre pension. It is hardly possible to convince these people that Lithuania has a vibrant economy, or that it is “a Baltic tiger” (as former Polish finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz recently described it). While such claims seem valid for certain groups, quite a large segment of Lithuanian society currently lives beyond the “EU reality”.

¹⁶ For more on Oscar Lewis' concept of the culture of poverty, see Lewis, Oscar: “The Culture of Poverty”. In: LeGates, Richard T. and Frederic Stout (eds.): *The City Reader*. London / New York 1996, 217–224.

It is indeed telling that in a December 2004 sociological poll, 34 % of the respondents characterised the years 1990–2004 as the most unfortunate period in Lithuania’s entire history. Only 30 % reserved this “honour” for the Soviet period, and even fewer – 23 % – thought the period under Tsarist Russia was the most unfortunate (1795–1915).¹⁷ Lithuania today has the highest suicide rate in the world – an alarming fact that sheds new light on the extent of social depression, alienation and despair in society. Moreover, growing emigration has deprived the country of many young and highly qualified people: more than 500 000 have left Lithuania over the past ten years, settling in the USA, Great Britain, Ireland, and other Western countries.

In other words, the country has lost much in terms of human resources, while the countryside in particular has been denied any prospect of rapid economic and social development. In recent years, political commentators and politicians have begun to speak of “two Lithuanias” – a westward-looking and economically vibrant Lithuania, celebrating its own dynamism and rejoicing over accession to NATO and the European Union, versus an elite-abandoned, long-suffering, divided and depressed Lithuania, longing for something akin to the “equality in misery” that many people remember from Soviet times.

In view of these developments, many commentators have diagnosed Lithuania as suffering from a new social disease characterised by identity crisis, amnesia, political illiteracy, the loss of a sense of history, and, ultimately, the decline of national pride. The fragmentation and segmentation of Lithuanian society has reached the point where it threatens democracy as well as cohesion and civic solidarity. Not least, growing social divisions have opened up fertile ground for populism, as events since 2002 testify only too well.

In fact, such a state of affairs does not bode very well for Lithuanian Jews. Political frustration and anger combined with uncertainty and emotional insecurity often calls for symbolic compensation. Jews have always been a perfect target group for scapegoating and for politics of discontent in general. This could be the case also in contemporary Lithuania.

¹⁷ For more on these data, provided by the market research group *Rait*, see: <http://www.rait.lt/en/?pid=143&id=32>, 12.06.2006.

Conclusion

It would be more than naïve to deny the fact that anti-Semitism remains persistent and strong in contemporary Lithuania. Its ugly face tends to appear in the guise of the most simplistic and primitive versions of anti-Communism, not to mention the myriad ways it lurks behind conspiracy theories of various shades, including a new European disease: an exaggerated anti-Israeli stance, which misrepresents the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and attempts to delegitimise the State of Israel. The emergence of this new form of anti-Semitism makes itself present in Lithuania as well. It might often be found in Western Europe and North America as well, where a sort of camouflaged, anti-globalist, leftist, politically correct, and anti-Israeli sentiment tends to close ranks with more traditional anti-Semitic prejudices. Unfortunately, this new disease has not bypassed Lithuania.

Each time an Israeli official or any person from the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem mentions that Lithuania has failed to bring Second World War criminals to justice, or that anti-Semitism makes itself present in the Lithuanian mass-media, newspapers and internet sites are full of angry comments and bitter remarks on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the vast majority of them only being vaguely related to the issue and, instead, targeting Lithuanian Jews.

After an official visit of the speaker of Israel's Knesset in 2004, which was politically charged from beginning to end, journalist Aras Lukšas went online to start a debate with anonymous chat commentators, challenging them in harsh words and opposing their poisonous anti-Semitic insinuations. Later he was charged with the instigation of ethnic hatred, thus facing a penalty. Only when public opinion stood up and mobilised for Lukšas did the then Prosecutor General Antanas Klimavičius admit the mistake of the this office, calling it a confusion of good and evil.

In the same year 2004, the aforementioned Vitas Tomkus, editor-in-chief of the daily *Respublika*, published a series of editorials making fun of Jews and gays, describing them as the most powerful interest groups that still rule the world. These stupid remarks would not be worthy of attention if it was not for a curious detail: some cartoons were added to editorials, in which a skinny, crooked-nosed Jew depicted beside a gay person, looking as if they were taken straight out of a Nazi cartoon in Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer*. The Jewish Community of Lithuania put charges against him, evoking a big political scandal, yet the outcome was stunning. Recently, Tomkus, who was fined for verbal abuse of Lithuanian Jews with 3000 Litas (approx-

mately 860 Euros), made an appeal and was acquitted. It is difficult to add anything to this account, except that nothing could discredit the Republic of Lithuania more than stories like these.

Yet, this was not the end of the ghost-chase. In 2005, *Respublika* launched a series of massive attacks on the non-governmental organisations and civil and human rights activists of Lithuania, mockingly describing them as “Sorosologists”, that is, adherents of George Soros’ notion of an open society, which led him to launch a network of Open Society Funds throughout Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. The insinuation that these “treachery and subversive” activities – allegedly inspired by a rootless, cosmopolitan and wealthy Jew – alienating Lithuania from its historical-cultural legacy and ethnic sensibilities, was straight out of the ideological repertoire of the nineteenth century: the mythology and demonology of Jewish capitalists, bankers and liberals. Judging by the easily identifiable idiom and political vocabulary, it was hardly surprising, then, that a series of the aforementioned lampoons came out much around the same time as Russian authorities began blaming the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia and the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine on non-governmental organisations in general and George Soros in particular.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate, if not unfair, to insist that modern Lithuanian politics and culture has completely failed to face up to the challenge of anti-Semitism. In recent years, some Lithuanian intellectuals and public figures have shown a genuine interest in the history of, and a great deal of sensitivity towards, their fellow Jewish citizens. The foundation in the year 2000 of the *House of Memory* in Lithuania, which is a non-governmental institution inspired by the *Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre* in Britain, is therefore a sign of hope for the future. Much the same applies to the establishing, in the year 1999, of the *Sugihara Foundation – Diplomats for Life*, a private funding body named after Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese Consul General in interwar Lithuania, who saved thousands of Jews by issuing them Japanese visas and, thus, acting against the will and instructions of his own government. The *Sugihara Foundation* promotes civic culture and tolerance, and also monitors and fights all manifestations of racism and anti-Semitism in Lithuania.

The names of Lithuanian public intellectuals who raised their voices against all manifestations of anti-Semitism in Lithuania over the past years – the film critic Linas Vildžiūnas, the journalists Algimantas Čekuolis and Rimvydas Valatka, the his-

torian Egidijus Aleksandravičius, the Calvinist priest Tomas Šernas, the educator Snieguolė Matonienė, and the journalist and film script writer Pranas Morkus, among others – signify the arrival of a new epoch and also the emergence of a new moral culture in Lithuania.