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Trials and Tribulations: The Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre Reconsidered

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In early 2021, the Director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (GRRC) in Vilnius was replaced provoking a wide-ranging debate on the inner workings and public mandate of the nation's leading memory institution. The article discusses the Centre's past performances between conducting historical research and engaging in memory activism and it reflects on the new appointment's potential to strike a better balance.

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Trials and Tribulations: The Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre Reconsidered

A scandal in Lithuania in early 2021, which led to the replacement of the Director General of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (GRRC) in Vilnius, provoked a wide-ranging debate on the inner workings and public mandate of the nation's leading memory institution. Emerging from the anti-Soviet popular movement of the late 1980s, and drawing on the grassroots social and political activism at the time the GRRC played a substantial, if varied, role in pursuing transitional and retrospective justice as a key element of post-Soviet nation building. Since then, the Centre has struggled to find a balance between historical research and memory activism on the one hand, between focussing on the Nazi period vs. the Soviet period – a tension evident at analogous institutions in neighbouring Poland and Ukraine. Whether the appointment of a professional historian and specialist on the Holocaust in Lithuania as the Director General of the GRRC may help to establish a balance in the eyes of domestic and international observers remains to be seen.

A Scandal in Lithuania: The Historians Revolt

In January 2020, seventeen historians employed by the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (GRRC) in Vilnius signed a petition addressed to the Lithuanian Parliament, expressing concern about the politicization of the Centre's work. They drew attention to the ideologisation of historical research in support of memory wars, the issuance of biased memoranda on behalf of the Centre and the devaluation of professional competence by the Centre's management.^[1] Within a couple of months, and a rancorous series of publicized exchanges over the proper mandate of the GRRC, Parliament dismissed its Director General Adas Jakubauskas, and appointed Arūnas Bubnys, the head of the Centre's historical department and one of the signatories of the petition, to replace him.

[Concerns about the direction of the GRRC emerged](#) when Jakubauskas appointed Vidmantas Valiušaitis as senior advisor in the summer of 2020. Trained as a philologist and having made a career in journalism, Valiušaitis was well known in Lithuania as a staunch proponent of the heroic interpretation of June 1941 Uprising – a highly controversial moment in Lithuanian history.^[2] For Valiušaitis and his camp, the Uprising was a legitimate and heroic act of resistance by a nation that had experienced a year of brutal repression under the Soviets. They argue that if some of its members also took part in the Holocaust, this was a matter of their individual responsibility and should not taint the Uprising as a whole.

For others, like Tomas Venclova, the intention of the Uprising cannot be separated from the leading role played by the Lithuanian Activist Front, a Berlin-based, antisemitic organisation that openly collaborated with the Nazis, and deadly outbreaks of communal violence against Jews that presaged the Holocaust and the murder of 95 per cent of the Lithuanian Jewish community.^[3]

In published commentaries, GRRC employees who signed the petition explained that shortly after his appointment, Valiušaitis gathered the historians together and accused them of using the “wrong” sources in their research, namely, Soviet police records, and not using the “right” records, namely, the memoirs of Lithuanian émigrés. According to Mingailė Jurkutė, a young historian working at the Centre, political influence was exerted at all stages of research, starting from which questions were to be researched, which interpretations should be supported and which sources to use.^[4] The staff were

instructed not to talk with the media after Monika Kareniauskaitė, another young historian who later quit the institution, was reprimanded for questioning the decision to award Valiušaitis with the status of a “participant of the Freedom Fights” just a few months after his appointment.^[5]

The Parliament formed a committee to investigate the situation, and the proponents of the memory-activist approach launched a public attack against the petitioning historians. This campaign was led by Vytautas Radžvilas, a Vilnius university philosopher and the leader of the United National Front political movement. With a history of political activism going back to the anti-Soviet popular movement Sajūdis, Radžvilas was paradoxically one of the founders of the Lithuanian Liberal Union back in 1990. Since then, he has emerged as a leading voice of Euroscepticism, based on a critique of the EU as having renounced its origins in ancient and Christian civilization.

Radžvilas defended the leading role of non-professional historians like Valiušaitis in the work of the GRRC, contrasting their “civic courage and simple loyalty to the state” with the dubious loyalty of the petitioners. “How many and which of the seventeen historians are already keeping a Russian tricolour and portraits of Putin in their homes?” And with clear antisemitic overtones, he mused about “the day when the Centre will write certificates that it is time to build monuments to Abba Kovner, Fania Brancovskaya...” – that is, Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors who were members of anti-Nazi, pro-Soviet partisan formations. His call for the politicisation of history was explicit:

The trouble for many Lithuanian historians is that they still want to write a “non-politicized”, supposedly objective history, as if they do not understand that all sciences serve practical purposes. The ideological struggle for the interpretation and evaluation of the Uprising is not an intellectual exercise but a very practical matter.^[6]

Responding to the argument that the task of the GRRC is simply to lionize anti-Soviet resistance fighters, Monika Kareniauskaitė notes that Paragraph 6 of the 1997 [‘Law on the Legal Status of Participants in the Resistance of the Republic of Lithuania to the Occupations of 1940–1990’](#) specifically states that a person who resisted a totalitarian regime will not be accorded the status of a member of the resistance if he had also worked in the repressive structures of a regime, or otherwise committed crimes against humanity or war crimes. Thus, she says the GRRC is obliged to investigate such allegations against alleged resistance fighters if it is to fulfil its mandate. Kareniauskaitė argued that publicizing the names of Lithuanians who participated in crimes against humanity is also necessary to provide symbolic justice, noting that most of the research has already been completed by Arūnas Bubnys, then the head of the GRRC’s historical research department.^[7]

In the end, Parliament sided with the petitioning historians and dismissed Jakubauskas from his post, shortly after a scandalous interview he gave to a Ukrainian TV station, in which he blamed the critique of his leadership on the influence of “young leftists” entering parliament and espousing “European worldviews” that were foreign to Lithuanians, like same-sex marriage and the decriminalization of drugs.^[8] Jakubauskas’ reference to “young leftists” rehearsed frequently heard populist attacks against a trio of influential politicians: leader of the Freedom Party Aušrinė Armonaitė (member of the governing coalition), Speaker of Parliament Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen and Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė. He quickly renounced these words, saying he was tired and stressed when he gave the interview, but his fate seemed already sealed.^[9]

A Difficult Balancing Act

This was by no means the first crisis to grip the GRRC. The pursuit of transitional and retrospective justice for the victims of the Nazi and Soviet occupational regimes in post-Soviet Lithuania has long been fraught with difficulties and has had no shortage of scandals.^[10]

In May 1990, just weeks after the restoration of Lithuanian independence, Parliament passed a [“Law On the restoration of legal rights of people repressed for resistance to occupational regimes.”](#) Based on this provision, by spring 1991, over 50,000 individuals deemed unjustly punished by the Soviet regime were ‘rehabilitated’ – including several individuals who had taken part in the Holocaust. International protests forced a revision of the rehabilitation process, which involved departments from the Ministry of the Interior, the Prosecutor’s Office and the Supreme Court working in an uncoordinated and rushed manner, with the USSR collapsing in the background.^[11]

The establishment of a Research Centre in 1992 was part of a series of measures, hastily adopted by the Supreme Council (the parliament at the time), dominated by national-conservative forces. Among these were also the passing of the “Law on Genocide” and the creation of a Special Investigations Department in the Prosecutor’s Office. The mandate of the Centre included the task of cooperating with this Investigative Department in investigating crimes committed under both the Nazi and Soviet regimes; its practical work, however, was overwhelmingly focused on what was perceived as the immediate and urgent task of documenting Soviet crimes, specifically, the activities of the Soviet KGB in Lithuania.^[12]

As a reflection of the political discourse at the time, the 1992 ‘Law on Genocide’ declared the Soviet repressive policies, including the mass deportations of civilians and the violent suppression of the armed anti-Soviet partisan movement during the Stalinist rule, as genocide against the Lithuanian people. By doing so, the lawmakers expanded the scope of the international crime of genocide as defined in the 1948 Convention to include social and political groups. While the 1992 law was eventually replaced by a more precise amendment to the existing Criminal Code, this broad definition of genocide remained in place and led to endless controversies among legal experts as well as courts, including the European Court of Human Rights.^[13] It also resulted in much criticism about the lack of balance in how the Lithuanian state pursued legal-criminal action against Lithuanians who had committed crimes in collaboration with the Soviet regime as opposed to those who collaborated with the Nazi regime. Moreover, some reproached Lithuania of appropriating the Holocaust memory with the intent of aggrandizing the suffering of Lithuanians under the Soviets.^[14]

Over time, the pursuit of transitional and retrospective justice in Lithuania matured and adapted to the evolving European consensus on the importance of Holocaust commemoration and education. In 1996, the national-conservative government returned to power and decided to establish a more structured and systematic process of transitional and retrospective justice by joining various existing research and documentation centres as well as the Museum of Genocide under one roof – that of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre. As of 1997, the new Centre would continue to work with the Special Investigations Department in the Prosecutor’s Office and a newly created Lustration Committee would likewise work under its roof. In addition, in 1998, the Lithuanian President established an International Commission, tasked with investigating and determining responsibility for crimes committed under both the Nazi and Soviet regimes. The involvement of Western experts on the Holocaust was solicited to boost the authority and credibility of the commissions, and to reinforce the reconciliatory dimension of the effort. Parliament amended the Criminal Code to more clearly conform with the 1948 Genocide Convention, and Lithuania was among the founding signatories of the Stockholm Declaration, the founding document of the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#) (then: Task Force for

Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance). The International Commission was charged with establishing a network of Tolerance Education Centres in Lithuanian schools (today numbering 130).^[15] The Commission and the GRRC itself have conducted and published extensive and detailed research on the Holocaust in Lithuania.^[16]

The Pitfalls of Memory Activism

However, these measures, intended to shift the centre of gravity of Lithuanian memory work from the uncritical glorification of anti-Soviet resistance towards a more balanced and critical assessment of the legacy of the Soviet and Nazi periods, were perceived by some as something imposed on Lithuanians from the outside. Members of the GRRC continued to generate scandals through persistent memory activism, for example, in defending the reputation of anti-Soviet partisans who had also played a role in the machinery of the Holocaust, such as Jonas Noreika (1910-1947).

Before the Second World War, Noreika was a member of the Lithuanian Activist Front, the antisemitic, nationalist organization that sought to collaborate with the Nazis in order to overthrow the Soviet regime in Lithuania. As the German-appointed governor of the Šiauliai district, Noreika signed orders in 1941 confining local Jews to a ghetto and confiscating their property. He was arrested by the Germans in 1943 for refusing to raise a Waffen-SS division from the local population and emerged as a member of the anti-Soviet resistance from 1944 until his arrest and execution in 1947.

With this chequered background, Noreika is revered by some as a national hero for his resistance to the Soviets and reviled by others as a Nazi collaborator. Several monuments have been erected in his honour across the country, including a commemorative plaque mounted in 1997 on a prominent building in downtown Vilnius. While these and several other monuments to individuals implicated in the Holocaust have attracted occasional criticism from abroad, they were not subject to sustained public attention within Lithuania until 2015, when the Mayor of Vilnius removed Soviet-era sculptures from a downtown bridge, [triggering a widespread debate over the need to keep or remove monuments](#) to historical figures associated with the Communist or Nazi totalitarian regimes.

Pressured by a public campaign to remove the plaque, the city requested an assessment of Noreika's role in the Second World War from the GRRC. The resulting [memorandum](#), published in October 2015, refuted witnesses' claims that Noreika was personally involved in the killing of Jews and minimized his agency as a collaborator, admitting only that "the Nazi authorities managed to involve him, as well as other officers of the Lithuanian civilian administration, in matters relating to the isolation of Jews."^[17]

The criticism of Noreika's wartime record, and the GRRC's apologetic approach, intensified through legal action taken against the GRRC by Grant Gochin, a US citizen whose relatives perished in the Holocaust in Lithuania.^[18] Gochin claimed that the GRRC misrepresented Noreika's record, and he demanded that the GRRC's memoranda be corrected or annulled. Ultimately, [he pursued the case up to the Supreme Court](#) of Lithuania, but his claims were refused on the administrative grounds that he does not have the right to demand a correction to the GRRC's historical assessments since they do not concern him personally. Nevertheless, the five-year series of trials that took place regarding Gochin's case attracted significant international attention to the matter.

International attention to the Noreika case was also amplified by the publications of Noreika's US-born granddaughter, Sylvia Foti. On 15 July 2018, Foti published an article in the magazine [Salon entitled "My](#)

[Grandfather Wasn't a Nazi-fighting War Hero – He Was a Brutal Collaborator.](#)” As noted on her website, Foti teamed up with Gochin to campaign against the honour bestowed on Noreika. Their cooperation led to the publication of Foti’s book, *The Nazi’s Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather Was a War Criminal* (2020), which includes extensive excerpts from Gochin’s lawsuit.^[19]

In March 2019, the Centre published a defence of Noreika that was intensely [criticized by Lithuanian and international historians](#) as riddled with “exculpatory arguments and obfuscations.” In December 2019, the GRRRC went further, implausibly claiming that Noreika was a rescuer of Jews. Based solely on the uncorroborated testimony of a Lithuanian émigré given in 1986 to an extradition hearing in the USA, the [memorandum was roundly condemned by prominent Lithuanian historians](#) as unprofessional, raising questions about the leadership and professionalism of the institution.

The memorandum, as it turns out, was written by a PR expert hired by the Centre and had not been reviewed by professional historians at the GRRRC before being issued under the signature of Director General Birutė Burauskaitė, who was nearing retirement after serving two five-year terms in the position (2010-2020). Defending her decision against another wave of criticism coming from professional Lithuanian historians at Vilnius University and the Institute of History, Burauskaitė said, “I am not a historian myself. My own inner conviction is very important to me. For me, the litmus test for professionals researching those painful periods in our history is whether they believe in the results of their research.”^[20] As noted above, Burauskaitė’s replacement by Jakubauskas did little to improve the reputation of the GRRRC’s leadership.

Meanwhile, outside the walls of the GRRRC, populist politicians like Radžvilas made the defence of Noreika a cause celebre for the National Union, a political party formed in the Spring of 2020 to run in Parliamentary elections. The party selected the title of an antisemitic pamphlet published in 1933 as its motto: “Raise your head, Lithuanian!” The original pamphlet, which called on Lithuanians to “liberate themselves from economic slavery to the Jews” had precisely been authored by Jonas Noreika. The National Union failed to win any seats in the Lithuanian parliament, but its members remain extremely active in social and broadcast media.

A New Path for the GRRRC?

Upon his appointment, the new director Arūnas Bubnys struck a conciliatory note, saying his priority would be to heal the divisions within the institution, to increase the wages of its employees and restore constructive relations with other history institutions in Lithuania and abroad.^[21] Indeed, as the former director of the research department and as a well-respected historian of the Holocaust in Lithuania, Bubnys seems to be well placed to restore the Centre’s reputation amongst scholars within Lithuania and abroad.

That said, the politics of the past are unrelenting. Bubnys himself ran in the 2020 elections on the populist National Union ticket, though he left the party when it took Jakubauskas’ side in the dispute against the historians and ignored Bubnys’s position on the underlying issues.^[22] Regarding the debate over Noreika, Bubnys suggests that more research needs to be done, and the root of the problem is that “some see only white, others see only black. People don’t want to see the whole picture, the totality of what’s in a person’s biography.”^[23]

Meanwhile, the pressure on the new leadership to release a GRRRC study, which identifies some 2000

individuals as having played a direct role in the Holocaust, is mounting. Bubnys acknowledges and has himself established through ground-breaking archival research of mass killing in the Lithuanian provinces, that the record of local participation in the Holocaust is “much sadder” than previously thought, but he argues that the report in question does not provide a full or balanced picture and should not be released in its current form. This argument is rejected by the head of the [Lost Shtetl Museum](#) Sergey Kanovich as a delay tactic: “Jews are standing like beggars with outreached hands. Not just Jews, but all decent people are waiting for historical justice from the GRRC.”^[24]

It remains to be seen whether the difficulties facing the GRRC can be solved through the integrity of its leadership, structural reorganization, or whether it hinges on the evolution of Lithuanian society. Historian Valdemaras Klumbys, another signatory of the petition, traces the problems to the tension between the two main departments of the institution: historical and memorial, and the competing demands of these two internal constituencies. He argues that the focus on memorial activities has led the Centre to fall behind in its basic research objectives. Meanwhile, according to Klumbys, this bias emerges from Lithuanian society itself, which is still afraid to learn about what the historians will reveal about the nation’s past.^[25]

The latter assertion, which would shift responsibility for the bias of the GRRC to “social demand,” is debatable. The fact that Rūta Vanagaitė’s 2016 popular exposé of Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust, titled *Our People (Mūsiškiai)*, was a repeated bestseller, suggests that a significant constituency of Lithuanians are entirely open to confronting the most difficult chapters of the past and attempting to resolve deeply entrenched conflicts.^[26] Whether political leaders decide to represent this constituency and mobilize a more forward-looking approach to the difficult and complicated past is another matter.

Footnotes

1.

Modesta Gaučaitė-Znutienė, [Akibrokštas Genocido centre: už viešai išsakytas abejones – įspėjimas centro istorikei](#), LRT.lt (28 January 2021), retrieved 27 September 2021.

2.

In 2011, for example, Valiušaitis conducted oral interviews with the participants of the Uprising – both in Lithuania and in Lithuanian émigré circles – for the documentary “Pavergtųjų sukilimas” (The Uprising of the Enslaved), released on the 70th anniversary of the event.

3.

Tomas Venclova, [Atminties konfliktai: kas priimtina ir kas nepriimtina](#), LRT.lt (2021 June 2016), retrieved 27 September 2021.

4.

Mingailė Jurkutė, [Kaip yra politizuojamas LGGRTC?](#), LRT.lt (4 February 2021), retrieved 27 September 2021.

5.

Assigning the status of a “participant in the Freedom Fights”, i.e. against the Soviet or Nazi occupational regimes, which confers certain state benefits, is one of the key practical functions of the GRRC. Valiušaitis received the award on the basis of his participation in the first demonstration commemorating the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, held in Vilnius on 23 August 1987, and the professional repercussions that followed as a result of his participation.

6.

Vytautas Radžvilas, [Po susidorojimų: atidavus Sukilimą, nebereiks ir Genocido centro](#), alkas.lt (01 February 2021), retrieved 26 September 2021.

7.

Monika Kareniauskaitė, [Atminties karuose](#), LRT.lt (3 February 2021), retrieved 26 September 2021.

8.

Natalija Zverko, Ieva Vitėnienė, Modesta Gaučaitė-Znutienė, [Jakubauskas „sublizgėjo“ interviu Ukrainos televizijai: į parlamentą išrinkta jaunoji karta bando visuomenei primesti savo leftistines vertybes](#), LRT.lt (26 March 2021) retrieved 27 September 2021.

9. Natalija Zverko, Ieva Vitėnienė, Modesta Gaučaitė-Znutienė, [Jakubauskas „sublizgėjo“ interviu Ukrainos televizijai: į parlamentą išrinkta jaunoji karta bando visuomenei primesti savo leftistines vertybes](#), LRT.lt (26 March 2021), retrieved 26 September 2021.

10. See Eva-Clarita Pettai and Vello Pettai, *Transitional and Retrospective Justice in the Baltic States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. The authors add “retrospective” to the concept of transitional justice to capture how the post-Soviet transitions in the Baltic States involved the restoration and prosecution of distant historical wrongs as much as the reckoning with more recent regime crimes.

11. Tomas Balkelis & Davoliūtė, Violeta, *Legislated history in Post-Communist Lithuania*, in *Palgrave Handbook of State-sponsored History after 1945*, edited by Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018, pp. 121-136.

12. *Ibid.*; see also Pettai and Pettai, 2015.

13. For a detailed discussion of Lithuanian “Soviet genocide” cases at the ECtHR, see: Dvilė Sagatienė, *The Debate about Soviet Genocide in Lithuania in the Case Law of The European Court of Human Rights*, *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (2021): 776-791.

14. Dovid Katz, *The Extraordinary Recent History of Holocaust Studies in Lithuania*, *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 31,

- no. 3 (2017): 285-295.
15. Eva-Clarita Pettai, Negotiating History for Reconciliation: A Comparative Evaluation of the Baltic Presidential Commissions, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67, no. 7 (2015): 1079-1101.
 16. On the maturation of Lithuanian and Baltic State policy in this area, see: Violeta Davoliūtė, *The Baltic Model of Civic-Patriotic History*, *Journal of Genocide Research* (2021) forthcoming. DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2021.1968145.
 17. Vaidotas Beniušis, [State research centre wins case over Noreika Holocaust report](#), LRT.lt (2 April 2020), retrieved 26 September 2021. See also the [translation of the memorandum](#) by Grant Gochin.
 18. Gochin maintains an [extensive record of the legal actions](#) he has taken against several Lithuanian institutions beginning in 2015.
 19. Sylvia Foti, *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered my Grandfather was a War Criminal*, Washington D.C.: Regnery History, 2021.
 20. Mindaugas Jackevičius, [Genocido centro vadovė: svarbu ne istorinis išsilavinimas, o tikėti tyrimų rezultatais](#), LRT RADIJO, Program: „Aktualijų studija“, LRT.lt (27 December 2019), retrieved 26 September 2021.
 21. Rasa Tapinienė, [Bubnys apie pasitraukimą iš „Nacionalinio susivienijimo“: jie teigė, kad atstatydinus Jakubauską situacija bus panaši į 1940-ųjų birželio](#), LRT TELEVIZIJOS program: „Dienos tema“, LRT.lt (22 April 2021), retrieved 26 September 2021.
 22. Ibid.
 23. Modesta Gaučaitė-Znutienė, [Prie LGGRTC vairo stojęs Bubnys – apie Birželio sukilimo sąsajas su Holokaustu. Noreikos asmenybė ir istorinę tiesą](#), LRT.lt (25 May 2021), retrieved 26 September 2021.
 24. Mindaugas Jackevičius, [Poetas Kanovičius apie slepiamas Holokausto vykdytojų pavardes: padorūs žmonės stovi kaip elgetos ir laukia istorinės teisybės](#), LRT.lt (23 September 2021), retrieved 27 September 2021.
 25. Valdemaras Klumbys, [Istorijos baimė](#), LRT.lt (24 February 2021), retrieved 26 September 2021.
 26. See Violeta Davoliūtė, [Between the Public and the Personal: A New Stage of Holocaust Memory in Lithuania](#), *Cultures of History Forum* (19.12.2018), DOI: 10.25626/0092.



The former KGB headquarters in Vilnius, now hosting the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania



Corridor in the Museum of Genocide (now Museum of Occupation and Freedom Fight). To the left, display of partisans killed by Soviet forces