

Controversies of the Memory of the Second World War in Lithuania: Between Cosmopolitan and Nationalist Approaches

**Kontrowersje wokół pamięci o II wojnie
światowej na Litwie. Między podejściem
kosmopolitycznym a nacjonalistycznym**

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**PEDAGOGICZNY ASPEKT PAMIĘCI
O II WOJNIE ŚWIATOWEJ**

PODZIEMIE ANTYSOWIECKIE
PODZIEMIE ANTNAZISTOWSKIE
UPAMIĘTNIANIE
„WOJNY PAMIĘCI”
LITWA

ANTI-SOVIET UNDERGROUND
ANTI-NAZI UNDERGROUND
COMMEMORATION
“REMEMBRANCE WARS”
LITHUANIA

Abstrakt

W artykule przeanalizowano najważniejsze epizody tzw. wojen pamięci, związane z oskarżaniem wybitnych postaci litewskiego ruchu oporu antysowieckiego i antynazistowskiego o udział w zbrodniach Holocaustu. Od 2012 r. dyskusje te są szeroko nagłaśniane na Litwie i przyciągają uwagę historyków, polityków, a także różnych „wspólnot pamięci”. Autorka szczegółowo omawia przypadki, motywy i formy walki symbolicznej wokół upamiętniania tych postaci. Dochodzi do wniosku, że konflikty te mają przede wszystkim charakter normatywny, a ich podłożem jest głębszy dysonans wynikający z różnic między kosmopolitycznymi i nacjonalistycznymi wersjami polityki historycznej Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej w odniesieniu do wydarzeń z połowy XX w. Narracje te są także wykorzystywane do celów politycznych przez państwa sąsiednie, które wzmacniają negatywny wizerunek krajów bałtyckich, a zwłaszcza Litwy.

Abstract

The article analyses the most important episodes of the so-called “remembrance wars”, when prominent figures of Lithuanian anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi resistance movements were accused of involvement in the crimes of the Holocaust. Since 2012, these discussions have been widely publicised in Lithuania and have attracted interest from historians, politicians, and various remembrance communities. The author discusses in detail the instances, motives, and forms of symbolic struggles related to the commemoration of these figures. The author concludes by saying that these struggles are primarily normative in nature, and that at their base lies a deeper dissonance arising from the differences between cosmopolitan and nationalist views on the Central and Eastern European historical politics of the mid-20th century. These conflicting narratives serve a political agenda of the neighbouring states, whose goal is to reinforce the negative image of the Baltic countries, especially Lithuania.

INTRODUCTION

The academic and public debate on the Second World War, the Holocaust, collaboration, and resistance in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is still one of the most complex and painful topics. Many historians studying the twentieth century strive to remain faithful to a vision that their goal is purely to do accurate research and not for there to be a wider dissemination of their work or discoveries in a language understandable to the general public. Unfortunately, this attitude widens the gap between academic and popular knowledge, paving the way for extensive intellectual speculations and political manipulations. A deeper understanding of mid-twentieth-century events is also hampered by the black-and-white image of the history of Lithuania that took root in official historical politics after the restoration of independence: it elevates the memory of “our national heroes and victims” by excluding or bypassing even more controversial facts and their interpretations. However, over the past few years, this situation has begun to change as new interest groups, such as influential international and local Jewish organisations, foreign embassies, national and regional politicians, representatives of the émigrés, public intellectuals, journalists, writers, and bloggers have joined the field of the public debate. They spread ideas adopted from and actively promoted by

cosmopolitan European historical politics, which have been increasingly challenging both the monopoly on the truth about wartime events nurtured by the community of historians, and the institutionalised patriotic image of national history. This inevitably triggers value conflicts over wartime events and assessments of historical figures. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand what is more important in these discussions, often emotional and heated: a genuine search for the truth, adaptation to the changing European conjunctures of historical politics, manipulations of empathy for the victims to achieve certain political or financial gains, miscommunication, or elementary ignorance? The aim of this article is to analyse some of the most prominent recent “value conflicts” regarding the commemoration of the memory of the participants in the Lithuanian anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet resistance accused of Holocaust crimes¹. Also, it aims at understanding the background, motives, and consequences of these conflicts, both at the national and international levels of historical politics. In this article, only the most high-profile public debates and political campaigns of the recent decade will be examined, starting with the reburial, in 2012, of the remains of Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, head of the Provisional Government of Lithuania (22 June–5 August 1941) and ending with the accusations made by the leadership of the Jewish community in Lithuania against the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) and the renowned partisan fighter, Juozas Lukša-Daumantas, brought forward in 2020 after the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania had made a decision to designate 2021 as the year to honour his memory. Owing to space limitations, no attempt will be made to reconstruct the broader overview of the escalation of this topic in the Lithuanian political and public sphere since independence began². This is because the events and debates, which will be discussed in more detail below, best reflect the essence of the problem, the changing situation in the field of historical politics and memory cultures, and also the emerging resistance to these new tendencies. These conflicts have attracted a great deal of attention from the Lithuanian and international community and have been most widely covered in media and social networks, where they sometimes acquired quite creative forms of expression, for example, memes or political satire.

¹ I will not discuss here those cases where crimes against humanity and their perpetrators have been accurately identified and named.

² The case of the assessment of the activities of Juozas Krikštaponis (1912–1945), the anti-Soviet partisan to whom a monument was erected in the city of Ukmergė, has also been left out of the scope of the present study because the academic and public debate on whether or not he took part in the perpetration of the Holocaust in Lithuania and Belarus is still ongoing.



COMPLEXITIES OF THE REBURIAL OF JUOZAS AMBRAZEVIČIUS- -BRAZAITIS, HEAD OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF LITHUANIA

During the interwar years, the literary historian Juozas Ambrazevičius taught at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, was engaged in journalistic work and wrote several biographies. At the outbreak of the war, the Nazi authorities prevented Kazys Škirpa, the former Lithuanian ambassador to Germany, from returning to his homeland because he was also the leader of the LAF, which was preparing for the restoration of Lithuanian independence. Thus, he was replaced by Ambrazevičius, who assumed the leadership of the Lithuanian liberation struggle. From 24 June to 5 August 1941, he served as prime minister and minister of education in the Lithuanian Provisional Government, which sought to restore Lithuania's independence. However, due to the opposition of the German military and later civil administration to these plans, the Provisional Government quickly lost control over the Lithuanian government bodies restored during the June Uprising. Having refused to become a board of trustees of the Nazis, it was forced to suspend its activities. Later, some of its members, including Ambrazevičius himself, were active in the anti-Nazi underground, and four members of the Provisional Government were even arrested and imprisoned in concentration camps. To avoid arrest, Ambrazevičius changed his surname to Brazaitis, and in 1944, as the second Soviet occupation was approaching, he fled to Germany, from where, in 1951, he moved to the United States of America. He lived there until his death and took an active part in public and cultural activities of Lithuanian émigrés. On 6 June 1974, on the basis of an indictment filed by the Soviet security services, *The New York Times* published a list of suspected Lithuanian war criminals, and the name of Juozas Brazaitis was among them. The accused were incriminated with collaboration with the Nazis and organising the massacres of Jews. These accusations were investigated in the US House of Representatives. However, the lawsuit did not reach court: the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and International Law of the Congressional Judiciary Committee chaired by Joshua Eilberg formally declared that the charges against Brazaitis were unfounded as no evidence could be found that his activities were pro-Nazi or anti-Jewish. However, Juozas Brazaitis had died before this decision was taken³.

³ During the Cold War, the KGB often planted fabricated evidence and testimonies in the hands of US law enforcement to falsely accuse certain Baltic and Ukrainian immigrants of complicity in the Holocaust. According to Paul Žumbakis, the lawyer who defended some of these defendants in court, the naivety of the Americans and their ignorance about the war and post-war situation in these occupied countries was successfully exploited, and sometimes even documents that could have exonerated certain defendants were deliberately withheld, ignored, or even lost (from the author's interview with Paul Žumbakis, 19 January 2022). This topic is still awaiting a closer examination by historians.

In Lithuania, Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis's national service was recognised in as late as 2009, when President Valdas Adamkus posthumously awarded him the Grand Cross of the Order of Vytautas the Great, the country's highest state decoration. His remains, flown back from the United States in 2012, were buried in the churchyard of the Christ's Resurrection Church in Kaunas. The ceremony was attended by outgoing President Valdas Adamkus and Andrius Kupčinskas, the mayor of Kaunas. The Mass was celebrated by Sigitas Tamkevičius SJ, a Soviet-era dissident and Archbishop of Kaunas.

Up until the present day, the June Uprising and the Provisional Government has been viewed with controversy by historians and the Lithuanian public: on the one hand, it is respected for its efforts to restore Lithuania's statehood, which was annihilated by the first Soviet occupation (1940–1941), but on the other hand, it is still accused of having contributed to the incitement of anti-Semitism at the beginning of the war. The organisers of the June Uprising and the members of the Provisional Government are accused of failing to distance themselves from the occupying Nazi authorities, thus contributing to the genocide of Lithuania's Jews, during which 96% of the country's Jewish citizens were killed. Despite these reproaches, in 2012, the Lithuanian government allocated LTL 30,000 for the reburial of Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, but the then leaders of the country did not participate in the solemn events dedicated to his memory, presumably because they were afraid of the controversy. The funeral triggered a renewed debate on the activities of the Provisional Government. The Lithuanian Jewish Community, which was particularly opposed to the official ceremonial reburial, issued a public letter in which it stated: "In our opinion, it compromises modern Lithuania. We are sad and regret that the state of Lithuania has expressed such disrespect for its Jewish citizens who were murdered here and who survived the Holocaust"⁴. Emanuelis Zingeris, the chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Seimas, was also critical of the Provisional Government: he asserted, in a circulated statement, that "the Provisional Government cannot be regarded as a moral guide in the development of civic society".

An open letter, very likely circulated by a group of mainly left-wing intellectuals, read:

„ The Provisional Government was undoubtedly inspired and led by the Lithuanian Activist Front, whose anti-Semitic and authoritarian programme is well documented in historical sources. The rhetoric, actions, and cooperation with the German authorities inevitably compromise the legitimacy and moral status of the government. As the prime minister of that government, Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis cannot avoid responsibility for its actions.

⁴ Cituojama iš R. Bacevičius, *Kai bijome laisvės*, XXI Amžius, http://www.xxiamzius.lt/numeriai/2012/05/25/atmi_01.html [access: 13 II 2022].



The surviving documentary material testifies that the Provisional Government headed by Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis did not dissociate itself either from Kazys Škirpa, an active supporter of the pro-Nazi politics, or the Lithuanian Activist Front he had founded. Moreover, throughout its existence, the Provisional Government declared its ambition to contribute to the reordering of Europe “on a new basis” and pursued a pro-Nazi policy⁵.

However, Lithuanian expatriates living in the USA opposed these sentiments, which at the time prevailed in the Lithuanian public sphere and in the circles of the academic elite. Dr Augustinas Idzelis, head of the Centre for Lithuanian Studies and Research in Chicago, gave a paper on Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis’s political merits at a conference in Kaunas Municipality, in which he presented evidence that the Provisional Government under his leadership had condemned the Nazis’ treatment of Jews. Dr Arūnas Bubnys, one of the most authoritative historians of the Second World War working at the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (Lith. Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, LGGRTC) also discussed his participation in the anti-Nazi resistance. Other speakers drew attention to the problem of the Soviet-era historical forgeries about the anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi movement, which are still used uncritically by Lithuanian and foreign researchers. However, as the dissatisfaction voiced by the Lithuanian Jewish Community and certain intellectuals was already spreading in public space, the management of Vytautas Magnus University suddenly revoked the agreed permission to organise the conference honouring a memory of the lecturer of this university, and the event was moved to the Palace of Kaunas Municipality. Speaking at this conference, Vytautas Antanas Dambrava, the long-standing Lithuanian diplomat, said that although we restored our independence, we were still scared of freedom and still daunted by the need to figure out many things.

ACCUSATIONS OF THE WRITER RŪTA VANAGAITĖ AGAINST THE PARTISAN LEADER ADOLFAS RAMANAUSKAS-VANAGAS

Another well-known episode that reignited the issue of Lithuanian involvement in the crimes of the Holocaust was the so-called “Rūta Vanagaitė scandal”, which was widely publicised outside Lithuania. In 2016, a renowned writer, theatre personality, and public relations specialist Vanagaitė published a book *Mūsų šikiai* (Our People) about the Holocaust in Lithuania, in which, just like in her numerous public speeches abroad and at home, she developed the idea that Lithuanians allegedly mass-murdered

⁵ *Atviras laiškas dėl J. Ambrazevičiaus-Brazaičio iškilmingo perlaidojimo*, Bernardinai.lt, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2012-06-11-atviras-laiskas-del-j-ambrazeviciaus-brazaičio-iskilmingo-perlaidojimo/> [access: 25 II 2022].

local Jews during the Second World War; that this was the official policy of the state of Lithuania (which did not actually exist as the country was occupied first by the Soviets and then by the Nazis)⁶; that the Lithuanians of today must acknowledge their collective guilt and collectively repent; that there are things in every house that had been looted from the victims of the genocide⁷, that the mouths of the Lithuanians are full of Jews' gold⁸, and the like. Vanagaitė went as far as to claim that today's massive emigration and the emptying of the province was a punishment for the crime committed by the people of that time⁹. She also asserted that the theme of the Holocaust was bypassed by historians, that, purportedly, they were afraid to even talk about it in public, and that she was the only one who dared to broach this subject¹⁰.

To promote her book, the author was vocal in the mainstream media, which was eager to have her; she kept claiming that she would soon be prosecuted for it, but this did not happen. The book was well received by the liberal and cultural elite. Meanwhile, experts on the subject were writing reviews¹¹ claiming that Vanagaitė had no idea what correct historical research was and that her book was highly biased, one-sided, and basically glossing over other important wartime factors and events. After all, the author herself admitted that not long before she had known almost nothing about the Holocaust, which, nonetheless, did not prevent her not only from researching this theme but also from writing and publishing a book within a year (!)¹². But the majority simply kept quiet, not wanting to get involved in this matter and become notorious as "anti-Semitic".

⁶ Рута Ванагайте: «Литва на государственном уровне участвовала в холокосте», RuBaltic.ru, <https://www.rubaltic.ru/blogpost/03032017-vanagayte-litva-uchastvovala-v-kholokoste/> [access: 3 IV 2017].

⁷ V. Eremin, *Kogda ubivali evrejev, vsia Litva razbogatela*, <http://www.istpravda.ru/digest/14999/> [access: 20 IX 2017].

⁸ Movie.RememberUs.org, *Ruta Vanagaite, Kiev, September 3, 2017*, Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnCDGhByRKQ> [access: 30 XII 2017].

⁹ Открытая Библиотека, *Рута Ванагайте – Сергей Пархоменко. «Наши»*, Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNroFyMLvQ> [access: 30 XII 2017].

¹⁰ V. Grigaliūnaitė, *Rūta Vanagaitė: apie žydų žudynėse dalyvavusius lietuvius vis dar bijoma kalbėti*, 15min.lt, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/ruta-vanagaite-apie-zydu-zudynese-dalyvavusius-lietuvius-vis-dar-bijoma-kalbeti-56-572329> [access: 30 XII 2017].

¹¹ V. Valiušaitis, *‘Mūsiškiai’: dvylika esminių Rūtos Vanagaitės knygos klaidų*, Lrytas.lt, <https://lietuvsdiena.lrytas.lt/aktualijos/2016/02/29/news/-musiskiai-dvylika-esminių-rutos-vanagaites-knygos-klaidu-823825/> [access: 30 XII 2017]; V. Valiušaitis, *Dar kartą apie ‘Mūsiškiai’: visa tiesa apie skandalingą knygą*, Lrytas.lt, <https://kultura.lrytas.lt/istorija/2016/03/17/news/dar-karta-apie-musiskius-visa-tiesa-apie-skandalinga-knyga-861191/> [access: 4 I 2018]; N. Šepetys, *Jūsiškiai – mums ne mūsiškiai*, Delfi, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/n-sepetys-jusiskiai-mums-ne-musiskiai.d?id=71032318> [access: 4 I 2018].

¹² M. Jackeivičius, *Surinko įrodymus, kaip iš tiesų žudėme žydus: nuo R. Vanagaitės nusisuko giminės ir draugai*, Delfi, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/surinko-irodymus-kaip-is-tiesu-zudem-zydus-nuo-r-vanagaites-nusisuko-gimines-ir-draugai.d?id=70205706> [access: 5 I 2018].



However, it was eventually discovered that the photograph used for the back cover of the book and supposedly illustrating the fact of the Lithuanians shooting their fellow-citizen Jews was in fact a forgery. This forgery was detected and made public by translator Irena Tumavičiūtė¹³, although it did not provoke any noticeable reaction. Ironically, what appears under this photograph is a sentence by a famous poet Tomas Venclova, that “this book will help us to take a more objective and mature look at our own history, to gain more genuine national self-awareness and self-esteem”.



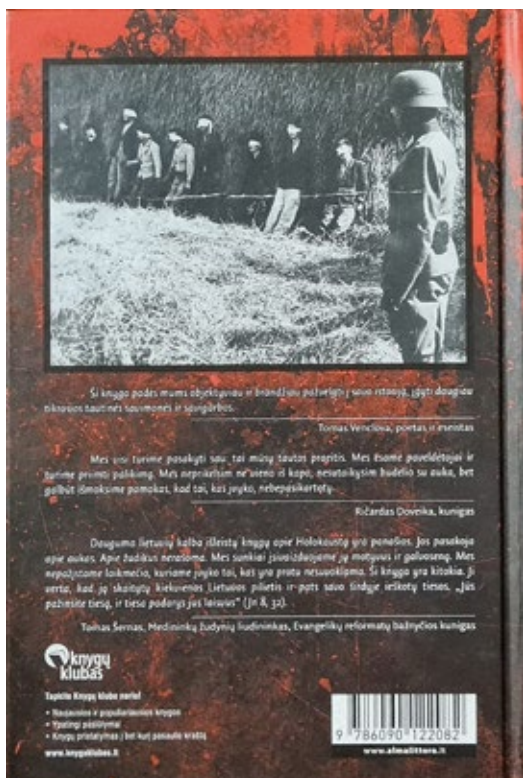
Although Vanagaitė was indicated as the sole author of the book, she mentioned a co-author, the well-known “Nazi hunter” Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, in her interviews abroad. She developed a close relationship with him while she was doing her research and writing the book¹⁴. Both names appear on the cover of the book

IL. 1

The original photograph of Germans shooting Serbian partisans in 1941 (source unknown)

¹³ I. Tumavičiūtė, *Kodėl serbų žudynės iliustruoja ‘Mūsiškis’?*, <http://www.lks.lt/pdf2/Tumaviciute-Serbu%20zudynes%20ir%20MUSISKIAI.pdf> [access: 5 I 2018].

¹⁴ M. Jackevičius, *Vanagaitė confesses about her new relationship: her new significant other is the well-known Nazi hunter E. Zuroff*, Delfi, <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/vanagaite-confesses-about-her-new-relationship-her-new-significant-other-is-the-well-known-nazi-hunter-e-zuroff.d?id=76185201> [access: 5 I 2018].



IL. 2

A mirror image of the photograph on the back cover of Rūta Vanagaitė's book *Mūsų šiečiai*

published in other languages. In the Lithuanian edition of the book, the co-authorship was hidden; very likely this was done to avoid intense annoyance of the public, who associated Zuroff with the controversial “anti-Semite hunter”.

It was, however, not this book that caused the “Vanagaitė scandal” but her subsequent public statements made during the launch of her new autobiographical book *Višta strimelės galva* (A Hen with a Herring Head) in 2017. Although it had nothing to do with the book in question, the writer unexpectedly accused the well-known commander of the anti-Soviet underground, Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas¹⁵, of being an agent

¹⁵ Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas (1918–1957) – a Lithuanian partisan commander, brigadier general. He was born in New Britain, USA, to a family of Lithuanian immigrants. In 1921, the family returned to Lithuania. He studied pedagogy and warfare. He worked as a teacher, joined the June Uprising, and taught at the Alytus teachers’ seminary during the war. In 1945, he joined the partisans. On 16 February 1949, he participated at the congress of partisan leaders of all Lithuania, which took place in the territory of the Resurrection District, in the village of Minaičiai, and which adopted the Declaration of the Movement for the Struggle for Freedom of Lithuania. Ramanauskas-Vanagas was appointed deputy to Jonas Žemaitis, chairman of the presidium of the Council of the movement, and early in 1950 he was appointed the commander of the Defence Forces of the movement and was given the rank of colonel in the partisan forces. He was awarded the Freedom Struggle Cross of the first degree. In 1951, Jonas Žemaitis, chief commander of Lithuanian partisans, fell ill, and as his deputy, Ramanauskas-Vanagas took over the duties of the chairman of the Council of the Lithuanian Freedom Fighting



recruited by the NKVD and having exterminated Jews during the war. According to her, while browsing through interrogation protocols in the archives, she found that Adolfas Ramanauskas, who had “broken down” in the NKVD prison, glorified the Soviet Union in his last speech, and that he had self-mutilated by puncturing his eye and cutting his testicles. Although both Vanagaitė and Zuroff claimed they possessed documents proving this and relied on the notes of Vanagas’s interrogator, Nachman Dushanski, which allegedly incriminated him with participation in the Holocaust, neither of the two produced these documents. During his visit to the recently established State Historical Remembrance Commission in the Seimas, Zuroff also demanded the recognition of Jewish co-workers of the Soviet repressive structures, who died at the hands of the anti-Soviet underground, as Holocaust victims. This, as well as Vanagaitė’s statements that Ramanauskas-Vanagas allegedly tortured himself when arrested, caused a huge scandal. Alma Littera, the largest publishing house in Lithuania where she would publish, decided to withdraw all her books, including her latest one, from sale and returned them to her. This decision caused much controversy in both Lithuania and abroad.

Although later, after clarifications by authoritative historians investigating the anti-Soviet resistance, Vanagaitė publicly admitted that she had been mistaken (still, the words “forgive me” did not appear in the statement she issued¹⁶), the public did not believe her sincerity. Although condemned in Lithuania for open slander and lies, the writer continued to actively tour the world and tell the story of “the terrible Lithuanian murderers of Jews”. For example, after a meeting with the Lithuanian community in the USA, when a journalist remarked that there were multiple historical inaccuracies in her statements, Vanagaitė retorted that what was important to her was not historical accuracy but the truth¹⁷. In the Russian-speaking information field, her position was intensively promoted, with no alternative views presented. Unfortunately, there was no official position of Lithuania on this topic in the international arena, except for a short

Union and the commander of the Armed Forces from him. From the end of 1952, after the communication channels with the high command broke down, he lived illegally in hiding with his wife Birutė and daughter Aukšė. The family had fake documents and stayed with people they trusted. At that time, he wrote his memoir, *Partizanų gretose (In the Partisan Ranks)*. He was arrested in 1956 and brutally tortured. Ramanauskas-Vanagas was shot on 29 November 1957 and secretly buried in Našlaičių (Orphans) Cemetery in Vilnius. His remains were found and identified and ceremoniously reburied in Antakalnio Cemetery in Vilnius in 2018. In the same year, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania recognised him head of the state.

¹⁶ A. Ramanauską-Vanagą apšmeižusi R. Vanagaitė atsiprašo: „Aš to nežinojau“, 15min.lt, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/rutos-vanagaites-atsiprasymas-del-a-ramanausko-vanago-as-to-nezinojau-56-876482> [access: 5 I 2018].

¹⁷ Ruta Vanagaite in Cleveland: “It’s not about accuracy, I’m only interested in the truth”, LT News Exclusive, <http://lithuaniannews.net/ruta-vanagaite-cleveland-not-accuracy-im-interested-truth/> [access: 11 IX 2018].

statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent to the European Jewish Congress, which stood up for the writer against the alleged hounding. She was supported by the famous Tomas Venclova. Zuroff also continued telling the story of “Vanagas the Holocaust Perpetrator” to international audiences. This actively disseminated public opinion bore fruit. In 2018, on the centenary of modern Lithuania and the 100th anniversary of Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas’s birth, a monument dedicated to him was to be erected in his hometown in the USA. However, fearful of honouring a person accused of collaboration with the Nazis and extermination of Jews, the local community objected to the erection of the statue in a public park of the city of New Britain¹⁸. The Lithuanian authorities failed to react and the monument was erected on private grounds at the Lithuanian Community Centre in Lemont, a suburb of Chicago, but this time it was the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that expressed its indignation¹⁹.

We will probably never find out the real reasons behind the “Vanagaitė scandal”. Was it a too bold and too far-fetched PR campaign devised to promote an autobiography? Why did the writer choose the circumstances of the arrest and death of this partisan leader for her public “doubts” that had nothing to do with the presentation of this particular book? Is the similarity of the names Vanagas and Vanagaitė accidental? Lithuanians know only too well that this is not the second surname of Adolfas Ramanauskas, but his conspiratorial nickname Vanagas (Hawk): partisans would choose such nicknames, sometimes even a few of them, for the purposes of conspiracy. In her notorious book *Mūsiškiai* and in her public speeches, Vanagaitė repeatedly mentioned her relative who, as she had, purportedly, unexpectedly found out, was a Jewish murderer: her large foreign audience, mostly Russian-speaking Jews, was able to draw a logical conclusion from her mention of Vanagas that she spoke about the same person. The historian Tomas Baranauskas speculates that the writer unjustifiably slandered even her actual grandfather Jonas Vanagas, who was also a participant in the June Uprising of 1941 and was indirectly involved in the crackdown on fleeing Soviet activists, including several Jews²⁰. All this is reminiscent of the black PR technologies often used in Russia during elections, when an undesirable candidate is confronted with his or her namesake in order to mislead voters. After the sale of her books

¹⁸ BNS, *Stringa planai JAV pastatyti paminklą A. Ramanauskui-Vanagai*, Delfi, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/stringa-planai-jav-pastatyti-paminkla-a-ramanauskui-vanagai.d?id=78459669> [access: 15 IX 2018].

¹⁹ LRT.lt, *Paminklas Ramanauskui-Vanagai įžiebė diplomatinį konfliktą ir atkreipė užsienio dėmesį*, LRT, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1057076/paminklas-ramanauskui-vanagai-iziebe-diplomatini-konflikta-kuris-atkreipe-uzsienio-demesi> [access: 20 VI 2019].

²⁰ T. Baranauskas, *Apie du Vanagaitės apšmeižtus Vanagus ir sovietinės istoriografijos gaivinimą*, Alkas.lt, <http://alkas.lt/2017/11/03/t-baranauskas-apie-du-vanagaites-apsmeiztus-vanagus-ir-sovietines-istoriografijos-gaivinima/> [access: 6 I 2018].



had been discontinued, Vanagaitė falsely claimed in a number of interviews to Russian and Israeli media that they were already being burnt (maybe it was an allusion to the book-burning Nazis). In her numerous interviews and lectures given abroad, Vanagaitė repeatedly called all participants in the Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance war criminals and referred to the so-called “Melamed’s List”, which names over 5000 participants as alleged perpetrators of the Holocaust. In a bid to discredit the name of one of the underground leaders – a symbolic personality of the resistance and a martyr of the NKVD – an attempt was made to cast a shadow over all those who took part in the anti-Soviet struggle, thus inadvertently resurrecting the Soviet myth of “the bourgeois nationalists, Hitler’s henchmen” and “just criminals”. Surprisingly, the crimes of Stalin’s regime do not exist in Vanagaitė’s historical interpretations: the guilt of Nazi Germany is also glossed over. This creates the impression that as if out of nowhere, the Lithuanian inhabitants suddenly went berserk and rushed to kill their fellow-citizen Jews and loot their property. This, just as the surrealism of the unsubstantiated accusations against Ramanauskas-Vanagas, caused shock and understandable outrage among historians and the public. Vanagaitė and Zuroff were even accused of acting as agents of the so-called “Holocaust industry”, trying to extract more material and symbolic benefits for themselves under the guise of the “fight against anti-Semitism”.

However, the consequences of the “Vanagaitė scandal” were not only negative, by damaging Lithuania’s international reputation, but also surprisingly positive. Unlike the political and cultural elite, which in this case maintained a low profile, the audience spontaneously united to defend both the national hero martyred by the NKVD and the historical truth. The topic was widely discussed in the public discourse. Interest in the history of the Holocaust and the anti-Soviet underground in Lithuania increased significantly, especially among children and young people. For some people, it was the first time they had ever heard of this partisan. To symbolically express his support for the Lithuanian side, the Israeli ambassador Amir Maimon visited the daughter of the famous partisan, Auksutė Ramanauskaitė-Skokauskienė, on her birthday and expressed his official position, stressing that “his country respects and appreciates the [Lithuanian] freedom struggle led [...] by Adolfas Ramanauskas Vanagas”²¹. The scandal was still unfolding when, thanks to the meticulous work of the historians and archaeologists of the LGRTC, the remains of Ramanauskas-Vanagas, who was shot by the repressive structures of the USSR in 1957 and buried in Našlaičių Cemetery in Vilnius, were found and identified. A ceremonial

²¹ *Izraelio ambasadorius pasveikino Vanago dukrą*, KaunoDiena.lt, <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/kaunas/miesto-pulsas/izraelio-ambasadorius-pasveikino-vanago-dukra-842230> [access: 24 I 2018].

state reburial ceremony on 5 October 2018 attracted crowds of the residents of Vilnius. In 2020, the well-known film director Vytautas V. Landsbergis made a documentary *A Portrait of Vanagas*. On 30 November of the same year, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania adopted a declaration “On Recognition of Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas as Head of State”, because in 1954, after the death of Jonas Žemaitis-Vytautas, the chairman of the Presidium of the Council of the Freedom Fighting Movement, Ramanauskas-Vanagas occupied the highest position in the leadership of the partisan movement.

The “Vanagaitė scandal” revealed that the Lithuanian public was already prepared to firmly reject unfounded allegations of collective guilt, dismiss a selective view of historical figures, and oppose the double standards applied to understanding a complex past. They also rejected the interpretations of the atrocities of Nazism as a convenient cover for the crimes of communism. Another positive consequence of the scandal is that it drew attention to the state of Holocaust studies. The public was provided with the opportunity to take a deeper look at them and to learn that detailed analyses of the main events of the war had already been carried out and that numerous monographs, articles, atlases, etc. had been published. The LGGRTC is involved in research into this topic at the institutional level. In addition, Vilnius University hosts the Centre for Studies of the Culture and History of East European Jews, headed by Dr Jurgita Verbickienė. In the field of education, considerable contribution has been made by the Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum of Jewish History and its Tolerance Centre, the Museum’s branches dealing with the Holocaust in Lithuania, and the Paneriai Memorial, which employs a promising young historian Zigmąs Vitkus. European Jewish Heritage Days, organised by the Department of Cultural Heritage, have been held every autumn for several years. Thanks to its efforts and with financial support from the EU, a number of Jewish architectural objects have been restored and opened to the public, not only in Vilnius, but also across Lithuania. This meticulous collective work of many specialists – researchers, museum workers, restorers, teachers, etc. – has already yielded productive results, such as a deeper understanding of the Litvak culture and their reinforced positive image in Lithuanian society. Very likely, these specialists were offended by the irresponsible statements of the pseudo-historian Vanagaitė, who claimed to be a pioneer on a topic that, supposedly, Lithuanian historians and the public were still afraid to address.

However, the scandal reignited the issue of the participation of local Jews in the first Soviet occupation, even though efforts were made to marginalise and criminalise it under the guise of “Holocaust denial” at the

However, the scandal reignited the issue of the participation of local Jews in the first Soviet occupation, even though efforts were made to marginalise and criminalise it under the guise of “Holocaust denial” at the political level.



political level. According to the historian Liudas Truska, the occupation of 1940–1941 was extremely insidious (the new government promised and said one thing, but did something completely different) and cruel (arrests of the former government and cultural figures, their killings, repressions, mass deportations of innocent people to Siberia, restrictions on cultural activities, etc., began at once). People suddenly noticed Jews in the Soviet repressive structures and among their local collaborators. This does not mean that the Jews comprised a statistical majority there: it simply gave the impression that Jews, who had previously been rather poorly integrated into Lithuanian society, were massively supporting the foreign occupation regime and actively collaborating with it. That was despite the fact that only part of the left-wing young Jews, who suddenly saw opportunities for a secular career that had previously been difficult for them, were involved, with some of the Jews being deported to Siberia, etc.²² It is believed that the wave of anti-Semitism, which transformed into the participation of several thousand Lithuanians in the Holocaust, was also influenced by the tragedy of Rainiai, when the retreating units of the NKVD and the Soviet army tortured and killed 75 prisoners from the prison of Telšiai between 22 and 26 June 1941. Nachman Dushanski from the NKVD, who later tortured Vanagas, is known to have taken part in the killings. Some of the victims of the massacre in Rainiai also had their genitals mutilated, which was a recognisable manner of Stalinist sadists. This crime was discovered without much delay and was expertly used by Nazi propaganda to stir up hatred among the local population against the “Judeo-Bolshevik plunderers”. All of this turned into a tragedy that claimed between 165,000 and 210,000 victims. Historians from the LGGRTC have currently identified 2039 Lithuanians who contributed, in one way or another, to the massacre of Jews. The number of the individuals directly involved in the massacre is currently estimated at 534. Meanwhile, Yad Vashem has officially counted 918 rescuers of Jews in Lithuania²³, which percentage-wise is quite a large number for the country’s population at that time. Historians do not deny that a small minority of resistance fighters did take part in the genocide, but the same cannot be said of the movement as a whole or of its ideology, in which open anti-Semitism is absent. For example, in his dissertation “Partisan War in Lithuania (1944–1953)”, defended at Vilnius University in 2020, Dainius Noreika presented a detailed examination of the biographies of 1000 of the most famous partisans and revealed that only circa 5.8% of the anti-Soviet fighters were tainted by the genocide during the

²² L. Truska, *Tikros ir primestos kaltės: žydai ir lietuviai pirmuoju sovietmečiu 1940–1941*, “Darbai ir dienos” 2003, t. 34, p. 285–320.

²³ *Righteous Among the Nations*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Righteous_Among_the_Nations, Wikipedia, [access: 18 III 2022].

war²⁴. Moreover, the vast majority of Jew-killers were exposed and convicted under the Soviet penal system.

In so far as Vanagaitė and her supporters were almost unanimously condemned by the Lithuanian public, the case discussed below was split into several parts: it highlighted certain deepening value-related divides, not only in the realm of historical politics, but also on the plane of different “memory communities”. It is about the so-called “war of the plaques” that broke out in Vilnius in the spring of 2019.

BATTLES OVER MEMORIALISATION OF JONAS NOREIKA²⁵ AND KAZYS ŠKIRPA²⁶

On 8 April 2019, Stanislovas Tomas, a lawyer of ill repute, smashed, with a hammer, a commemorative plaque of the anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet resistance participant Jonas Noreika (*nom de guerre* Generolas Vėtra) put up in the very centre of Vilnius, on the wall of the Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences. His supporters filmed the attack and live-streamed it on Facebook. Vilnius City Municipality was reluctant to return it to its place because for some time, a negative opinion had been forming about this historical figure: he was accused of having

²⁴ D. Noreika, *Partizanų karas Lietuvoje (1944–1953): socialinių struktūrų problema*, Vilniaus universitetas, daktaro disertacija, typescript, 2020.

²⁵ Jonas Noreika (General Vėtra, 1910–1947) – an interwar Lithuanian army officer, lawyer, participant of the anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet movement. In 1941, appointed by the Provisional Government of Lithuania, he held the position of Šiauliai County governor. On 22 August 1941, Noreika communicated the order of H. Gewecke, Commissioner of the Šiauliai District of the Lithuanian General Region, to the chiefs of the rural districts and burgomasters of the towns to move the county’s Jews to the Žagarė ghetto, and later organised the expropriation of Jewish property to the Šiauliai County administration. These events became the core of the accusations against Noreika as a contributor to the genocide of the Jews. In 1943, he was arrested for his anti-Nazi activities, for obstructing the creation of the pro-Nazi Local Unit and was imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp until 25 January 1945. After his liberation, he had the opportunity to flee to the West and join his wife and daughter, but he decided to return to Lithuania and attempted to establish an anti-Soviet underground organisation, the Lithuanian National Council (Lith. Lietuvos Tautinė Taryba, LTT). The LTT was preparing for an uprising against the invaders but was betrayed, and all its members were arrested in 1946. Jonas Noreika was shot in the basement of the NKVD in Vilnius. Regarding the accusations of perpetration of the Holocaust, the LGRTC has prepared a number of historical notes in which these accusations were rejected.

²⁶ Kazys Škirpa (1895–1979) was the first volunteer of the Lithuanian army who hoisted the Lithuanian flag on the Gediminas Tower in Vilnius in 1919. He was an army officer, politician, diplomat, the envoy of the Republic of Lithuania to Germany, the leader of the Lithuanian Activist Front founded in Berlin in 1940, and the organiser of the June Uprising in 1941. The Germans prevented him from returning to Lithuania, placed him under house arrest, and interned him in 1944. In 1946, he left for the USA where he lived until his death. He worked at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.



worked as the governor of Šiauliai County, to which position he had been forming by the Provisional Government, and of his contribution to the establishment of ghettos in northern Lithuania during the war. However, persistent citizens of Vilnius found documents proving that the municipality had financially supported the production of this plaque in 1996, when Noreika was rehabilitated and posthumously awarded state honours. The damaged plaque was glued back and reinstated in place on 18 April. On the night of 27 July 2019, on the order of the mayor of the city, workers of the municipal company Grinda removed the plaque commemorating Jonas Noreika-Generolas Vėtra from the wall of the Wróblewski Library. It was a surprise not only for the people of Vilnius but also for the management of the library itself. In addition, on 7 July 2019, Vilnius City Council decided to rename Kazys Škirpa Drive²⁷ to Trispalvės (Tricolour) Drive²⁸ (20 votes in favour, 16 against, and one abstention). These obviously interconnected actions of the City Council and the individual actions of the mayor of Vilnius Remigijus Šimašius led to fierce dissatisfaction among some residents of Vilnius and culminated in a series of protests. In addition to several rallies, the partisan action on the night of 5 August 2019 stood out in particular: unknown persons put up signs on the monuments of the writer Petras Cvirka and the author of the national anthem, Vincas Kudirka, transforming them into “talking monuments”²⁹, pasted the walls with the images of Škirpa and Noreika, and sprayed graffiti with insults to the mayor of Vilnius in various places around the city. Outraged residents of Vilnius accused the municipality of double standards because the mayor, known for upholding high moral standards in the city’s public spaces, seemingly overlooked the memorial plaque to Valerija Valsiūnienė³⁰, a poetess who is said to have betrayed Noreika and his underground organisation to the NKVD, as well as several plaques commemorating controversial Jewish Red partisans. Eventually, after yet another protest rally, on 5 September 2019, a new commemorative plaque to Noreika, funded by the patriotic youth organisation Pro Patria and consecrated by the former Soviet political prisoner Bishop Jonas Kauneckas, was ceremoniously put up on the wall of the library. However, the municipality managed to prevent arbitrary

²⁷ The name chosen for this place is not accidental: the drive is located at the foot of the Upper Castle, on the Gediminas Tower of which the unit of soldiers led by Škirpa hoisted, for the first time, the Lithuanian tricolour.

²⁸ Critics of this decision pointed out the ambiguity surrounding which country’s tricolour was being honoured in this way.

²⁹ The plaque on the monument to Petras Cvirka read “Comrade Šimašius, I am proud!”, while the plaque on the monument to Vincas Kudirka read “Šimašius, am I next?” (referring to the growing accusations of anti-Semitism against the author of the anthem, who died of consumption in 1899).

³⁰ On the instructions of the municipality, the plaque was removed on 6 August 2019, apparently in an attempt to de-escalate the heated situation.

attempts by some nationalist organisations to put up a plaque restoring the name of Kazys Škirpa to the drive³¹. During one of the conflicts with the police, Astra Genovaitė Astrauskaitė, a Lithuanian language teacher and an organiser of various protests, was arrested for waving the national flag. Her brutal arrest was later ruled unlawful by a court.

Remigijus Šimašius, who was in his second term as mayor of Vilnius, stands out among his predecessors for his attention to the symbolic space of the capital. Among other activities in this field, he implemented a project of duplicating “national” street names in other languages to symbolically emphasise the historical multiculturalism of Vilnius. It was mainly his publicly expressed political will that led, in 2015, to the removal of the socialist-realist sculptures of the Green Bridge, seen as an unwelcome reminder of the Soviet occupation in the very centre of the capital, from their pedestals. In November 2021, the sculpture of Petras Cvirka, a famous inter-war writer and a member of the Lithuanian delegation to Moscow in 1940 to ask for Lithuania’s admission to the USSR, was also removed. One would think that these actions demonstrate the commitment of the mayor and his supporters to cosmopolitan historical politics, in which the Holocaust becomes the main instrument of remembrance. However, compared to the above-mentioned cases of cleansing the public space of Vilnius of “undesirable elements”, the attempts to erase the memory of the national figures Kazys Škirpa and Jonas Noreika, who are accused of having perpetrated the Holocaust, were neither as successful nor as smooth. Despite the levers of the municipal government, the contribution of the mainstream media in forming an unfavourable opinion of these individuals, the open pressure of Jewish organisations in Lithuania and abroad, and the personal support of Linas Linkevičius, the minister of Foreign Affairs, for the actions of mayor Šimašius, the opposition they encountered was unexpectedly fierce and quite massive. Over time, this confrontation turned into a painful succession of legal and moral defeats for the mayor of Vilnius (protest rallies, pickets and other actions, the reinstatement of Noreika’s plaque on the wall of the Wróblewski Library, defeats in courts that ruled his actions unlawful and the like). Why did it happen? For example, although there were many arguments and interpretations as to why the socialist-realist sculptures on the Žalasis tiltas (Green Bridge) or the monument to Petras Cvirka should or should not remain in place, none of the “camps” that fought for it denied the very fact of the occupation itself or the harm that totalitarianism inflicted on Lithuanian society. Thus, in this case the dispute seemed to be more about aesthetic taste and historical accuracy rather than the historical truth.

³¹ The police also prevented the putting up of a memorial plaque to Škirpa, made by the Pro Patria movement, in the summer of 2021.



Meanwhile, in addition to the question of historical justice, the conflict over the memorialisation of Škirpa and Noreika mostly concerned the question of truth: did these people collaborate with the Nazis and contribute, in one way or another, to the extermination of the Lithuanian Jews, or did they not? Looking at it more broadly, can we be proud of the anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet Lithuanian resistance or are its most important figures still tainted by their collaboration with the absolute evil and unworthy of public respect and commemoration?

An unexpected twist in this topic was brought about by a number of newly discovered historical sources that cast a different light on Noreika's and Škirpa's activities during the war. First of all, mention should be made of the investigation by Dalius Stancikas from the LGGRTC. It revealed that the testimony of priest Jonas Borevičius – a Jewish rescuer and officially recognised Righteous Among the Nations – given in 1986 to a US court, contained information that he had been recruited in the underground network of Jewish rescuers by Jonas Noreika, who was then serving as the governor of Šiauliai County. This data is confirmed by many other indirect testimonies and sources related to the underground network of Jewish rescuers operating in Šiauliai region during the war³². Stancikas reconstructed Noreika's circle of relatives and acquaintances during the war, most of whom were later officially recognised as rescuers of Jews. He thus raised the following question: how could they have befriended a man who was a known Nazi collaborator, as Noreika's real granddaughter, Silvia Foti, claims in her book *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather was a War Criminal* (2021)³³? Secondly, the well-known Jewish journalist Vitalijus Karakorskis provided significant information on the involvement of Kazys Škirpa in the rescue of a prominent Hasidic rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn and his entourage of twenty people in 1939 in Berlin by granting them Lithuanian transit visas to Latvia and later to the USA³⁴. The uncovered facts indicate that it is necessary to continue investigating the period of occupation by two totalitarian regimes in calm, comprehensive, and thorough manner rather than reiterating the accusations against the state of Lithuania and its people. However, while this information has been largely overlooked in Lithuanian public discourse, the testimony of priest Borevičius has been challenged by some historians as being unreliable, having been publicised many years after the events in question. On these issues, the historical community remains divided to this day.

³² D. Stancikas, *Kūju per Lietuvos istoriją*, Vilnius 2020, p. 169–177.

³³ The title of the book translated into Lithuanian was less shocking – “Storm in the Country of Rain. The Story of Jonas Noreika's Granddaughter” (Kitos knygos, 2022).

³⁴ T. Čyvas, *Škirpa nuo nacių išgelbėjo žydų rabiną?*, Valstietis.lt, <https://www.valstietis.lt/archyvas/kazys-skirpa-nuo-naciu-isgelbejo-zydu-rabina/106202> [access: 15 III 2020].

However, the opinion of the historical community was already unanimous before yet another attempt to question the memory of the partisans. When Faina Kukliansky, president of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, and Andrew Baker, head of the Good Will Foundation, attempted to “cast doubt” on whether the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania should declare 2021 the year of the partisan Juozas Lukša-Daumantas, their concerns were unanimously rejected. The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania refuted any insinuations that the prominent fighter had connections to Holocaust crimes, and the accusers were forced to retreat³⁵.

CONCLUSIONS. ECHOES OF SUPERLATIVE HISTORICAL POLITICS

In order to better understand the essence of these particular “value conflicts”, some of which are still unresolved³⁶, it is also necessary to bear in mind the much broader regional and global context of trends in historical politics. As previously mentioned, the ongoing debates concerning mid-twentieth-century events and figures in Lithuania can be linked to the intensifying processes in Western societies that social analysts have been observing over the last several decades. Despite the differences in meaning, the “culture wars” have a similar structure both in the West and in Central Eastern Europe, i.e., two clearly identifiable sides in the conflict, each with an uncompromising attitude and rhetoric, and seemingly no possibility of reconciliation. While the concept of “culture wars” is certainly broader, disputes over the recent past can be seen as one of their forms. Such debates flaring up in various regions of the world – ranging from the “unfinished” civil war in Spain through the controversies of the evaluation of the fascist period in Italy, confrontation on a number of issues in US life, including the theme of racists and slaveholders being part of the grand national narrative, which in 2017 turned into a fight over monuments to leaders of the Confederacy inspired by Trump’s election, the wave of the fall of Lenin’s monuments in Ukraine that started

³⁵ P. Levickytė, *Žydų bendruomenė abejoja sprendimu skelbti 2021 – uosius metus Lukšos-Daumanto metais*, LRT, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1195309/zydu-bendruomene-abejoja-sprendimu-skelbti-2021-uosius-luksos-daumanto-metais> [access: 15 XII 2020].

³⁶ On 1 April 2020, the Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania, in a final and non-appealable ruling, dismissed the appeal of Grant Arthur Gochin, a citizen of Lithuania residing in the USA, against the Lithuanian Centre for Genocide and Resistance Research, demanding that the Centre’s historical conclusion on the activities of Noreika during the war be changed. Earlier, the Administrative Court of Vilnius District refused to accept another appeal by G.A. Gochin against the Centre’s new note on the activities of Jonas Noreika. Having found new historical sources, with this note the Centre declared that Jonas Noreika had actively contributed to the rescue of Lithuanian Jews and that he had been a participant in the anti-Nazi resistance from the very beginning of his work as governor of Šiauliai County.



in 2014, etc. – makes it necessary to look for inner kinship of these phenomena. Taking all this into account, the Lithuanian examples discussed above can also be attributed to such “culture wars”.

Despite decades of deliberate historical amnesia pursued by the Soviet regime, during the national revival in Lithuania, historians, politicians, journalists, and public intellectuals succeeded in restoring and eventually consolidating a consistent and uninterrupted line of the historical narrative of the struggle for freedom and statehood that had been drawn since the June Uprising of 1941 – through the armed post-war anti-Soviet resistance, the subsequent unarmed dissident struggle, right up to the reform movement *Sąjūdis*, which led to independence. However, although at the beginning of independence the newly-formed great national narrative based on the discovery of “our victims and heroes” and new practices of remembrance became a formative element of public policy and the new ideological field, it did not last for long. Just like globalisation processes and interests of a more general nature, the civilisational “return to Europe” challenged these national narratives taking root in Central Eastern Europe, which, alongside other plots, started plucking out of oblivion and legitimising the political or cultural figures and anti-totalitarian fighters who supported, strengthened, and defended national statehood and whose names were deliberately scraped into forgetfulness, scrupulously erased from collective memory, or demonised by the previous regime.

European integration also meant the synchronisation of national memories and their subordination to Europeanisation goals. The project of European unification was born out of a pacifist effort to forestall new inter-state conflicts, so, naturally, the focus turned to reflecting on the wars of the twentieth century and the prevention of future military conflicts. The memory of the Holocaust started moving to the forefront of this project. The origins of historical politics of the European Union are found in post-war Germany and its efforts to “digest” and “recycle” its own experience of Nazism. At the time when the German Democratic Republic, a Soviet satellite, created and consolidated the myth of the “anti-fascist” state, the Federal Republic of Germany had walked a long way from ignoring the subject of the Jewish genocide and suppression of the responsibility of the German public for it in the first post-war decade to a peculiar turning point in consciousness in the light of the events of 1968, with the intensive reshaping and healing of German self-awareness, which was based on collective guilt, repentance, and compensations to the victims. Aleida Assmann, a famous researcher into memory cultures, observes that the consolidation of the Holocaust, first at the German, then at the European, and finally at the global level, was happening gradually before it became a transnational form of remembrance at the beginning of the twenty-first century and prevailed even in the countries that, like the United States, did not have

any direct experience of the phenomenon³⁷. The image of the Holocaust as the foundation of European memory, the greatest tragedy of humanity, and Jews as the greatest collective victim, is enshrined in interstate treaties, memorial laws, memorials and monuments, international Holocaust education programmes, criminalisation of the denial of the Jewish genocide³⁸, and the like. Meanwhile Russia is also dominated by the unquestionable narrative of the “great victory” and the “greatest sacrifice”. Thus, despite certain differences, the current historical politics of the West and Russia surprisingly share a common feature: the tendency of memory narratives to use rhetorical figures of the “highest order” – superlatives, which might be called superlative politics of memory.

Having absorbed some of the features of the war cult formed during the Soviet era, the cult of the Great Patriotic War in Russia has especially intensified since the 2000s, when Brezhnev’s interpretation of the war was revived and supplemented with new symbols (the Georgian ribbon) and was used to justify the geopolitical decisions of the present. Celebrated in 2015, the 70th anniversary of the victory became an instrument of repressive decisions of the authorities, the struggle against those holding different views, and of the mobilisation and indoctrination of the masses. Its organisation has even taken on the perverse characteristics of mass hysteria, which critics of the regime referred to as *pobedobesiye*, an obsession with the victory. The trauma of losing world power status and the distinction of being a great power, the impossibility for returning to the “bright Soviet past” gives rise to nostalgia and melancholy and drives the search of the guilty, who supposedly bear the greatest responsibility for this loss. The USA, NATO, and, more recently, Ukraine, which is no longer willing to tolerate the role of a Russian colony, or the Baltic countries, which are seen as destructors and traitors of the USSR, turn into these internal and external enemies. It is therefore not surprising that, among other things, the old myth of Ukrainian and Baltic “fascism” was used both at home and abroad to justify the military invasion of the territory of sovereign Ukraine in 2014 and especially in 2022. Although this mythologem was born in the post-war period in order to weaken and discredit the anti-Soviet underground in the eyes of the population³⁹, it was invoked again as a nickname for popular fronts born at the time of the disintegration of the USSR. From time to time, the official Russian

³⁷ A. Assmann, *Suskaldyta Europos atmintis ir dialoginio atminimo koncepcija* [in:] *Atminties kultūrų dialogai Ukrainos, Lietuvos, Baltarusijos (ULB) erdvėje*, sud. A. Nikžentaitis, M. Kopczyński, Vilnius 2015, p. 14–15.

³⁸ D. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust. The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, New York 2012.

³⁹ In her doctoral dissertation, Mingailė Jurkutė gives a detailed analysis of the means used to discredit Lithuanian anti-Soviet fighters and to link them to Nazi crimes. See: M. Jurkutė, *Lietuvos partizanų karo atmintis: sovietinis, vietinis ir išėivijos pasakojimai*, Vilniaus universitetas, doctoral dissertation, typescript, 2016.



media would later attach this “label” to the Baltic countries, especially when they would take decisions that irritated Russia. Parades of local SS legions or the refusal to grant citizenship to the Russian-speaking population in Latvia and Estonia, or the emerging demands for occupation reparations in Lithuania could be quoted as examples of such decisions. This broader context of the region’s historical politics allows a better understanding of the logic and motivation behind the growing number of hybrid attacks against Lithuania, not necessarily coming directly from Russia, in order to discredit the country in the international arena as a state that is allegedly prone to Nazism and which covers up for its war criminals. Themes and rhetoric resembling Western discourse are adopted and skillfully used. Sometimes local intellectuals, artists, or well-known people (the writers Rūta Vanagaitė and Marius Ivaškevičius⁴⁰, poet Tomas Venclova, politician Remigijus Šimašius, and others) are successfully involved. While the Jewish genocide was erased from memory during the Soviet era and covered up in memory culture by the commemoration of the nameless victims of “Soviet citizens”, there arises an opportunity in current Russian official propaganda to form a link between the two grand narratives of the Holocaust in the West and the “Great Victory over fascism” in the East. Of course, this is applicable only as far as it supports the accusations of the residents of the Baltic countries of alleged inherent and eternal anti-Semitism, violence, and greed for the property of the victims, while prudently glossing over the topic of the Russians’ collaboration with the Nazis in the killing of the local Jewish population during the war and the virtually non-existent memorialisation of the victims of the Holocaust⁴¹. As shown in the brief discussion on the reburial of Juozas Ambrazėvičius-Brazaitis and the “Vanagaitė scandal”, the Lithuanian political, media, and to some extent academic elites have sided with the cosmopolitan historical politics, thus rejecting the nationalist perspective of historical interpretation. Meanwhile, critics of the former were given disproportionately

⁴⁰ Marius Ivaškevičius rose to fame in 2002 with the publication of his controversial novel *Žali* (The Green), in which he used the names of real anti-Soviet partisans to create a post-modern narrative of a “fratricidal war after the war”. This Soviet-era propaganda cliché was removed from the 2019 edition of the novel, when the author was awarded the National Prize for Culture and Art. The excessively liberal and arbitrary interpretation of post-war events provoked the ire of the veterans of anti-Soviet resistance, who unsuccessfully tried to sue the writer. During the “Vanagaitė scandal”, Ivaškevičius actively supported her. In 2017, he organised the “Molėtai March”, a commemoration of the Jewish tragedy that became famous far beyond Lithuania’s borders.

⁴¹ The subject remains taboo to the present day. It was raised by Mark Solonin, a well-known historian of the Second World War, in response to Vanagaitė’s information attacks on Lithuania in Russian and Western public discourse. See: *Марк Солонин ответил Владимиру Познеру, который заявил, что в Литве „уничтожением евреев занималось все население”*, Delfi RU, <https://ru.delfi.lt/opinions/comments/mark-solonin-otvetil-vladimiru-pozneru-kotoryj-zayavil-chto-v-litve-unichtozheniem-evreev-zanimalos-vse-naselenie.d?id=77821285> [access: 10 X 2018].

rare opportunities to present an alternative view in the mainstream media. However, during Vanagaitė and Zuroff's attack on the partisan Vanagas, when the political, cultural and academic elite remained prudently silent, the public spontaneously rallied to defend the historical truth. The role of professional historians was particularly important in that debate. Unfortunately, this united position has no effect abroad, where claims of the "Nazi" granddaughters Vanagaitė and Foti and their supporters about alleged mass participation of Lithuanians in the Holocaust continue to be actively promoted, disseminated, and reinforced by the publishing of their books in various languages. Thanks to them, the construction of the image of Lithuania as an "intolerant state" that stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the unpleasant truth about itself continues. Although it is recognised that these scandals have damaged Lithuania's international image, it is unfortunate that Lithuanian official institutions have not provided a more effective response to international audiences.

Meanwhile, the "case of the memorial plaques to Škirpa and Noreika" in the summer of 2019 failed to impose the above-discussed cosmopolitan narrative on the public and to monopolise public discourse. In this case, opinions were divided, both among the public and professional historians. The evidence found by Dalius Stancikas and Vitalijus Karakorskis, to the effect that Kazys Škirpa and Jonas Noreika were not Nazi collaborators, but, on the contrary, can be considered not only participants in the anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet underground, but also very likely rescuers of Jews, becomes a strong argument in their favour for some of the participants in the debate, while others continue to ignore it. However, this debate has reached a point where we can move past previous taboos and the fear of being labelled anti-Semitic. We have the opportunity to engage in open, fact-based discussions without confining ourselves to the new, simplistic "black-and-white" ideological narrative. In the end, the attempts of the leaders of the Lithuanian Jewish community to discredit the memory of the partisan Juozas Lukša-Daumantas were instead unequivocally rebuffed by the historians and they had to retreat, at least for a while. The Škirpa-Noreika "war of the plaques" marked an important shift in public discourse. As it turns out, only at first glance can its most active participants be grouped into two clearly definable groups, as the mainstream media have tried to demonstrate. On the one hand, it is the victims of the Holocaust, their descendants, and other denouncers of the perpetrators of this crime against humanity, and on the other, it is supporters of "national heroes in spite of everything", usually associated with the so-called "ultra-right". The reality, however, turns out to be much more complex. In the second group, we actually find mostly fighters against the Soviet occupation and victims of the communist regime



(political prisoners, deportees, and their descendants⁴²), who are raising the question of the incomplete de-Sovietisation of Lithuania and the responsibility of specific individuals for their participation in the occupation. Unfortunately, Europe, despite its unity, has yet to reach a legal or political consensus on how to treat the crimes of communism in the same indisputable manner as it has with the Holocaust. The disagreement is not only about such obvious facts as the Ukrainian Holodomor in the 1930s, Stalin's repressions of Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and others, but even about the unequivocal treatment of communism as a totalitarian ideology⁴³. On the contrary, the public sphere is still dominated by texts and claims that the Holocaust and Stalin's Gulag or the Ukrainian Holodomor cannot be compared or contrasted⁴⁴. Thus, Central Eastern Europe with its experience of both totalitarian regimes becomes a peculiar "buffer zone of memory" and a hindrance to the fusion of the narratives of the Holocaust and the "Great Victory over fascism", offering a fundamentally different perspective on how to interpret and assess the past. It is a nationalist perspective, in which, despite the painful defeats and years of subjugation, the voice of resistance to both totalitarian regimes is strong and embodied in the histories of actual freedom fighters. On 24 February 2022, Russia's attack on Ukraine was accompanied by a rationale that included the need to "de-Nazify" the country⁴⁵. These tragic events place the "memory struggles" in Lithuania, discussed in the article, in a new light; they add particular relevance to this topic, which goes far beyond the confines of academic historiography or current historical politics.

⁴² I formed this impression not only from the fact that the organisations of former political prisoners and deportees publicly supported the restoration of Noreika's plaque but also from my informal interviews with those who had been actively involved in this symbolic struggle.

⁴³ T. Kavaliauskas, *Ar Prahos deklaracija pabudins Europos sąžinę?*, "Kultūros barai" 2013, nr. 3, p. 59–63.

⁴⁴ Ch.S. Maier, *Hot Memory... Cold Memory. On the Political Half-Life of Fascist and Communist Memory*, IWM, <https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/hot-memory-cold-memory-on-the-political-half-life-of-fascist-and-communist-memory/> [access: 10 X 2018].

⁴⁵ The motif of Lithuanian partisans would be heard again during the fundraising for the Ukrainian front. Andrius Tapinas, a journalist and leading influencer who, incidentally, in 2017 took part in the promotion of Rūta Vanagaitė and her books accusing Lithuanians of Holocaust crimes, including the prominent partisan leader Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, initiated a fund-raising campaign to buy a Bayraktar which was named "Vanagas".

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