In the Jerusalem of the North, the Jewish story is forgotten

Three times as many people died in Lithuania under the Nazis than the Soviets, but the state is myopic about the past

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Jonathan Steele in Vilnius The Guardian, Friday June 20, 2008 Article history

Follow the English signs to this elegant baroque city's Museum of Genocide Victims and you reach a massive building resembling a respectable prewar bank. Every granite block on the facade's lower section now bears an engraved Lithuanian name, plus a year of birth and, judging from the dates, a premature death.

During almost 50 years of Soviet occupation this was where Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, and its successor until 1990, the KGB, held sway. The high-ceiling rooms tell a terrible story of executions and deportations to Siberia. A recording of a steam train chuffs softly beside photos of prisoners wrapped in felt jackets and children sitting bleakly outside wooden huts. Corpses caught by a ghoulish camera lie in the woods.

But as I moved from room to dismal room, I had a growing sense something was missing. Vilnius was once known as the Jerusalem of the North. What about the Jews? Did their fate not merit remembrance? In a corridor I eventually found a placard with a brief, though telling, mention. It gave estimates for the victims of Lithuania's Soviet occupation and of the Nazi one as well. The number summarily shot, or who died in prison and during deportation in the Soviet period, reached 74,500. During three years of Nazi

rule from June 1941, those killed amounted to 240,000, "including about 200,000 Jews".

Three times as many deaths, but the museum contains no exhibits on them. A guide assured me Vilnius also had a "museum of the holocaust". Well, not exactly. There is a state-supported "Jewish museum", with three sections in different buildings, but no prominent signs to help you find them. "Ah well, the other genocide was more important," a woman at one of the Jewish exhibition centres told me with an ironic shrug.

I asked Arvydas Anusauskas, the director of Lithuania's Genocide and Resistance Research Centre, whether it wouldn't be more accurate to call the former KGB building the "museum of Soviet repression". Nodding in agreement, he said that after the Soviet collapse, historians originally proposed creating a combined "museum of terror" to record Lithuania's fate under both totalitarian regimes. If it could not be housed in a single location, there would at least be a common management for branches in separate buildings.

The state finances Dr Anusauskas's centre to research both regimes, and it has produced three volumes on Soviet and three on Nazi repression. There is also a subsidised International Commission for the Evaluation of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. But even-handedness disappears when it comes to museums. They have a higher profile, so politicians put in their oar.

The fact that anti-Communist emotions are still so raw in Lithuania was also visible during a down-memory-lane conference in the parliament building the other day. Western Europe has been bombarded this year with 1968 anniversary reflections. Next year comes a central European extravaganza of

1989 memoirs. The equally momentous events of 1988 have been almost overlooked, though there is a strong case for claiming them as the key to the later revolutions: without the peaceful Baltic uprisings of 88, would protesters have flocked to vote Poland's communists out of power in 89, or to call for regime change in Leipzig, Berlin and Prague?

As this paper's Moscow correspondent I watched a huge throng outside Vilnius cathedral in October 1988, celebrating mass and singing nationalist songs the day after the building was handed back to the church. Describing themselves as movements in support of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, each of the three Baltic republics set up "popular fronts" to push for "autonomy" and "economic sovereignty". They played their cards carefully at first - independence was not mentioned in public and, in the first few weeks, it was not even discussed behind closed doors.

The 36 founders of Lithuania's popular front, known as Sajudis, included several communists and, in order not to provoke Moscow, excluded anyone who had been deported to Siberia. Within weeks, Sajudis had a membership of several hundred thousand. Its increasingly euphoric rallies raised demands for dignity and freedom that Lithuania's Communist party soon adopted. By chance I was the only foreign reporter in Vilnius on June 24 1989, when the Communist leader, Algirdas Brazauskas, recommended to his central committee that they break with the Soviet party. No other Communist party in the Soviet Union's 15 republics had gone so far. Arguably, this was the moment when the USSR's collapse became irreversible. Until then, amid the rebellions going on below, Gorbachev expected the Soviet party to hold things together. Once the Lithuanian communists split away, everything was doomed.

Brazauskas later became Lithuania's president, and now lives in a villa outside the capital. His study is dotted with photos of him standing beside,

or shaking hands with, world leaders. Pointedly, there are none of him and Gorbachev. Brazauskas recalled his clashes with the Soviet leader, which sometimes culminated in threats of force. "In November 1989 I was summoned to the Politburo. For five or six hours they harangued me," he told me. He gave no ground.

In spite of his record, bitterness among Lithuania's independence veterans is still so sharp, almost 20 years later, that Brazauskas was advised by the Sajudis conference organisers not to address the anniversary meeting. I listened in amazement as a professor who praised the Lithuanian Communist party's role was barracked and prevented from finishing his speech.

Now a member of the EU and Nato, Lithuania tends to be a tougher critic of Russia than its Baltic neighbours, Latvia and Estonia. It insisted on a strong mandate for the EU's negotiations with Russia and demanded changes before accepting the other 26 EU members' draft a few weeks ago.

But however clear-eyed Lithuania's decison-makers claim to be about today's Russia, many seem myopic about their own country's past. Anger over 48 years of Soviet occupation clouds their judgment about the Communists' recent role. Worse, it blocks discussion of Nazi mass murder and the fact that too many Lithuanians eagerly supported it.

Next year will bring yet another big European anniversary, the 70th since the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that "gave" the Baltic states to Stalin. It should be a time to remember two tyrannies, not just one. And for the Baltics, the longer one was not the more brutal.