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The Provisional Government and the Jews: What Do We Know?

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Lithuanians are often accused of not daring to look openly at their own history, and, moreover, of a counterfeit history.

Efraim Zuroff comes out with accusations against Lithuanians every few months. Russian officials aren't falling behind either. Last week Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov urged Lithuania to reject "different distorted interpretations of events of the 20th century." And Lithuanians regret their compatriots' lack of desire to judge their past. Leonidas Donskis remarked that Lithuania will not come to terms with her history so long as "the elite of the country fail to recognize that the Provisional Government of 1941 cooperated with the Nazis against their own citizens." Tomas Venclova whipped the Provisional Government even harder: "It's necessary without any excuses to declare that the new Lithuania categorically rejects including this tradition in its list of honored and exemplary traditions. The Provisional Government did not in essence differ from the Tiso regime in Slovakia or the Pavelic regime in Croatia." Venclova said "they harmed Lithuania's reputation more than any enemy of Lithuania." He believes that if the Allies had liberated Lithuania in 1944, the Provisional Government (PG) would have been convicted as was Phillip Petain in France.

Who are these "they" who damaged Lithuania's reputation more than her enemies? And how did they damage it? Venclova probably has in mind the

active participation of Lithuanians in murdering Jews, one of the most shameful things in the history of Lithuanians. But the PG didn't give orders to murder Jews. And they couldn't have stopped the mass killings. Influential Germans couldn't stop it. In August, 1941, colonel Helmuth Groscurth temporarily stopped the efforts of Nazi henchmen to kill about 100 Jewish orphans in a village, Belaja Cerkov, and even approached the leadership of the German military. He was told not to interfere in SS matters and the children were murdered. One ought not forget that when the PG dissolved its activities, 95 percent of Lithuanian Jews were still alive, and women and children were not being killed en masse.

Venclova imagines that the PG like Philip Petain] would have been tried. But for what? Ph. Petain, Vidkun Quisling in Norway, and high officials in other Western countries were accused of treason against their homeland and fraternization with the occupiers. Cases were initiated against French deputies who voted in favor of giving Ph. Petain special powers not in conformity with the Constitution. In every case officials were accused of contributing to the burial of their country's independence. The PG cannot be accused of this. They did not betray the Lithuanian state, because Lithuania was already occupied. Its authorization was provided (if one can speak in these terms) not by an occupier who had annulled the country's independence, but by those who, perhaps naively, expected to restore sovereignty. If the Soviets came back they would have initiated a case for treason against the USSR, but an uprising of the downtrodden against an occupier is not treason. It is rather a patriotic duty.

Once upon a time the Provisional Government and the uprising of 1941 were portrayed as an impeccable attempt to win back independence. Now it is pictured as a overture of mass murder conducted by the Nazis. Some insurgents [in the uprising], even the majority perhaps, sought to wash away the shame of the peaceful capitulation of 1940 and to show the world that Lithuania was prepared to fight for independence. It was hoped that a successful uprising would force the Germans to judge it as an accomplished fact and to recognize Lithuanian sovereignty. Similar hopes inspired the Armia Krajowa to attempt to occupy Warsaw and Vilnius, and by this to demonstrate to Western allies that Poland lived, and to force the Kremlin to deal with the nation.

It is not disputed that too many Lithuanians too quickly got involved in the massacre of Jews. It wasn't just low-lives, but also responsible officers and

local officials. An extraordinarily large number of people were apathetic to the fate of their neighbors.

The murders began during the period the Provisional Government [PG] operated. But what was its role? Did the PG contribute to the massacres, or try to stop them, and could they have affected the process? The work of the PG is terra incognita. Although the Jewish massacres have their historians, so far we don't have any more serious studies on the activity of the PG, especially studies taking into account the wider context of the occupation and Nazi methods of governance. There is a lack of memoirs. PG members and insurgents who withdrew to the West kept quiet about the murder of Jews, although they should have left memoirs on this question. PG member Adolfas Damusis lived in Lithuania when independence was restored, but, according to my information, historians didn't interview him.

The PG is accused of not daring publicly to condemn the massacres, not being able to help the Jews, and finally of adopting the Regulations on the Situation of Jews. But Juozas Ambrazevicius (Brazaitis), temporary acting prime minister, often expressed regret that the so-called excesses could not be affected. It would have been better if he and the PG had condemned the massacres more publicly. But silence and careful speech were the norm throughout Europe, not the exception.

It's important to research how much real power the PG had. Were local police subject to it, or did they have to carry out Nazi, especially SS, orders? If the police and government ['power structure'] were not subordinate to the PG, was it a Government, or did it just aspire to become one?

There are unknowns surround the *Regulations on the Situation of Jews*, which allows it to become the main accusation in the list of charges some level against the PG. The regulations were not printed in newspapers, and it should not be believed that copies were sent to the municipalities and police, so it is hardly appropriate to speak of their promulgation. These regulations really didn't regulate the life of Jews. It's not clear: Why were they adopted September 1, that is, several days after Gebietskommissar Kramer promulgated stricter regulations, and the administration of Lithuania was turned over to a civilian Nazi government? The minutes of the meeting haven't survived, which would finally confirm that the regulations were adopted, and might explain why. Although they give due devotion to anti-Semitism, they were gentler than Kramer's. Furthermore, the regulations

emphasize that they do not apply to volunteer artists [*sic*, author meant soldiers, i.e., Jewish veterans of World War I and the Lithuanian independence struggle]. This is a sort of challenge to the Nazis who found such an exception unacceptable [although similar exceptions were in force in Nazi Germany, and probably at this very time, before the Final Solution was in high gear]. Kestutis Skrupskelis, who has researched the PG meeting protocols, notes that only one copy of the regulations has been found, and that it seems to have entered the archive in a manner other than the other PG documents [in right-wing nationalist circles this is code for raising suspicions that Holocaust documents were produced by the KGB to defame Lithuania – Tr.]; [he also says] not all important PG documents have been published and that some have vanished, etc. etc. So there are many questions.

Once upon a time a *Veidas* magazine correspondent explained the four rules for writing an article: collect material, generalize, analyze, condemn. Unfortunately it isn't just journalists who follow these rules in Lithuania. Next year is the 70th anniversary of the uprising and the PG. It's not too late for Lithuanian historians to begin serious studies, to review the German and Russian archives and to organize a conference which would attempt, without preconceptions, to analyze the PG. We judge and condemn (or honor) [the PG, but] maybe it's time to collect the facts.