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## **If We Don't Recognize the Holocaust We Won't Take Responsibility for the Tragedy**

by **Andrius Bielskis**, member of NK95 [New Left 95]

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The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Germany from the United States in 1939, inspired by the wonderful line in the Book of Isaiah: “the one who trusts will never be dismayed”. This was an act of real faith and heroism. In April, 1945, just before the German capitulation, Bonhoeffer was hanged at the Flossenburg concentration camp for helping the plotters who tried to kill Adolf Hitler.

Today, when a Lithuanian magazine that puts itself out as serious publishes an editorial denying the Holocaust, and the main media outlets avoid categorically condemning this behavior by their colleagues, when a commentator who defends classical virtue ethics in politics attacks those who call to account the editorial office that trivializes the Holocaust, I am compelled to stop and think.

Is Lithuanian educated society really so morally insensitive that it does not understand the scope of the crime of the Holocaust? From where does so much exaggeration of painful wounds enter into our position, to the point where we cannot find the power to admit simply and without any “but” the obvious truth: the genocide the Soviet Union waged against Lithuanian residents is not equal to the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis.

The stories of Germans who fought heroically against Nazism are very meaningful to us. They show that real moral sensitivity and responsibility demand resisting evil, especially when it is committed in the name of my entire political community, resisting evil directed against those who are different from the majority. The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran theologian, pacifist and at the same time a German patriot, is a wonderful example for everyone who doesn't want to recognize that the Holocaust carried out by the Third Reich against Jews and Roma was a crime without precedent in the history of mankind. Bonhoeffer, along with many Lutherans, believed that all power comes from God (Romans 13), but, although he was a pacifist, he nonetheless decided to directly support the coup plotters plotting against Adolf Hitler!

The truth is that evil cannot be measured. But it's not true when people say that we can't compare genocides of different scopes and especially not the ideologies that justified them. On the contrary, we can and must compare the Stalinist Marxism of the Soviet Union and the Nazism of the Third Reich, just as we must analyze historical documents and the facts they record. We must do this because conscience, critical

thought, historical memory and the necessity to learn from bloody errors of European history demand it. I will present several instances.



Nazi Germany sought to physically annihilate all European Jews just because they were Jews. From 1941 to 1945 not only Jews but also Roma, homosexuals and the disabled were imprisoned and exterminated en masse merely because they were not considered to be human beings in the Third Reich. Nazi ideology, suffused with pathological racism, held that Jews were responsible for a global conspiracy and like a paranoiac held them responsible for all possible evils in the world (Communism, exploitation, financial machinations, capitalism, World War I, etc.).

The Holocaust reached its apogee during Operation Reinhardt in 1942 when the mass and systemic physical destruction of Jews began. More than 2.8 million people were destroyed over three years at six extermination camps that were set up in occupied Poland (these should not be confused with concentration camps where in the main political prisoners were held). At these camps, among other things, the traditional method of murdering political opponents by firing squad or hanging was replaced by gas chambers. Holocaust researchers say that 8,000 people were exterminated daily at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

It is well known that the institution of the Gulag in the Soviet Union deported 14 million people from 1929 to 1953. In June of 1941 alone more than 17,000 Lithuanian residents were deported. Despite the quantitatively much greater scope of the repressions, about 1.6 million people died after being deported. The pathological Stalin regime destroyed political opponents and those considered “class enemies,” but there was no systematic destruction of people in gas chambers in the camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan (my grandfather was imprisoned at one of them). The Gulag operated through a system of hard, demeaning and often fatally exhausting labor camps, but unlike Polish territory occupied by the Third Reich, people were not systematically murdered there.

Likewise, ghettos were not set up by force in the cities of the Soviet Union, as they were in many of the cities of Eastern Europe occupied by the Third Reich, where many Jews died directly of hunger. Of course, the famine in the Ukraine of 1932-1933 was directly connected with Stalin’s policy of forced collectivization, but even if we admit the harshest historical interpretation of this tragedy (i.e., if we call it the Holodomor), it would be a mistake to say that the Ukrainian famine and the direct liquidation of Jews had the same level of intentional effect.

It’s not the facts of the brutality of the genocides of Stalinism and Nazism (however important and informative they are), however, that are most important. Much more important are the unspoken double standards which we still tend to apply in appraising the genocides of Nazism and Stalinism. For the majority of members of society, what the Third Reich did with the Jews of Europe (including of Lithuania) is still not all that important, because Jews, as Justinas Žiliniskas so fittingly pointed out, are not considered ours (not to mention the often-heard antisemitic cynicism that claims the

Holocaust is a way for Jews to reach their political aims). Conservative ethnolinguistic nationalism which is opposed to real civic patriotism won't allow us to categorically condemn Holocaust denial the same way that it seems all would condemn those who publicly cast doubt on Stalin's repressions.

All expressions of antisemitism should be uniformly condemned and made public, including that of such cardinal Lithuanian personalities as Vincas Kudirka and Antanas Maceina, because it is banal, everyday antisemitism, expressed as silent assent or apathy, that gives birth to monsters such as Adolf Hitler. It is the greatest error to think that Nazism in Germany was just one dictator or his lackeys because it was the majority of Germans who directly supported or supported through silence Hitler's morbid manipulation of antisemitism.

Recently Alasdair MacIntyre delivered a lecture in London and presented three important reasons why we should be strict in not tolerating Holocaust denial. First, the Holocaust is the clearest example demonstrating to what level of evil people of civilized society can fall. Second, the Holocaust could only have happened in a society where a large part of society had mildly racist views. Finally, the Holocaust shows how banal apathy with a dash of racism, the petty evil of average citizens (i.e., "slightly" antisemitic patriotism, mild hatred of foreigners, tolerance of "soft" talk about the racial purity of the nation and so on), can serve to establish a rationally incomprehensible evil.

To deny the Holocaust, not to be able to ask forgiveness, and not to be able to condemn it, doesn't just insult the memory of its victims. It also doesn't allow us to learn from historical mistakes and tragedies, which are also our own mistakes and our own tragedies. Several thousand Lithuanian collaborators who actively participated in the destruction of Lithuanian Jews in 1941 are one of the greatest stains on our history. The inability to recognize the Holocaust hinders us from accepting collective responsibility for this tragedy. Finally, this behavior of ours reinforces the status quo wherein our ethnic patriotism is precariously balanced with mild racism.