



Publication: USF News (online)
Date: 16.01.2020
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Lithuania wants to erase its Holocaust role. That's deplorable | Pinchas Goldschmidt

By USFNEWS- ISRAEL - January 16, 2020



The renowned author George Orwell once said, "The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."

Last week, the Lithuanian Government began its latest attempt to do just that: rewrite





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history. While the Jewish world was the obvious victim of attempts to exonerate the country from its role in the systematic attempt to eradicate Jews from European society at the beginning of the 1940s, it will also be to the detriment of Lithuanian citizens.

Off the back of two horrific terror attacks in New York and New Jersey perpetrated by three people fuelled by a deep hatred of Jews, a committee of the Lithuanian parliament proposed a draft bill that seeks to deny any involvement of Lithuanian citizens in the Holocaust. A member of the Lithuanian parliament Arūnas Gumuliauskas argues that the Lithuanian state could not have helped contribute to the deaths of Jews living in the country as the Lithuanians were 'an enslaved people' under Nazi occupation. Mr. Gumuliauskas' attempt to gloss over the crimes carried out by the Baltic state are absurd and dangerous.

Lithuanian novelist Ruta Vanagaite, who was honored by the Conference of European Rabbis for exposing the truth about the nature of her country's past, has worked tirelessly to reveal Lithuanian complicity in the deportation and murder of more than 90 percent of approximately 220,000 Jews during the Shoah. Ruta's work drew a sharp backlash — her treatment by the Lithuanian authorities demonstrates their true attitude: propaganda over substance.

Lithuania's cultural heritage and history was significantly shaped by the traditions and values of its Jewish community. Indeed, the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius was widely referred to as 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania' because of its Jewish community's significant impact on communal life. Denying these facts is a barrier to learning the lessons of the Holocaust, distancing ourselves rather than putting in measures to prevent racism and discrimination.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time a European country has attempted to waive responsibility for its involvement in the extermination of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. In 2018, Poland made it a criminal offence to accuse it of complicity in Nazi war crimes. The absurd law rightly provoked an outcry throughout Europe and across the globe, leading the Poles to downgrade the law's severity from a criminal to a civil offence. Three million Polish Jews were brutally murdered by the Nazis during the occupation of Poland.

Western democracies, such as France and Switzerland, have also struggled with their wartime records and set up historical commissions to deal with the past. These measures





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are welcomed by the Jewish community and rightly acknowledge a sense that many countries could have done more.

With Holocaust survivors ageing, it is our responsibility to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust do not die with them. Anti-Semitic acts, now a daily occurrence, pose a real threat to the Jewish communities of Europe. It is the job of governments to ensure that Europe remains open to Jews and that we are able to practice our religion openly across the continent. The kind of revisionism that Lithuania is proposing only alienates the Jewish community, making us feel that we are not welcome and that the plight of our grandparents can be dismissed as someone else's fault.

We can understand why the Lithuanian parliament wants to erase its unpleasant history of Nazi collaboration. However, the country must face up to its history, not seek to ignore or deny it. It is cynical for the government to fund celebrations of the 300th birthday of the Vilna Gaon, a man who encapsulated so much Torah study and then to deny the sad truth that many Talmudical scholars following in his way were murdered by Lithuanians in cold blood during WWII.

The facts are clear: under Nazi occupation, the Provisional Lithuanian Government, Lithuanian paramilitary battalions and local Lithuanian populations were complicit in the slaughter of thousands of innocent Jews. By no means should we let a handful of people seek to legislate falsehoods.

Unfortunately, the Lithuanian state has a very difficult history and not much of a democratic past. The best guarantee for a future is to seek the truth. The rewriting of history for political gain can never be tolerated and I urge the Lithuanian parliament to withdraw this bill with immediate effect.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt is the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, a position he has held since 1993. In 2011, he also became president of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), and is the envoy of the World Jewish Congress to Orthodox Churches.

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