# Prosecution and persecution

## Lithuania must stop blaming the victims

IS LITHUANIA really persecuting Holocaust survivors as if they were war criminals? Not quite, but the story is still troubling. It starts with the Nazi occupation of Lithuania when the Germans, with local help, were murdering Jews (more than 200,000 Jews perished, around 95% of the pre-war population). The Nazis' main opponent was the Soviet Union, so Jews' only chance of survival was to fight alongside Soviet-backed partisan groups, who were fighting both against Hitler and to restore communist rule in Lithuania.

Sixty years on, independent Lithuania is still wrestling with the dilemmas of the wartime years. The Soviets condemned many Nazi collaborators (and tens of thousands of others) immediately after the war, but atrocities committed by the other side remain almost wholly unpunished. Perpetrators of dreadful crimes are still living freely in Russia and elsewhere.



AFP/Novosti                                                                           A parade of war criminals?

Yet the interest Lithuanian prosecutors have shown in a handful of elderly Holocaust survivors seems to have only a tangential relationship with righting those historical wrongs. Fania Brantsovsky, now 86, is a librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute in Lithuania, a survivor of the Vilna Ghetto and a former partisan. Prosecutors say they want to talk to her and another survivor, Rachel Margolis, about a partisan massacre of civilians in 1944.

Perhaps most spectacularly, a prosecutor wants to interview Yitzhak Arad, a Lithuanian-born historian and ex-head of Yad Vashem in Israel. Until recently he sat on a high-level Lithuanian commission investigating crimes perpetrated by totalitarian regimes in the country. Now he is refusing to co-operate. In a book published in 1979 he described how his partisan unit "punished" villagers who did not give them food.

No formal charges have been brought; the prosecutors say they are just following up a line of inquiry. But they claim to be "searching" for Ms Brantsovsky, as if she were a fugitive. The Lithuanian government seems embarrassed by the issue but says it cannot intervene in the justice system. It is bits of the Lithuanian media, calling for the individuals concerned to be put on trial as terrorists and criminals, who have done most to inflame the situation.

But it is still bad. Lithuania's record on prosecuting war criminals of the other stripe has been spotty, to put it mildly. Targeting prominent local Jews looks selective, even vindictive. It also fits into a general pattern of what Dovid Katz, the Yiddish Institute's research director, calls "Holocaust obfuscation". This involves a series of false moral equivalences: Jews were disloyal citizens of pre-war Lithuania, helped the Soviet occupiers in 1940, and were therefore partly to blame for their fate. And the genocide that really matters was the one that Lithuanian people suffered at Soviet hands after 1944.

These arguments are as repellent as they are flimsy. Jews (perhaps 500 of them) comprised around a third of the pre-war Communist Party. But Jews also suffered disproportionately from the deportations of June 1941, aimed at the bourgeoisie of all races. The Soviet Union was profoundly anti-Semitic.

Dodging the blame for Lithuanian collaboration in the Holocaust is shameful. It also makes separating facts from Soviet-era smears (now enthusiastically repeated by Kremlin propagandists) more difficult. Lithuania suffered dreadfully under Soviet rule, but "genocide" is the wrong word. Lithuania in fact suffered less than its Baltic neighbours. It regained territory (including its historic capital, Vilnius) and a wily local Communist leader shielded it from russification.

It may suit demagogic politicians and their media hangers-on to distort history and defame Jews. But it reflects dreadfully on Lithuania, at a time when small countries in Russia's shadow need all the help they can get.