Global Learning Hub
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Glorification, whitewashing, erasure
The populist challenge to dealing with the past in Lithuania

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Introduction

This article describes the populist instrumentalisation of the past in Lithuania since 2014, the year when Russia invaded Ukraine. As a small nation nestled between Russia (Kaliningrad) to the West and Belarus to the East, Lithuanians feel exposed to the risk of military aggression like that which has befallen Ukraine. Like Ukraine, Lithuania has a history of domination by the Soviet Union (USSR) and the Russian Empire, and Lithuanians are sensitive to the historical revisionism that is integral to Russia's war propaganda.

In this highly pressurised context, the nation's traumatic history has become a field of contestation. Pro-European and democratic voices look to the experience of the Second World War and its aftermath, including the Holocaust, military occupation, mass population displacement and partisan warfare, to learn hard lessons of civic duty—how to strengthen social resilience and respect for human rights. Meanwhile, Eurosceptics and populists speak of the same events in simplistic narratives that whitewash historical crimes with the ostensible aim of strengthening patriotic sentiment.

The remainder of this paper is organised into four parts. To contextualise the emergence of populist discourse since 2014, the first traces the origins of populist historical discourse in the propaganda of the Second World War to its dissemination by far-right and populist actors today. The second and main part of the paper will analyse populist historical discourse over the last ten years in a series of three stages: i) the glorification of anti-Soviet partisans through commemorative practices; ii) the politicisation of historical research to whitewash the reputation of Lithuanians who collaborated with the German occupation and participated in the Holocaust; and iii)

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the iconoclastic impulse to erase the stain of collaboration, which has amounted to sweeping the complexities of the twentieth century under the rug. The third part will describe how this erasure of the past has opened the door to the emergence of openly antisemitic discourse propagated by the leader of a new, right-wing populist party. The paper will conclude by offering recommendations on how the integrity of historical discourse and the democratising potential of public history can be preserved.

Part I. The origins and spread of populist historical discourse

It is impossible to grasp how populist discourse resonates in Lithuanian society today without an understanding of how the foundational myths of this discourse were created and spread by the propaganda of competing occupational powers during the Second World War and its aftermath. Like several of its neighbours, Lithuania emerged from the Russian Empire as a modern nation-state in the aftermath of the First World War. During the interwar period of national independence (1918 – 1940), a multi-ethnic society comprised mostly of Lithuanians, Poles, Jews and Belarusians underwent significant modernisation and economic growth.

By the late 1930s, geopolitical tensions caused by the rise of Nazism in Germany and the rivalry of fascism and communism across Europe undermined the balance of Lithuanian society. While Jews enjoyed equal civil rights and strong communal rights in areas like education and religion, economic nationalism and antisemitism grew in tandem with Europe-wide trends (Vareikis 2004). Tensions reached a peak when Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the Pact of Non-Aggression on 23 August 1939, which was shortly followed by the German invasion of Poland, and the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, including Lithuania.

The first Soviet occupation of Lithuania (June 1940-June 1941) would last twelve months before the Nazi invasion of the USSR, but it inflicted an unprecedented level of stress and strain on society. Individuals deemed hostile to Soviet power were designated as anti-Soviet, "fascist", and persecuted. On 14 June 1941, two weeks before the German invasion, the Soviets deported 17,500 Lithuanian citizens to camps and special settlements in Siberia (Balkelis and Davoliūtė 2016, 7).

The Soviets deported Lithuanian citizens without regard to their ethnicity—Lithuanian, Polish, Jewish—but this historical atrocity would later be represented in populist, right wing narratives as a tragedy where ethnic Lithuanians were the victims and Lithuanian Jews were the perpetrators of the Soviet repressions. In reality, Jews were deported by the Soviets in numbers proportional to their share of the population (Davoliūtė 2018). And while Jews were slightly over-represented in certain Soviet institutions like the Komsomol, or league of young communists, the repressive institutions of the Soviet occupation were dominate by ethnic Russians and Lithuanians (Truska 2004, 182 – 187).

However, the German military invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941 was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign that identified the entire Jewish population as Bolsheviks. The explicit aim of this campaign was to incite hatred among the local population against Jews, blaming them for the Soviet repression in general and for the deportations in particular. For example, the following article published in July 1941, i.e., a few weeks after the mass deportations and just as the killing of Jews in the Holocaust began to accelerate, exemplifies how the German-controlled Lithuanian media was

flooded with false stories of how Jews were responsible for the Soviet deportations of 14 June 1941:

> On the red horse of Communism, the Jews began to trample upon the Lithuanian nation, to suppress Lithuanian identity in the cities, to push Lithuanians out of offices and enterprises, to Russify and to Judaize them! […] Thousands of grey-haired women are gazing with tears in their eyes along the road by which their sons, betrayed by Jews, were transported away. Thousands of orphans and unhappy deportees are screaming: "Eliminate the Jews!" (Labūnaitis 1941).

The myth of a "double genocide", i.e., the idea that the genocide of the Jews (about 95 % of Lithuania's pre-war population of 200,000 Jews were killed) was somehow a "just return" for their role in the "genocide" of Lithuanians through Soviet deportation, was not dismantled during the subsequent Soviet occupation, but remained in the distant recesses of collective memory until open discussion of Soviet repressions became possible in the late 1980s (Davoliūtė 2012).

After Lithuania restored independence in 1991, public discourse about the past went through two major steps before 2014. The first step could be described as the re-nationalisation of a distorted historical memory, fuelled by grassroot efforts to collect and disseminate the stories of traumatic suffering from the Stalinist Sovietisation. The ethos of non-violent protest that guided the popular movement against Soviet rule led to a focus of historical discourse on the tragedy of Lithuania's victimisation and the nation's stubborn resistance (Budrytė 2022).

The second step in the evolution of post-Soviet historical discourse in Lithuania can be characterised as one of *Europeanisation*. By the late 1990s, historical discourse in Lithuania and public practices of education and commemoration were seen by Lithuania's American and European partners to be falling short of the democratic standards expected of a NATO and EU aspirant state (Budrytė 2022). For instance, the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (GRRC), established in 1992 to investigate all historical atrocities committed by the Soviet and Nazi occupational regimes, was in practice concerned mainly with investigating Soviet crimes. The apparent lack of interest in prosecuting, documenting or teaching about Nazi crimes, including the role of locals in the Holocaust, was the subject of frequent criticism. International organisations, Holocaust memory activists and Western embassies in Lithuania were concerned that antagonistic memories of the Second World War would fester and derail the process of post-communist democratisation (Pettai 2015).

To address these concerns, in 1999 the president of Lithuania established a national historical commission tasked with investigating and determining responsibility for crimes committed under the Soviet and Nazi regimes. The involvement of Western historians of the Holocaust was solicited to boost the authority and credibility of these commissions and to reinforce the reconciliatory dimension of the effort. The sub-commission on Nazi crimes conducted several historical investigations and published a series of studies that laid the foundations for a new generation of scholarship on the Holocaust. The commission also established several outreach programmes to promote civil society and strengthen democratic values, including Holocaust education programmes at Lithuanian schools (Sužiedėlis 2014).

However, Lithuania's attempt to come to terms with its difficult past has been complicated by the resurgence of populist historical discourse across Europe in recent years. The spread of this discourse

in Lithuania, which will be described in detail in the next part, has been driven by notable actors on the far right. Founded in 2020, the National Alliance *(Nacionalinis susivienijimas)* party was for a time the only far-right populist party to politicise the past in a significant manner. Other right-wing parties such as the People and Justice Union *(Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga)* and the Christian Union *(Krikščionių sąjunga)* were more concerned with issues like "family values" than history. Moreover, none of these parties had passed the threshold of 5 % necessary to win any seats in the Lithuanian parliament.

It was only when the Dawn of Nemunas *(Nemuno aušra)* party gained 15 % of the popular vote during the parliamentary elections of 27 October 2024 that a right-wing party flirting with historical revisionism not only passed the threshold to gain a significant number of seats but entered the governing coalition. Remigijus Žemaitaitis founded Dawn of Nemunas in November 2023 after he was expelled from the Freedom and Justice party due to his antisemitic statements (LRT.lt 2024).

Part II. Populist discourse in the wake of Russian aggression

Populist discourse about the past in Lithuania emerged on the margins of mainstream historical discourse in a series of three stages. The first stage, which began on a large scale after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and accelerated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, was marked by the gradually increasing public glorification of armed, anti-Soviet resistance, which somewhat displaced the commemoration of Lithuanian victims of Soviet oppression as the focus of national remembrance. In a second stage, the glorification of the anti-Soviet resistance took a populist turn with the whitewashing of partisans who collaborated with the Nazis, reinforcing mythological narratives of the Second World War and reviving antisemitic themes from the 1930s and 1940s. The third stage was triggered by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, dramatically strengthening the iconoclastic impulse to erase the stain of collaboration with the Soviet regime, an impulse that has led to the emergence of openly antisemitic discourse.

Glorification of the armed, anti-Soviet resistance

Lithuanians have commemorated the struggle against the Soviet occupation that followed the Second World War since the Soviet era, but it was not until the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and especially of Ukraine in 2014 that the armed anti-Soviet resistance of the early post-war era (as distinct from the dissident movement and non-violent resistance of the catholic church during the late Soviet period) took on a primary role in public memory. Numerous monuments had been erected across the country since the collapse of the USSR to commemorate the death of individual partisans, the places of significant camps and battles, and other "martyrological" sites, primarily by the relatives of fallen partisans, and most often in remote, rural areas. Since 2014, however, no fewer than 23 such monuments have been erected, increasingly in central, urban sites, and increasingly on the initiative of municipal and state bodies, significantly boosting the visibility and prestige of this legacy (Rimaitė-Beržiūnienė 2022).

The commissioning of monuments to the armed resistance was part of a more general campaign to elevate the role of the anti-Soviet partisans as the highest example of civic valour, and to formally incorporate the history of the resistance into the history of the state. Building on a prior decision

of the Lithuanian parliament, the Seimas, to recognise a partisan body established in 1949 as "the sole legal authority within the territory of occupied Lithuania", in 2009 the parliament retroactively proclaimed General Jonas Žemaitis, a partisan leader executed by the Soviets in 1953, as the fourth President of Lithuania (serving from 16 February 1949 to 26 November 1954) (Lietuvos respublikos įstatymas 1999; Lietuvos respublikos Seimo deklaracija 2009).

Moreover, in 2018 lawmakers dedicated the centennial of Lithuanian independence to the memory of Colonel Adolfas Ramanauskas (1918–1957), the last leader of the partisans. In June of that year, his remains were exhumed from an anonymous grave and reburied at the Antakalnis cemetery in a high-profile state funeral, attended by the heads of state and government, and representatives from 30 nations. In October 2018, the Seimas declared Ramanauskas, who served from 26 November 1954 until his death on 29 November 1957, to be the fifth President of Lithuania (BNS 2018).

The glorification of anti-Soviet partisans has generated controversy in cases when political populists sought to exploit their legacy to advance uncritical narratives about the past—ignoring that anti-Soviet partisans such as Jonas Noreika (1910 – 1947) also played a role in the machinery of the Holocaust. The most contentious narratives revolve around the 1941 Uprising, in which anti-Soviet activists took up arms in support of the approaching German forces, the role of these activists in the initiation of violent pogroms against Jews (including the infamous massacre at the Lietūkis garage in Kaunas), and the role of anti-Soviet activists in various acts of collaboration with the occupational German forces, including the direct killing of Jews in the Holocaust.

Whitewashing the role of Nazi collaborators

Before the Second World War, Noreika was a member of the Lithuanian Activist Front, an antisemitic, nationalist organisation that sought to collaborate with the Nazis to overthrow the Soviet regime in Lithuania. As the German-appointed governor of the Šiauliai district, Noreika signed orders in 1941 confining local Jews to a ghetto and confiscating their property. He was arrested by the Germans in 1943 for refusing to raise a Waffen-SS division from the local population and was deported to the Stutthof concentration camp. He returned to Lithuania after the war and served as a member of the anti-Soviet resistance from 1944 until his arrest and execution in 1947. With this checkered background, Noreika is reviled as a Nazi collaborator by many Lithuanians, but some revere him as a national hero for his resistance against the Soviets. Monuments have been erected in his honour across the country, including a commemorative plaque mounted in 1997 on a prominent building in downtown Vilnius.

While these and several other monuments to individuals implicated in the Holocaust have attracted occasional criticism from abroad, they were not subject to sustained public attention within Lithuania until 2015, when the mayor of Vilnius removed Soviet-era sculptures from a downtown bridge. This triggered a widespread debate over the need to keep or remove monuments to historical figures associated with the communist or Nazi totalitarian regimes (LRT.lt 2019).

Pressured by a public campaign to remove the plaque, the city requested an assessment of Noreika's role in the Second World War from the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre. The resulting memorandum, published in October 2015, refuted witnesses' claims that Noreika was personally involved in the killing of Jews and minimised his agency as a collaborator, admitting only that "the Nazi

authorities managed to involve him, as well as other officers of the Lithuanian civilian administration, in matters relating to the isolation of Jews" (Burauskaitė 2015).

The criticism of Noreika's wartime record, and the GRRC's apologetic approach, intensified through legal action taken against the GRRC by Grant Gochin, a U.S. citizen whose relatives perished in the Holocaust in Lithuania. Gochin claimed that the GRRC misrepresented Noreika's record and demanded that the GRRC's memoranda be corrected or annulled. Ultimately, he pursued the case up to the Supreme Court of Lithuania, but his claims were refused on the administrative grounds that he did not have the right to demand a correction to the GRRC's historical assessments since they do not concern him personally (Gochin 2020).

International attention to the Noreika case was amplified by the involvement of Noreika's U.S.-born granddaughter, Sylvia Foti. On 15 July 2018, Foti published an article in the magazine Salon entitled "My Grandfather Wasn't a Nazi-fighting War Hero – He Was a Brutal Collaborator" (Foti 2018). As noted on her website, Foti teamed up with Gochin to campaign against the honour bestowed on Noreika. Their cooperation led to the publication of Foti's book, *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather Was a War Criminal* (2020), which includes extensive excerpts from Gochin's lawsuit. The book was translated into Lithuanian and republished with a modified title: *Storm in the Land of Rain: The Story of Jonas Noreika's Granddaughter* in 2022.

In March 2019, the GRRC published a defence of Noreika that was criticised by Lithuanian and international historians as riddled with "exculpatory arguments and obfuscations" (International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania 2019). In December 2019, the GRRC went further, implausibly claiming that Noreika was a rescuer of Jews. Based solely on the uncorroborated testimony of a Lithuanian émigré given in 1986 to an extradition hearing in the U.S., the memorandum was roundly condemned by prominent Lithuanian historians as unprofessional, raising questions about the leadership and professionalism of the institution (International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania 2019).

Meanwhile, outside the walls of the GRRC, populist politicians like Vytautas Radžvilas made the defence of Noreika a cause celebre for the *Nacionalinis susivienijimas* (National Alliance) party. With a history of political activism going back to the anti-Soviet popular movement *Sąjūdis,* Radžvilas has emerged as a leading voice of far-right Euroscepticism, based on a critique of the EU as having renounced its origins in ancient and Christian civilisation.

In the lead-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections, the *Nacionalinis susivienijimas* selected the title of an antisemitic pamphlet published in 1933 as its motto: "Raise your head, Lithuanian!" The original pamphlet, which called on Lithuanians to "liberate themselves from economic slavery to the Jews" was authored by none other than Jonas Noreika. The *Nacionalinis susivienijimas* failed to win any seats in the Lithuanian parliament in 2020. In municipal elections held on 5 March 2023, the party elected three deputies to the municipal council of Vilnius but failed to elect any representatives to the EU parliament or to the Lithuanian parliament in the first round of elections held on 13 October of the same year.

While the *Nacionalinis susivienijimas* failed to win seats in parliament, the politicisation of history continued apace at the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre. In January 2020, seventeen historians employed by the GRRC signed a petition addressed to the Seimas, expressing concern about the politicisation of the centre's work. They drew attention to the ideologisation of historical research in support of memory wars, the issuance of biased memoranda on behalf of the GRRC, and the devaluation of professional competence by the centre's management (Gaučaitė-Znutienė 2021a). Within a couple of months, and a rancorous series of publicised exchanges over its proper mandate, the Seimas dismissed the GRRC's Director General Adas Jakubauskas, and appointed Arūnas Bubnys, the head of the centre's history department and one of the signatories of the petition, to replace him.

Concerns about the direction of the GRRC re-emerged when Jakubauskas appointed Vidmantas Valiušaitis as senior advisor in the summer of 2020 (The Jewish Community of Lithuania 2020). Trained as a philologist and having made a career in journalism, Valiušaitis was well known in Lithuania as a staunch proponent of the "heroic" interpretation of the 1941 Uprising—a highly controversial moment in Lithuanian history.

For Valiušaitis and his camp, the 1941 Uprising was a legitimate and heroic act of resistance by a nation that had experienced a year of brutal repression under the Soviets. They argue that if some of its members also took part in the Holocaust, this was a matter of their individual responsibility and should not taint the uprising as a whole. For others, the intention of the 1941 Uprising cannot be separated from the leading role played by the aforementioned Lithuanian Activist Front that openly collaborated with the Nazis as well as deadly outbreaks of communal violence against Jews that presaged the Holocaust and the murder of 95 % of the Lithuanian Jewish community (Venclova 2021).

In published commentaries, GRRC employees who signed the petition explained that shortly after his appointment, Valiušaitis gathered historians and accused them of using the "wrong" sources in their research, namely Soviet police records, and not using the "right" records, namely the memoirs of Lithuanian émigrés. According to Mingailė Jurkutė, a young historian working at the centre, political influence was exerted by the leadership of the centre at all stages of research, starting from which questions were to be researched, which interpretations to be supported and which sources to be used (Jurkutė 2021).

The GRRC's staff were instructed not to talk with the media after another young historian was reprimanded for questioning the decision to award Valiušaitis with the status of a "participant of the Freedom Fights" just a few months after his appointment. Lithuania's parliament formed a committee to investigate the situation, and the proponents of the memory-activist approach launched a public attack against the petitioning historians. This campaign was led by Vytautas Radžvilas, the far-right politician mentioned above.

Radžvilas defended the leading role of non-professional historians like Valiušaitis in the work of the GRRC, contrasting their "civic courage and simple loyalty to the state" with the dubious loyalty of the petitioners. "How many and which of the seventeen historians are already keeping a Russian tricolour and portraits of Putin in their homes?" he asked. And with clear antisemitic overtones, he mused about "the day when the centre will write certificates that it is time to build monuments to Abba Kovner, Fania Brancovskaya…"—that is, Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors who were members of anti-Nazi, pro-Soviet partisan formations. His call for the politicisation of history was explicit:

> The trouble for many Lithuanian historians is that they still want to write a "non-politicised", supposedly objective history, as if they do not understand that all sciences serve practical purposes. The ideological struggle for the interpretation and evaluation of the uprising is not an intellectual exercise but a very practical matter (Radžvilas 2021).

Responding to the argument that the task of the GRRC is simply to lionise anti-Soviet resistance fighters, Monika Kareniauskaitė notes that Paragraph 6 of the 1997 "Law on the Legal Status of Participants in the Resistance of the Republic of Lithuania to the Occupations of 1940–1990" specifically states that a person who resisted a totalitarian regime will not be accorded the status of a member of the resistance if he had also worked in the repressive structures of a regime, or otherwise committed crimes against humanity or war crimes. Thus, the GRRC is obliged to investigate such allegations against alleged resistance fighters if it is to fulfil its mandate (Lietuvos respublikos pasipriešinimo 1997).

In the end, parliament sided with the petitioning historians and dismissed Jakubauskas from his post, shortly after a scandalous interview he gave to a Ukrainian TV station, in which he blamed the critique of his leadership on the influence of "young leftists" entering parliament and espousing "European worldviews" that were foreign to Lithuanians, like same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of drugs (Zverko et al. 2021).

Upon his appointment, the new director Arūnas Bubnys struck a conciliatory note, saying his priority would be to heal the divisions within the institution, to increase the wages of its employees and to restore constructive relations with other history institutions in Lithuania and abroad (Tapinienė 2021). As the former director of its research department and as a well-respected historian of the Holocaust in Lithuania, Bubnys seemed to be well placed to restore the GRRC's reputation amongst scholars. At the same time, he himself ran in the 2020 elections on the populist *Nacionalinis susivienijimas* ticket, though Bubnys has since left the party (Tapinienė 2021). Regarding the debate over Noreika, Bubnys has stated that more research needed to be done, and that the root of the problem is that "some see only white, others see only black. People don't want to see the whole picture, the totality of what's in a person's biography" (Gaučaitė-Znutienė 2021b).

In addition to replacing the head of the GRRC, parliament passed a law to establish a council to oversee the work of the institution, consisting of eleven members appointed for a five-year term. This governing body now includes four persons submitted by the Conference of Rectors of Lithuanian Universities, a member delegated by the GRRC itself, and delegates from the Lithuanian Institute of History, the Seimas, the Presidency, the Government, and the Lithuanian Union of Political Prisoners and Exiles.

Erasing the stain of collaboration, or forgetting the past?

The Lithuanian parliament's engagement in regulating historical discourse took a sharper turn in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the wave of anti-Soviet iconoclasm that swept the region. With the sight of Ukrainians tearing down statues of Lenin, Lithuanians sought to remove the last remaining monuments associated with the Soviet period. By June 2022, twenty-six municipalities across Lithuania had made requests to the Ministry of Culture to strip Soviet memorials of their status as heritage objects. Parliament went a step further and

adopted the so-called “de-Sovietisation” law, which mandates the removal of all monuments that promote totalitarian or authoritarian ideology in public spaces. The principal monument to victory in the “Great Patriotic War” was promptly removed from the Antakalnis cemetery in Vilnius and placed in storage (BNS 2022).

The law came into effect on 1 May 2023 and its implementation began within a 20-day period during which municipalities were obliged to produce a list of objects within their boundaries that were potentially in violation of the ban. Ultimately, the decision to remove a monument is to be taken by the director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (currently held by Arūnas Bubnys), on the advice of a commission of nine individuals delegated by the Ministry of Culture and other cultural and academic institutes.

Since then, municipalities have been compiling lists of public monuments to be decommissioned or amended, including statues and memorial plaques, as well as of streets, squares, public buildings and schools named after Soviet-era intellectuals, writers, artists, and performers. In the country’s capital, for instance, the Vilnius Historical Memory Commission has proposed removing all public monuments to three Soviet-era writers who also supported Lithuania’s incorporation into the USSR in 1940: Salomėja Nėris, Petras Cvirka, and Liudas Gira (BNS 2023).

Perhaps the most contentious matter thus far concerned not the decommissioning of an existing monument, but a plan to commission a new monument to Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930 – 2011), a popular Lithuanian writer during the late Soviet period (1960s-80s), and one of the iconic figures of *Sąjūdis,* the popular movement against Soviet rule. Like many prominent figures of *Sąjūdis,* Marcinkevičius was part of the official Soviet Lithuanian intelligentsia; he occupied a privileged position within society, and was viewed by some dissidents as complicit with the regime. The idea to commission a monument to Marcinkevičius has been entertained ever since his passing, but the Writers Union applied to the Vilnius City Council with a proposal only in July 2023, at the peak of the current wave of anti-Soviet iconoclasm. Faced with an outcry from activists, the City Council wavered, and the Writers Union was pressured to withdraw its application (Bakaitė 2023).

Up to this point, the campaign against the Soviet-era intelligentsia has been opposed by a small number of historians, writers, artists, and heritage specialists. The removal in November 2019 of a monument to Petras Cvirka, for example, was subjected to a performative critique by artists who covered the condemned statue with green moss, shortly before it was physically dismantled by the municipality (Grėbliauskaitė and Gintalaitė 2021). One historian pointed out that the practice of cleansing the city of monuments erected by earlier regimes was in itself a manifestation of Soviet culture, echoing the current practice in Russia of re-writing history (Klumbys 2022).

This minority of artists and academics were not seeking to defend the person or historical legacy of Cvirka, or other members of the Stalin-era intelligentsia. Instead, they criticised the presentism of those who would seek to remove monuments associated with the difficult past from public view (Grėbliauskaitė and Gintalaitė 2021). But when the iconoclastic gaze turned to Marcinkevičius, a poet whose works from the late-Soviet era were genuinely popular, expressing visions and ideas that resonated with the cultural mainstream of that era, prominent cultural and political figures stepped up to defend his legacy.

Indeed, no less a figure than Gitanas Nausėda, the president of Lithuania, spoke out in defence of the last generation of the Soviet Lithuanian intelligentsia, and writers and poets who were its most celebrated representatives: "Justinas Marcinkevičius built a monument that no ideological inquisitor of the twenty-first century can tear down. His verse, and the verse of the other famous poets who were part of *Sąjūdis,* were among the greatest songs we had in the twentieth century" (Delfi.lt 2023).

Part III. The return of open antisemitism

The iconoclastic impulse to erase the stain of collaboration with the Soviets and to sweep the complications of the twentieth century under the rug has paradoxically, but predictably, opened the door to the emergence of openly antisemitic rhetoric by a politician propelled to the forefront of Lithuanian politics through recent parliamentary elections.

In May 2023, Remigijus Žemaitaitis, who is a member of parliament from the Law and Justice *(Tvarka ir teisingumas)* party, published antisemitic comments on Facebook, in which he claimed that "the Jews and Russians" oppressed ethnic Lithuanians during the Second World War and were responsible for the 1944 massacre of the village of Pirčiupiai, a massacre committed by the Nazis as collective punishment for the acts of pro-Soviet partisans in the region (LRT.lt 2024). By associating Jews with the Soviets and blaming them for atrocities committed by the German occupation, Žemaitaitis brought the atrocity propaganda of the Second World War back to the surface of populist political discourse in Lithuania.

The comments were received with harsh criticism and condemnation from Lithuanian politicians, the Lithuanian Jewish community and ambassadors to Lithuania. Žemaitaitis was expelled from his political party, but on 11 November 2023, he announced the creation of a new political party, Nemuno aušra *(Dawn of Nemunas),* named after the country's largest river and the country's first newspaper, Aušra, which is a symbol of the national revival of the late 19th century.

Even while the Prosecutor General asked the Lithuanian parliament to strip Žemaitaitis of his legal immunity, stating that the pre-trial investigation suggested that Žemaitaitis "publicly ridiculed, expressed contempt for, and incited hatred against a group of people of Jewish nationality", Žemaitaitis announced a bid for presidency as the candidate of Dawn of Nemunas (Andrukaitytė 2024). During parliamentary elections held on 16 and 27 October 2024, his party came in third place, gaining 15 % of the popular vote and 20 seats in parliament.

Following the election, the Dawn of Nemunas joined the coalition led by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, sparking loud protests from the other political parties, civil society and Lithuania's international partners, including the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the Vice-President of the Polish Senate. The Social Democrats justify the coalition by downplaying the significance of Žemaitaitis' remarks and pointing to the inclusion of a commitment to fight against antisemitism in the coalition agreement.

So far, three months into the new government, there is no evidence that the Dawn of Nemunas is pursuing any particular ideological agenda. For example, their eclectic political platform included a call to roll back the establishment of a governing council to guide the work of the Genocide and

Resistance Research Centre, but this isolated "talking point" has not been followed up by any action. The governing council was duly established, with officers appointed, and is exercising its mandate to strengthen the governance of the centre.

Nevertheless, Žemaitaitis continues to play on populist themes, raising controversy to attract attention. While he has not uttered any further antisemitic comments, and sought to qualify his earlier comments as merely a critique of Israel's policies, he continues to play on social divides. Most recently, he has been criticised by the President and the Speaker of Parliament for parroting Russian propaganda, denigrating the leadership of Ukraine, making false allegations that the savings accounts of citizens will be nationalised to pay for increases to the Lithuanian defence budget, and calling for the lifting of sanctions against Belarusian goods (Balčiūnaitė 2025).

Conclusion

The rise of political populism across Europe and geopolitical tensions have had a significant effect on historical discourse in Lithuania. In this context, historical myths generated by propaganda during the Second World War are a tempting resource for political opportunists, who may resort to antisemitic tropes that turn victims into villains and perpetrators into victims.

Lithuanian legislators have sought to regulate historical discourse by prohibiting the trivialisation of historical crimes committed by the Soviets and the Nazis in equal measure. They have sought to balance the attention of historical research and commemorative activities between the two totalitarian regimes. While this strategy has been relatively successful, the campaign to eradicate all traces of the Soviet regime has in some instances eroded the spirit of self-reflective critique and confrontation with the traumatic events of the twentieth century.

Among the far-right and populist parties of Lithuania, only *Nacionalinis susivienijimas* has—thus far—sought to politicise the past through the glorification of a Nazi collaborator, and they have failed, in two successive elections, to gain any seats in parliament. The electoral success of *Nemuno aušra,* the antisemitic comments of its leader, Remigijus Žemaitaitis, and the inclusion of his party in the governing coalition are alarming developments. To date, however, they would appear to signal only the *potential* of populist politics to challenge democratic and inclusive approaches towards the past.

To ensure that this potential danger is not actualised, and to ensure that declarations of intent to combat antisemitism are not just words, it is essential for Lithuania to maintain an active engagement with the difficult past of foreign occupation and local collaboration—not only with the Soviet but also the Nazi regime. The impulse to erase this legacy from memory through iconoclastic campaigns to remove public reminders of the past is understandable from a psychological point of view but misguided as policy. Without ongoing research and debate over the most uncomfortable episodes of contemporary history, society will lose its bearings as it confronts new challenges.

The establishment of a supervisory board for the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre was an important step in the ongoing evolution of Lithuania's infrastructure for researching and communicating the difficult past. After governance, the next steps should focus on programmes to build capacity at the centre, in schools, museums and other institutions that practice public history in Lithuania.

Capacity building programmes should begin with the dissemination of the theory and practice of public history itself. Public history is the set of measures used by state and non-state actors to engage the citizenry in the co-creation of historical narratives to promote democracy and social cohesion while maintaining professional standards of truthfulness (Cauvin 2022). It is a relatively new discipline, the relevance of which increases in tandem with the rise of social media and the potential for digital technologies to spread disinformation about the past.

The next steps should include an exploration for more diverse sources of funding, beyond the Lithuanian government. Lithuanian institutions could access a broader base of funding from the European Commission and European foundations, especially through participation in transnational networks. This is especially relevant for local history museums, which enjoy significant holdings of valuable historical materials, but which lack the capacity to communicate these to national and international audiences.

The means of engaging citizens through history are many and varied. Lithuania has a multitude of museums, commemorative sites, monuments, and programs, more or less successful in fulfilling their mandate to educate and inform the public about the past. Successive assessments of the performance of such institutions typically highlight the lack of professional qualifications as a key problem (Beresniova 2017). Building professional and institutional capacity in the discipline of public history will help to build an informed and critically minded citizenry more resilient to populist plays on the past.

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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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