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HISTORY AS A MEANS OF HYBRID WARFARE?

THE IMPACT OF THE ONGOING WAR IN EASTERN UKRAINE ON HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS IN LITHUANIA

The events of the Euromaidan in Kyïv were followed by Lithuanian society not as distant news, but as a reflection of more general developments in the region lying between Russia and the EU. For many of Lithuania's three million inhabitants, the subsequent annexation of Crimea triggered fears of Russian aggression in the Baltics. The ongoing war in the eastern part of Ukraine has already altered how the media reflects on 20th century Lithuanian history.

After Lithuania took over the EU presidency in late 2013, the shadow of the war in Ukraine brought considerable change in Lithuanian politics. The intensive preparations for the EU presidency as well as the Euromaidan in Kyïv increased the sensitivity of Lithuanian society to external threats. After the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, this feeling was intensified primarily by the practices of hybrid war being used in the Donbas region and beyond, accompanied by an ongoing propaganda war, directed at, among others, the Russian-speaking inhabitants of the Baltics.

In Lithuania, public discourse centred on debates about historical interpretations of the 20th century.¹ The history of societies under Ger-

¹ An earlier exploration of the subject by the author was published previously: Felix Ackermann, 'Repercussions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania? The Public Perception of the Ukrainian War in Lithuania', *Cultures of History Forum*, 27 June 2014, available at <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/focus/ukrainian-crisis/lithuania-repercussions-of-the-grand-duchy-of-lithuania-the-public-perception-of-the-ukrainian-war/> (last visited 24 April 2019); idem, 'Der Krieg vor der Haustür. Litauen und die Ukraine-Krise', *Merkur* 69, 798 (2015): 81–6. A prior version of this text was published in German as: Idem, 'Aktualisierte Gewalterfahrung. Litauens Geschichtspolitik und Russlands Ukrainekrieg', *Ost-*

man and Soviet occupation during the Second World War is the subject of bitter conflicts in Ukraine extending far beyond the interpretation of other historical events.² The logic of contemporary hybrid warfare is imposed on discussions about the great ruptures of the 20th century. Lithuanian society is no longer able to conceive of itself without reference to the war in Ukraine.

The Public Representation of State-Driven Public History

Since the emergence of the Lithuanian *Sąjūdis* independence movement in the 1980s, politicians have drawn a historical-political narrative continuum between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the new independent state. This serves to present Lithuania as historically strong and large.³ In 2002, this vision started to materialize with the building of a new palace of the Grand Duchy between the cathedral in Vilnius and Castle Mountain. The construction project aroused controversy and public protests about its considerable expense. Although the *Valdomų Rumai* was built on top of archaeologically documented foundations, the architectural style of the new building was based on a small number of 18th-century watercolours. The ruins of the palace, which had already fallen down before the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, were removed under Russian rule. Politicians construed the building of the new palace as an act of symbolic defence against Russian rule, although the ruins could also be seen as a symbol of the growing weakness of the Commonwealth.

The art historian Vidas Poškus complained that the architectural design lacked authenticity and accused the government of protecting false cultural heritage. He compared the commemorative quality of the new building to the concrete sarcophagus around the Chornobyl' nuclear reactor.⁴ The architect Augis Gučas defended the new palace in the public

europa 66, 3 (2016): 111–28. Thanks to Helen Ferguson for translation and the edition of this text.

² Audrius Bačiulis, 'Kovo 11 protestas prieš valdžios nutautintą šventę', *Veidas*, 20 February 2013, available at www.veidas.lt/kovo-11-aja-%E2%80%93-protestas-pries-valdzios-nutautinta-svente (last visited 24 April 2019).

³ Barbara Christophe, *Staat versus Identität: Zur Konstruktion von 'Nation' und 'nationalem Interesse' in den litauischen Transformationsdiskursen von 1987 bis 1995* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1997).

⁴ Vidas Poškus, 'Pietinis fasadas: Mintys apie valdovo rūmų "atkūrimą"', *Spyntos meno dienos*, 9 February 2007, available at http://www.culture.lt/7md/?leid_id=742&kas=straipsnis&st_id=6816 (last visited 24 April 2019).

debate which raged for years. To illustrate the necessity of reconstructing the palace, he drew a parallel between the 40 years of Socialist rule in East Germany and several centuries of Russian rule and argued that the long-term consequences of dictatorship must be combated aggressively.⁵ In cultural political discussions about the meaning of historicizing palace constructions, which are also familiar to the Berlin Republic, other publicists and activists criticized the centralization of state cultural policy.⁶ The decision to support a new building in the centre rather than old structures on the country's periphery can be seen as an attempt to overhaul what Lithuania perceives as its peripheral position in Europe and in the EU in particular. In June 2013, when the palace was officially opened as part of the programme of Lithuania's presidency of the EU, the web portal *Kauno Diena* highlighted the significance of the building as a new symbol of Lithuanian statehood.⁷ The neo-Renaissance building is also an architectural attempt to emphasize Lithuania's bond with the West through its membership of the EU and NATO.⁸

Alongside the re-centring of Lithuania, there is also the use of history as an instrument. The permanent exhibition in *Valdovų rūmai*, the new Grand Duchy palace, is designed to emphasize the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a European power during the Middle Ages and the 'Saddle Period'. At that time, the state covered a considerably larger territory, but by presenting maps with clearly drawn borders, it gives the impression that it was a modern state exerting a monopoly on physical violence over a specific territory. The pictorial presentation serves the same function as the Grand Duchy palace: it transposes the image of a strong, large, and influential Lithuania from the past onto the present and the near future. The palace was hurriedly completed in summer 2013 so that it could provide the backdrop for the EU summit in December of the same year

⁵ Augis Gučas, 'Kita nuomonė apie Valdovų rūmus', *Kultūros barai*, 7–8 (2009): 30–31, available at http://v1.valdovurumai.lt/Apie_mus/Gucas_Kita_nuomone_apie_Valdovu_rumus.lt.htm (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁶ A graduate of Vytautas Didžiojo University in Kaunas contributed to the discussion through their blog, see <https://valdovurumai.wordpress.com/kita-nuomone-gera-apie-valdovu-rumus/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁷ Laima Žemulienė, 'Atidaryti trečdali milijardo litų kainavę Valdovų rūmai', *Kauno diena*, 8 July 2013, available at <http://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/atidaryti-trecdali-milijardo-litu-kainave-valdovu-rumai-402317> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁸ Evas Nekrašas, 'Litauen: Auf der Suche nach einer regionalen Identität', in *Fortsetzung folgt. Essays über Litauen und Europa*, eds. Paulius Subačius et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Inter Nos, 2002), 197–216.

under the Lithuanian presidency of the EU, although parts of the building were still unfinished.

The same principle of cartographic national state-building was applied to the renovation of the parliament building and its grounds. Built in 1980 by the architects Vytautas and Algimantas Nasvytis as the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic, like Vilnius' television tower, the building today is a symbol of Lithuania's independence movement and the decision of the people confirmed in 1991 to secede peacefully from the Soviet Union.⁹ The parliament building was restored and 28 flagpoles were erected for the EU member states. The late-Soviet expressionist flagpole was repaired, but there was not enough money to renovate the pyramid-shaped fountain and its complex steel structure.¹⁰ In summer 2013 as part of an art project, it was wrapped in plastic sheeting, on which are depicted the various stages of expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In contrast with the permanent exhibition at *Valdovų Rūmai*, it showed not only the modern states from the 14th–20th centuries, but the sharp outlines projected onto a political map of 21st century Europe.¹¹ The outline of historical Lithuania in black against a grey background symbolically pushed the Grand Duchy beyond the boundaries of the current state and into the territories of the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine. Although the key to the map attempted an explanation, this depiction triggered protests from Belarusian bloggers who see the Grand Duchy as a proto-Belarusian state and part of shared Lithuanian–Belarusian heritage.¹²

The former Museum of the October Revolution, which had been refurbished and reopened as the National Art Gallery in 2009, became the

⁹ Though built during Soviet times, the parliament building is one of the most outstanding works by the Nasvytis brothers: 'Mirė garsus architektas, Parlamento ir kitus žymius pastatus suprojektavęs V. Nasvytis', *Delfi*, 8 January 2016, available at www.delfi.lt/veidai/kultura/mire-garsus-architektas-parlamento-ir-kitus-zymius-pastatus-suprojektavęs-v-nasvytis.d?id=70060504 (last visited 24 April 2019).

¹⁰ The architects considered it a violation of their piece and protested: 'Seimo fontano bėdas palaidojo po skalda ir juodžemiu', *Lietuvos diena*, 24 May 2013, available at <https://lietuvsdiena.lrytas.lt/aktualijos/2013/05/24/news/seimo-fontano-bedas-palaidojo-po-skalda-ir-juodzemiui-5005485/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

¹¹ 'Seimo fontano vietoje – kontroversišku žemėlapiu puošta piramidė', *TV3*, 1 July 2013, available at <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/740928/seimo-fontano-vietoje-kontroversisku-zemelapiu-puosta-piramide> (last visited 24 April 2019).

¹² Arūnas Dimalakas, 'Seimo fontano žemėlapiai kliūva baltarusiams', *Lietuvos diena*, 14 July 2013, available at <https://lietuvsdiena.lrytas.lt/aktualijos/2013/07/14/news/seimo-fontano-zemelapiai-kliuva-baltarusiams-4958249/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

press centre for the EU summit. This building on the right bank of the river Neris stands in a park commemorating the Japanese Consul General in Kaunas. Chiune Sugihara disobeyed the orders of his government and issued hundreds of visas to Lithuanian Jews, enabling them to survive the war.¹³ This heroic act is commemorated by a garden of cherry trees, visited by thousands of people every spring.¹⁴ A helicopter-landing site was built in the garden so that important EU heads of state could land directly for the press conference. Ubiquitous bunting consisting of the EU flag alongside flags of the EU states demonstrated how important the summit was for city and nation, because public veneration of the symbols of statehood is one of the many daily practices retained from the Soviet period, but simply involving new content.

The European Neighbourhood Policy on Trial

When the backdrop of the Seimas, the National Art Gallery and *Valdovų Rūmai* were ready and a legion of multilingual volunteers had been assembled, on 1 July 2013 the EU presidency could begin. Lithuanian political and media circles viewed it from the outset as an opportunity to alter the country's own perceived position on the periphery for one historical moment. The main concern was to realign and strengthen foreign policy towards the states between the EU and the Russian Federation: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and the states of the South Caucasus. By establishing closer ties between the EU and these states, the hope is that Lithuania will become more central in the union, protecting it against any attempt by Russia to expand into the 'near abroad'. Due to the absence of a common foreign policy and a shift in perceptions of the 'Arab Spring', which dominated the attention of Western Europe after 2011, the EU had little to offer to the people of Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova.¹⁵

Negotiations between Ukraine and the EU were followed closely in Lithuania. The posturing around the Association Agreement seemed to increase the significance of the summit, which was meant to create a

¹³ Linas Venclauskas, *Chiune Sugihara: Visas for life* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2009).

¹⁴ Michael Mustillo, 'Japan's Schindler: The Spy Who Became a Lifesaver', *The Baltic Times*, 27 January 2016, available at https://www.baltictimes.com/japan___s_schindler_the_spy_who_became_a_lifesaver/ (last visited 27 July 2020).

¹⁵ See an overview of the arguments at stake in issue no. 15 of *Belarus-Analysen*, 18 December 2013, available at www.laender-analysen.de/belarus/pdf/BelarusAnalysen15.pdf (last visited 24 April 2019).

breakthrough before the summit in Vilnius planned for 28–29 November 2013. But when, under pressure from Russia, the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign the agreement, the existing borderlines were revealed: those of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, the Lithuanian EU Presidency, and also the symbolic invocation of the historical heritage of the Grand Duchy. Yanukovych's decision not only exposed the limitations of the foreign policy capacity of the EU in the region but also demonstrated Russia's readiness to use annexation and wars of intervention in neighbouring states as a means of asserting its own interests.¹⁶

From the Lithuanian perspective, the core of the Association Agreement negotiated with Ukraine went far beyond the relationship between the periphery and the centre, a rivalry over integration between Russia and the EU, or the construction of a counterweight to Russia. This particular historical sensibility, born out of the experience of having suffered under the Hitler–Stalin pact with its secret additional protocols, is concerned with more than military threat and the demarcation of zones of influence. The core of the historical experience, shared by Lithuania, Poland, and other states in Central East Europe, is a loss of sovereignty. From the point of view of Lithuanians who only demanded the return of their independence in 1991, it was not a question of the EU making greater efforts in the region, but of defending the basis of any form of democracy in Lithuania: the sovereignty and autonomy of Lithuanian society.

In Lithuania, there is a social consensus on this issue which goes beyond allegiance to any political group. So the former leader of *Sąjūdis*, Vytautas Landsbergis, invoked the right to self-determination of Ukrainian society in relation to the Lithuanian independence movement: “As a small country, we won not only our own freedom, but also the freedom of other peoples in the Soviet Union”.¹⁷ The historical necessity that Ukrainian society owed its own sovereignty was from the Lithuanian perspective the heart of the drama in December 2013. Under the influence of Putin's politics, Viktor Yanukovych had already questioned the right of Ukrainian society to make sovereign choices. This was perceived by Lithuanians across the political spectrum as a threat to their own exis-

¹⁶ Thomas Vogel, ‘Überforderung und Desinteresse: Die EU, die Nachbarschaft und die Ukraine’, *Osteuropa* 64, 9–10 (2014): 51–65.

¹⁷ Felix Ackermann, ‘Der Majdan von Vilnius’, *Zeit Online*, 13 January 2016, available at <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2016-01/blutsonntag-vilnius-litauen-unabhaengigkeit> (last visited 24 April 2019).

tence. Sensitivity to the importance of this autonomy stems from historical experience, transferred long ago from the communicative memory of individual families into the cultural memory of Lithuanian society.¹⁸

Euromaidan from a Lithuanian Perspective

The Ukrainian president's refusal to sign the Association Agreement meant that the Vilnius summit and the concurrent Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum ended without success.¹⁹ However, Lithuania's efforts during its presidency of the EU to make the Association Agreement for Ukraine a concern for the whole of Europe did have some effect. Even before the escalation of violence in February 2014, the Maidan was present everywhere in everyday life in Lithuania. For several hours every morning, a panel of experts would discuss the current situation in Ukraine on the Žinių Radijas radio station. Many Lithuanians watched the Maidan streamed on Espresso TV in the background at work. From everyday public and private discussions, it was clear that the Euromaidan in Kyïv was felt to be about Lithuania too. The live coverage of the Euromaidan became the new backdrop to daily life in many public institutions and private homes.²⁰

The Euromaidan was a live revolution, given a running commentary by Lithuanian politicians, philosophers, and historians, and the subject of heated debate online. In March 2014, Leonidas Donskis, then a Member of the European Parliament, publicly called for Viktor Yanukovych to be brought before the UN Tribunal in The Hague in the event that Russia were to begin an open war in Ukraine.²¹ The vigilance of networked

¹⁸ Ekaterina Makhotina, 'Die Unsrigen: Die Holocaustdebatte in Litauen', *Erinnerungskulturen. Erinnerung und Geschichtspolitik im östlichen und südöstlichen Europa*, 26 February 2016, <https://erinnerung.hypotheses.org/671> (last visited 24 April 2019).

¹⁹ 'EaP Civil Society Forum at the Civil Society Conference in Vilnius: Political Challenges and Future agenda of the Eastern Partnership', 10 December 2013, available at <http://archive.eap-csf.eu/en/news-events/news/eap-civil-society-forum-at-the-civil-society-conference-in-vilnius-political-challenges-and-future/> (last visited 24 August 2020).

²⁰ The live stream of the Euromaidan was integrated into other media and thus was present on several media channels: 'Šturmuotas Maidanas atsilaiškė, yra žuvusiųjų (tiesioginė transliacija, video)', *Alkas*, 18 February 2014, available at <http://alkas.lt/2014/02/18/sturmuojamas-maidanas-yra-zuvusiuju-tiesiogine-transliacija/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

²¹ Nemira Pumprickaitė, 'Leonidas Donskis: "Viktoro Janukovyčiaus byla Hagoje jau pradedama"', *Penkiolika minučių*, 3 March 2014, available at <http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/interviu/leonidas-donskis-viktoro-janukovyčiaus-byla-hagoje-jau-pradedama-599-409316> (last visited 24 April 2019).

Lithuanian society online brought about this moment not from a postcolonial projection of the past of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but from the political awareness that the future of their society was also being negotiated at the Euromaidan.

The escalation of violence and the shooting of over 100 people after 18 February stirred up Lithuania's political and societal memory of January 1991, when 14 people were killed defending strategically important buildings in Vilnius against Soviet troops and secret service agents during the struggle for independence. There was an immediate visual symbolic response in the city: the Lithuanian flags in front of the Presidential Palace were replaced by a Lithuanian, an EU, and a NATO flag. In the centre of Vilnius, the Soviet statues on Green Bridge were covered with symbols of the Lithuanian state and NATO flags. In Lukiškės Square, which had been Lenin Square until 1991, a big red flag flew, bearing the symbol of the Lithuanian state, the medieval knight Vytis. Even those who were not following events in Kyïv live online could tell from these signs in public spaces that a fundamental shift had occurred.

Lithuanian Reactions to the War in Eastern Ukraine

The escalation of the Euromaidan in February 2014 was followed closely by other sections of Lithuanian society. When the first killings occurred in Kyïv, the state flag was flown at half-mast on many public and private buildings in Vilnius – even before the official declaration of national mourning. On the radio, the situation in Ukraine was always discussed in terms of the military and logistical position of Lithuania.²² The number of tanks, fighter jets, and other weaponry in the areas of Kaliningrad, Belarus, and the three Baltic states were documented to prove the existence of a real threat that went beyond the symbolic limitation of the rights to autonomy of the individual and the sovereignty of society as a whole. The Ministry of Defence sent out a handbook for use in the event of a crisis.²³

²² It was particularly present on the radio station Žinių radijas, see 'Karas Ukrainoje: žudomos šeimos, dvasininkai, politikai', *Penkiolika minučių*, 14 May 2014, available at <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/pasaulis/karas-ukrainoje-zudomos-seimos-dvasininkai-politikai-57-426629> (last visited 24 April 2019).

²³ Jürgen Steihammer and Thomas Vieregge, 'Die Angst der Balten vor dem großen „Bruder“ Russland', *Die Presse*, 26 February 2015, available at <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/4672875/Die-Angst-der-Balten-vor-dem-grossen-Bruder-Russland> (last visited 24 April 2019).

These were all reactions to Russia's war of intervention in eastern Ukraine. Consequently, the Russian war in the 'People's Republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk was seen much more as a hot war in Lithuania than it was in Western Europe. In the West it was considered a 'hybrid war', and broad sections of the public saw it as the start of a new Cold War. In Lithuania, attention was more focussed on the conventional dimension of the war, waged with heavy weaponry by volunteers and soldiers on the ground. For this reason, the Lithuanian President made greater efforts than other heads of state to ensure regular supplies of weapons to Ukraine. From December 2014 to February 2016, the Minister for Economic Development and Trade in Kyiv was the Lithuanian Aivaras Abromavičius, an investment banker. The Lithuanian special envoy Gvidas Kerušauskas was deployed as an external advisor to the government in Kyiv. Many Lithuanians considered the war in eastern Ukraine an existential matter. Specific historical perceptions turned out to be significant.²⁴ In Lithuania, media reporting of fighting in Ukraine triggered many people's private memories of the repercussions of 1940 and 1944, when Soviet rule was established in Lithuania.²⁵

Changing Public Debates and the Transformation of Memory Politics

Although fundamental parts of the conditions attached to the Minsk Protocol were not implemented, the actual war slipped increasingly into the background. However, the impact of the ongoing armed conflict permeated public debate – not only political debate but also in particular historical debate. Very different discussions were overshadowed by the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. It was a double-sided sword. It was the self-protective response of Lithuanian society to close discursive ranks when faced by a symbolic and real threat and to reject criticism even more vehemently, whether from within or without.²⁶

²⁴ Herfried Münkler, *Kriegssplitter: Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2015), 264ff.

²⁵ 'Lietuviai užsienyje minės Baltijos kelio ir Molotovo-Ribentropo pakto metines', *Alkas*, 22 August 2015, available at <http://alkas.lt/2015/08/22/lietuviai-uzsienyje-mines-baltijos-kelio-ir-molotovo-ribentropo-pakto-metines/>; 'Šalies vadovai sveikina Baltijos kelio metinių progą', *Vakarų ekspresas*, 23 August 2015, available at <http://www.ve.lt/naujienos/lietuva/lietuvos-naujienos/salies-vadovai-sveikina-baltijos-kelio-metiniu-proga-1391031/> (both last visited 24 April 2019).

²⁶ Christophe, *Staat versus Identität* (see note 3).

However, as a result of Russia's ongoing campaigns of disinformation accompanying the war there is no longer any public debate in Lithuania which does not make reference to Russian intervention.

'Conspiracy theory' thinking, prevalent both in Russian and Ukrainian society, also flourishes in those countries which are directly targeted by Russian media outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, but also by less prominent newspapers and magazines supported directly or indirectly by the Russian state. Several public debates in Lithuania followed similar patterns to the German 'Lisa case', when members of the Russian-speaking community were mobilized against the German central government in order to spread fear – in that instance fear of immigrants.²⁷ The objective and techniques tested earlier in Ukraine turned out to be effective in Latvia or Estonia as well, where the proportion of Russian-speaking inhabitants is considerably larger than in Lithuania. The everyday use of cases such as 'Lisa' proved that in an environment of conspiracy theory thinking it is increasingly difficult to negotiate truths in public.

The aim of the media front in a hybrid war is to disseminate fictitious versions of an event in order to relativize other interpretations of it.²⁸ As a consequence, it has been more difficult for politicians and the public in Western Europe to recognize media mechanisms of hybrid war as carried out in the Baltics. Counter to this development, reference to indirect interference by Russia is used in Lithuania as an instrument of last resort in domestic political discussions.

Allusion to the invisible hand of the Kremlin was used in 2015 as an argument against perceived price increases after the introduction of the Euro, as if the 'Euro price rise debate' in the media was actually about a Russian conspiracy.²⁹ Even the Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius did not flinch from disseminating conspiracy theories, when during a teachers' strike in February 2016 he referred to alleged Russian

²⁷ The temporary disappearance of a young woman was used to spread rumours about an allegedly migrant background of the perpetrator, see Alice Bota, 'Das missbrauchte Mädchen', *Zeit Online*, 21 January 2016, available at <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-01/russland-propaganda-entfuhrung-maedchen-berlin> (last visited 24 April 2019).

²⁸ Felix Ackermann, 'Konkurrenz der Leidensgeschichten', *FAZ*, 23 March 2016, 10.

²⁹ Like a distorting mirror the Russian language weekly newspaper *Litovskii Kur'er*, which is financially supported by the Russian and Belarusian embassies in Vil'nius, reports on price rises and Lithuanian conspiracy theories. Mikhail Kisel'ev, 'Raptory i kapusta', *Litovskii Kur'er*, 5 May 2016, 1106, 18 (2016): 5.

support for trade unions.³⁰ In turn, critics of Butkevičius' government argued that fear of Russia was being fomented to distract from social problems in Lithuania, as well as from controversial political decisions such as the liberalization of Lithuanian employment legislation.³¹

Another example of the war waged in the media is the metamorphosis of Lithuanian-Swedish filmmaker Jonas Ohman from public historian into paramilitary aid worker and national hero on the front in the Donbas. The director and activist, who has lived in Lithuania since the early 1990s, was initially involved in the Lithuanian environmental movement. This stoked his enthusiasm for the Lithuanian nation and familiarized him with nationalism as an emancipatory idea, which was still compelling at the end of the 20th century.³² In his documentary film *The Invisible Front*, Jonas Ohman projected this view onto a narrative about Lithuanian partisans who were still living and hiding in the forests of Lithuania and resisting the Sovietization of the country long after the end of the Second World War and even into the 1950s.³³ This film, which premiered in November 2014 during the war in eastern Ukraine, became a box-office hit in Lithuania.

Jonas Ohman took the film on tour to several Ukrainian cities to provide 'historical-political' support to the population. After the screenings in Ukrainian cinemas he began to organize aid transport in Lithuania for Ukrainian paramilitary troops.³⁴ He was not troubled by the involvement of right-wing extremist organizations like *Pravyi Sektor*, because he believed his work as a historian put him on the side of the good guys. Ohman collected donations in Lithuania to provide equipment for Ukrai-

³⁰ 'A. Butkevičius mokytojų streike įžvelgia Rusijos paramą', *Alkas*, 23 February 2016, available at <http://alkas.lt/2016/02/23/a-butkevicius-mokytoju-streike-izvelgia-rusijos-parama/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

³¹ Dmitrii Zacharov, 'Nastoiashchikh buŋnych malo...', *Obzor* 1008, 18 (2016): 1.

³² Jonas Ohman, 'Lithuania's Historical Fate Could Have Been Different', *Lithuania Tribune*, 8 January 2014, available at www.lithuaniatribune.com/60500/jonas-ohman-lithuanias-historical-fate-could-have-been-different-201460500/ (last visited 24 April 2019, no longer available).

³³ *The Invisible Front*, directed by Jonas Ohman, 76 min. (Lithuania et al.: Aspectus Memoria, 2014), see full title information available at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2073679/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

³⁴ 'Filmo "Nematomas frontas" kūrėjas dabar pats yra nematomo fronto karys Ukrainoje', *LRT Televizija*, 10 March 2015, available at <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/kultura/12/95353/filmo-nematomas-frontas-kurejas-dabar-pats-yra-nematomo-fronto-karys-ukrainoje> (last visited 24 April 2019).

nian volunteer groups in the conflict zone and transported them to the front or, after the Minsk Agreement, to the demarcation line. In Lithuania, this earned him the status of national hero.³⁵

Having researched national, regional, and urban remembrance practices, from 2014 the historian Alvydas Nikžentaitis turned his academic attention to the symbolic creation of the entity of the former territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.³⁶ With funding from the Lithuanian and Polish governments he set up the Giedroyc Forum, which aims to improve relations between Lithuania and Poland. After the annexation of Crimea, Nikžentaitis broadened his focus to investigate the discursive creation of a phantom Grand Duchy which he calls the “ULB area”: Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus. In an interview with *Delfi* the historian argues:

“We can’t say that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a purely Lithuanian state. It was just as much a Belarusian and Ukrainian state. It’s our shared cultural heritage, which we can use as a powerful tool both in foreign policy and for integration within Lithuania itself.”³⁷

One of the basic assumptions of the Giedroyc Forum is revealed by the journalist Vytautas Bruveris, who accompanied Nikžentaitis to Ukraine. When he returned to Vilnius he published a report in the newspaper *Lietuvos Rytas*:

“Ukrainians need Lithuanian and Polish support primarily in the areas of economics, politics, and the military. Ukrainians equally need collaborations with intellectuals and those involved in the cultural sector in the EU and Western civilization, because it is a question not only of an economic and material space, but also of a cultural and intellectual one.”³⁸

³⁵ Jonas Ohman, ‘By Helping Ukraine, Lithuania Helps Itself’, *Delfi*, 28 August 2014, available at www.delfi.lt/video/laidos/zinios-anglu-kalba/jonas-ohman-by-helping-ukraine-lithuania-helps-itself.d?id=65694460 (last visited 24 April 2019).

³⁶ Alvydas Nikžentaitis and Michal Kopczynski, *Atminties kultūrų dialogai Ukrainos, Lietuvos, Baltarusijos (ULB) erdveje* (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2015).

³⁷ ‘A. Nikžentaitis: ir vis dėlto mums LDK reikia’, *Delfi*, 18 May 2015, available at <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/a-nikzentaitis-ir-vis-delto-mums-ldk-reikia.d?id=67975538> (last visited 24 April 2019).

³⁸ Vytautas Bruveris, ‘Ukrainos bilietas – tik į Europą, bet kaina vis auga’, *Lrytas*, 21 December 2015, available at <http://pasaulis.lrytas.lt/rytai-vakarai/ukrainos-bilietas-tik-i-europa-bet-kaina-vis-auga-20151202120013.htm> (last visited 24 April 2019).

So the Forum contributes to a common understanding of their shared history. Bruveris believes that the discussion generated helps to counter Russia's hybrid war. Adam Michnik, the publisher of the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, who also participated in the Giedroyc Forum in Kyiv, summarized his viewpoint as follows: "Sooner or later Ukraine will move closer to Europe. At present Russia is doing all it can to halt the course of history, but Ukraine is the key to Russia. For Ukraine to be successful, it means the end of dictatorship in Russia."³⁹

Totalitarianism and the Ideology of the Double Genocide

The high level of attention focused on the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia's aggressive foreign policy boost totalitarianism theory in Lithuania and the idea of a double genocide as the basis of state ideology.⁴⁰ Many Lithuanians believe that the historical conflation of 'the Soviet' and 'the Russian' creates a continuity between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and present-day Russia in the threat they feel. Consequently, the occupation of large parts of Central Europe in the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet deportations of 1941 are perceived by many Lithuanians even today as Russian rather than Soviet crimes. In state museums they are presented as an element of Soviet totalitarianism which is symbolically equated with the consequences of the Nazi occupation of Lithuania. Meanwhile the real war in Ukraine exacerbates the imbalance between the two dictatorships in Lithuanian debate. While the last remaining publicly exhibited Soviet sculptures from the Stalinist period were removed from Green Bridge in Vilnius, plaques commemorating those who collaborated with the German occupiers remain.

As a reaction to the escalation of the Euromaidan, in March 2014 the view of the Soviet statues in the centre of Vilnius was literally blocked with large NATO flags. The highest authority for the preservation of monuments then came under pressure. Those who had suffered persecu-

³⁹ Vytutas Bruveris, 'Ukrainos bilietas – tik į Europą, bet kaina vis auga', *Lrytas*, 21 December 2015, available at <http://pasaulis.lrytas.lt/rytai-vakarai/ukrainos-bilietas-tik-i-europa-bet-kaina-vis-auga-20151202120013.htm> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁴⁰ Joanna Beata Michlic, 'Bringing the Dark to Light: Memory and Holocaust in Post-communist Europe', in *Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives*, eds. Małgorzata Pakier and Joanna Wawrzyniak (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 121.

tion in the Soviet Union and their families fought hard for the conservation status of these relics of Stalinism to be withdrawn so that they could be removed from public view. The monument conservationists (most of them rather conservative Lithuanian historians and art historians) argued that the statues were one of the last remaining public testaments to that period and that they should be kept as a cautionary reminder. In an internal battle over the legal status of the sculptures, they voted in June 2015 against the withdrawal of conservation status.⁴¹ The minister responsible then disbanded the commission and reappointed its membership in 2015 after checking the loyalty of individual members over the phone.⁴²

In summer 2015, the newly elected mayor of Vilnius, Remigijus Šimašius, tried to cool down the heated public debate by having the sculptures removed for restoration work. In the meantime, the new commission for the preservation of monuments withdrew the conservation status from the statues. The irony of the story is that these sculptures had been designed and made by Lithuanian architects and sculptors and depicted Lithuanian figures: farmers, builders, students, and soldiers who were meant to symbolize the new Soviet beginning in Vilnius and Lithuania.⁴³ In the shadow of the war in Ukraine, dominant figures in Lithuanian public debate had secured the removal of sculptures which testified to the close connection between the demographic Lithuanianization and the Sovietization of Vilnius.⁴⁴

A parallel to this can be seen in the Lithuanian discussion of the ‘Forest Brothers’, depicted as heroes in the film *The Invisible Front* directed by

⁴¹ Liepa Želnienė, ‘Seimas atleido ir vėl priėmė Gražiną Drėmaitę: gėles leido pasilikti’, *Penkiolika minučių*, 30 June 2015, available at www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/seimas-atleido-ir-vel-prieme-grazina-dremaite-geles-leido-pasilikti-56-512930; ‘Punkt Widzenia: Czy trzeba zachować sowieckie dziedzictwo Wilna?’, *ZW*, 17 November 2015, available at <http://zw.lt/wilno-wilenszczyzna/punkt-widzenia-czy-trzeba-zachowac-sowieckie-dziedzictwo-wilna> (both last visited 24 April 2019).

⁴² The longstanding head of Gražina Drėmaitė was replaced in December 2015 by Evelina Karalevičienė, see ‘Seimas paskyrė E. Karalevičienę Valstybinės kultūros paveldo komisijos pirmininke’, *Penkiolika minučių*, 23 December 2015, available at www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/seimas-paskyre-e-karaleviciene-valstybines-kulturos-paveldo-komisijos-pirmininke-56-559197 (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁴³ Rasa Čepaitienė, ‘Tarybinės sostinės konstravimas J. Stalino epochoje: Minsko ir Vilniaus atvejai’, in *Nuo Basanavičiaus, Vytauto Didžiojo iki Molotovo ir Ribbentropo: atmintis ir atminimo kultūrų transformacijos XX–XXI a.*, ed. Alvydas Nikžentaitis (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2011), 171–224.

⁴⁴ Theodore Weeks, ‘Remembering and Forgetting: Creating a Soviet Lithuanian Capital. Vilnius 1944–49’, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, 4 (2008): 517–33.

the new Lithuanian hero Jonas Ohman. In the period after 1944, they were depicted in the Lithuanian public sphere exclusively as heroes, although Lithuanian historians point out that their relations with villagers living near their forest hideouts were highly ambivalent. One specific problem with the representation of the 'Forest Brothers' as heroes concerns those cases where paramilitary fighters actively participated in the slaughter of Lithuanian Jews in the summer and autumn of 1941. There are several such cases where individuals are publicly considered 'Forest Brothers' even though they had actively participated in or helped prepare for the murders of former Lithuanian co-citizens – just because they were Jews.⁴⁵

The most prominent example is Jonas Noreika, who is commemorated as a resistance fighter on a plaque on the wall of the Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, not far from Green Bridge. In the summer of 1941, he co-organized the murder of the Jews of Žagarė. Under German rule, he actively participated in administrative preparations for the ghettoization of the Jewish community.⁴⁶ The historical fact that the murder of Lithuanian Jews was a German state crime organized by the SS and the Gestapo does not change the historical fact that not only Jonas Noreika but also other later 'Forest Brothers' helped the German occupying forces to carry out the murders. Lithuanian intellectuals like the poet Sergei Kanovič have called for a critical approach to Noreika and the removal of the commemorative plaque.⁴⁷ Numerous publications about Noreika and similar cases online have aroused heated debate. Essentially it centres on the question of whether Lithuanian society has a moral obligation to examine critically the short period of cooperation by their former elites with Nazi Germany in summer 1941, even in the shadow of the subsequent Soviet invasion of Lithuania in summer 1944.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ellen Cassedy, *We are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 81ff.

⁴⁶ Boleslovas Baranauskas et al., eds., *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje 1941–1944: Dokumentų rinkinys. 2 dalis*, vol. 1 (Vilnius: Leidykla "Mintis", 1973), 225–31.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, vol. 1, *Early Camps, Youth Camps, and Concentration Camps and Subcamps under the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 1154.

⁴⁸ As in Poland, these debates are often about the relationship of members of the titular nation to Jews in the interwar period and about radicalization prior to the outbreak of violence in the course of the Soviet and German occupations. In Lithuania, the collaboration of Jews with the Soviet authorities is still used to explain anti-Jewish violence, see

As in other cases, public discussion always follows the friend / enemy model, whereby calls for a reassessment of the 'Forest Brothers' are seen as enemy attacks.⁴⁹ In the eyes of many members of the current conservative Lithuanian elite, this legitimizes the possibility of letting the problem blow over and not publicly acknowledging these demands for reassessment. In this sense, what is specific to Lithuanian public debate is the presentation of controversial subjects, also regarding the collaboration of Lithuanian elites with occupying forces, but always involving a historical reference to foreign forces or a current threat to Lithuanian statehood. A specificity of the Lithuanian debate is that there is actually no strict taboo in the discussion: there is public debate over these problematic issues and various points of view reverberate in the public arena. But there are certain limitations, usually involving a reference to the ongoing hybrid war. For example, open criticism of the idea of a double Genocide as formulated by the Central Museum in Vilnius in its depiction of the atrocities of both the German and the Soviet regimes of occupation is presented as potentially part of a Russian conspiracy.

This approach has allowed the Academy of Sciences to retain the plaque to Jonas Noreika despite the public outcry and without any reference to his involvement in the genocide.⁵⁰ Indeed the double occupation of Lithuania could be located biographically in the life story of Noreika. After his initial collaboration with the Nazi authorities, in 1943 Noreika was taken to the concentration camp at Stutthof along with other activists.⁵¹ When the camp was liberated by the Red Army, Noreika returned to Vilnius, where he worked from 1945 in the legal department of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences. In November 1946, the MGB secret service discovered the secret organization known as the Lithuanian Peo-

Alfonsas Eidintas, 'Das Stereotyp des "jüdischen Kommunisten" in Litauen 1940–41', in *Holocaust in Litauen: Krieg, Judenmorde und Kollaboration im Jahre 1941*, eds. Vincas Bartusevičius, Joachim Tauber, and Wolfram Wette (Köln: Böhlau, 2003), 13–25.

⁴⁹ In some cases there appears to be a direct link between the theology of Carl Schmitt and the legitimization of the 'Forest Brothers' as in the case of the conservative historian Bernardas Gailius, see Bernardas Gailius, 'Partizanų diktatūra', *Politologija* 62, 2 (2011): 74–93; Laurynas Peluritis, 'Ilgai (ne)lauktas priešas?', *Knygų Aidai*, 1 (2015): 5–10; Linas Jokubaitis, 'Carl Schmitt and the Future of Europe', *Telescope*, 18 February 2014, available at <http://www.telospress.com/carl-schmitt-and-the-future-of-europe/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁵⁰ Ackermann, *Konkurrenz* (see note 28).

⁵¹ *Pragaro vartai – Štuthofas* (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 1998), 223.

ple's Council (*Lietuvos Tautinė Taryba*), of which Noreika was a founder. It had been established to unite various underground organizations. Noreika and other members of the People's Council were hanged in Vilnius in 1947.⁵²

Holocaust Debates as Part of Hybrid Warfare?

The Noreika case may well serve to illustrate why arguments about the interpretation of history became part of a larger environment of hybrid warfare. The case of the public commemoration of a perpetrator who had served under German rule before turning against both German and Soviet forces has been covered by Russian state media on several occasions.⁵³ It has been used within a broader discursive frame depicting all the paramilitary units active in the western borderlands during the period of post-war Sovietization as bandits and proto-fascist activists and collaborators. The discursive setting replicates the equation of Ukrainian claims for sovereignty in a direct continuum with the image of the so-called *Banderivtsi* promoted intensively by Russian media outlets in their coverage of the Euromaidan in 2014.

As with the coverage of issues in Ukraine there are hints in relation to Lithuania that the simplistic equation of paramilitary violence and collaboration with Nazi Germany is not just a distant echo of Soviet post-war propaganda but part of a larger information campaign targeted not only at Russian citizens, but far beyond the Russian Federation.⁵⁴ Military analysts have interpreted similar narrative structures and their diffusion into media outlets within the European Union as a direct threat to the defence capacity of NATO. The response prepared by the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence is no less simplistic than Russian propaganda. A text

⁵² 'Jonas Noreika', in *Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija*, vol. XVI, *Naha-Omuta*, eds. J. Tumelis et al., (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2009), 494. See also: 'Jonas Noreika', available at https://lt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonas_Noreika (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁵³ 'V Litve pozhalovalis' na telekanal "Rossiia 24" iz-za "Lesnykh Brat'ev", *Sputnik International*, 15 January 2019, available at <https://lt.sputniknews.ru/politics/20190115/8078889/V-Lithuania-pozhalovalis-na-telekanal-Rossiia-24-iz-za-lesnykh-bratev.html> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁵⁴ See various nuanced accounts in the first issue of the *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* and the introduction by Julie Fedor, 'Introduction: Russian Media and the War in Ukraine', in *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 1 (2015): 1–11.

published in October 2018 at *Delfi* explains allegedly why the Kremlin is interested in using the history of the ‘Forest Brothers’ as an instrument of propagandistic manipulation. The author Auksė Ūsienė, senior specialist at the Strategic Communication Department of the Lithuanian armed forces, argues that a core aim of these Russian interpretations of history is to whitewash the history of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania itself. But in her response, she herself uses a simplistic and false notion of history arguing that

“in Lithuania, just as in other European countries, the Holocaust was planned and organized by the Nazi regime. Some Lithuanian residents assisted the Nazis in their effort to eradicate Jewish residents, but they were not partisans – these genocidal campaigns took place under Nazi occupation and not during the guerrilla war against Soviet occupying forces.”⁵⁵

The argument is put in such a way as to create in itself a false picture of the past. Firstly, in Lithuania it was not just a few helpers who assisted the Nazis, but thousands.⁵⁶ Secondly, the argument that ‘Forest Brothers’ did not kill Jews in the aftermath of WWII is cynical because about 90% of all Lithuanian citizens of Jewish background had already been killed by the end of the period of German occupation. Thirdly, the formulation does not make clear that among the ‘Forest Brothers’ were those who collaborated at the beginning of the German attack on the Soviet Union with the Nazi German occupiers. Fourthly, the argument omits the information that among these Lithuanian helpers were representatives of the pre-war Lithuanian state including former policemen, soldiers, and bureaucrats.

This selective use of history by an institution of the Lithuanian state, in contradiction with recent historical research both in Lithuania and abroad, seems to be seen as legitimized by the ongoing hybrid war. But in fact it clearly forms part of the war because it follows the same criteria as Russian disinformation campaigns: selective use of sources, biased interpretation of historical events, and extreme simplification.

The emergence of media activity as part of wider conflicts does not mean that public debate is no longer possible. But the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine did change the way in which public debate was

⁵⁵ Auksė Ūsienė, ‘Lithuanian Freedom Fighters in Russian Propaganda: Why Does the Kremlin Care?’, *Delfi*, 25 October 2018, available at <https://en.delfi.lt/cyber-security/lithuanian-freedom-fighters-in-russian-propaganda-why-does-the-kremlin-care.d?id=79412987> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁵⁶ Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011), 1528–153.

carried out. The best proof of a quite nuanced, lively, and at the same time very polarized discussion came in the form of public reaction to the book *Our People* by the Lithuanian journalist Rūta Vanagaitė. It had been published in Lithuania already in 2016 and was co-authored by the head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Jerusalem, Efraim Zuroff.⁵⁷ Since the 1990s, there have been important debates about the involvement of Lithuanians in the genocide. Academics have researched and documented the subject widely.⁵⁸ Vanagaitė's book made the direct and indirect involvement of Lithuanians in the murder of almost 200,000 people the subject of bitter public debate once more.⁵⁹

In detail and illustrated with the few remaining historical photos, the author describes how in summer 1941, after the end of Soviet occupation, hundreds of Lithuanian volunteers were prepared to round up, torture, and shoot Jews under German supervision. She describes how local inhabitants not only sold the clothes of the victims, but also took over their homes and furniture. In the book Rūta Vanagaitė and Efraim Zuroff describe their travels through 13 Lithuanian shtetls and explore the events of the first weeks after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Vanagaitė interviews people who remember the events of summer 1941 when the first mass shootings of men and women, children and the elderly took place on the outskirts of these villages.

The book reveals in a non-academic manner that in many villages local knowledge still exists about who was involved and what happened to the possessions of the Jews who were shot. Unlike most historians and history educators before her, Vanagaitė presented the material in a way which aroused very emotional reactions from large sections of the Lithuanian public.⁶⁰ Her approach is revealed most clearly by her use of historical photos showing the corpses of Jewish victims. Vanagaitė uses the photos without considering the context in which they were taken, or

⁵⁷ Rūta Vanagaitė, *Mūsų šaliai* (Vilnius: Alma Littera, 2016).

⁵⁸ Liudas Truska, 'Litauische Historiographie über den Holocaust in Litauen', in *Holocaust in Litauen* (see note 48), 262–76.

⁵⁹ Klaus Richter, 'Der Holocaust in der litauischen Historiographie nach 1991', *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 56, 3 (2008): 389–416; Dieckmann, *Besatzungspolitik* (see note 56).

⁶⁰ For a broader contextualization and analysis of the conflict, see Ekaterina Makhovina, 'We, They and Ours: On the Holocaust Debate in Lithuania', *Cultures of History Forum*, 27 September 2016, available at <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/lithuania/we-they-and-ours-on-the-holocaust-debate-in-lithuania/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

whether they are a necessary addition to the textual content. Readers are not made aware that a picture was taken in a different location or cannot be precisely attributed. Critics argued that the use of photos and the book's graphic design revealed an author more interested in stirring up controversy to increase sales than in advancing public debate.⁶¹

Nevertheless, there is consensus that the book has brought more attention to the subject than any other in recent years. This is a result not only of professional public relations around its publication. The dynamic of Russia's current hybrid war is also relevant in explaining this particular case. One of the strongest arguments made by the book's opponents is that it was promoted indirectly by Russia. Those critiques claimed that Efraim Zuroff received money from Russia in order to carry out 'black PR'. They argued that by supporting his activities as Russia's principle Nazi-hunter, the aim was publicly to discredit opponents in East Central and Eastern Europe and to mark them out as "fascist perpetrators" – just as Russian state media had managed to stigmatize Ukrainians as "Bandera supporters" far beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union.⁶²

This unsubstantiated allegation, part of a larger conspiracy theory complex, is typical of hybrid war. It shows that this war is not a one-sided battle over the meaning of history, but rather an interaction in which Lithuanian intellectuals also participate. The situation created by the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine is specific because it leaves little room for manoeuvre – public statements such as those in Vanagaitė's book are perceived per se as statements *vis à vis* a perceived Russian threat. After the publication of the book, there soon appeared online the first Russian language articles reporting on Lithuania in a way which recalled the calculated shift in the depiction of Ukraine towards that of proto-fascist rule. Rūta Vanagaitė refused to give interviews to Russian journalists and declared publicly that she had written the book for Lithuanian society.⁶³

⁶¹ Arūnas Brazauskas, '“Mūsiškiai” ir trolė Rūta Vanagaitė', *Delfi*, 16 January 2016, available at www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/musiskiai-ir-trole-ruta-vanagaite.d?id=70412692 (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁶² Nerijus Šepetys: '“Buti žydu” Lietuvoje: Šoa atminimo stiprinimas, pilietinio sąmoningumo ugdymas, o gal... naudingų idiotų šou?', *Penkiolika minučių*, 30 May 2015, available at <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/istorija/buti-zydu-lietuvoje-soa-atminimo-stiprinimas-pilietinio-samoningumo-ugdymas-o-gal-naudingu-idiotu-sou-582-506253> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁶³ Valerij Mokrushin, 'Kto ubival evreev v stranach Baltii?', *Nakanune.ru*, 29 January 2016, available at <http://www.nakanune.ru/articles/111348/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

For the Russian translation she asked the Belarusian Nobel prize-winner Svetlana Aleksievich to write an introduction to make sure that she would not be accused of supporting Russian propaganda efforts.⁶⁴ Nevertheless she was publicly accused of being a Russian agent. She spoke of a rift in her own family and said that some family members felt personally under attack.

Despite these experiences, Rūta Vanagaitė was invited to give readings in different towns all over Lithuania. Even in the shadow of the war in Ukraine, public discussion thrives in Lithuania today. There are MA theses being written on the Soviet post-war trials against Lithuanians. Sergei Kanovič and Milda Jakulytė, the author of a Holocaust atlas published by the State Jewish Museum, are currently building a memorial for the former Jewish community of Šeduva.⁶⁵ The foundation stone for the project was laid by Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius in a public ceremony. Milda Jakulytė is also writing a PhD on Lithuanian Holocaust memories in Amsterdam. Her colleague Violeta Davoliūtė has recently carried out research as part of a project funded by the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences about the memories of Lithuanian Jewish victims of Soviet deportation in 1941, adding to the discussion another perspective on the non-Catholic Lithuanian victims of Soviet occupation and their survival under Soviet rule.⁶⁶

It is striking that most of these initiatives emerge from the capital and from Kaunas and are taken from there into other regions. Similarly, initiatives in state institutions involving the revision of the difficult Jewish Lithuanian past are either carried out by the institutions themselves or by remembrance professionals, such as academics, museum staff, and history

⁶⁴ Mindaugas Jackevičus, 'Po R. Vanagaitės knygos – puolimas iš Rusijos', *Delfi*, 28 January 2016, available at www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/po-r-vanagaites-knygos-puolimas-is-rusijos.d?id=70244218; idem, 'Vanagaitė atveitila rossijskim SMI: Ja napisala etu knigu dlia Litvy', *Delfi*, 28 January 2016, available at <http://ru.delfi.lt/news/live/vanagajte-atvetila-rossijskim-smi-ya-napisala-etu-knigu-dlya-litvy.d?id=70245622> (both last visited 24 April 2019).

⁶⁵ *Holocaust Atlas of Lithuania*, available at <http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁶⁶ The necessity of investigating this aspect was demonstrated by Davoliūtė and Balkelis in earlier work. See Violeta Davoliūtė and Tomas Balkelis, eds., *Maps of Memory: Trauma, Identity and Exile in Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2012); Violeta Davoliūtė, 'Deportee Memoirs and Lithuanian History: The Double Testimony of Dalia Grinkevičiūtė', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 36, 1 (2005): 51–68.

educators supported by public funds.⁶⁷ In Žagarė in northern Lithuania, there are signs of grassroots initiatives, independent of the initiatives coming from the centre. These examples show that it is wrong to claim that the book *Our People* has not significantly changed this process or that hybrid war has made public debate completely impossible. It has on the contrary greatly increased public interest in this subject and broadened the spectrum of people involved in the discussion. How this discussion influences future commemorative practices will become clear in due course.

In 2017, a new public debate involving Rūta Vanagaitė arose.⁶⁸ It followed a different line of argument after the author openly criticized the decision by the Lithuanian parliament to commemorate in 2018 the organizer of the post-war resistance movement, Adolfas Ramanauskas alias Vanagas.⁶⁹ Pointing to existing archival documents, but without carrying out either in-depth research or analysis, Vanagaitė pointed to a supposed collaboration between Vanagas and the KGB. This was a bold statement, as Vanagas after his capture in 1956 had been systematically tortured and ultimately killed in 1957. Vanagaitė's analysis of Soviet protocols did not take into account the violent character of the interrogation and suggested that Vanagas may have actually been a traitor and a collaborator. Most commentators agreed that Vanagaitė was using these public allegations to promote an upcoming book and criticized her for her lack of respect in relation to the Ramanauskas legacy. But as Vanagaitė's critique was perceived as more problematic than in the case of *Our People* the general reaction was even harsher.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The homepage of the Tolerance Centre gives examples in its exhibition about deportations. Also, see several publications about the Holocaust in Lithuania, for example Arūnas Bubnys, *Vokiečių okupuota Lietuva, 1941–1944* (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų, genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 1998); Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews during Summer and Fall of 1941: Sources and Analysis* (Vilnius: Leidykla "Margi raštai", 2006).

⁶⁸ For a contextualizing overview see Violeta Davoliūtė, 'Between the Public and the Personal: A New Stage of Holocaust Memory in Lithuania', *Cultures of History Forum*, 19 December 2018, available at <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/lithuania/between-the-public-and-the-personal-a-new-stage-of-holocaust-memory-in-lithuania/> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁶⁹ Arvydas Anušauskas, *Aš esu Vanagas* (Vilnius: Dominicus Lituanos, 2018), available at https://issuu.com/dominicuslimuanos/docs/as_esu_vanagas (last visited 27 July 2019).

⁷⁰ Ekaterina Makhotina, 'Eure Helden, unsere Täter: Die litauische Holocaust Debatte ist auf's Neue entflammt', *Erinnerungskulturen. Erinnerung und Geschichtspolitik im östli-*

After a very short period of fierce public criticism the publishing house Alma Littera withdraw all the books of this bestselling author, including *Our People*, from the market, effectively banning the sale of books by Vanagaitė in Lithuania and beyond. The author suggested that all printed copies of her books might even be publicly destroyed. Regardless of this fast and comprehensive reaction on the part of the publishing house, the public witch-hunt continued, fuelled by harsh and very personal criticism.

It was characteristic of the prevailing discursive climate that the former leader of *Sąjūdis* and first elected president, Vytautas Landsbergis, attacked Vanagaitė in an article for the largest internet resource, *Delfi*, suggesting that she “go to the forest and judge for herself”.⁷¹ By referring to her as “Mrs Dušanskienė” he symbolically closed a discursive circle. Nacham Dušanskis had been an active member of the Soviet security service and had been personally involved in the post-war persecution of several members of the Lithuanian resistance movement.

On the one hand, Landsbergis had referred to the well-known fact that Dušanskis had personally interrogated Adolfas Ramanauskas, thereby implying a comparison between Vanagaitė’s allegations and Soviet crimes against Lithuania. On the other hand, the direct reference to Dušanskis is a link to a dominant discourse about Jewish–Bolshevik cooperation in the conquest of Lithuania.⁷² Since the Jewish roots of Dušanskis–Dushanski are well-known, Landsbergis was effectively linking Vanagaitė’s critique of Ramanauskas with her book *Our People* and her collaboration with Zuroff.

As an elder statesman Landsbergis was consciously setting the public tone about how to treat those who behaved like Dušanskis in relation to the national Lithuanian cause. In doing so, he reinforced anti-Jewish sentiment in an area of public discourse where it had seemingly been formally eliminated years ago. As a result of this heated debate, Vanagaitė came under verbal attack in her everyday life in Vilnius. People started openly to call her *žydmergaitė* (Lithuanian for Jewish girl) in the street.

chen und südöstlichen Europa, 24 August 2019, available at <https://erinnerung.hypotheses.org/1617> (last visited 24 March 2020).

⁷¹ Vytautas Landsbergis, ‘Dušanskienė’, *Delfi*, 27 October 2017, available at <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/politics/v-landsbergis-dusanskiene.d?id=76184081> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁷² Felix Ackermann, ‘Hätten Sie kollaboriert? Litauische Bestsellerautorin Vanagaite angegriffen’, *FAZ*, 21 November 2017, 14.

Feeling unsafe, Vanagaitė left for Israel.⁷³ Since Dušanskis had also left for Israel after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Landsbergis seemed by implication to have made a direct comparison between him and Vanagaitė, with the result that some Lithuanians now see her as a traitor.

In the ensuing public debate the US-based Lithuanian poet and public intellectual Tomas Venclova called for calm and pointed out similarities with the vindictiveness which characterized those earlier Soviet campaigns.⁷⁴ The German historian Christoph Dieckmann, the author of a two-volume history of the German occupation of Lithuania, called in an open letter via *Delfi* for the crucial difference between research and public memory to be upheld:

“Bans and demonization will not advance our position: only a civilized open discourse can achieve this for us.”⁷⁵

The Vilnius-based historian Alvydas Nikžentaitis reacted, warning Dieckmann against publicly disputing a national myth without providing clear evidence. He also criticized the patronizing tone of Dieckmann’s letter and reminded Lithuanian readers that German public discourse was not always calm and concise, as in the debate surrounding Goldhagen’s book. In a later iteration of this critique, co-authored with Joachim Tauber, Nikžentaitis repeated that every nation needed a certain number of myths in order to function with sufficient stability.⁷⁶

Even after a public apology, Vanagaitė’s books continued to be banned from public sale by her publishing house, preventing the author from making a living in Lithuania. Thus, the many who claim publicly that the author tends to use scandals to promote herself and her books turn out to

⁷³ Interview with Rūta Vanagaitė via telephone, 14 November 2017.

⁷⁴ ‘Tomas Venclova: R. Vanagaitės pjudydas labai primena sovietinius laikus’, *Delfi*, 29 October 2017, available at <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/t-venclova-r-vanagaite-pjudydas-labai-primena-sovietinius-laikus.d?id=76193551> (last visited 24 April 2019).

⁷⁵ Mindaugas Jackevičius, ‘Christoph Dieckmann: Vokiečių istorikas įvertino R. Vanagaitės pareiškimus: yra tik vienas kelias pirmyn’, *Delfi*, 30 October 2017, available at <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/vokieciu-istorikas-ivertino-r-vanagaite-pareiškimus-yra-tik-vienas-kelias-pirmyn.d?id=76199271>; Alvydas Nikžentaitis, ‘Tautinis mitas tai ne paprasta istorija: atviras laiškas vokiečių istorikui’, *Delfi*, 31 October 2017, available at <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/a-nikzentaitis-tautinis-mitas-tai-ne-paprasta-istorija-atviras-laiskas-vokieciu-istorikui.d?id=76220619> (both last visited 24 April 2019).

⁷⁶ Alvydas Nikžentaitis and Joachim Tauber, ‘Aufruhr um einen Partisanen: Eine litauische Erinnerungsdebatte’, *Osteuropa* 68, 6 (2018): 83–90.

be wrong. At the same time, following a private allegation of slander, the state prosecutor did not open a case against her. After some months it became clear that the publishing house Alma Littera would hand over printed copies of her books and allow for their privately-organized sale.⁷⁷

The tone in which Vanagaitė's most recent scandal was framed demonstrates that the memory of post-war paramilitary forces is seen as a source of the legitimacy of Lithuanian national statehood and as mobilizing force in Lithuanian defence strategy in the early 21st century. The debate illustrates how history and the public interpretation of it began to be used as a weapon and a mobilizing resource in an ongoing hybrid war. It is the context of the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine and a growing perception of Russian interference in Lithuanian public debate which explain both the extent and the significance of the Vanagaitė case and the relevance of the 'Forest Brothers' as specific 'projection screens' for both mythmaking and myth destruction.

In this particular case historical evidence is provided by, among others, Arūnas Bubnys, referring to the Lithuanian KGB archives which do indicate that Ramanauskas was not involved in the murder of Lithuanian Jews in the summer of 1941. His non-armed collaboration with German occupying forces is presented as preserving his reputation because it did not involve the use of weapons against civilians. At the same time, the fact that Ramanauskas was involved in securing a warehouse in Druskininkai in 1941 under German supervision is not problematized, although the settlement at the time was inhabited predominantly by Poles and Jews and had been part of the Second Polish Republic until September 1939. So Ramanauskas clearly took part in the process of the forced Lithuanianization of Druskininkai which is perceived by most spa tourists today as an eternally Lithuanian place.

Although we have a broad range of texts in Lithuanian, English, and German covering collaboration with the Nazi German occupiers on the part of Lithuanian members of local police units, we are still missing a history of the forced incorporation of the Lithuanian-Polish borderlands which had been under Polish rule until WWII. A historical analysis and narrative involving both the first Soviet occupation, the subsequent German occupation, and the Soviet recapture of Lithuania as a process of

⁷⁷ Mindaugas Jackeivičius, 'R. Vanagaitė atgaus iš "Alma Littera" visas savo knygas', *LRT Televizija*, 6 April 2018, available at www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/201846/r-vanagaite-atgaus-is-alma-littera-visas-savo-knygas (last visited 24 April 2019).

active Lithuanianization is missing on a macro- and a micro-scale.⁷⁸ It is for this reason that the argument that Ramanauskas was only guarding a warehouse in the late summer of 1941 in Druskininkai is accepted widely as evidence of non-harmful collaboration with the German occupiers.

Conclusion: The Heightening and Relativization of Historical Arguments

The deliberate construction of a connection between Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania through the state-promoted remembrance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was until 2013 purely symbolic. The Euromaidan, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the war initiated by Russia in eastern Ukraine increasingly turned the notion of the shared interests of the societies living between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea into concrete media, economic, and military support in Lithuania for Ukrainian society. The increased media perception of a Russian threat reawakened historical experiences stored in the communicative memory of Lithuanian society. But it also changed the field of public discourse, which from 2014 onwards made Lithuania part of the hybrid theatre of war.

Constant references to the Russian threat which has materialized in Ukraine now make it almost impossible to create a binding social truth in a clear public process in which argument and counter-argument relate to one another. Whether work was financed directly or indirectly by Russia is not relevant. The public suspicion of such funding is enough to shift the debate, as in the case of the book *Our People*, into the discursive field of war, under the shadow of the fact of the annexation of Crimea and the specific Lithuanian perception of it as an attack on the sovereignty of a post-Soviet state.

Even without direct media intervention by Russia, the discussion in Lithuanian society of its own 20th century past is deeply disturbed. Instead of promoting a critical exploration of the ruptures in its own history, the shifting of historical debates into the field of hybrid war intensifies the following trends: politicized thinking according to the friend-or-enemy model; and the attempt to tolerate controversies without resolving them. As demonstrated by the case of the removal of the Soviet statues on

⁷⁸ Violeta Davoliūtė did formulate an argument mainly focusing on the post-war period, see Violeta Davoliūtė, *The Making and Breaking of Soviet Lithuania: Memory and Modernity in the Wake of War* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013).

Green Bridge, under these conditions it seems easier to remove a bone of contention from the public space than to engage in a public discussion about Lithuanian involvement in the Sovietization of the capital. The case of the still-debated commemorative plaque to Jonas Noreika shows that controversial perspectives on the 20th century can be represented publicly only if they appear to serve the notion of national statehood.

The war in eastern Ukraine and the strong Lithuanian positioning against Russian aggression have contributed to marginalizing the voices which criticize the use of totalitarianism theory as an ideological foundation of Lithuanian statehood. The resulting contradiction is particularly clear in the case of the book by Rūta Vanagaitė. On the one hand, it generated a broad media discussion about Lithuanian involvement in the Holocaust. But the legitimacy of the debate was also called into question by the suggestion of Russian support for the book. Therefore, one result already of the hybrid war is that positions in public debate are simultaneously heightened and relativized. Interpretations of the 20th century and in particular of German and Soviet rule in Lithuania are not the starting-point, but simply the surface onto which contemporary political discussions are projected. Although these discussions are internal Lithuanian political debates, the various forms of hybrid warfare introduced by Putin's Russia into the region are highly present in this area of the public sphere.