



NEWSLETTER

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The Public Statement of the International Commission

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE CRIMES OF THE NAZI AND SOVIET OCCUPATION REGIMES IN LITHUANIA

To Her Excellency the President of the Republic of Lithuania
Dalia Grybauskaitė

2019-04-08

To The Most Honorable Prime Minister of Lithuania
Saulius Skvernelis

PUBLIC STATEMENT ON THE PLANS OF THE LITHUANIAN GOVERNMENT TO ASSUME THE FUNCTIONS OF AND LIQUIDATE THE INDEPENDENT SECRETARIAT OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE CRIMES OF THE NAZI AND SOVIET OCCUPATION REGIMES IN LITHUANIA

We address you about the disturbing and worrying plans of the Lithuanian Government to abolish the Secretariat of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania and to transfer the functions of the said Secretariat to the Chancellery of the Lithuanian Government.

The international community sees the work of the Commission and its Secretariat as an important factor in the process of democratization and the willingness of the Republic of Lithuania to come to terms with its history, especially of the Holocaust and Soviet occupation. From its inception the Commission has helped to research and to present internationally Lithuania's historical experience. The Commission's work is important in raising awareness of, and respect for, the victims of the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes, the development of democratic norms, and a culture of dialogue and understanding.

The essential precondition for the Commission members to participate in the work of the Commission was, and still is, independence and freedom from any interference in the Commission's academic work from the Government or other political bodies, regardless of the reasons. Since the establishment of the Commission, the Government of the Republic of Lithuania has respected this principal and it was one of the major reasons for the success of the Commission and international recognition of its work. This principal of independence and non-interference was applied both to the Commission and its Secretariat.

The Commission is based on the voluntary contribution of its members who are internationally respected experts in their fields. The Commission's work could not be performed without the administration, that is, the Secretariat. Despite the fact that the level of financing of the Commission's activities is clearly inadequate for a member state of the European Union, the Secretariat managed to fulfill its main functions. We in the Commission very much appreciate the work of the Secretariat in organizing academic research and initiatives in the field of education. In this regard it is important to mention the establishment and efficient coordination of the network of Tolerance Education Centers (a positive example of such outreach), the annual teacher-training seminars with Yad Vashem, the academic conferences, and the numerous other public activities which commemorate the victims of totalitarian regimes, build support for democracy, and encourage openness and tolerance.

Taking into consideration the information outlined above, the intention of the Government to liquidate the Secretariat of the Commission and transfer its functions to the Government itself without any consultations with the Commission is extremely worrying to its leadership and members. The international community will see this as turning back from the Commission's principle of independence and unfettered research, as direct interference by the Government, and as the politicization of history. This will end the work of the Commission and this fact will be used to question all of its previous work and achievements. We fear that this will have a very negative impact on the image of Lithuania.

Previously, the concerns over the ill-advised actions of the Government have been expressed in an official letter of the Chairman of the Commission, Emanuelis Zingeris, the Chairman of the Sub-commission for Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi Occupation Regime and the Holocaust, Prof. Saulius Sužiedelis, and the Chairman of the Sub-commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Soviet Occupation Regime, Dr. Arvydas Anušauskas. The Government did not even deign to answer these concerns. We should draw attention to the fact that plans to abolish the Secretariat are negatively evaluated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, many educators, members of civil society, as well as the directors of Lithuanian schools.

If the Lithuanian Government proceeds in its plans to liquidate the Secretariat, the Commission does not see how it can function in accordance with the mandate outlined in the President's decree of 16 October 2012. We regret that we have to consider resignation but believe we must act in defense of our reputation, freedom of expression, and the principles of academic independence.

THEREFORE, WE STATE:

THE COMMISSION IN CORPORE RESIGNS IF THE LITHUANIAN GOVERNMENT
TAKES THE DECISION TO ABOLISH THE SECRETARIAT OF THE COMMISSION AND
TRANSFERS ITS FUNCTIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT'S CHANCELLERY

Emanuelis Zingeris, Chairman of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania

Prof. Saulius Sužiedėlis, Chairman of the Sub-commission for Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi Occupation Regime and the Holocaust

Dr. Arvydas Anušauskas, Chairman of the Sub-commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Soviet Occupation Regime

Members of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania:

Rabbi Andrew Baker, Director of International Jewish Affairs, American Jewish Committee, Washington, DC, USA

Dr. Jonathan Brent, Executive Director/CEO, The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, USA

Dr. Arūnas Bubnys, LGGRTC, Lithuania

Aleksandr Daniel, International Public Organization Memorial, Russia

Dr. Christoph Dieckmann, University of Bern, Switzerland.

Dr. Algirdas Jakubčionis, Vilnius University, Lithuania

Nicholas Lane, American Jewish Committee USA

Prof. Dr. Šarūnas Liekis, Vyatutas Magnus University, Lithuania

Dr. Jürgen Matthäus, Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, USA

Prof. Norman M. Naimark, Stanford University, USA

Dr. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, The Lithuanian Institute of History, Lithuania

Prof. emeritus Dr. Antony Polonsky, Brandeis university, USA

Prof. emeritus Dr. Dina Porat, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Dr. Janos M. Rainer, Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Hungary

Prof. Dr. Timothy Snyder, Yale University, USA

Prof. Dr. Joachim Tauber, Director of the North-East-Institute at the University of Hamburg, Germany

Dr. Arkadi Zeltser, Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Israel

[A Response to The Statement of The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania of 27 March 2019, “On The Accusations Against Jonas Noreika \(General Vėtra\)”](#)

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE CRIMES OF THE NAZI AND SOVIET OCCUPATION REGIMES IN LITHUANIA

The Sub-commission for
Evaluation of the Crimes of the
Nazi Occupation Regime and the
Holocaust

2019-04-11

Three years ago (19 March 2016) the Sub-Commission on Nazi Crimes of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania approved a statement on the issue of commemorating persons who had collaborated in the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes: “The Sub-commission condemns the commemoration in the public sphere of persons if there is reliable historical evidence that they have participated in any way in the persecution and/or murder of Jews and other victims during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania regardless of any other activities in which they have been engaged at that time or at a later date.” In view of the statements of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (Lietuvos Gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimų centras) [hence – Center] during its litigation with Grant Gochin, and following the decision of the Vilnius District Administrative Court of 27 March 2019, the Chairman of the Commission, as well as the members of the Sub-Commission, believe that it is our obligation to restate our previous objections to such commemorations to include attempts to minimize the nature and extent of the collaboration of the District (Apskritis) Chief of Šiauliai in carrying out the genocide of the Jews during the summer and fall of 1941. We are troubled by the Center’s ongoing explanations in this regard and, especially, of the document, “On the Accusations against Jonas Noreika (General Vėtra)” (Dėl kaltinimų Jonui Noreikai (Generolui Vėtrai) issued on 27 March 2019.

While we make clear in the statement that follows our belief that Jonas Noreika’s wartime activity disqualifies him from any honor, we certainly do not endorse vigilante actions to remove plaques erected in his name. These and similar issues should be dealt with according to lawful democratic process.

While the Center was within its rights to address the obvious weaknesses and inconsistencies in some of the plaintiff’s historical arguments (re: especially the document of 15 June 2018 cited by the Court), we find utterly unacceptable the Center’s attempts to surround the actions of Jonas Noreika with exculpatory arguments and obfuscations which are irrelevant to the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania and, in some cases, even offensive to the memory of the victims. We especially note the following:

1) The Center has explained that on 22 August 1941 and 10 September 1941, Jonas Noreika, following the directives of the German Commissar of Šiauliai District, Hans Gewecke, issued orders for the ghettoization and expropriation of the Jews of the District, and followed up the process with additional detailed instructions (as noted in documents presented to the Court). Nearly all victims rounded up under these orders were subsequently murdered as part of the killing operations carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators during the summer and fall of 1941, by far the bloodiest page in Lithuania’s modern history. This is the historical reality supported by unequivocal documentary evidence. If this is not participation in the process of the genocide of Lithuania’s Jewish citizens, then what is? Other aspects related to the history of the German occupation which have been argued before the Court, the Plungė massacre of 12-13 July 1941 (where the evidence of Noreika’s activities is inconclusive); the nature and extent of the

anti-Soviet insurrection in Žemaitija; anti-Nazi complaints by some Lithuanian leaders, and similar issues, should be examined by scholars and find their way into history books, but are, strictly speaking, extraneous to Noreika's documented collaboration in the Holocaust. In the 18 July 2018 response to the plaintiff, the Center pointed out that 31,000 citizens of Lithuania became "victims of Soviet genocide." These people suffered a course of imprisonment, deportation and expropriation, which led to many deaths. If they were victims of genocide under the legal definition of that term in the Republic of Lithuania, then so were the Jews of Šiauliai District.

2) There is no question that the Nazis stood at the apex of the power structure during the German occupation of Lithuania and held ultimate authority over the fate of the Jews, but this in no way diminishes the responsibility of the native collaborators. After World War II international courts have consistently rejected the argument of "following orders" as a defense, most recently in cases of crimes against humanity in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. In Lithuania, local officials often acted against the Jews with minimal German supervision and at times even on their own. There is no record of any ranking Lithuanian official executed or imprisoned for refusing anti-Jewish German directives during the height of the genocide in the summer and fall of 1941. The fact that the Nazi administration suppressed Lithuanian anti-Nazi activists during the latter part of the occupation is not relevant to Noreika's history of anti-Jewish actions as District Chief of Šiauliai.

3) The fact that Noreika had conversations with persons who rescued Jews (Domas Jasaitis), may have been aware of their activities, or expressed some anti-German resentments in no way mitigates the results of his collaboration in ghettoizing and expropriating Jews, actions which were part of the process which ultimately resulted in their murder.

4) The notion that the establishment of the ghettos created, albeit temporarily, some sort of haven for the Jews not only recycles the Nazi argument of 1941 but is deeply offensive to the memory of the inmates who perished, and also to the handful of remaining elderly survivors who suffered this unspeakable horror. The statement that "the Vilnius Jews themselves wanted to live together in the ghetto" based on the memoir of a single person, an outlier, is astonishing in its dismissal of what life in the ghetto entailed, described in numerous diaries and historical studies: death by starvation and disease, constant harassment, overcrowding and, ultimately, death at Paneriai. The Jews were the only group destined for total annihilation by the Nazis. This is what makes the Holocaust a unique event in European history and distinguishes it from other crimes against humanity during World War II.

5) We cannot understand why the Center defends the reputation of the Lithuanian Nationalist Party (Lietuvių Nacionalistų partija), an openly racist and fascist political group. LNP members serving in police formations were among the most active persecutors and murderers of Jews (a fact reflected in the Blynas diary, which is a document cited by the Center). In its statement of 27 March 2019, the Center accused the plaintiff of selecting documents "referring not to the criteria of objectivity, but attempting to justify the preconceived notions; – G.A. Gochin evaluates individual documents without contextualizing them with the totality of other archival documents, known facts, testimonies and circumstances, thus ignoring the overall historiographical context prerequisite for scientific analysis" [cite original text from the Center's 27 March document]. It seems obvious that the Center has adopted much the same approach.

The points outlined above do not exhaust what the Sub-Commission considers flawed historical arguments noted above.

The historical issues we have outlined have an international dimension. The Sub-Commission includes historians from Lithuania, Germany, Israel, the United States and the United Kingdom who collectively represent decades of experience in the history of the Holocaust and Nazi crimes. The Sub-Commission has never adopted conclusions or interpretations under pressure from governmental institutions or non-academic social organizations. It has operated under accepted, well-established international academic rules of peer review and rigorous, critical evaluation of historical sources. The importance of the Commission's ongoing outreach and education programs which not only commemorate the crimes of totalitarian regimes, but also seek to develop attitudes of tolerance and support for democracy should not be underestimated. The Commission has always held that "maintaining its independence is essential to the ongoing research and other activities of the Commission and its Secretariat" (as cited in the conclusions of our meeting on 19 March 2016). President Valdas Adamkus established the Commission by decree on 7 September 1998. It was reconstituted and reformed by the decree of the current President of the Republic on 16 October 2012, which affirmed the international scope and scholarly nature of the Commission and underlined "the unique and unprecedented nature and scope of the Holocaust."

Emanuelis Zingeris, Chairman of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania

Prof. Saulius Sužiedėlis, Chairman of the Sub-commission for Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi Occupation Regime and the Holocaust

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Dr. Christoph Dieckmann, University of Bern, Switzerland.

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Prof. emeritus Dr. Antony Polonsky, Brandeis University, USA

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