The Holocaust in the Contemporary Baltic States: International Relations, Politics, and Education

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by Doyle Stevick

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Abstract
For a variety of historical and cultural reasons, many societies across Central and Eastern Europe have not embraced the history of the Holocaust as it is understood in Western Europe and the U.S. and Israel, nor have they incorporated it substantively in their education systems, textbooks, and curricula. This article reviews the shared historical experiences of the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the Second World War and the Soviet period and considers how those shaped contemporary perspectives and attitudes in the region. Using data from cross-cultural exchanges between Estonians and foreign advocates of Holocaust education, the article shows that distrust exists around evidence gathered or disseminated by the Soviets and about perceived inconsistencies in the pursuit of justice. It finally compares two approaches to foreign engagement in the Holocaust, one rooted in power that was counterproductive and one rooted in dialogue that seems more promising.

Keywords: Holocaust education, international partnerships, cross-cultural curriculum work, education policy.

The Baltic States have a troubled relationship with the history of the Holocaust. Ethnic nationals in the Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania often view the Soviet occupation during the Second World War in a more negative light than the Nazi occupation. Since the countries regained independence from the Soviet Union more than two decades ago, Holocaust perpetrators have generally not been subjected to prosecution or, if prosecuted, they have not been compelled to serve any meaningful time in prison. Symbols evocative of the fascist period and of the Nazi Swastika have become increasingly visible in recent years. Education about the Holocaust itself has generally been modest, if not entirely absent.

The first task for scholars is to understand how contemporary views came into being and why they persist. Contemporary Baltic views about the Holocaust exist in a complex context. The long decades of Soviet hegemony left their mark. Geopolitics after September 11th, 2001, put the United States in a more conciliatory relationship with Russia, with which the Baltic states have tense relations. Moreover,
research into the Holocaust has been expanding rapidly. What is known and being learned today about the Holocaust has only a tenuous relationship at best with what is being taught and learned in schools in the region. Education about the Holocaust is particularly worthy of attention both because schools reflect the attitudes of societies, and also because schools are active in reproducing societal attitudes in the young.

At present, no comprehensive account of research about the Holocaust in the Baltic states is available, neither is there a comparative account about the contemporary politics of memory in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, nor about the curricula, policies, and pedagogy of Holocaust education in Baltic schools. Enough scholarship has been produced in these interlinking areas, however, to provide a sense of the key issues across the region.

**Shared experiences since 1939**

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania share a number of historical experiences that have contributed to the current controversial status of the Holocaust. First, citizens of the three countries were not apprised of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, in which the Baltic states were offered up to the Soviets, together with eastern Poland and the Romanian provinces of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina by Stalin’s then-ally, Hitler. As a result, their first experiences of the war involved the Soviet invasion and occupation that included deportations and other forms of terror meant to weaken resistance.

When the Nazis broke off the alliance and invaded territories held by the Soviet Union, they had good reason to mislead the Baltic peoples about their ultimate intentions. If people in the Baltic states believed that supporting the German forces offered the best opportunity to regain independence from the Soviets, they were more likely to enlist and perhaps more likely to act of the Nazis’ racial ideology. Indeed, one of the most difficult issues for the Baltic states has been the degree of complicity of the Baltic nationals in the persecution of their Jewish minorities. The Nazis’ ultimate ambitions, however, encompassed more than the Jewish residents of the region. According to *Generalplan Ost*, the Nazis anticipated and intended the elimination of 50 million people in the western Soviet Union, a toll that would have included most of the Baltic peoples (Snyder, 2009). These ambitions are not well-known in the Baltic states. Those Baltic nationals who enlisted in German units are often depicted today as freedom fighters and national heroes.

By 1944, of course, the Soviet Union ultimately pushed back the Nazis and reoccupied the Baltic states, that it had officially annexed in 1940. Those were thus formally part of the Soviet Union until 1991, nearly half a century later (although the United States never recognized the annexation). The Baltic states are small and
felt politically vulnerable next to their powerful neighbors; because Soviet policies introduced hundreds of thousands of native Russian speakers in the Baltic states and education policies were designed to promote Russian at the expense of the Baltic languages, a strong sense of cultural endangerment exacerbated the loss of political independence.

Baltic peoples felt that, in the words of Alfred Kaarmann, one resister in Estonia, who expressed his views about the Nazis and Soviets to the BBC: “The difference between them was that the Germans enslaved us and took our land. But the Russians destroyed the Estonian nation. They opposed — and still oppose — Estonian independence” (Fish, 2003). The toll on the Baltic states was substantial. Timothy Snyder included the Baltic states in the region he dubbed the “Bloodlands”, not just for the toll of the war and three waves of foreign occupation, but also for the devastation wrought by the Holocaust, other mass killing policies undertaken by the Soviets and Nazis, and massive displacement. Estonia, the only country to be declared “free of Jews” after its 4,000 Jews were deported by the Soviets during the initial occupation (roughly 400), killed in the Holocaust (estimated at 963), or escaped with Soviet troops during their retreat (the other roughly 2,700), was deeply affected, but it was by no means the worst: “Between 1940 and 1945 the [Estonian] population seems to have declined by a minimum of 200,000 [of roughly a million]” (Raun, 1991, p. 181). If this toll was terrible, the “demographic consequences of Stalinism in peacetime proved even more devastating to the population of Estonia than the upheavals of World War II” (*ibidem*). By comparison, half of the people in Belarus were killed or displaced during the war (Snyder, 2009).

For the Baltic peoples, “the Stalinist deportations, planned immigration, and russification policies were remembered as an attempt at nation killing, or genocide” (Budryte, 2005, p. 8). When the term genocide, recently coined, was applied to the Holocaust after the war, Baltic peoples in the diaspora appropriated the term to describe the threat of national, linguistic, and cultural extinction many perceived at the hands of the Soviets (Budryte, 2006). The concept of Soviet genocide, which enabled some Baltic nationalists to elide important differences between the Baltic and Jewish experiences at Soviet and Nazi hands was thus well entrenched by the time independence arrived.

The long period of Soviet hegemony had a profound impact on the Baltic views on the Holocaust for several reasons. First, Jewish survivors behind the Iron Curtain generally did not have the opportunity to publish their stories, as they were able to do in the West. Second, historical inquiry was generally suppressed. It was no simple matter to conduct original research, or to publish it; though there were some important exceptions, particularly in Yiddish, dissemination was a problem. Third, access to foreign scholarship was generally unavailable. The understanding of the Holocaust and its centrality that became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s was not available for consideration to most people. Fourth, anything associated
with the Soviet authorities generally lacked legitimacy for the Baltic nationals. In the context of Baltic experiences with deportations, propaganda, and show trials, subsequent Baltic perceptions of the evidence of death camps, labor camps, and other crimes of the Holocaust that were gathered by Soviet forces were clouded by its association with the noxious and mendacious former occupiers. Fifth, despite its potential use for the Soviets as a propaganda tool, the Holocaust was not separately emphasized by the regime. Instead, Holocaust victims simply became Soviet victims, and annihilationist anti-Semitism was reduced to one more natural symptom of a corrupt capitalist and fascist system.


The Baltic states regained their independence at a time when the reigning paradigm for international relations remained the Cold War, bipolar lens. Fearful of a hostile and powerful Russia and the belligerent rhetoric of Russian nationalists like Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who would famously threaten to wipe Latvia off the map, the Baltic states sought admission into both NATO, and the European Union. The burdens included in the pursuit of security from Russia were perhaps more substantial than they could have anticipated.

Matters such as minority rights were an emphasis of Western states and researchers during the first decade. For the Baltic peoples, however, these minorities were symbols of foreign hegemony, illegitimate residents who made little effort to learn local languages or respect local customs. These residents were perceived to be a tool used by the Russian Foreign Ministry to meddle in Baltic affairs and potentially to justify the need to intervene on their behalf. As Budryte observed, “historical memory about the past wrongs committed by the former occupying powers is likely to be one of the sources of resistance to accepting the recommendations of outsiders to extend rights to the minorities associated with the former occupying powers” (2005, p. 7). The Baltic states were in the paradoxical position of protecting ethnic minority rights in order to ensure their own security from their nation-state of origin, Russia. “The promise of EU membership and ‘concerted international efforts’ (the coordinated action of several international organizations) helped to subdue domestic opposition to policy changes that involved minority rights” (Budryte, 2005, p. 2), but, as a result, “ethnic tolerance [for the Baltic states] has been a ‘geopolitical matter’ that lacks genuine domestic support” (ibidem, p. 3).

The Jewish minorities that remained or now lived in the Baltic states, a tiny fraction of what existed before the war, were thus further encumbered by the situation of the Russian and other Russian-speaking minorities such as Belorussians and many Ukrainians. Minority rights were a contentious subject and any concession made to Jewish communities could create opportunities for Russian-speakers
to make claims that the Baltic states did not want to honor. The Russian minority was still perceived as a threat to the cultural survival of the Baltic states and conceptions of ethnic citizenship flourished. Because historical understandings of the Holocaust aligned the West and Jewish communities more closely with the Soviet narrative than the Baltic narratives, it became simpler for Baltic peoples to conflate Jews with Russians, which in turn created fertile fields for the reemergence of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth.

Among prominent Estonian educators, for example, the Russian minority was perceived as a threat to the ideal, which was the nation-state:

One objective of Estonia is to be a nation-state and this is legislated in the 1992 Constitution. If we say it is this way, it also has to be this way, and we need to do something in this direction. If we cannot be this, the situation is schizophrenic (Valdmaa, 2002, pp. 22-23).

Such views went hand in hand with the problematic accounts of the past. A scholar writing about racist extremism in contemporary Estonia drew attention to problems in Holocaust education in particular: “One of the local textbooks on history states that some Jews were killed as an act of revenge for Bolshevik abuses” (Poleshchuk, 2005, p. 74). These views were also linked to the rhetoric of restoration (of pre-war constitutions) rather than the construction of new states in which everyone belonged. The purpose of restoration was “to forge a ‘historic’ state, or a ‘community of fate’, membership in which is limited to the residents of pre-1940 Estonia and Latvia and their descendants” (Budryte, 2005, p. 8). The implications of such views for the Jewish population are clear: few survived, they had few descendants, and few of those would desire to return. Restorationism thus offered not just the prospect of returning to the more ethnically homogenous conditions that existed before the war, but also of establishing a state on an idealized model whose contemporary manifestation the Holocaust had further homogenized.

Geopolitics of the Holocaust and Russian minorities after September 11th, 2001

The autonomy the people of the Baltic states had anticipated in the post-Soviet period was further constrained by the accession processes for the European Union. The Baltic states had to align their new laws, rights, finances, and so forth with European standards. This apparent reduction in political autonomy shifted the realm of independent action for the Baltic states towards domestic cultural affairs, such as education and language policy, where ethnic identity remained particularly strong, and a fear of the Russians within endured. The relative autonomy the Baltic states expected came under further foreign pressure and scrutiny after the events of
September 11th, 2001, when NATO courted Russian support for efforts against Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan.

This shift resulted in some surprises for the Baltic states. These surprises were perhaps best captured in a speech given to Baltic officials at the April 24th, 2002, Stockholm Security Conference by Heather Conley, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs. Only seven months had passed since the attacks and action against Al-Qaeda and the Talibans was unfolding. The Baltic states could reasonably expect demands for troops, equipment, and spending. Conley recognized the progress that had been made in the region, but then took the audience in a surprising direction:

"[A]ll NATO aspirants need to do more to better prepare themselves for membership so that they are ready and able to contribute to European security in tangible ways. For the Baltic States, this means hard work — not just words, but concrete action on complex domestic issues like dealing with the history of the Holocaust… and fully integrating ethnic Russian-speakers into society” (Embassy, 2002).

The United States and NATO were thus using the prospect of the Baltic states’ accession to push for domestic policy changes, including educational ones, related to the Holocaust. That effort was not taken in isolation. The U.S. had established an ambassador-level Special Envoy for Holocaust issues in Central and Eastern Europe. The U.S. ambassador to Estonia undertook a campaign to promote action on Holocaust related issues. The U.S. also supported the establishment of research commissions to investigate the three periods of occupation during World War II in each country. Dealing with the Holocaust had become a focal point of the U.S. foreign policy in the region.

**Foreign involvement in Holocaust issues in the Baltic states**

Foreign engagement in Holocaust issues in the region occurred in several domains. Beyond the political activity of the U.S., the most publically visible — and vilified — was Efraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who sought to prosecute Baltic nationals accused of participation in the Holocaust. Though focused on prosecutions, Zuroff’s activities were more broad-based. He also criticized commemorative practices that involved Nazi insignia, which appeared on monuments and rallies in the region. He also advocated for better educational materials.

Though these efforts spanned a range of approaches from attempts at engagement to public confrontation, they were often conflated in the public eye. They also placed Jewish leaders in the Baltic states in an awkward position, as they witnessed the backlash against foreign efforts and some strove to dissociate themselves from campaigns that seemed to provoke a backlash.
The Estonian media at this time provided unique forums for Zuroff and U.S. ambassador Joseph Michael DeThomas to engage directly with the Estonian public about issues related to the Holocaust. The interlocutors were a mix of sympathetic voices, often with Russian names, critical Estonians who took a rhetorical approach of opposition that was consistent with a debate style, and others still who sought dialogue, expressing local perspectives and concerns cogently and with clear efforts to persuade or at least understand. The following exchange is worth quoting at length, because it articulates so clearly a common Baltic perspective and provoked a revealing response:

While this writer fully acknowledges the horror of what the Nazis and their accomplices did to Jews, Gypsies, and Estonians during the three years of German WW II occupation of Estonia, the number of lives lost and the duration of the combined Soviet occupations enormously eclipse the Nazi period. When will the U.S. Embassy begin dedicating time to these dark chapters in proportion to their significance to the host country? When will the U.S. begin funding an Office of Soviet Investigations or an Office of Communist Investigations designed to systematically condemn and bring to justice the few surviving communist war criminals, torturers, and executioners who terrorized Central and Eastern Europe (and Cambodia and several other victim societies?). A few more years and it will be too late. Is this the objective? Surely it must be the gravity of the offenses and even-handed consistency of approach that interests the U.S. government — a country that practices and advocates the rule of law — and not the ethnic origin or the religious orientation of the victims? Even-handedness is what we’re asking for. Most Estonians are in agreement that German atrocities and Soviet Russian atrocities must be handled using the same legal yardsticks, and that the consequences for the perpetrators should be the same (Online Intervjuud, 2003).

Clearly, the foreign and particularly the American focus on the Holocaust contributed to a perception in Estonia that some victims were more important than others, that a Baltic national was less important than a Jewish victim, and that selective justice was being pursued. For Baltic people, the argument is often compelling and heard in various forms. The underlying logic generally follows this pattern: for all that hundreds of thousands of Baltic nationals have suffered, they are seen not as victims who also need justice — indeed, there is no pressure on Russia to acknowledge Soviet crimes —, but are regarded primarily as supporters of the Nazis, hence complicit in the Holocaust, making them not victims, but criminals. The U.S. ambassador acknowledged the specific approach to the Holocaust in his reply:

You are correct that there were many crimes against humanity. I have personally participated in events commemorating victims of Soviet crimes in Estonia. However, the legal structures the U.S. government pursues regarding the Holocaust are unique to that particular set of crimes. In large part, this is because many survivors of the
Holocaust fled to the U.S. and are now U.S. citizens. They look to U.S. law for redress. Similarly, many perpetrators of the Holocaust fled to the U.S. under false pretenses and obtained U.S. citizenship. We needed a special legal structure to deal with these individuals (Online Intervjuud, 2003).

Efraim Zuroff often faced similar questions. He was asked, for example: “You have dedicated your life to disclose Nazi war criminals. Why haven’t you turned your attention to disclosure of communist war criminals and communist persecutors of Jews? (Online Intervjuud, 2001) He responded that:

As someone with a Ph.D. in the history of the Holocaust, my expertise is in Nazi crimes, not Communist crimes and that is also my own personal interest. I do not understand why there isn’t someone like myself or some institution like the Wiesenthal Center to deal with Communist criminals (Online Intervjuud, 2002).

Zuroff, who is often believed in the Baltic states to be a Russian agent or funded by the Kremlin, faced numerous questions about the trustworthiness of evidence coming from the Soviet authorities, a question of legitimacy that poses ongoing challenges for tackling the history of the Holocaust in the region. One asked:

No Estonian who served in the German army escaped from the NKVD and its successor, the KGB. Many of them were given the death sentence in the Soviet Union based on huge propaganda. Do you think that their research was so ineffective and untrustworthy, that you put these results under suspicion? (Online Intervjuud, 2002).

Another echoed this sentiment, asking: “Why are many of your accusations based on KGB materials, even though it is widely known that many of them are fabricated?” (Online Intervjuud, 2001). Yet a third inquired, “How do you evaluate the actions taken by the KGB in investigating the Nazi crimes?”

The depth of distrust of anything perceived to have a Soviet origin or even association functions as a major obstacle to making progress on Holocaust issues in the Baltic states. Legitimacy is a major issue. In the West, many have grown up with the Holocaust clearly established as the worst event in human history. It is self-evident, common sense. Their engagement in the issue is thus rooted in the belief that the evidence speaks for itself and that people need merely to be exposed to the evidence in order to come to the correct conclusions. The kinds of changes needed then would be primarily education-related: disseminating information, providing better textbook materials, and so forth. The degree to which questioners invoke the problem of politically corrupt evidence, Soviet propaganda, and the like reveal the extent to which issues surrounding the Holocaust are bound up for people in the Baltic states with a wide range of different issues. Addressing beliefs about the Holocaust requires not simply correcting mistaken views or addressing deficits.
It involves a long process of establishing trust, of confronting the complex web of issues that are tied up with the implications of taking the history of the Holocaust seriously. These challenges are best illustrated by the international efforts to promote better Holocaust education in the region.

**Cross-cultural engagement on the Holocaust and education in the Baltic states**

In addition to the broad public efforts of foreign notables such as U.S. diplomats and Dr. Zuroff, educational partnerships were undertaken to develop better educational materials about the Holocaust, particularly in Latvia. In this section, I will review some of the work on this area conducted by myself (Stevick, 2007, 2009, 2010) on Estonia and Misco (2007a, 2007b) on Latvia.

My own work on Estonia concentrates on the adoption of a day of Holocaust commemoration in Estonia and the subsequent (non-)implementation of that day. The political context at the time of the Holocaust commemoration-day policy was characterized by continued fear of Russian aggression, resentment of foreign interference in domestic affairs, and frustration with the Russian-speaking minorities “who have been here for fifty years and have still not learned Estonian”. The resentment of foreign meddling is augmented by a sense that Estonia is not understood or respected by outsiders, while its suffering and losses are held to be less important than those endured by others (Stevick, 2007, p. 226).

Estonian officials drew upon practices developed under Soviet hegemony that enabled ambiguous communication that would satisfy foreigners that proper commemoration was occurring, even while conveying a different message to Estonian listeners.

Such ambiguity is captured by the symbol of the cattle wagon. There is one displayed in Estonia’s Museum of Occupations, which purports to cover both the Nazi, and Soviet occupations. As critics have noted, bringing the two occupations under one roof (or one report, as the historical commissions of the Baltic states did), can be a subtle way of eliding differences between the two regimes and their conduct. There are many terms put to use in the attempts to shift focus away from the Holocaust. Dovid Katz calls this practice “Holocaust obfuscation” (2009), an approach that does not go so far as Holocaust denial, but seeks instead to draw parallels that essentially equate the Soviet and Nazi regimes. Michael Shafir (2002) writes of “comparative trivialization”. Zuroff (2005) frames the issue as “one of the most prevalent tendencies in post-Communist Eastern Europe… the attempt to create a false symmetry between Nazi and Communist crimes and the erroneous classification of the latter as genocide [the ‘double genocide’ theory].”
As Budryte rightly points out,

In Western and Central Europe, the image of the cattle wagon is immediately associated with the memory of the deportation and destruction of the European Jews by Nazi Germany. In the Baltic states, the image of a cattle wagon is a symbol of suffering during the Stalinist times and deportation to the *gulag* (Budryte, 2005, p. 187).

The cattle wagon can thus accommodate the meanings that both parties bring to it, without challenging the view of either. This kind of deliberate ambiguity was used frequently when Estonian officials sought to convey one message to an international audience, while conveying a different message to the national population.

One rationale for promoting a Holocaust commemoration day was for the Estonians to become aware and acknowledge the connections of Estonia to the Holocaust, whether focused upon perpetrators who were involved in atrocities or on Estonian Jews. The Estonians satisfied some foreign advocates by adopting January 27<sup>th</sup> as the anniversary of the liberation from Auschwitz. In doing so, however, they were implicitly rejecting the purpose articulated above:

27 January, which has no ostensible link whatsoever to the history of the Holocaust in Estonia, since no Estonian Jews were deported to Auschwitz. In fact, Estonian officials rejected a suggestion by the Simon Wiesenthal Center that they choose either 20 January, the date of the infamous Wannsee Conference in 1942, at which the implementation of the Final Solution was discussed and Estonia was declared *Judenrein* (free of Jews), or 7 August, the date on which the 36<sup>th</sup> Estonian Security Battalion murdered Jews in Nowogrudok, Belarus (Zuroff, 2005).

This pattern of acceding to foreign pressure in ways that seemed to satisfy most foreign advocates, but nevertheless contested the implicit meanings, particularly for a domestic audience, is captured effectively in an English-language press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

During the Second World War, the Nazi regime systematically eliminated on the occupied Estonian territory both Estonian Jews, and those that had been brought here from elsewhere… There is no justification for the participation of anyone in these shameful and morally condemnable acts. Even if they have not directly shed the blood of anyone, they are nevertheless morally responsible. Knowing the past teaches tolerance and helps admit that the crimes of the last century will never be repeated… The Ministry of Education and Science called on all Estonian schools to explain to students the tragic events of the last century (Estonian Foreign Ministry, 2006).

The passage explicitly addresses the Holocaust. But, when it moves over to the statement from the Ministry of Education, it uses the more general term “tragic
events of the last century” and the foreign reader is intended to assume that this term still refers to the Holocaust. An Estonian audience would almost certainly hear in that call a reference to the suffering of the Estonians themselves, rather than the Holocaust specifically.

Indeed, it is clear that the broader meaning was exactly what the Estonian government had in mind for the national audience, while making use of the ambiguity to satisfy a foreign audience. In conveying how Estonian teachers should conduct the first Holocaust day, the Ministry of Education sent explicit instructions to the schools:

Education Minister Mailis Rand, in a circular sent to the schools in the Fall, noted that not only the Nazi crimes against the Jews, but also all other victims persecuted for ethnic, racial, religious, and political reasons should be remembered. The Ministry gave the schools a free hand in deciding how and in which classes the subject should be handled (Baltic States Report, 2003).

Despite the policy, teachers were specifically directed not to single out Jewish victims of the Holocaust. However, the choice mechanism manifested in this policy — i.e., giving the schools a “free hand” in its implementation — is really only a “choice” if it is not known what choice will be made. Given the powerful backlash against the policy, however, it was clear that most teachers and principals would do little or nothing. If the choice can be predicted, and the result will be clear and overwhelming, then offering the choice is little more than a form of policy fiat (Stevick, 2010).

The evidence for how the policy would be implemented had filled the media. Principals at the most elite schools — individuals who have the status of public intellectuals in Estonia — immediately spoke out against the plans and were not reprimanded by the Ministry. Teachers expressed their views in local media outlets. A typical collection of objections appears here:

I think that Holocaust day is nothing but an activity for activity’s sake, nothing more, adding that it brought the theme to the students on just one day.

The Soviet occupation interests students more, because they have more connections with this, more relatives were deported.

You shouldn’t traumatize a child with description of this, how a baby was thrown into the air as target practice, the idea of history is not to shock the youths. Rather on this day we should emphasize the danger of all types of violence (Nielson, 2003).

Principals of other schools were more circumspect (Stevick, 2009), but a specialist working with 30 principals that first year shared this account of their private feelings about the policy:
One [assignment for] 30 different school directors and headmasters was to examine the way the Holocaust Day was spent the first time in Estonia in 2003. We asked them to get the information from another school: to ask how it was spent and what people were thinking about Holocaust Day. People were very bitter, most were very direct and very honest in their responses, saying that this is not the day that is celebrated in Estonian schools, and not in a nice way. But public opinion and the opinion of teachers and head directors was that this came from outside… and from these 30 answers that we got, we had zero responses that this was an important day that we need to have in our school system (Stevick, 2007, p. 228).

Three years later, despite press releases to the contrary, this official explained that “Basically, Holocaust Day does not exist in Estonia” (Stevick, 2007, p. 230).

The approach and outcomes taken by American partners working with Latvian educators was quite different. This six-phase partnership with educators from Latvia provided the time necessary to develop trusting relationships and candid communication between the partners (Misco, 2007a). It involved bilateral collaboration of public and academic institutions and more than two months of time spent together in Latvia and the United States, including a week at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In building up a relationship of trust, the Latvian educators were reassured that the project was not simply about casting all Latvians in a negative light. As one participant noted after the first week, the curriculum authors were very happy about many things, but one of our worries has been how people view Latvians and Latvia in the context of the Holocaust, and we heard from several presenters that there is nothing to worry about; these are just things that happened and there is no intention to blame. There is no attempt to blame and make big summaries. Everyone feels much better after these days (Misco, 2007a, p. 7).

Once they moved past the concern or anxiety, they were able to engage the materials more directly and openly. Indeed, when educators begin with evidence, they are often better served than when starting with conclusions. Often evidence does produce cognitive dissonance that requires those confronting it to adjust prior paradigms to make the newly understood realities fit. An educator’s task can then be to create the conditions in which students are prepared to encounter evidence with an open mind and grapple productively, rather than defensively, with such cognitive dissonance. One educator spoke of her non-blaming approach, in which she let evidence do the talking, in this way:

My lessons, they don’t blame Latvians. They neither blame, nor defend, but in the lesson about bystanders there are citations about Latvian Jews saying not a single person spoke to protect us. All the Latvian politicians did nothing (Misco, 2007a, p. 7).
Because the time was taken in a deliberative manner to enable these Latvian educators to develop Holocaust curricula, they were well positioned to understand and to address the resistance and hesitation they encountered when it came time to implement it. This training-of-the-trainers model can be effective in this way. Indeed, the participants noted that they got resistance from the Ministry of Education officials in Latvia, who responded with remarks like “Aw, again Holocaust!” and “Why do we have to speak again about Holocaust?” (Misco, 2007b, pp. 408-409).

In responding to reluctant Ministry officials, the educators resorted to strategies that were often used to appropriate Holocaust education materials selectively. Educators who did not want to engage the Holocaust might try to use its lessons to condemn violence at a general level, for example. Indeed, Holocaust education has focused upon “understanding, discrimination, anti-Semitism, stereotyping, loyalty, justice, conflict resolution, human rights” (Misco, 2007b, p. 398) and much more. The Latvian educators were able to use these alternative rationales in reverse, as a mechanism to get Holocaust content past those who were resistant (ibidem, p. 409). According to a Latvian teacher, in their discussions with government officials, at first they were “afraid that the Americans would come and dictate to them what should be taught and what should be included” (ibidem, p. 417), but the Latvian curriculum developers were able to allay those concerns as they took ownership of the material and how it would be developed and presented in Latvia.

**Emulating the Holocaust educational effort to undermine it**

For many in the Baltic states, however, the feeling of foreign imposition and collective accusation remained strong. As one Latvian teacher expressed it, the foreign effort “was rubbing Latvians the wrong way and they felt their ethnic group was being neglected” (Misco, 2007b, p. 411). Many Estonians reacted in a similar manner. Although Efraim Zuroff, for example, was very careful to emphasize that the Simon Wiesenthal Center was interested in individual prosecutions and rejected the notion of collective guilt; statements such as the following from Dr. Zuroff were often received as implying broad guilt in the population:

> While we recognize the reasons why many East Europeans preferred the Nazis to the Communists, the fact remains that they chose to fight for a Nazi victory, which makes them collaborationists, among whom there were many who also participated in the mass-murdering of Jews, and that makes them Nazi war criminals (Online Interview, 2001).

At other times, it emerged as the result of misunderstandings. For “Operation Last Chance”, Dr. Zuroff commissioned ads in the Estonian papers that included the
text: “During the Holocaust, Estonians murdered Jews in Estonia as well as in other countries” (City Paper’s Baltics Worldwide, 2003). Due to the lack of definite articles like “the” in Estonian, the translation introduced a key ambiguity that could be interpreted as “all Estonians” rather than simply “some Estonians”. A prominent academic at Estonia’s leading institution of higher education, the Tartu University, “said that although the text of the advertisement does not call for violence, it instigates ethnic hatred and ‘accuses Estonians as a nation of murdering Jews’” (ibidem). This distinction was critical for the Latvian educators. One participant noted: “I had this discussion with my staff recently — some of them wound up in tears — that it was very important to say some Latvians, not the Latvians. Some Latvians collaborated” (Misco, 2007b, p. 417).

For those who harbored resentments, who felt that there were collective accusations against the nation as a whole, who believed their suffering under Soviet domination was neglected or dismissed, and who felt there was a double standard in the pursuit of justice, the success of the Holocaust education campaign made into a campaign worth emulating precisely in order to promote knowledge about communist and Soviet terror and crimes to the rest of Europe. This drive, known by many names, including the “Red/Brown movement”, is often advanced from the Baltic states, and with support from politicians and others who are eager to equate the Soviet and Nazi forces (Katz, 2009). Because these campaigns have a political resonance inside the Baltic states, that takes a substantial degree of local knowledge and language ability to track, they are often overlooked or misconstrued by outsiders. The campaign has gained a good deal of traction, however, as illustrated by the June 2008 Prague Declaration and the choice of 23 August to commemorate jointly the victims of totalitarianisms (plural) on the date of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact signing. Its success would have implications not just within Central and Eastern Europe, but for the whole of the European Union as well, again as illustrated in a resolution adopted by the European Parliament in April 2009, that practically equates Communism and Nazism. Although the European Commission rejected this drive in 2011, that might be not its last word in a generally volatile political situation.

The recognition and interpretation of the Holocaust remains a core diving line between the countries that were long free and those that emerged from Soviet hegemony. Timothy Snyder sums up some of the key differences in their perspectives:

Many West Europeans saw […] that the horrors of Nazi rule […] had been undone […] by communism. Meanwhile, many East Europeans saw […] that Soviet policies, far from undoing Nazi policies, provoked them, exacerbated them, imitated them, and multiplied the damage that they caused (Snyder, 2009, p. 10).

These disparate views seem unlikely to reach a significant resolution anytime soon. A valuable resource exists on the web for following current events related to the Holocaust in the Baltic states. The website — http://defendinghistory.com/ —
The Holocaust in the Contemporary Baltic States: International Relations, Politics, and Education

is curated by Dovid Katz, a top Yiddish linguist who moved the Yiddish Language Institute he founded from Oxford to Vilnius in 1998. Together with the website, important new research about the Holocaust and about Holocaust education continues to be undertaken across the three Baltic states. Whether this research can have a meaningful impact on national and regional perceptions in the region remains to be seen.
REFERENCES
