



Author: Sergey Davidov

Returning to the blank spots

Andrievs Ezergailis, historian, author of the book 'Holocaust in the Nazi occupied Latvia during 1941-1944'
Saturday, January 31 (2009) 11:53

Reflections on the book 'Extermination of the Jews in Latvia, 1941 – 1945. Course of lectures'. The editor and author of the introduction – Rabbi Menahem Barkagan.

The book 'Extermination of the Jews in Latvia, 1941 – 1945. Course of lectures' was published in 2008 by the community 'Shamir' in Riga. It was printed with the financial help of the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in Latvian, Russian and English languages. The project also includes translation of the book to German and French. It consists of ten essays by Boriss Volkovich, Miriam Zalmanovich, Grigory Smirin, Rita Bogdanova, Ilana Ivanova, Rozalia Suhare and Josif Rochko. The editor and author of the introduction is Rabbi Menahem Barkagan.

An ideological line of the book suggests it is a counterpoint to the research on the Holocaust by the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, who have had very little influence on the authors of the essays.

Hitler and his era had created each other – this blend was concentrated in Germany, but was reaching far outside the borders of the country. While ideological knots and their leftovers – imperialism, violence, class inequality, racism, which were urging souls of Europeans after the First World War – will be alive, or while capitalism is standing on its own, unable to solve the global poverty, clean the environment of the Earth or finance sustainable energy sources, Hitler's spectrum will continue its dark deeds. In spite the fact that Hitlerism was defeated in the war, it's still living, not as open as under the Nazi flags, but through the thoughts and ideas of the enemies. Interaction of the Nazism and Marxist ideology, including Soviet gallimaufry that is still influencing many citizens of Latvia, is not a secret. Many have written about Hitler's / Stalin's 'Kabuki dance' not only during the 30s, but also after the war. A few have analysed the influence of the Nazism on democratically imperialistic countries. An excessive reliance

of the United States of America on weapons rather than strength of their own hearts is one of those unfortunate legacies of the Nazism of the 30s.

Global anti-Semitism

This review will be focusing only on one of the Hitlerisms, the catchy and iffy term 'global anti-Semitism' created in the public relations offices of the Nazis. Already prior to his raise in power Hitler was preaching that Jews are hatred by every single nation in the world, including Britons and Americans. When the boat St. Louis was not allowed to anchor in any of the USA ports in 1939, it gave Hitler's notion on the global anti-Semitism a sudden widespread resonance. The notion that was firstly pitched as a polemic joke and alibi for the planned murders still thrives in Hitler's successors, enemies and victims, academic writings and in others that I have to review.

In retrospect, one of Hitler's and his soul mates Goebbels achievements was to convince the world already before the start of the Holocaust that all the humankind, even in the countries in war with the Nazis, is immersed in the anti-Semitism and therefore co-responsible for the actions yet to come.

A successful tactic of the Nazis was raising suspicion of the Jews about their friends, showing them that the world would not come to help. Yes, it was bad, there were prejudices, and if looked into, anti-Semitism could be found everywhere; however as soon as the world got to know about the plans of Hitler, both friends and rescuers appeared. Even Sweden, which before the war was one of the most enclosed countries, was one of the most welcoming to Jews. But Hitler had done it. Historians are still continuing to explore his hyperbolic ideas with more passion than opposing ones. The promises made during the crash of the old regime, to fill in the blank spots, have faded – that should be mourned on because pluralism has faded out and almost all this compilation's authors in their narrow-mindedness are prompting for return to those blank spots. Pluralism has lost its voice.

If we would read the Nazi appraisals of Latvia, they would be far from being positive. Although at times Latvia has been named 'the paradise of the Jews', as soon as there were first news on the murders of the Jews, Hitler himself announced that Baltic people are slaughtering Jews, overtaken by revenge. As we will see further on those Hitler's words have greatly influenced authors of this work.

Despite the fact that the notion of the 'global anti-Semitisms' is eminent in numerous studies and has been a rock-hard truth, it is only a chain of components that cannot withstand an empirical analysis. Surely most of the human kind, especially at the times of a crisis, are selfish and egocentric, worried about themselves, their own families, tribes and nations much more than willing to waist time and anger on 'intruders'. If we are to call selfishness the 'anti-Semitism', there is some logic behind it, since not to see your own brother in the face of stranger is not the highest norm of the humanism. However then we should stop focusing on the global anti-Semitism. It is an intellectual movement that, especially considering Hitler's pronounced biological anti-Semitism, is neither understandable nor acceptable to the most of the humankind. An ego-centricity is widely acceptable, while understanding of the anti-Semitism as the intellectual movement has certain limitations.

There is only one way we could say that Churchill and Roosevelt were anti-Semitic – multiple times they have emphasized that Germany should solve their 'Jewish issues' by themselves or else Europe would be in a chaos, and that is exactly what happened and thus cannot be doubted. Just as all exaggerations and generalisations, the 'global anti-Semitism' idea bursts into nothingness when confronted by real people.

No one yet has studied and organised diaries, the mirrors of the souls, of the anti-Semitic personas, those that were written at the time when the Jews were slaughtered all over Europe, including Germany. I am guessing researchers would not find there much on the Jews. I have read Latvian voluntary SS legion lieutenant's Peter Vitols war time diary. At the time Canadian court was charging P. Vitols for his SS crimes, including the slaughter of the Jews in Madona. After getting to know about such intimate document, Canadian prosecutors had the adrenaline rush in excitement to find proofs on Vitols' SS crimes there. And how big was their disappointment, when nothing like that was found there; the Jews were not even nearly mentioned. 'The voice of the nation', despite the ways it's being heard, will always prove – Russians are interested in Russians, Germans in Germans, Jews in Jews, ad infinitum... So I would predict that even in diaries of Germans there would not be much mentioned on the Jews, but much more on Germans.

Let us move on. The anti-Semitism can be doubted as a determinatively causal explanation for the Holocaust. If the global view would stay true, there would be no Jews left in 20th century to move to Auschwitz. It is undisputed historical fact that, apart from very few exceptions, for centuries Jews and European anti-Semites were able to co-exist together. Therefore to emphasize the anti-Semitism would mean diminishing the role of Hitler and his party. However this spin is not creating any doubts in the minds of promoters of the global anti-Semitism.

In spite of Germany's intensive work to spread they ideology even on diplomatic levels, in no other country Nazis could find allies amongst governors on the way to exterminate Jews. The only exception could be agitated Stalin. (He started targeting Trockists already in the 30s.)

For many post-Holocaust historians, including the authors of the 'course of lectures' reviewed here, it has been hard to admit that Nazi Germany was a unique politically ideological creation! In no other place but Germany, governmental and military structures gradually and determinatively appeared and were preparing for the extermination of Jews. Nothing like that has happened in any other country. Even in Latvia until the invasion of the Soviet tanks in 1940, country's principles of the legislative functions were going in their traditional way. Only Germany determined Jews as outlaws on the basis of Nuremberg's process and wanted to wipe them out the country's borders. It is true that Churchill and Roosevelt did not establish the significance of the crash of the Reichstag correctly. While everywhere else across the Europe laws were still protecting the Jewish nation.

Only Germany had introduced the notion of the anti-Semitism to the educational system, as early as kindergarten. The main part in rescue of the Jews from 'fascists' was taken by citizens of 'fascistic' countries, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria, and they were seconded by citizens of Sweden and Denmark.

A paradigm of the promoters of the global anti-Semitism is not allowing to admit the uniqueness of the Nazi Germany. They are also neglecting diversity amongst the anti-Semites and different levels of their strength. It is unexpected blindness in the intellectual history to think that there is no difference between the anti-Semitism that is sponsored by the government and supported by governmental structures, tanks and million of armed forces, and a country where two elders in the marketplace could be arguing on the unfair price one has paid for some pigs. Actually thinking in depth, it should be highlighted that promoters of the global anti-Semitism have not yet defined, what they mean by 'anti-Semitism'. Well-known, but not so much read, Holocaust researcher Daniel Goldhagen has briefly mentioned an idea of the 'eliminationist anti-Semitism' and moved on considering that all types of the anti-Semitism are 'eliminationist'.

Finally it is obvious that authors of this compilation are favouring the Nazi fiction stories on spontaneous rebel action of the occupied nations and 'detoxication' powered by the revenge, more than an event being empirically documented and organized by the supreme structures. I doubt any of those authors have explored litigation documents from the case of Ajaqs and read the whole Shataker report of October 1941. Out of all the cases described by the authors of the reviewed book, only the description of the non-German slaughters is matching with Hitler's atavisms.

In comparison to juridical processes, many books and articles on the Holocaust written in Eastern European countries (including Latvia) are almost solely based on memories of the Jews as depictions of eyewitnesses. Whilst in criminal cases testimonies of eyewitnesses always become a reason for debates since two statements would rarely match entirely, they play a determinative role in the literature on the Holocaust. Thus it is no surprise that from empirical point of view disputes amongst researchers of different ethnicities are not only continuing, but seem to be never-ending. Although these 'eyewitness' testimonies' do have a particular characteristic – unlike criminal cases on the Holocaust matters, these testimonies written down at various times and places are highly coincidental, and instead of challenging, they are very supportive of each other. How can this solidarity be explained, so different to the experiences of earlier centuries from Heraclites to Spinoza and up to Wittgenstein?

Content

Similarly to many article compilations this work lacks qualitative and contextual cohesion. Generally the best that can be said about this book is that it is amateur, episodic and non-formal, just like suit without a tie, apart from such exception as an introductory essay "Jews in Latvia between the two World Wars". It is more like a preacher rather than source of information; it lacks energy and desire to pull a sword out of a stone, to create a rationale from chaos that teaches and enlightens at the same time. The bests of this book are pieces of memories, which often are tempting, but yet again disappointing like dough that's prepared but never baked. The note on the title page that book is a course of lectures is ambivalent on its own – is it an excuse for the lack of the source analysis and references, or just a try to say that this contribution is a synthesis of knowledge accumulated over a long time period. Regretfully, even when translated in ten different languages of the European Union, this book will not step above the retro-literature that has been dictated in the basements in the centre of the empire. The blank spots will not filled on their own.

Notable is the range of pictures in the book, part of them printed for the first time, however at least two photos have no connection to Latvia at all. J. Rochko memory lanes are nice, although many are very fragmented and often poorly connected to the issue of the Holocaust. To correct all the factual and methodological mistakes of the book, one would have to write another book, however further only couple of exemplary ones will be explained, and readers can take them on as a telegraphic description of greater symptoms.

A historical essay by Boris Volkovich on the life of the Jews between wars in Latvia is one of the best in the bunch. If all the others would have followed his example, this review would be much more different (if there would be any necessity to write it at all). I have only one note on the widely popular idea on spreading anti-Semitism and deterioration of the Jewish lives during the authoritarian regime. Can it be stated that the anti-Semitism spread in Latvia only because Ulmanis closed all left parties and their media? Were Ulmanis' anti-capitalistic ideas manifestos of the anti-Semitism? If the answer is no, the idea is wrong. To give a complete appraisal on the Ulmanis' anti-Semitism, one should not avoid the dialogues of the Old man with well known anti-Semites like Janis Davis and Arvids Bergs, where Ulmanis suggested them to discontinue their anti-Semitic activities.

I would fore-mostly suggest Mirjam Zalmanovich that describing times of chaos with a hectic article is pointless as it loses a backbone of the story. The author writes: "The main thing holding together those men self-appointed guards was their nationalistic disposition. They are guilty for slaughter of the Jews, their oppression and plundering of the Jewish properties."

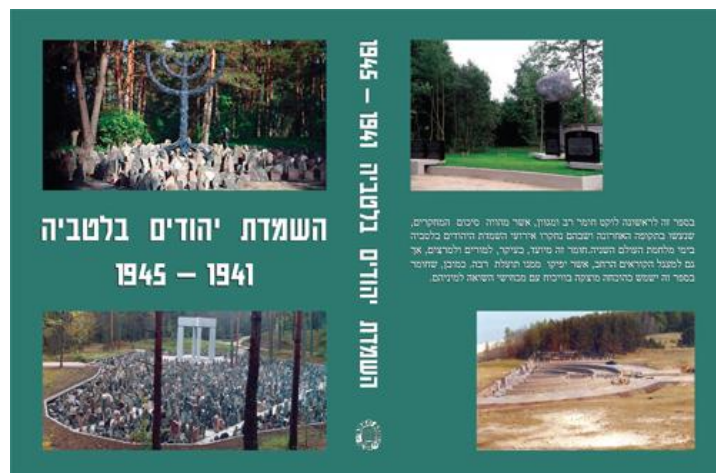
Those sentences are presented as declarations of the ultimate truth without any argumentation, analysis or references. As authors were writing on the basis of the materials accumulated by Commission of the Historians, it could be expected that they would pay more attention to the facts. Allegation by M. Zalmanovich that Latvian government did not request extradition of Konrads Kalejs from Australia is completely against any factual information. It could not have been known before the trial whether Latvian prosecution office had enough evidence to sentence K. Kalejs. What is known is that Australian prosecutors did not bring K. Kalejs to trial due to insufficient evidences. Latvian side requested the extradition of K. Kalejs, as soon as Australia denied the case.

The article by Grigory Smirins on the Holocaust in Riga is far from improving the general level of the book, however for a second it seemed that it covers less blank spots, while it also appeared that the author has a limited knowledge of source materials. For example, it seems that he knows something on formation of the 'Araja unit', although following text uncovers that facts are not the strength of the author. G. Smirins writes: "V. Arajs assembled unit of 100 – 150 people and overtook prefecture." If the author would have taken time to read the documents of the Arajs' trial, he would know that, firstly, Arajs moved into the Letonnia house on Valdemara Street 55 and on July 4th was already on Valdemara Street 19. Prefecture was the seat of Shtiglitz, thus he could have been able to move in only after Shtalker moved out of the building. G. Smirin also states that "The first activities were personally led by the prefect of the police of Riga – R. Shtiglitz." Archive materials of the Riga police department would not give any proof to such fact. Moreover, it is misleading to call 'Tevija' [Fatherland] pro-

Nazi daily newspaper, as it suggests that ideology of the newspaper could have been different. 'Tevija' was a clear and vocal Nazi newspaper that was founded on the grounds of orders of the occupiers.

The essays on Kurzeme, Zemgale and Vidzeme are very different; some of them, for example, about Liepaja, although factually incorrect are satisfactory, however description of Smiltene is not even generalising. A citizen of the European Union would gain very little if any but chaotic understanding of the Holocaust in small cities of Latvia.

Original source (in Latvian): <http://www.diena.lv/lat/politics/viedokli/atgriesanas-pie-baltajiem-plankumiem>



Dear editors of the 'Diena' newspaper!

My attention was very much captured by the review of the book 'Extermination of the Jews in Latvia, 1941 – 1945. Course of lectures.' by American historian of a Latvian origin A. Ezergailis that was published in this years January 31st issue of your newspaper. It was named 'Returning to the blank spots'.

I could not restrain from commenting on this publication not only because its subtitles give credits to me as an editor and author of the introduction of the book, but also because I am sincerely thankful that your newspaper has attracted attention of your readers to the book that has already been published in six languages – Russian, Latvian, English, German, French and Hebrew. It is also pleasure to know that book is read not only in Latvia and other countries of the European Union (with whose help it was published), but also further abroad.

As we cared to mention in the annotation, this compilation of lectures is a popular science edition and not an academic research material. Its sole purpose it to give more publicity to results of the recent research of various historians. Therefore standards of an academic publication should not be applied here.

Also I would like to disagree with prof. Ezergailis on the matter that book serves the purpose of a counterpoint to the research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, who, according to the professor, had a very limited influence on the authors of the essays (i.e. lectures). On contrary, most of the factual material for the lectures was sourced from the research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, apart from the information on several settlements, which have not yet been covered by their research. Missing information was filled in using other published sources

as well as materials of local history museums and oral recollections of eyewitness' memories (the last ones used in the article by Josif Rochko).

It is pleasing that our compilation of the articles has been the cause of the in depth thoughts of the prof. Ezergailis and as a result have prompted him to write this lengthy (relative to the size of the whole review) essay on the global anti-Semitism, which, however, has no connection to the book he was reviewing. Our group of authors has never set out such a global goal for ourselves, but thought of much more modest aims: to summarise the destiny of the Jews in Latvia during the Second World War in a way accessible to the wide range of readers. That is why I will move on to the main topic or, more precisely, to the smallest part of the review, which author had named the 'Content'.

The flattering commentary on the introductory lecture on the Jewish community in Latvia in the time between the two World Wars will be very pleasing for the author, Boris Volkovich, however the note of the prof. Ezergailis that it is incorrect to write about the growth of the anti-Semitism in Latvia during the authoritarian regime of K. Ulmanis requires an in depth commentary. As a matter of fact, B. Volkovich is not writing about the growth of the anti-Semitism during that time; he is describing a sharp deterioration of the Jewish minority. Yes, regime did not allow any open propaganda of the anti-Semitism, although many Jewish organisations, schools and press was closed down, properties belonging to Jews were being nationalised, Jewish businesses had to close and many lost their jobs. Already in 1935 there were first waves of immigration of Jews to Palestine and Western countries. This way ethnocentric regime that was targeting all ethnic minorities did hit hard on the Jewish community as well. Therefore talking about that period as a 'golden age' for Jews, just like for everyone else, is a sign of retrograded utopian thinking.

In the overview of the lecture by Miriam Zalmanovich professor did not like, as he felt, very declaratory statement that main factor uniting the local Nazi collaborationists (more precisely 'self-appointed guards') was nationalistic disposition. (Many authors have indicated this fact through post-war years already before M. Zalmanovich.) Moreover, to serve the Nazis these people went alongside their ideological proximity, as Nazism is just a higher developed level of nationalism – its extreme form. (Even nowadays nationalism is one of the main threats to the existing world order – this has been identified numerous times in many international forums in the last decades.) And the fact that those people are guilty, as M. Zalmanovich states, in the murders of the Jews and looting of their property is directly derived from most of the research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia.

Now a bit more on another part of M. Zalmanovich's article. Not much time has passed since the moment of the great hustle around the extradition of the Nazi service-man Konrads Kalejs to Latvian structures of justice; it is still fresh in our memories. Readers probably remember well, that the case was slowed down and prolonged until the natural death of the subject of the extradition. What kind of lack of evidence can we talk about (and range of lawyers were commenting on this at the time) in case of bringing to the court a former commander of the unit in the notorious slaughter 'Arajs unit', and later the head of security of the Salaspils' concentration camp?

Certainly, the reviewer has all right to think that materials prepared by Grigory Smirin are not raising the quality of the book in general. However, in reality it is a shortened version of the article of the author that has been published in the 18th volume (2006) of the research by Commission of the Historians of Latvia, which, as we have seen before, is highly valued by the reviewer. In connection to criticism of the professor on the matter of the author's poor knowledge 'of the source materials' and facts also not being his strong side, I will allow myself

to cite an abstract from another review, this time of Latvian historian, who took his job more responsibly and read the aforementioned article by G. Smirin. This is what Arthur Zhvinklis writes in the "Journal of the Latvian Institute of History" (1st issue of 2007):

"The research of the doctor of history Grigory Smirin on the fate of the Jews of Riga during the Nazi occupation is characterised by the strength of facts and emotionality. Author's use of the eyewitnesses of Jews of Riga, who survived Holocaust, is very thoughtful and expressive, and gives a great example of research work on the sources about the Holocaust. Those, who have ever thought that there is too much spoken and written about the Holocaust, should definitely read this article. They would find out that during 2 days – November 30 and December 8 – in 1941 in Rumbula enormous and yet unseen in Latvian country death machine was in action; slaughtering 25 000 men, women, kids and elders, according to, so called, Eckeln method, the Nazis made alive people lie down on the already shot or people in agony over bleeding bodies and shot-through heads and wait for the bullet to come, just to make more efficient use of already pre-dug holes. This continued row by row until the holes were full (p.97). This was a culmination of the Holocaust in Latvia. But crimes did not end on that. The article is colourfully explaining how in the summer of 1944, in attempt to hide the evidences of their deeds, the Nazis were organizing labour teams, where Jewish man, who were still alive and able to work, were gathered, chained and made to reopen the collective graves, gather human remains and burn them in piles. When job was done, these men were killed and burned in the same fires (p.106). At the end of the article author also mentioned saviours of the Jews and in short followed destinies of murderers, and with pain had to admit that many were able to avoid any consequences of their deeds (p.108). The only issue where I would not agree to G. Smirin is on the fact that in the monography of A. Ezergailis destiny of the Jews (p.83) is not taking too much space, as actually there is specific chapter on murders of the Jews in Rumbula so A. Ezergailis does not deserve this comment."

As we can see, it speaks, about the memories of witnesses without which the picture of actual happenings can not be restored to a level of more than abstract schemes. This is the opinion of Dr. Smirin and that is the radical difference of his opinion to prof. Ezergailis, who in many of his own works with a poorly hidden irony is writing about those type of sources as sort of folklore, i.e. local spoken creative language (could it be because the nature of the evidence is so strikingly realistic and monstrous?).

Now about the ignorance of the other sources that is noted by the reviewer as a failure of the author. As Dr. Smirin explained to me, materials related to the court on the V. Arajs that took place in Germany are available in Riga in copied versions. Including all documents relating to the activities of the 'Arajs' unit' in Bikernieki and Rumbula, and he has thoroughly studied them – that is obvious from the text of his publication. However history of the creation of Latvian armed forces by Hitler is neither topic of our course of lectures, nor interest of the research of Dr. Smirin. We are not interested in that. While in the impressive monography of prof. Ezergailis "The Holocaust in the Latvia during the German occupation, 1941 – 1944" (Riga, 1999) this kind of information takes up lots of space. (That is, by the way, there the line on the destiny of Jews not 'taking too much space' is coming from.) That is why Dr. Smirin was using what such well renowned historian as prof. A. Ezergailis has written about those units in his widely popular monography. Namely, that on the first day of occupation of Riga on July 1st, 1941, Arajs with his people took over (not moved in or settled, but took over) prefecture of Riga (the head office of the police). At the same time prof. Ezergailis is quoting words of Arajs himself during the court process (p.206). Nonetheless, now, in his review, prof. Ezergailis is saying that is not true. Now he is considering also a mistake the fact that the first anti-Jewish actions in the city were lead by the Nazi appointed prefect of the Riga police department P. Shtiglitz. Maybe in the fragmented and poor (in the matters of our topic) archives of the Riga police department this information is

not present, but in this case Dr. Smirin took it from the before mentioned monography of the prof. Ezergailis (p.210).

So maybe one should first deal with his own mistakes before pointing a finger at the mistakes made by others?

We would have been thankful to the reviewer for comments that would be relevant to the merits of the content of our course of lectures that could have helped us in our future work. Apparently, professor did not have any comments of that kind.

The only issue where I would like to agree with prof. Ezergailis on the materials of Dr. Smirin is that naming the newspaper 'Tevija' pro-Nazi was too gentle of him. Professor is right; this poisonous newspaper printed by Latvian collaborationists was in the fullest sense of this word fascistic.

Also I would like to agree with reviewer that readers in Latvia and other countries of the European Union will have a very limited knowledge on murders of the Jews in small towns of Latvia. This was due to the current state of the historiography, of which our print is pure reflection. Moreover, too many of those crimes have been too terrible to show all of them in such a small and modest in size popular science compilation.

However I can not agree that this presentation is chaotic. In the lectures presented to the reader, events are covered in systematic manner throughout all settlements in Latvia, where Jewish population was 100 people and more, and in couple of cases even smaller than 100. Therefore I completely disagree with statement of the reviewer that our print is 'amateur, episodic and non-formal'. I think his comment (written with a certain degree of a smirking) on some 'ideological aim' or 'retro-literature', written from someone's dictation 'from the basements of the empire' is absolutely inappropriate.

Very irrelevant and offensive is also visual aid for the review: on the tablecloth with pattern of the red swastikas there are two books – one black with six-pointed star and another red with national emblem of the Russian Federation. What a cheap conduct!

Rabbi Menahem Barkagan,

The head of the board of religious community "Shamir"

Original source (in Russian):

http://shamir.lv/index.php?lang=ru&rub=1000&subrub=0&stat_id=84