



## **ON THE ECHOES OF ANTI-SEMITIC DEMAGOGUERY IN 2023**

*Historian Dr. Modestas Kuodys*

When working at Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum, I often have to deal with a very selective attitude of certain society groups towards the history of Lithuania, especially towards the terrible episode of the Holocaust. It is quite typical that various activists and politicians, fighting against global conspiracies, do not shy away from publicly expressing their anger at the excessive attention paid to the massacre of the Jews during the Nazi occupation and the biased assessment of this process, which is "pushed by the state." As the 80th anniversary of the destruction of Vilnius Ghetto is approaching this year, some ideas have been expressed very reminiscent of the so-called "two genocides" theory. The essence of this theory is the interpretation that the Jews, taking advantage of the Soviet power, were the first ones who started the extermination of Lithuanians, even with a plan (apparently prepared by the "Elders of Zion" [an allusion to the famous "anti-Semitic bible," "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" - M. K.]). Then Lithuanians allied with the Hitlerites and "decontaminated" the Jews themselves in the wide and deep pits in 1941-1944 just because they were defending themselves and had no other option. In other words, it has been tried to argue that there were two parallel genocides: the "Jewish-Soviet" genocide and the "Nazi" genocide in response. This was a cynical attempt to "justify" the extermination of almost 200,000 Lithuanian Jews initiated by the German occupiers, with the active participation of local collaborators. This dogma of sectarian belief appeared almost at the same time as "fait accompli." Later, during

the Soviet period, it smouldered in some private discussions, and during Lithuania's liberation from the "Red Empire" it was the subject of all kinds of marginal historical journalism. It is a good thing that under the conditions of freedom of speech, it quickly faded away, as if it had been "poured over" with the arguments of serious academic research. However, as it turns out now, the problem is not yet solved. On top of the dross that has not cooled down yet, some kerosene has been deliberately poured again. In 2023, accusations of Jews "abusing their victim status" and "contributing to the genocide of the Lithuanians" began to circulate on social networks and online "broadcasts" in the same way as the ghost of death hovered over the tightly-packed, dehumanised and tortured Vilnius ghetto in 1943. The experience of the Holocaust was also a huge psychological trauma for Lithuanian society. Many of those who accepted the inevitability of the massacre tried to distance themselves from the terrible tragedy in every way and passed on this attitude to later generations. The part of society that adheres to it has "blocked" a full and authentic picture of the past, retaining only the things to be proud of. Such self-deception cannot lead to a bright future.

The images of the Holocaust reality began to be erased from collective memory in Lithuania before the end of WWII. This was not only because in the autumn of 1943, the Nazis organised a rapid, "conveyor-type" dismantling of the largest mass graves and the burning of the bodies of those who had been shot. The destruction of evidence was reflected in a different way at the socio-cultural level. At that time, the legally published Lithuanian press did not write anything specific about the massacres of Jews that had been carried out throughout the country. Censorship did not allow this to be mentioned. Nevertheless, the horizons of the people at that time were not limited to newspapers. They knew much, and not only from what they heard around. Yet, many of them took a vow of silence, if not of oblivion at that time or a little later. However, the desire to free oneself from such a state remained. It is still relevant today. This is possible, but it is necessary not to shy away from confronting the past and not to be afraid of the

truth; it is important to acknowledge it and protect it from distortion. However, for many people the opposite behaviour is also very attractive: to persistently and fanatically "bounce back" from that truth, trying to "compromise" it and "re-create" it in their own favour. Hence the hysterical resistance to the reminder of the past can be observed and the desire to get drunk on the morphine of egoistic "patriotism" for the sake of self-anesthesia. As a result, some figures who supposedly sacrificed themselves for the interests of Lithuania are put on a pedestal and even recklessly defended despite the fact that they, if not openly collaborated with the Nazis, then at least flirted with them. On the other hand, such condescension and respect does not "flatter" the memory of any Soviet henchman. It should be noted that legally both occupying totalitarian regimes are officially considered to be the same evil in Lithuania today, with the same condemnation of their symbolism, genocidal ideology and practices. It is a shame that there are still people who think that the Nazi occupiers were slightly better than the Soviets. The reasoning behind this attitude is easy to guess: the former killed fewer Lithuanians and more Jews and other "inferior races." Only because of this. Anyway, Hitler did not want or promise to create an independent Lithuania as he planned to annex the country to the Third Reich, "clean" it and colonise it. The Führer divided peoples and social groups into those of greater and lesser value, and those who had no right to exist at all. These principles had to be confessed, at least publicly, by all those who worked with the Nazi occupiers. With respect to moral assessment, it is not so important that some prominent Third Reich henchmen in the Lithuanian administrative bodies or military structures did not personally shoot anyone and did not even approve of the massacres. Sometimes this is even documented. However, they served or at least expressed restrained loyalty to the regime that systematically committed crimes against humanity that are hard to comprehend. It is not fair to extract from a particular section of the past only the useful and heroic evidence and to deny or conceal the inconvenient or unpleasant facts. In other words, to give in to the desire to "separate the flies from the meatballs." After all, this is the principle that has been repeatedly called for by the greatest war criminal of our time, sitting in the

Kremlin or some secret bunker. Sometimes one can note a very strange overlap between the views of this "Great Denazifier" and those of Lithuanian radicals. What is it that the latter then resent when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is justified and Lithuania's "voluntary" entry into the Soviet Union is explained? After all, it was all for the sake of victory in the "Great Patriotic War;" the victims must not complain and "humiliate" the aggressor. Thus, the "saviours of honour" of both the large and the small country only like a story that supports the desired myth. That is why, when critics point at heinous crimes, the "defamed" explain about "the heroic past," "the great leaders" and "the glorious deeds." In their opinion, history should only inspire, not teach. This is how the passion for erecting monuments not to symbols of humanity but to idols of political power can be explained. The manipulation of the theme of "historical honour or self-respect of a nation" even by blaming the victims themselves for imaginary "insults" is an old favourite rhetorical trick of the most vile demagogues. It is not only convenient, but also costs nothing, unlike the populist promises of material prosperity for everyone according to their need. Thus, such figures are becoming more active when the conditions are best for them to bastardise Lithuania in front of the whole civilised world, when the elections are approaching.

This essay has aimed at reminding of this as well as emphasising the importance of guarding against demagoguery, which can turn a person who has not studied history into an involuntary hostage of deliberately instigated primitive hatred, immoral "pragmatism" and mythologised images of the past. There are many ways to defend oneself in the face of such a threat, but one of the simplest ones is to visit Kaunas Ninth Fort or other similar museums on a regular basis.



Fragment of the defensive wall and moat porch of Kaunas Ninth Fort. During most of the Nazi occupation, executions of individuals or small groups of condemned persons were carried out here. It is also one of the places on the fort territory where, from November 1943 onwards, the remains unearthed in the massacre field were burnt. This way, the Nazis, anticipating their defeat in the war, tried to hide the traces of the genocide. A photograph taken by Povilas Karpavičius in 1975 shows an example of such a bonfire, recreated by museum staff. Along with firewood, about 300 decomposed bodies (which had been lying in the ground for almost two years) were stacked in one large square pile. Pouring petrol or kerosene over it (two empty metal barrels can be seen next to it) quickly ignited the fire. This is how this kind of open-air crematorium worked day after day. The Nazis did not manage to burn all the remains of those who were shot before they left Kaunas (the summer of 1944). Therefore, there was no shortage of material for forensic investigations. Collections of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum (KDFM 954)