Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

Published by Central European University Press

Stach, Stephan, et al.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94691.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94691

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3197378
tion. Thus, they were included in the memorial activities taking place at this site. Survivor of the Kaunas ghetto and former Jewish partisan, Alex Faitelson, writes in his memoirs that he gave numerous lectures in Soviet Lithuania, and even in Moscow, where he spoke about the Nazi crimes and even called for the fort to be turned into a museum.23

Creation of a Commemorative Idiom: Antifascism and the (Im)possibility of the Jewish Narrative of the Holocaust in the Ninth Fort Museum

On May 30, 1959, the museum officially opened with an exhibition in four cells that presented Nazi war crimes in Lithuania. The museum’s exhibition confronted visitors with emotionally charged texts and objects (see figure 5.1). It aimed at displaying “evidence”: documents, photographs, inscriptions on the walls, and personal belongings of the murdered, including prosthetic limbs, human hair, and bones. These objects were often left unexplained; they evoked deep emotions but had limited didactic value. The failure to identify specifically Jewish victims in the exhibition was a historic oversight, as during World War II the Ninth Fort had primarily been a mass murder site for Jews. In the 1960s, new research work and excavation of the mass graves began to search for more forensic evidence of the Nazi crimes in the Ninth Fort, which led to more and more objects for exhibition. The aim of this research was to define the exact boundaries of the mass murder site and to collect proof that could be displayed in the museum exhibits.24

The Soviet authorities declared the opening ceremony of the Ninth Fort Museum to be a public demonstration against the Nazis and their collaborators.25 During this event, the First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus delivered a speech. In it he declared that the Ninth Fort Museum was not only a reminder of the victims of fascist violence but, first and foremost, symbolized the heroic struggle of the Soviet people that ended in victory.26 In his speech, he also identified the ethnic background of

25 “Garbė žuvusiems kovotojams! Amžinai atminsime fašizmo aukas! Mitingas skirtas Kauno devintojo forto muziejaus atidarymui [Respect to the dead fighters! We will remember forever the victims of fascism! Demonstration dedicated to the opening of the ninth fort museum],” Tiesa, May 31, 1959.
the victims: “Among the victims of the fascists there were people of different nationalities: Lithuanians, Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, and Poles.” He also mentioned the names of the perpetrators responsible for the mass murders in the Ninth Fort, like Kazys Škirpa, the founder of the antisemitic Lithuanian Activist Front, and Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, who served as the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Lithuania from June 1941 to August 1941. Sniečkus also reminded his audience of the collaboration of the Lithuanian Catholic Church and its priests with the Nazis. He stated that the Ninth Fort represented direct evidence of the mass exterminations and thus the Soviet people had to be careful that such cruel crimes would never be repeated again. It might be claimed that the museum had a forward-

---

27 Cited according to “Garbė žuvusiems kovotojams!” 1.
28 “Garbė žuvusiems kovotojams!” 1.
29 “Garbė žuvusiems kovotojams!” 1.
looking political goal, namely that any fight against the Soviet regime was to be seen as the continuation of fascist crimes.

Historian Jonathan Huener, in his book on *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979*, writes that during the communist period, a “memorial site could function as a political aesthetic for the communist government, historical revisionism or vigilance toward a Western security threat and not as a metonym for the Shoah.”30 This was obviously the case for the Ninth Fort Museum, which was primarily defined as a memorial site for the revolutionary struggle and proletarian internationalism. In this Soviet commemorative framework, even Jewish victims from foreign countries who were executed in the Ninth Fort were turned into international proletarians. Their names inscribed on the walls of the fort’s cells were displayed in the exhibition and included in the publications about the Ninth Fort. The language of war commemoration in the Ninth Fort Museum was that of class struggle. Nazis and their Lithuanian helpers were “bourgeois nationalists,” while victims were “proletarians,” who suffered from the crimes of fascism and racism.

However, after Stalin’s reign of terror ended, Lithuanian Jews found it easier to breathe in Soviet Lithuania. According to Lithuanian historian Samuelis Barnajus, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Lithuanian Jewish community flourished, for example the renowned Jewish dance and song ensemble *Fajerlech* (headed by Jakovas Magidas), which still exists today, was founded in 1971.31 Historians Atamukas and Barnajus, the two main authors who have studied Jewish life in Soviet Lithuania in depth, have both noted that the Soviet Lithuanian government was relatively liberal towards Jews in comparison to other Soviet republics, and Lithuania was seen as “the island” where Jews could foster their own cultural heritage.32 According to Atamukas, there are several reasons why Lithuanian Jews managed to display Jewish culture more openly. First, he highlights the traditionally high level of Jewish national consciousness in Lithuania.33 Second, in

contrast to other Soviet republics like Latvia and Estonia, in Lithuania, many leading communist figures were native Lithuanians. Some of these politicians had strong connections with Jews. They had spent years together in jail or fought together against Nazi Germany.\(^{34}\) Justas Paleckis, who until 1967 was the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR,\(^ {35}\) was a friend of the famous Jewish poet and partisan Avrom Sutzkever.\(^ {36}\) Such Jewish connections, Barnajus and Atamukas argue, made these communist officials motivated to successfully confront antisemitic policies emanating from Moscow. Moreover, the Soviet regime chose Vilna as the representative city for Jewish culture and heritage to demonstrate that Jewish culture was also blossoming in the Soviet Union.\(^ {37}\) The Soviet news agency regularly reported internationally on the cultural activities of Vilna Jews.\(^ {38}\) However, historian Aurimas Švedas, who also affirms that in Soviet Lithuania antisemitism was not so intense as in other parts of the Soviet Union, explains this phenomenon differently. He claims that lessened degree of antisemitism was not due to the politics of Sniečkus and the “soft” position of the Lithuanian Communist Party, but rather a consequence of there being few Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Lithuania.\(^ {39}\) Only 5 to 10 percent of Lithuanian Jews survived the war; more than 195,000 of them were killed.\(^ {40}\)

80 percent of the Jewish population of Lithuania had been already executed by the end of 1941. In fact, most of Lithuanian Jewry perished during the first days of the war, even before the ghettos were created in July and August 1941; in provincial areas, many Jews were killed immediately not far from their homes.\(^ {41}\)

\(^{34}\) Atamukas, *Lietu vos žydy kelias*, 321.

\(^{35}\) The Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.


\(^{37}\) Atamukas, *Lietu vos žydy kelias*, 322.

\(^{38}\) Atamukas, *Lietu vos žydy kelias*, 322.

\(^{39}\) Aurimas Švedas and Irena Veisaitė, *Gyvenimas turėtų būti skaidrus* [Life should be transparent] (Vilnius: Aukso žuvys, 2016), 232.


The estimated percentage of Jews murdered in Lithuania was one of the largest in Europe. Most Jews, the main objects of Soviet antisemitism, had simply perished and so, Švedas claims, without them there was naturally less antisemitism.

Whatever the nature of antisemitism in Soviet Lithuania, the opening ceremony of the Ninth Fort Museum honored both communist bureaucrats and Lithuanian Jews who had been imprisoned in the fort’s cells or lost their relatives there. And they were not invisible participants. On the contrary, Lithuanian Jewish partisans who escaped the Ninth Fort were allowed to speak publicly and tell their memories about the Ninth Fort (see figure 5.2). Even the official photographer from the opening ceremony had connections to former Jewish inmates of the fort. Povilas Karpavičius, an official state photographer, was assigned after the war to photograph the traces of the Nazi crimes in Soviet Lithuania. Karpavičius, like other inhabitants of Kaunas, knew exactly what was happening

42 Compared to approximately 95 percent in Latvia, 90 percent in Poland, and over 80 percent in Germany.
in the Ninth Fort. His close Jewish friends, the family Rozenblat, which included two small children, were interned in the Kaunas ghetto, and Karpavičius, along with his wife Alevtina, “supported them at every opportunity.”

43 In April 1944, he sheltered their daughter, a four-year-old girl named Ginda Rozenblat, at his home in a secret hiding place inside the piano.

After the opening of the Ninth Fort Museum, many Lithuanian Jewish partisans published their memoirs from the Kaunas ghetto and retold the crimes committed in the fort. Their books were illustrated with photographs by the Lithuanian Jewish photographer interned in the Kaunas ghetto, George Kadish. Some of their publications even made the ethnic identification of Jewish victims explicit. These publications were less subject to Soviet censorship as they were written in the Lithuanian language and distributed locally, so the communist authorities in Moscow most likely did not see them as a threat to their dominant antifascist narrative. Of course, first and foremost, their memories were embedded in the heroic narrative of Soviet resistance against the Nazi regime. Nonetheless, antifascist ideology, which was instrumentalized for political ends, provided a possibility to speak about the Nazi crimes against Jews specifically. It served as an arena for Lithuanian Jews to commemorate the Holocaust and to present, at least partly, their narrative of the past. This contributed to a far richer understanding of World War II and the Holocaust in Soviet Lithuania than it is usually believed.

Medialization of the Ninth Fort as a Site of Memory in Soviet Lithuania: Narrative(s) of Male Martyrdom

The memories of victims in the Ninth Fort were channeled through many different forms of media. The majority of Soviet publications, memoirs, documentaries, and feature-length films based on the history of the Ninth Fort were re-


44 Yad Vashem, “The Righteous Among the Nations. The Karpavičius Family.”

45 See footnote no. 5 of this chapter.

46 George Kadish documented the life of the inmates of the Kaunas Ghetto. He secretly took pictures with his handmade camera through the buttonhole of his coat or over the window-sill. After the war, he emigrated to the USA, however, some of his pictures remained in Soviet Lithuania.

47 There were more publications related to the Holocaust that managed to avoid censorship in Soviet Lithuania. One of the most prominent cases was the book published by Sofija Binkienė about the rescuers of Lithuanian Jews, published in 1967. See Sofija Binkienė, ed., Ir be ginklo kariai [Untitled fighters] (Vilnius: Mintis, 1967).