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Neighbors Look to *Neighbors*: Debates over the Holocaust in Lithuania

Abstract

Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbors*, published twenty-five years ago, provoked a significant public debate on the Holocaust in Poland, with political fallout in Poland and throughout Central and Eastern Europe. This article examines similar debates over the Holocaust in Lithuania, provoked by the popular publications of Rūta Vanagaitė and Silvia Foti. Coming from outside academia, the personal and engaged non-fiction works of these authors have played an important role in bridging the gap between academic historical research and public reckoning with the past by squarely addressing the dark legacy of local collaboration with the Nazi administration, the participation of some "ordinary" Lithuanians in genocide, along with the complex biographies of certain leaders of the anti-Soviet resistance.

Keywords

Holocaust in Lithuania, Holocaust research, collaboration, memory, autobiography

Lithuanian historians of the Holocaust pay close attention to Polish historiography of the Holocaust in Vilnius and the Vilnius region, including mass murder sites like Ponary.¹ They also recognize the leading role played by

¹ Dariusz Stola and Natalia Aleksion, "Polska historiografia w zagranicznych badaniach Zagłady: zwiad w gęstniejącym lesie," in *Człowiek twórcą historii*, vol. 7: *Miejsce historii w edukacji humanistycznej w XXI w.*, part 1, ed. by Cezary Kuklo and Wojciech Walczak (Białystok: Uniwersytet w Białymstoku, 2024), p. 93.

Polish scholars in shaping the content and context of Holocaust studies. In this regard, the publication of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* occupies a special place.² Although the book was never translated and published in Lithuania, professional historians working on the Holocaust know and use it in their research, either on the basis of the Polish-language original or the English edition published in 2001. The intellectual response and political fallout from the debates over *Neighbors*, which include efforts to politicize history and put pressure on scholars, extended beyond the borders of Poland to affect all Central and Eastern Europe. In this manner, the relevance of this book extends beyond Poland to the evolution of "historical policy" (*polityka historyczna*) and public history in Lithuania and throughout the region.³

In the case of Lithuania, the Lithuanian government has never adopted an official *polityka historyczna*. The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, LGGRTC) is frequently accused of politicization, but it is by no means the only nor even a leading voice within Lithuania on the history and memory of the Holocaust. In response to an open letter signed by several historians at the institution, protesting the politicization of historical research by the department responsible for memorialization, the Lithuanian Parliament replaced the top leadership and imposed a supervisory board composed of scholars from leading institutes and universities.⁴ Meanwhile, other Lithuanian scholars, together with colleagues across Europe, have promoted the development of *public history* as a means of engaging the public on historical issues to strengthen democracy and social resilience.⁵ Despite these differing institutional contexts and a lack of an official *polityka historyczna*, the recent debates and controversies in Lithuania over the Holocaust and collaboration with the Nazi occupation still share striking similarities with the discussions in Poland.

² Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Polish edition: *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2000).

³ Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Marci Shore, "Conversing with Ghosts: Jedwabne, Żydokomuna, and Totalitarianism," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 2 (2005): 345–74; Dariusz Stola, "Scholars and Coming to Terms with the Holocaust in Poland," *Jewish Historical Studies* 53, no. 10 (2021): 136–51; Kornelia Kończal, "Politics of Innocence: Holocaust Memory in Poland," *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (2022): 250–63.

⁴ Violeta Davoliūtė, "Trials and Tribulations: The Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre Reconsidered," *Cultures of History Forum*, September 29, 2021, DOI: 10.25626/0131.

⁵ See, for example, the Horizon Europe program led by Vilnius University called Europast (2022–2025): www.europast.vu.lt.

This paper takes the reception of *Neighbors* as a point of departure for examining the question of engaging the public with the difficult past in a regional context. To do this, it examines the publication and reception in Lithuania of Rūta Vanagaitė's *Mūsiškiai* (Our people, 2016), as well as an autobiographical article published by Silvia Foti (2018) entitled "My Grandfather Wasn't a Nazi-Fighting War Hero – He Was a Brutal Collaborator."⁶ The article served as a crucial breaking point in public discourse and was later expanded into a full-length memoir, *The Nazi's Granddaughter*, which was also translated into Lithuanian.⁷ These texts provoked a significant debate in Lithuania over the Holocaust and collaboration with the Nazi administration which, as in Poland, had a significant impact on the politics of memory and even on academic historical research.

As distinct from Jan T. Gross, however, these authors – one Lithuanian, the other an American of Lithuanian extraction – are not professional historians. In North America, their works would be found in bookstores under the convenient label of "non-fiction." In the German tradition of literary criticism and historical scholarship, they might be classified as second- or third-generation memory of the Holocaust.⁸ When considered against the backdrop of the debates surrounding *Neighbors*, it must be acknowledged that the authors of these works have played an important role in bridging the gap between academic research and public perception by openly and even provocatively addressing local collaboration with the Nazi administration, the participation of "ordinary" Lithuanians in genocide and the plunder of Jewish property, and examining the complex biographies of certain leaders of the anti-Soviet resistance. In this respect, their function in the public sphere, if not their methodology, ran parallel to that of Gross in Poland. They forced a public confrontation with difficult historical truths that academic historiography had not, up to that point, successfully brought to a mainstream audience.

Stages of Holocaust Memory in Lithuania

Before analyzing the primary texts, it is essential to contextualize the evolution of Holocaust memory in Lithuania following the restoration of its independence. Under Soviet rule, the particularity of the Jewish genocide went unacknowledged. Official narratives identified the victims of Nazi Germany's genocidal policies as "Soviet people" writ large, thereby largely erasing the

⁶ Rūta Vanagaitė, *Mūsiškiai* (Vilnius: Alma littera, 2016); Silvia Foti, "My Grandfather Wasn't a Nazi-Fighting War Hero – He Was a Brutal Collaborator," *Salon*, July 14, 2018, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.salon.com/2018/07/14/my-grandfather-didnt-fight-the-nazis-as-family-lore-told-it-he-was-a-brutal-collaborator/>.

⁷ Silvia Foti, *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather Was a War Criminal* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2021).

⁸ Violeta Davoliūtė, "Genealogical Writing and Memory of the Holocaust in Lithuania," *East European Jewish Affairs* 51, no. 1 (2021): 70–85.

specific targeting of Jews and other groups.⁹ To fit local collaborators into a Marxist-Leninist framework, they were ideologically stripped of their national motivations and summarily categorized as “bourgeois nationalists.” According to Irena Veisaitė, a literary scholar and survivor of the Holocaust, the survivors of the Holocaust in the Soviet occupied Lithuania were afraid to speak openly about their experiences during the war, since the atmosphere was unfriendly and hostile.¹⁰

In parallel, the Lithuanian diaspora often obfuscated the fact of Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust. This phenomenon stemmed partly from the self-serving revisionism of those émigrés who were themselves collaborators. More broadly, however, it functioned as a defense mechanism against Soviet propaganda, which deliberately sought to taint the legitimacy of all anti-Soviet resistance by conflating it with Nazi collaboration.¹¹

These deeply entrenched narratives in both occupied Lithuania and the diaspora created a hostile environment for public discussion. For instance, when the celebrated poet and scholar Tomas Venclova called for a sincere dialogue about Lithuanian complicity in his 1975 samizdat essay, “Jews and Lithuanians,” he was rebuffed by intellectuals on both sides of the Iron Curtain.¹² His plea was countered with the so-called “double genocide” theory, a false equivalency which posited that Lithuanian collaboration was a justifiable reaction to alleged Jewish participation in Soviet atrocities.¹³

Another attempt at dialogue was similarly quashed in 1982. Leonid Olschwang, a survivor of the Holocaust in Plungė, submitted an article to the Lithuanian exile newspaper *Tėviškės žiburiai* (Lights of the Homeland) that blamed Lithuanians for their collaboration. The editor, Catholic priest Pranas Gaida, rejected it, explaining that “the Lithuanian community would reject your

⁹ While the dominant narrative erased Jewish specificity, some attempts were made to incorporate the history of the Jewish genocide into the broader narrative of World War II, even during the Soviet period. See Arkadi Zeltser, “The Holocaust in the Public Discourse of Soviet Belorussia and Lithuania,” in *The Holocaust in the East in the Public Discourse of the Post-Communist Countries*, ed. by Zvi Gitelman and David Shneer (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024), pp. 165–88; Violeta Davoliūtė, “The Habitus of Holocaust Reckoning during the Thaw in Soviet Lithuania,” in *Ethnic Relations in the Baltic Reconsidered*, ed. by Bradley Woodworth, Violeta Davoliūtė and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam: CEU Press, 2026), pp. 327–50.

¹⁰ Aurimas Švedas, *Irena Veisaitė. Gyvenimas turi būti skaidrus* [Irena Veisaitė: Life must be transparent] (Vilnius: Aukso žuvis, 2016), p. 20.

¹¹ Gintarė Malinauskaitė, *Mediated Memories: Narratives and Iconographies of the Holocaust in Lithuania* (Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2019), pp. 85–86.

¹² Tomas Venclova, “Žydai ir lietuviai” [Jews and Lithuanians], *Akiračiai*, no. 1 (1977): 4–5, 15.

¹³ A. Žuvinas, “Lietuviai ir žydai (Atviras laiškas Tomui Venclovai)” [Lithuanians and Jews (an open letter to Tomas Venclova)], in *Vilties formos: eseistika ir publicistika*, by Tomas Venclova (Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1992), pp. 38–43.

article as unreliable merely for the fact that you were a Soviet army officer.”¹⁴ These represent two of the most prominent, though ultimately thwarted, public calls for reckoning with the dark legacy of the Holocaust and local collaboration during the Soviet era.

A more systematic social reckoning with the legacy of collaboration did not take place before the restoration of independence in 1990. The evolution of public memory concerning the Holocaust since then has been marked by several overlapping stages, driven by the convergence of various perspectives on the Second World War from previously isolated and diverse communities of memory.

The first stage, which could be characterized as the nationalization of memory, was driven by a concern with consolidating the popular movement against Soviet rule around the repressed narrative of resistance and victimization. This period was marked by the publication of memoirs of Soviet deportees and a nation-wide effort to collect first-hand testimony to the crimes committed by the Soviets during World War II and its aftermath. In this context, the specific memory of the Holocaust was often overshadowed by the focus on Soviet-era suffering.

The second stage could be described as the Europeanization of Holocaust memory beginning in 1997–1999, when the first international conferences on the topic were organized, new research was published, and international commissions for the investigation of Nazi and Soviet crimes were established.¹⁵ This stage witnessed the appearance of a critical historiography of the Holocaust in Lithuania, a certain institutional intent to accept responsibility for the role of Lithuanians in the occupational regimes, and the formal integration of Jewish history into the national narrative of the Second World War. This stage was also marked by an effort to secure greater recognition in Western Europe for the distinct experience of World War II and the brutalities of the Soviet occupation in East Central Europe.¹⁶

The third stage of Holocaust memory arguably began several years after Lithuania joined the European Union in 2004. This stage was marked by the gradual popularization and commercialization of historical memory, the proliferation of memory actors, including transnational networks, and the rise of grassroots initiatives of all kinds. Following Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and especially since the full-scale war launched in

¹⁴ Malinauskaitė, *Mediated Memories*, p. 65.

¹⁵ Dovilė Budrytė, “The Construction of Mnemonic Conflicts about the Holocaust in Lithuania: Tensions, Contradictions, Contestations,” in *War and Remembrance II: World War II and the Holocaust between Tabooization and Competing Narratives in Post-Socialist Europe*, ed. by Paul Srodecki and Daria Kozlova (Leiden: Brill Schöningh, 2025), pp. 105–30.

¹⁶ Violeta Davoliūtė, “The Securitization of Memory and the Practice of Public History in the Baltic States,” in *Defending Memory in Global Politics: Mnemonical In/Security and Crisis*, ed. by Erica Resende, Dovilė Budrytė, and Douglas Becker (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 52–70.

2022, memory politics have been profoundly influenced by the glorification of the armed anti-Soviet resistance and a tendency to securitize discussions of identity and the past.¹⁷ This has created a palpable friction, where the imperative to honor the anti-Soviet resistance is in tension with the moral and scholarly need to honestly confront the collaboration of some anti-Soviet partisans in the Holocaust.¹⁸

From Neighbors to Our People

Published in 2016, *Mūsiškiai* appeared just as the above-mentioned popular campaigns to elevate anti-Soviet partisans as the highest example of public virtue began to rise in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine.¹⁹ Against this background, Vanagaitė's chosen method of very frank, polemical, straightforward, and even abrasive engagement with the implication of Lithuanians in the Holocaust put the matter on the public agenda as never before. Her practical engagement in questions of national memory dates to 2008, when she established an experiential museum in a former Soviet military bunker, where visitors could "re-live" the brutalities of the Soviet system. Later, she developed another EU-funded project that enabled Lithuanians to learn about Jewish culture through cultural re-enactments.²⁰ *Mūsiškiai* would continue with this effort to make the past come alive – and to make it bite.

Mūsiškiai was launched as a public event. It was released on January 26, 2016 – the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Several local celebrities took part in the launch, including a popular Catholic priest, a famous Lutheran pastor, and Efraim Zuroff, a representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and a harsh critic of the Lithuanian government's track record on the prosecution of Holocaust perpetrators. Zuroff partnered closely with Vanagaitė in the conceptualization of the book, and the couple made a tour of Holocaust sites across Lithuania to gather material. He is listed as a co-author of the English translation of the book.²¹

As mentioned, *Mūsiškiai* is a hybrid work, a collage of essays and sketches, some written by Vanagaitė, who discovered that her grandfather was a member of the commission that compiled a list of Jews in the town of Kavarskas, some by other authors, combining subjective expression and documentary materials. Although the book incorporates a diverse range of materials, the author's distinct

¹⁷ Davoliūtė, "The Securitization of Memory," pp. 52–70.

¹⁸ Dovilė Budrytė, "The Complexity of Memory after Communism: Multiple Actors, Multiple Memories?" *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 1 (2022): 171–76.

¹⁹ Viktorija Rimaitė-Beržiūnienė, "Visual Securitization: Commemorating the Partisan War in Lithuanian Foreign and Security Policy," *Politologija* 106, no. 2 (2022): 11–52.

²⁰ These projects are summarized in Vanagaitė, *Mūsiškiai*, pp. 26–27.

²¹ Rūta Vanagaitė and Efraim Zuroff, *Our People: Discovering Lithuania's Hidden Holocaust* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

voice gives the text a strong coherence and personal character. The narrative is addressed to the “average Lithuanian,” provocatively presumed by Vanagaitė to be an ignorant *Homo sovieticus* and a virulent antisemite. It includes several long citations taken from Soviet-era trials, in which Lithuanian collaborators interrogated by Soviet investigators after the war confess to shooting, killing, and stealing property from persecuted Jews. While the unfiltered presentation of these archival materials was widely criticized as sensationalist, the director of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, Markas Zingeris (1947–2023), saw value in the “shock therapy” it provided in changing the attitude of ordinary Lithuanians, who saw the Holocaust as something external to their individual, family, and national history.²²

Zingeris expressed what was probably a minority opinion. By way of contrast, Marius Pečiulis, then serving as the deputy director for museology at the Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum, emphasized that the main goal when dealing with the topic of the Holocaust should be to educate society rather than to shock it, stating that complex historical topics should not be presented by taking facts out of context.²³ Vidmantas Valiušaitis, a stridently partisan memory activist and advisor to the former director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (Adas Jakubauskas, June 2020–April 2021), argued that Vanagaitė displays a lack of knowledge of legal and political categories and facts, instead using rhetorical figures to explain events by invoking a “god of Lithuanian hatred for Jews.” He emphasized that Vanagaitė does not verify facts or assess the reliability of sources, as historians must, and that her use of KGB interrogation files is problematic because these were prepared by professional perpetrators of totalitarian repression who aimed to compromise their victims.²⁴

Other commentators, like Ronaldas Račinskas, director of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania (Tarptautinė komisija nacių ir sovietinio okupacinių režimų nusikaltimams Lietuvoje įvertinti), questioned the authors’ motives, alleging that Zuroff and Vanagaitė sought to incite discord and to spread lies about Lithuania’s

²² Markas Zingeris, “M. Zingeris apie R. Vanagaitės knygą: tai šoko terapija” [M. Zingeris on R. Vanagaitė’s book: It’s shock therapy], *Delfi.lt*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/m-zingeris-apie-r-vanagaites-knyga-tai-soko-terapija.d?id=70224162>. All translations from Lithuanian are those of the authors.

²³ “Holokausto tyrinėtojai: visuomenę reikia šviesti, o ne šokiruoti” [Holocaust researchers: The public needs to be educated, not shocked], *Bernardinai.lt*, December 7, 2017, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2017-12-07-holokausto-tyrinetojai-visuomene-reikia-sviesti-o-ne-sokiruoti/>.

²⁴ Vidmantas Valiušaitis, “Dar kartą apie ‘Mūsų škius’: visa tiesa apie skandalingą knygą” [Once again about ‘Our people’: The whole truth about the scandalous book], *Lrytas.lt*, March 17, 2016, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.lrytas.lt/kultura/istorija/2016/03/17/news/dar-karta-apie-musiskius-visa-tiesa-apie-skandalinga-knyga-861191>.

past and present abroad.²⁵ Representatives of the academic community, like Nerijus Šepetys, a historian at Vilnius University, underlined that “*Mūsiškiai* inhibits one’s attentiveness and sensitivity towards the tragedy of Lithuanian Jews, it undermines one’s motivation to look deep into the realities of the past, because neither the tragedy nor its memory is of any concern to the authors.”²⁶

One thing is for sure. The debates fueled interest in the book, and it became a national bestseller. By fall of 2017, it was already in its fourth printing. The debates were followed by other public initiatives to commemorate victims of the Holocaust and to discuss collaboration during the Nazi occupation. One of the commemoration events took place in Molėtai in August 2016. According to Marius Ivaškevičius, writer and one of the organizers of this event, Lithuanians must rethink the difficult past and find an appropriate place for the history of Lithuanian Jews and the Holocaust in the “grand narrative” of the history of Lithuania.²⁷

The publication of *Mes nežudėme* (We did not kill) by Arkadijus Vinokuras, an essayist, media commentator and member of the Lithuanian Jewish community, sparked further discussions. The book, which presents the position of the descendants of collaborators, takes the stand that children are not responsible for the crimes committed by their parents. Vinokuras cites, for example, the grandson of Pranas Purnas, a Lithuanian security police officer who collaborated with the German SS to plan the massacres of the Jews in Švenčionys (Pol. Świeciany): “It is our history [...] it is important for me that my children know this. My children know everything and have made the necessary conclusions [...]. They know how to recognize the evil.”²⁸

Unfortunately, this wave of productive debate and discussion sparked by the publication of *Mūsiškiai* was cut short by an unexpected development. In October 2017, Vanagaitė’s publisher decided to remove all of her books, including *Mūsiškiai*, from circulation. The trigger for this extraordinary decision was a comment made by Vanagaitė, suggesting that the anti-Soviet partisan leader Adolfas Ramanauskas, nom de guerre Vanagas (Hawk, 1918–1957), had collaborated with the Nazis and the Soviets, and that evidence of his torture at the hands of the Soviets was doctored. The reaction to these statements, which Vanagaitė later recognized as unfounded, especially during the time of preparations for the centennial anniversary of this anti-Soviet partisan leader

²⁵ “Holokausto tyrinėtojai”

²⁶ Nerijus Šepetys, “Jūsiškiai – mums ne mūsiškiai” [Your people – not our people], *Delfi.lt*, April 25, 2016, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/n-sepetys-jusiskiai-mums-ne-musiskiai-71032318>.

²⁷ Marius Ivaškevičius, “Žydai. Lietuvos prakeiksmas” [Jews: the curse of Lithuania], *Delfi.lt*, May 18, 2016, accessed October 7, 2025, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/m-ivaskevicius-zydai-lietuvos-prakeiksmas-71273626>.

²⁸ Arkadijus Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme* [We did not kill] (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2017), pp. 156–57.

and amid state-level initiatives to honor his memory, was stormy, marked by a robust public campaign to ostracize Vanagaitė and to boycott her publisher.²⁹

This campaign was initiated by journalist, television personality, and social media activist Andrius Tapinas, himself an author of locally popular bestsellers published by *Alma littera*. In an open letter, he threatened to cut ties with the publishing house if they did not react to her statements and proceeded to publish her latest book, *Višta strimelės galva* (Chicken with the head of a Baltic herring).³⁰ Faced with this threat, Vanagaitė's publisher announced that it would pulp the roughly 27,000 copies of her books, *Mūsiškiai* among them, that it had in stock, creating an international outrage insofar as this action appeared to corroborate reports of rising revisionism and populism throughout East Central Europe.³¹

Since then, Vanagaitė essentially withdrew from public life in Lithuania. However, she later co-authored another Holocaust-related book, a conversation with the German historian and Holocaust researcher Christoph Dieckmann about the process of the Holocaust in Lithuania, titled *Kaip tai įvyko?* (How did it happen?).³² Unlike *Mūsiškiai*, this book did not ignite any significant public debate. The book was praised by international scholars and some reviewers in Lithuania who underlined how it made the complex details of the Nazi occupation accessible to the general reader.³³

The debates over Jan Gross's *Neighbors* and Rūta Vanagaitė's *Mūsiškiai* had similarities in many ways. Both books provoked enormous public debates about

²⁹ Mindaugas Jackevicius, "Public Letter by R. Vanagaitė: I Admit I Was Mistaken," *The Lithuania Tribune*, November 3, 2017, accessed May 23, 2025, <https://lithuaniatribune.com/public-letter-by-r-vanagaite-i-admit-i-was-mistaken/>.

³⁰ "Po Andriaus Tapino kreipimosi į 'Alma littera' leidyklą iš prekybos šalinamos visos Rūtos Vanagaitės knygos" [After Andriaus Tapino's appeal to the 'Alma littera' publishing house, all of Rūta Vanagaitė's books are being removed from sale], *15min.lt*, October 27, 2017, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://zmones.15min.lt/naujiena/po-andriaus-tapino-kreipimosi-i-alma-littera-leidykla-is-prekybos-salinamos-visos-rutos-vanagaite-knygos-ljBR08M9Qxq>. Rūta Vanagaitė, *Višta strimelės galva* (Vilnius: Alma littera, 2017).

³¹ Masha Gessen, "How a Single Remark Stole a Lithuanian Writer's Livelihood," *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2017, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/how-a-single-remark-stole-a-lithuanian-writers-livelihood>.

³² Christoph Dieckmann and Rūta Vanagaitė, *Kaip tai įvyko? Christoph Dieckmann atsako Rūtai Vanagaitei* [How did it happen? Christoph Dieckmann responds to Rūta Vanagaitė] (Vilnius: Rūta Vanagaitė, 2020). English edition: Christoph Dieckmann and Rūta Vanagaitė, *How Did It Happen? Understanding the Holocaust* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).

³³ Aurimas Šmeliūnas, "Kaip tai įvyko? / Christoph Dieckmann atsako Rūtai Vanagaitei" – svarbiausia nenumesti po pirmo puslapio" [How did it happen? / Christoph Dieckmann responds to Rūta Vanagaitė – the most important thing is not to give up after the first page], *Šiaurės Atėnai*, October 3, 2020, accessed October 17, 2025, <https://www.satenai.lt/2020/10/03/kaip-tai-ivyko-christoph-dieckmann-atsako-rutai-vanagaitei-svarbiausia-nenumesti-po-pirmo-puslapio/>.

collaboration in the Holocaust in Poland and Lithuania, respectively. Both books were discussed by a wide range of public actors, including academics, journalists, the Catholic Church, politicians, and various kinds of memory activists. This comparison extends to the severe backlash both authors endured, though the specific consequences reflected their different professional standings. While both faced intense public and political attacks, Gross, a tenured academic historian, primarily faced political condemnation and state-led legal investigations in Poland. In contrast, Vanagaitė, a non-academic author, withdrew from public life after her Lithuanian publisher capitulated to public pressure and pulled her books, which it has not reissued. She has not remained entirely absent from the topic, however, appearing, for example, at her grandfather's house in Kavarskas in the recent film by Boris Maftsir, *Following the Jäger Report* (2025).

“How I Discovered My Grandfather Was a War Criminal”: The Debate over Jonas Noreika

In the summer of 2018, American journalist and writer Silvia Foti published an article in *Salon* detailing her discoveries about her grandfather, Jonas Noreika (1910–1947). Prompted by her dying mother to continue a biography of her father, she collected extensive material, including 3,000 pages of KGB files, seventy-seven letters Noreika wrote to his wife, a fairytale he wrote to Foti's mother while imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp, letters from family members about his childhood, and numerous articles from magazines and newspapers.

In October 2000, after Foti's grandmother died, she and her brother traveled to Lithuania to bury their mother and grandmother's cremated remains, fulfilling their wishes. They did not anticipate that this trip would uncover new information about their grandfather's past and his collaboration with the Nazi administration in occupied Lithuania. The article, which chronicled this story, quickly ignited another public debate about the Holocaust in Lithuania, both domestically and internationally. Foti's conclusion in the article was stark: “My grandfather wasn't a Nazi-fighting war hero – he was a brutal collaborator.”³⁴

Noreika, also known by his nom de guerre Generolas Vėtra (General storm), was an anti-Soviet partisan and military officer who collaborated with the Nazi administration in occupied Lithuania. He served as governor of Šiauliai county, where he signed orders confining local Jews to a ghetto and confiscating their property. Some of this confiscated Jewish property, such as furniture, was found in Noreika's own home.³⁵ In March 1943, as retaliation for the foiled attempt to mobilize Lithuanians to create a Waffen-SS division, Noreika was

³⁴ Foti, “My Grandfather Wasn't a Nazi-Fighting War Hero.”

³⁵ The Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius, Manuscripts Department, Lists of confiscated Jewish property, fond 76–180, folio 28.

among forty-six members of the Lithuanian elite imprisoned by the Nazis at the Stutthof concentration camp. After the war, Noreika returned to Soviet-occupied Lithuania and organized the short-lived Lithuanian National Council, an anti-Soviet group. He was arrested by the Soviets in March 1946 and executed on February 26, 1947.

Before Foti's article, Noreika's legacy was not widely promoted in Lithuania, unlike some other anti-Soviet partisans. His remembrance was primarily based on a book by Viktoras Ašmenskas, Noreika's colleague and fellow anti-Soviet resistance fighter who had been imprisoned with him by the Soviet security police.³⁶ A memorial plaque honoring Noreika is attached to the Library of the Academy of Sciences in Vilnius, noting his role in the resistance and that he worked in this building in 1945–1946. Even before Foti's publication, some memory activists had begun to publicly question Noreika's role during the Nazi occupation. In 2015, several local and foreign memory activists lodged an official appeal to the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, asking the Centre to denounce him as a Nazi collaborator.³⁷

As noted, Foti's article and findings about her grandfather sparked a new wave of Holocaust debate in Lithuania. As in the previous cases involving anti-Soviet partisans and activists, the polemics largely revolved around the same arguments: one group emphasized Noreika's anti-Soviet activities and accused his granddaughter of being a provocateur, while others insisted that despite his anti-Soviet efforts, his actions during the Nazi occupation must be openly and honestly discussed. The debate escalated with a provocative act by a marginal political activist, Stanislovas Tomas, who in April 2019 smashed Noreika's memorial plaque with a hammer, filming and streaming the stunt on social media. This act was followed by demonstrations from some of Noreika's supporters. The plaque was subsequently removed, then reinstalled, temporarily removed "for restoration" during the NATO summit in 2023, only to be reinstalled once again.³⁸ In any case, the significance of this was that the open debate now also involved the scrutiny of the personal biography and the role of the Lithuanian diaspora, which, as argued by Dovilė Budrytė, played a key role in the political formation of the Lithuanian genocide narrative during the popular movement.³⁹

³⁶ Viktoras Ašmenskas, *Generolas Vėtra* (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 1997).

³⁷ The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, "Query Regarding Jonas Noreika's Criminal Gang," accessed October 18, 2025, <https://www.grantgochin.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/noreika-research.pdf>.

³⁸ Davoliūtė, "Trials and Tribulations."

³⁹ Dovilė Budrytė, "'We Call It Genocide': Soviet Deportations and Repression in the Memory of Lithuanians," in *The Genocidal Temptation: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda, and Beyond*, ed. by Robert S. Frey (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), pp. 79–95.

Foti would develop her narrative into a book entitled *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather Was a War Criminal*.⁴⁰ As with *Our People*, this text is written in a personal and eclectic style, drawing on family archives, interviews, KGB interrogation files, and other sources. Foti's account and the English version of the book received significant attention in English-speaking media; for example, she was invited for an interview on the BBC program HARDtalk and other platforms. Meanwhile, the reaction in Lithuania this time was also different than in 2018. Foti was invited to give presentations and to take part in educational activities initiated by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. In 2022, the book was translated and published in Lithuania; however, it did not provoke the same level of debate as Foti's initial article.⁴¹

Conclusion

The publications of Rūta Vanagaitė and Silvia Foti have undeniably ignited the most significant public debates in Lithuania concerning the Holocaust and the Nazi occupation over the past decade, some fifteen years after similar debates in Poland, both domestically and internationally. While Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* may not have directly inspired Vanagaitė's *Our People*, these works sparked remarkably similar controversies in Poland and Lithuania, respectively, highlighting a shared regional struggle with difficult historical truths.

Despite criticisms labeling them as provocateurs or dilettantes, Vanagaitė and Foti, through their accessible and often provocative approaches to confronting the uneasy historical past, have played a crucial role in reinvigorating Lithuania's public memory landscape. They have squarely addressed uncomfortable issues regarding the genocide in Lithuania, the complicity of "ordinary" Lithuanians, and local collaboration with the Nazi administration. Furthermore, their works have stimulated renewed research into the complex biographies of anti-Soviet resistance members, pushing for a re-evaluation of some national heroes. In doing so, they also brought the memory narratives of the diaspora and of post-Soviet Lithuania into a new, public, and often contentious dialogue.

Crucially, these texts have partially bridged the long-standing gap between academic historical research and public confrontation with the uneasy long-term legacy of the Holocaust in Lithuania. For years, memory activists and historians have grappled with how to effectively present their findings to a broader audience. Both Vanagaitė and Foti, paradoxically, achieved this goal, albeit through

⁴⁰ A year after the original publication, the publisher issued a paperback version with a more descriptive and less sensational title: *Storm in the Land of Rain: A Mother's Dying Wish Becomes Her Daughter's Nightmare* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2022).

⁴¹ Silvia Foti, *Vėtra lietaus šalyje: Jono Noreikos anūkės pasakojimas* [Storm in the land of rain: The story of Jonas Noreika's granddaughter] (Vilnius: Kitos knygos, 2022).

simplified and sometimes reductive narratives, fostering a much-needed public reckoning. Their contributions underscore the vital role of memory activists in shaping public history with methods that challenge established narratives and ignite significant polemics. The debates they generated, though stormy at times, have undeniably contributed to a wider engagement with a painful, yet crucially important, chapter of Lithuanian history. This engagement reflects the complex interplay between local reckoning and diaspora-led initiatives, a dynamic that merits further scholarly attention.⁴²

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⁴² Stanislovas Stasiulis, "The Holocaust in Lithuania: The Key Characteristics of Its History, and the Key Issues in Historiography and Cultural Memory," *East European Politics and Societies* 34, no. 1 (2020): 261–79.

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