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Warts and All: Comparing and Contrasting Contemporary Lithuanian Historical Narratives of 1940-1953

The paper will focus on the contemporary official and unofficial Lithuanian historical narratives that have been used since 1990 to describe the period of time between the first Soviet occupation in 1940 and the end of organized partisan resistance to the second Soviet occupation in 1953. The aim will be first to identify what the official and unofficial narratives are today, and then to show if (and how) they have evolved and changed over time since independence in 1990. The unofficial narrative will be defined here as what is conveyed informally through family reminiscences and popular culture- that is, without formal input from the state. The official narrative will be defined as the information conveyed through textbooks, state examinations, and by teachers and government officials in official settings such as schools or state-sponsored exhibits.

The unofficial narrative will be investigated primarily through interviews with individuals between the ages of 18 and 45 (45 year olds will be old enough to have taken state exams in or around 1991, the first full year of independence). As a secondary means of gathering information, popular culture consisting of movies, documentaries, TV shows, songs, and non-academic books will also be investigated if time and resources permit. At a minimum, the relative popularity of some of these items and the level of controversy they generate or fail to generate will be a useful means of gauging whether certain themes or ideas are widely accepted or rejected by that same 18 to 45 year old cohort.

The official narrative will be investigated through three different means: first, by reviewing the final history exam questions from 1991 through 2017 to identify topics covered and any changes or continuity from year to year. Second, by reviewing what is covered (and not covered) in contemporary state-selected history textbooks for the years 1940-1953. Finally, by conducting interviews with the individuals responsible for creating the test each year, high school teachers, and government officials involved in some capacity with education. If time and opportunity permits, interviews will also be conducted with some textbook authors and editors.

I anticipate that the official and unofficial narratives will differ from one another for several reasons. In the first place, the unofficial narrative will largely be formed through firsthand accounts and will be concerned with the personal experiences of individuals, families, or at most villages or neighborhoods. By contrast, the official narrative, although obviously influenced by these same things, will attempt to paint a broader picture which must therefore necessarily be more vague. It will largely be concerned with themes rather than with specific actions, barring a few individuals or events chosen (or omitted) to highlight those ideas deemed significant. The official narrative is meant to serve a greater purpose- to aid in unifying Lithuanian society- where the unofficial narrative by and large is not. Consequently, although the official narrative is likely to be described by its purveyors as more accurate and consistent than its unofficial counterpart, the unofficial narrative is less likely to have changed significantly over the last twenty seven years.