

# A Hero or a Collaborator: History and Memory of Kazys Škirpa (1895–1979)

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## 1. Introduction

In the Baltic states, the history of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian victims has been emphasized since the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Nobuya Hashimoto indicates that “victimhood nationalism” has consistently played a significant role in official narratives of the history of the Baltic states.<sup>2</sup> However, their history emphasizes not only their victims but also national heroes, as Liudas Truska mentions that the “cult of ‘fighting and suffering’” and “heroic-masochistic historical conception” abounds in the narratives of Lithuanian history.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, it often describes Lithuanians as not only suffering during the Soviet “occupation,” but also courageously resisting it. Hence, the name of the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania (hereafter, “Genocide Center”) is symbolic in this respect as the term Genocide implies the Lithuanians’ “suffering” while the term Resistance denotes their “fighting.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eva-Clarita Pettai, “Introduction: Memory and Democratic Pluralism in the Baltic States – Rethinking the Relationship,” in *Memory and Pluralism in the Baltic States*, ed. Eva-Clarita Pettai (London: Routledge, 2011), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Lim Jie-Hyun, “Victimhood Nationalism in Contested Memories: National Mourning and Global Accountability,” in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, eds. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 138–139; Nobuya Hashimoto, *Kioku no Seiji: Europe no Rekishi Ninshiki Funsou* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2016), 117–120.

<sup>3</sup> Liudas Truska, “Pasimokyti galima tik iš kritiškai suvoktos istorijos,” iš *Tautinis atgimimas ir istorija* (Vilnius: Edukologija, 2012), 377, 379. Lim Jie-Hyun, who coined the term “victimhood nationalism,” points out that this is now the era of post-heroism; nevertheless, heroism still plays an important role in the narrative of Lithuanian national history. Lim Jie-Hyun, “Global-na Kioku Kuukan to Giseisha Ishiki: Holocaust. Shokuminchi-syugi Genocide, Stalinism-Terror no Kioku ha Dono youni Deau no ka,” Yusuke Hara trans., *Shiso*, 1116 (April, 2017): 55–73.

<sup>4</sup> See below for further details of the center and the term “genocide” used in Lithuania: Dovilė Budrytė, “We Call It Genocide: Soviet Deportations and Repression in the Memory of Lithuanians,” in *The Genocidal Temptation: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda*,

Lithuanian historical narratives often describe the following events as the Lithuanians' resistance against Soviet occupation: (1) the Lithuanian Activists Front (LAF) that organized anti-Soviet uprisings and established the Provisional Government in June 1941; (2) the resistance movement "Forest Brothers" from 1944 to the 1950s; (3) Romas Kalanta, who protested against the occupation by committing suicide by fire in 1972; and (4) the Singing Revolution from 1987 to the January 13, 1991 event. Praising these events as heroic movements and these individuals as national heroes is occasionally inconsistent with the historical narratives of neighboring states, especially the East, for instance Russia sometimes claimed the Baltic states *voluntarily* joined the Soviet Union in 1940. Moreover, commending the history of the LAF and its anti-Soviet June Uprising is inconsistent with Western perspectives as well since they often point out that the LAF were Nazi collaborators.

In this paper I would like to focus on how Kazys Škirpa (1895–1979), the leader of the LAF from 1940–1941, has been assessed by Lithuanian society since its re-independence, as his activities during World War II have been controversial to evaluate.

## 2. Early Life of Kazys Škirpa

Kazys Škirpa was born in the village of Namajūnai in northern Lithuania on February 18, 1895. After graduating from a gymnasium in Jelgava located in southern Latvia, he studied at Saint Petersburg. During World War I, he was mobilized by the Russian army and became a military officer. In 1918, when Lithuania declared its independence, he returned to Lithuania and enrolled in the newly founded Lithuanian army; he was actually the first

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*and Beyond*, ed. Robert S. Frey (Dallas, TX: University Press of America, 2004), 79–101; Hisashi Shigematsu, "Ritoania ni okeru 'genocide': Sono Gensetsu no Keifu to Kokunaihou ni okeru Teigi ['Genocide' in Lithuania: Genealogy of its Discourse and Definition in the Municipal Law]," *Roshia-Yurashia no Keizai to Shakai [Russian Eurasian Economy and Society]*, 994 (June, 2015): 31–47; Sayaka Kaji, "Ritoania: Nationalism to 'Nishigawa-teki' Kokusai Kyouchou [Lithuania: Nationalism and 'Western' International Cooperation]," *Roshia-Yurashia no Keizai to Shakai [Russian Eurasian Economy and Society]*, 1005 (June, 2016): 36–40.

volunteer in the army. His military unit defended the capital city of Vilnius and on January 1, 1919, for the first time, hoisted the tricolor Lithuanian flag atop Gediminas' tower that is located in the center of Vilnius.<sup>5</sup> Today, January 1 is a commemorative day in Lithuania, called Lithuanian Flag Day, and the national flag ceremony is held every year on the Gediminas' tower.

Škirpa fought in battles against the Bolsheviks, Poland, and the Bermontians until 1920. After these wars, he served as a member of the Constituent Assembly (Seimas) from 1920 to 1922. He belonged to a leftist secular party, the Lithuanian Popular Socialist Democratic Party (LSLDP) that merged with the Lithuanian Peasant Union (LVS) becoming the Lithuanian Popular Peasant Union (LVLS) in 1922. After completing his term as a Seimas member, he continued his military service. Additionally, he served as a higher officer course lecturer at a military school in Kaunas.

When the army along with the *tautininkai* (nationalists) led by Antanas Smetona executed the coup d'état in 1926, he was the only officer who opposed it claiming it was anti-democratic. When Smetona became the President of Lithuania after the coup d'état, Škirpa lost his military post and began working for the diplomatic corps. He worked for the Lithuanian legation in Berlin from 1927, becoming a military attaché the following year. Later, he served as the Lithuanian representative to Poland in 1938 and to Germany from 1938–1940.

As a diplomat, he sometimes had a different view on Lithuanian foreign policy from President Smetona. For instance, when Poland issued an ultimatum to Lithuania, Škirpa advised against accepting it although President Smetona decided to do so; moreover, as the Lithuanian minister to Germany, Škirpa felt the need to bridge relations between Lithuania and Germany, but Smetona attempted to maintain his “neutral” foreign policy of not forming an alliance with other countries.

Discord between them continued despite the annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union in 1940. Škirpa, who maintained contact with German

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<sup>5</sup> *Karys*, nr. 20 (1928 m.), 377; *Lietuvos valstybinė vėliava: Gedimino kalne, 2-asis patalais*. ir papild. leid. (Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2008), 6, 14, 22.

diplomats, attempted to regain Lithuanian independence by establishing an anti-Soviet resistance organization and garnering support from the German government; so he asked Smetona, who had escaped from Lithuania and was living in Germany, to transfer his authority to the newly established organization. Since Smetona did not trust Škirpa and his organization, he did not transfer his authority. Škirpa, without Smetona's support, founded the LAF on November 17, 1940.

### **3. Activities of the Lithuanian Activists Front (LAF)**

The LAF established its headquarters in Berlin with representatives in Vilnius and Kaunas, and attempted to connect with others. In March 1941, the LAF unit in Berlin in the name of the "Lithuanian Information Bureau" issued an appeal to the Lithuanian population under Soviet rule. In the appeal, the LAF suggested that a German-Soviet war would begin shortly and asked the population to be prepared for the expansion of an anti-Soviet resistance movement; in addition, it asked them to assist the German army during the war. Moreover, in Article 2 and 6 of the appeal, the murder of Jewish people was implied:

2. As already mentioned, the hour of Lithuanian liberation is almost here. If marching from the West begins, you will be informed about it at the same time by radio or other means. At the moment, in the cities, towns, and villages of enslaved Lithuania, local uprisings, or more correctly speaking, succession of power to locals' hands must occur. Local communists and other betrayers of Lithuania need to be arrested immediately so that no one escapes the consequences of their own actions. (Betrayers will be pardoned, if they can prove their willingness to execute at least one Jew.) [...]

6. "Inform" the Jews immediately that their destiny is clear. Thus, Jews who can leave Lithuania today should do so to avoid any unnecessary victims. At the decisive moment, seize their property so that no one would kill any one for nothing. [...]

See you in the New Lithuania.

As indicated above, the LAF intended to establish a “New Lithuania” (*Naujoji Lietuva*) without Jews. In the same month, the LAF issued “Instructions for the liberation of Lithuania” that also included the notion of a “New Lithuania” without Jews:

[...] For the ideological development of a Lithuanian nation, it is necessary to strengthen anti-communist and anti-Jewish actions and to disseminate unreservedly the belief that a Russian-German armed conflict will really occur. So, the Russian Red Army will shortly be driven out of Lithuania, leaving Lithuania a free and independent state again. It is very important to dispose of the Jews as well on this occasion. Therefore, it is necessary to create an anti-Jewish environment in the land so that no Jew would dare to think that in the New Lithuania he would have either minimal rights or the general possibility of making a living. The purpose is to force all Jews to flee Lithuania together with the red Russians. [...] <sup>7</sup>

The proposal to deprive Jews of the right to live in Lithuania was also indicated in the LAF program that was issued around the same time. Article 16 of the program stated that “Lithuanian Activists Front withdraw the hospitality for the Jewish national minority in Lithuania.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Liudas Truska, ir Vygantas Vareikis, *Holokausto prielaidos: antisemitizmas Lietuvoje (XIX a. antroji pusė – 1941 m. birželis)* (Vilnius: Margi raštai, 2004), 264; *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje (1941 – 1944): Dokumentų rinkinys* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1965), I:49–50.

<sup>7</sup> Lietuvai išlaisvinti nurodymai, 1941 m. kovo 24 d., Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (LCVA), f. 648, ap. 2, b. 582, l. 194; Truska, ir Vareikis, *Holokausto prielaidos*, 255.

<sup>8</sup> Lietuvių aktyvistų fronto programa, LCVA, f. 648, ap. 2, b. 582, l. 141; Truska, ir Vareikis, *Holokausto prielaidos*, 314; Alfonsas Eidintas, ir kiti, *Lietuvos istorija*, 2-asis leid. (Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2013), 196; Živilė Kvaraciejienė, “Ar gėdytis Juozo Ambrazevičiaus-Brazaičio Vyriausybės?,” *Respublika*, 2012 m. birželio 1 d., [http://www.respublika.lt/lt/naujienos/lietuva/lietuvas\\_politika/ar\\_gedytis\\_juozo\\_ambrazevičiaus\\_brazaičio\\_vyriausybės/](http://www.respublika.lt/lt/naujienos/lietuva/lietuvas_politika/ar_gedytis_juozo_ambrazevičiaus_brazaičio_vyriausybės/) (žiūrėta 2016 m. vasario 8 d.). Škirpa displayed the entire text of this project in the book that was published in the United States in 1973,

The conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941, and anti-Soviet uprisings occurred on the same day across Lithuania (June Uprising). Massacres of Jews by Lithuanian semi-military units and others occurred simultaneously. The following day, the LAF declared the establishment of the Provisional Government of Lithuania and restoration of Lithuanian independence via a radio broadcast from Kaunas. Moreover, the LAF declared:

Lithuanian Brothers and Sisters!!!

The final hour of reckoning with the Jews has arrived. Lithuania must be liberated not only from the enslavement of the Asiatic Bolsheviks, but also from the prolonged yoke of Jewry. In the name of the entire Lithuanian nation, the Lithuanian Activist Front most ceremoniously declares:

1. The ancient right of sanctuary extended to the Jews by Vytautas the Great is canceled completely and finally.

2. Every Jew of Lithuania without exception is officially warned to leave the land of Lithuania immediately and without any delay. [...]

The New Lithuanian state will be restored by the powers, labor, hearts, and spirits of the members of the Lithuanian nation. [...] In the newly restored Lithuania, Jews do not possess either civil rights or possibilities of residence. [...] <sup>9</sup>

When the LAF issued the declaration of restoration of independence, the German army had not arrived in Kaunas yet. The German government permitted the establishment of the Provisional Government, but did not restore Lithuanian independence. In order to restrain the independence movement initiated by the Provisional Government, the German government placed

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despite deleting this article. Kazys Škirpa, *Sukilimas Lietuvos suverenumui atstatyti: Dokumentinė apžvalga* (Vašingtonas [Washington, D.C.]: [Franciscan Fathers Press?], 1973), 569.

<sup>9</sup> Lietuvių aktyvistų fronto programa, LCVA, f. 648, ap. 2, b. 582, l. 214–215; *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje*, I:50–51.

Škirpa under house arrest in Berlin although he was the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government. Therefore, Juozas Ambrazevičius, the education minister in the Provisional Government, served as the acting Prime Minister. On June 24–25, 1941, the German army arrived in Kaunas and assumed control of entire Lithuania.

On August 5, the Provisional Government requested the German administration to recognize Lithuanian independence<sup>10</sup> but the Germans refused; on August 5, the Provisional Government was forced to stop their activities and was dissolved in September.

#### 4. Memory of Kazys Škirpa

After World War II, Kazys Škirpa fled from Germany to France, Ireland, and eventually the United States of America. He played an important role in the Lithuanian American community and Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania (*Vyriausias Lietuvos išlaisvinimo komitetas*; VLIK), an organization seeking Lithuanian independence operating primarily in the United States. During the Cold War era, he was often considered a national hero among the Lithuanian diaspora since he had been the first volunteer in the Lithuanian army and had attempted to restore independence during World War II. In contrast, Kazys Škirpa was considered a “fascist collaborator” in Soviet Lithuania.

The *Sąjūdis* movement in the 1980s that finally restored Lithuanian independence altered this situation. After independence, names of streets in Vilnius and Kaunas were changed to “K. Škirpa alley” (*K. Škirpos aleja*), and “K. Škirpos street” (*K. Škirpos gatvė*) respectively.

In 2015, the Department of Cultural Heritage, an external bureau of the Ministry of Culture, required Kaunas City municipality to change the name of “K. Škirpa street.” Kaunas City municipality questioned the Genocide Center regarding its view on the issue and the Center responded that Škirpa was not

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<sup>10</sup> Lietuvos Laikinosios Vyriausybės einančio Ministerio Pirmininko p. J. Ambrazevičiaus kalba, 1941 m. rugpjūčio 5 d. LCVA, f. R-496, ap. 1, b. 5, l. 1–3.

responsible for the *genocide* of the Jews (note, the Center did not mention any responsibility regarding the *persecution* of the Jews). Thus, Kaunas City municipality decided not to rename the street.

The following year, a similar incident occurred in Vilnius. A member of the city council, Mark Adam Harold, who is a British citizen and eligible to stand for local council elections, proposed changing the name of “K. Škirpa alley,” that resulted in a public debate on the issue. By citing a report by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania (hereafter, “International Commission”) that confirmed “The Provisional Government’s and the Lithuanian Activist Front’s antisemitic views are well documented,” Harold insisted that the name of an antisemitic organization leader should not be appropriated for the name of a city street.<sup>11</sup>

In the same year, a monument was erected for Škirpa in the village of Namajūnai in Pasvalys district, his birthplace; subsequently, the local municipality was criticized, since erecting the monument was tantamount to commending his Nazi collaboration and antisemitic views during World War II. Gintautas Gegužinskas, the mayor of Pasvalys district, claimed, “It may be that K. Škirpa has made mistakes, but for us, the people of Pasvalys, he is a great personality who has made a significant contribution to the consolidation of Lithuanian statehood.”<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Since the restoration of independence, Lithuania has sought memberships in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Adam Harold, “Mano kalba dėl Škirpos alejos pervadinimo,” 2016 m. lapkričio 29 d., <http://markasftw.com/mano-kalba-del-skirpos-alejos-pervadinimo/> (žiūrėta 2016 m. gruodžio 19 d.); Mark Adam Harold, “My Speech in Favour of Renaming Škirpa’s Alley,” December 1, 2016, <http://markasftw.com/speech-favour-renaming-skirpas-alley/> (accessed December 19, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> “Pasvalys įamžino K. Škirpos atminimą,” 2016 m. lapkričio 30 d., <http://lzinios.lt/lzinios/Gimtasis-krastas/pasvalys-iamzino-k-skirpos-atminima/234330> (žiūrėta 2017 m. gegužės 16 d.).

European Union (EU); therefore, it continues pursuing the acceptance of Western values such as democracy and free economy. Regarding history, Lithuanian officials have attempted to accept Western views, or rather, have not denied them. President Valdas Adamkus' initiative to establish the International Commission that investigated crimes committed by not only "two totalitarian regimes" but also the Lithuanian Nazi collaboration and their participation in the massacre of Jews, is an excellent example. Given these circumstances, officially Škirpa is not highly regarded in Lithuania. Nevertheless, there are still several Lithuanians who desire to honor him. As Jewish Lithuanian writer Markas Zingeris indicates, there is still a "gap" between Lithuanian and Western public opinion regarding their Nazi collaboration during World War II.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Markas Zingeris, "Scrambling Out from the Abyss of Holocaust," *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review* 8 (2001).