

Beresniova, Christine. *Holocaust Education in Lithuania. Community, Conflict, and the Making of Civil Society*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. 189 p. \$95.00 hardback; \$90.00 e-book.

*Violeta Davoliute, Vilnius University*

[davoliute@gmail.com](mailto:davoliute@gmail.com)

In the Spring of 2019, an aspiring Lithuanian politician decisively destroyed a commemorative plaque dedicated to the anti-Soviet partisan fighter Jonas Noreika that had been on the side of a building in the center of the capital city of Vilnius. [The politician] accused Noreika of participation in the Holocaust. Revered by many for his defence of Lithuanian statehood against Soviet aggression, Noreika had also collaborated with the German occupying forces as the head of a local administration. A few hours later, another budding politician appeared at the same spot, looking over the broken fragments of the plaque and broadcasting a warning for Lithuanians to stand by their heroes. The plaque was quickly repaired by volunteers and restored to its place, only to be removed a few weeks later by the mayor's order.

This is only one example of the battles over history and memory taking place in Lithuania and many other former Soviet bloc countries like Poland, Croatia, Ukraine and Hungary. Before the Second World War, Lithuania was home to a population of some 200,000 Jews, a community whose roots in the country stretch back to the 14th Century. By the war's end, over 90% of this population had been murdered. The process of coming to terms with the Holocaust, including the role and responsibility of the local population, has been a significant issue in Lithuanian politics, law and society since the restoration of independence in 1991. The process of atonement and commemoration of the Holocaust has also become a critical dimension of Lithuania's integration into Europe and the global community.

Christine Beresniova's text engages this important issue with a focus on the role of Holocaust education. Noting the disputes that exist over the definition of the term, she treats it as a practice whose essence is fundamentally contested. Moreover, she points out that the disputes are not limited to technical matters of educational methodology like lesson plans and textbooks. Rather, the matter concerns real "battles over cultural capital, political influence, and society itself" (pg #). When it comes to Holocaust education, she describes Lithuania as nothing less than an "international battleground" (xv).

Accordingly, the book moves beyond the question of education narrowly considered and embraces the full spectrum of social and political issues surrounding the Holocaust today. In terms of methodology, Beresniova uses ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews in what she calls a "critical ethnographic framework" (xxi). The object of her study is "what Holocaust education means to individuals, both Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian, as they navigate their identities in local, national and international communities" (pg #).

By the same token, she also tells the story of the "social life" of Holocaust education as a set of policies as they move through different social landscapes in Lithuania (xxi). Holocaust education is nevertheless accepted as the driver of social change meant to accomplish the goal of coming to terms with the past and of bridging the gap between Lithuanian and Western approaches to the Holocaust. In this regard, Holocaust education is more central than any political or judicial process.

Beresniova breaches many divides while researching and writing this book: as a scholar and a practitioner of Holocaust education, and as an insider and outsider to debates on the subject in Lithuania. The theme of "encountering otherness" is concretized at the beginning of each chapter in a narrative. For example, she begins the first chapter on the evolution of Holocaust memory in Lithuania by narrating her chance encounter on a train with an elderly man who insists on a view of the Jewish genocide as having been "no worse" than what "Jewish

communists” had done to Lithuanians. The second chapter, on the role of the US in promoting Holocaust education, begins with an episode describing Beresniova’s embarrassment at being introduced by an American colleague as somebody who was going to bring Holocaust education to Lithuania, where it is supposedly absent. These narrative introductions frame the topic in a self-critical, reflexive mode of investigation that is highly effective and persuasive.

One of the key targets of Beresniova’s critique is the simplistic notion of a gap in understanding of the Holocaust between the civilized, modern West and the uncivilized, anti-Semitic East. Noting how Western agents of Holocaust memory (her interlocutors are mainly American) routinely portray Lithuanians as people “stuck in the past” and unable to overcome anti-Semitic prejudice, she argues that the process of Holocaust education has been undermined by an orientalizing discourse that unfairly “primitivizes” the local population. This approach to Holocaust education, wherein the Western agent views him or herself as a carrier of a higher degree of consciousness, is not only inaccurate in its uncritical self-aggrandizement, but ineffective as an educational stance.

Beresniova takes a decidedly pluralistic approach to the complexities inherent in Holocaust pedagogy, arguing that the “ambiguity of meanings and the multiplicity of approaches” (pg #) should be viewed as a normal starting point and not a sign of programs gone wrong. The post-Soviet condition is to be understood on its own terms and not necessarily through frameworks constructed in the west, which see the Holocaust education as a moral endeavor. She coins the term “chronopolitics (pg #) to describe the orientalizing, colonialist attitude that results from an attitude that views the other as an anachronism, somehow stuck in a different, more primitive era.

As an alternative, Beresniova proposes that Holocaust education be seen less as a program to be delivered and more as a process to be found, even if it is merely emergent, in

the subject country, in this case Lithuania, in the activity of educators, politicians, students and others who are trying to “make sense of the historical event in their own context” (xxi). This, she proposes wisely, is what coming to terms with the Holocaust is all about. It is a process as important and current in the West as in the East, even if various regional patterns of approach can be distinguished.

In this regard, Beresniova’s thick description and tightly argued text provide welcome support to a pluralist and anti-colonial position on Holocaust education in Eastern Europe that seem self-evident, but which is often overrun, as she amply demonstrates, in the practicalities of program administration. At the same time, she spares no effort to criticize the atavistic and parochial narratives of historical victimization that have long clouded efforts to face up to a difficult past in Lithuania and elsewhere across Europe.

If there is a blind spot in Beresniova’s analysis, it may lie in the way she takes Holocaust education, defined as a contested practice, as her starting point. At times this reviewer got the sense that Beresniova’s methodological approach, while rigorously empirical, defers the question of what Holocaust education should really be. Yes, it should be self-critical and reflexive, yes it should be a two-way street of learning, but she does not really engage in the substantive debate taking place in Lithuania and elsewhere on why Holocaust education is important and what it is meant to achieve.

Nevertheless, this book truly excels as one of the first and certainly the most significant studies on Holocaust education in Lithuania, and perhaps the post-communist area as a whole. It does so by going to the heart of the social and political transformations of the post-communist area, including the interaction of local and international actors seeking to influence their outcome. The book will be of serious interest to scholars and students of the Holocaust, the politics of memory, and education.