On Comparisons between Nazi Germany and the Soviet regime
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I wish to express my deep concern about repeated attempts to equate the Nazi regime's genocidal policies, with the Holocaust at their center, with other murderous or oppressive actions, an equation that not only trivializes and relativizes the genocide of the Jews perpetrated by the Nazi regime, but is also a mendacious revision of recent world history. The European parliament passed a resolution (April 2, 2009) determining August 23, the date on which in 1939 the infamous Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement was signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as a date of remembrance to victims of both regimes. This follows a similar resolution passed by the Senate of the Czech Republic on June 3, 2008, which declared that the "crimes against humanity committed by the Communist regimes throughout the continent must inform all European minds to the same extent (sic!!-YB) as the Nazi regime's crimes did."

There can be no doubt as to the crimes of violent and often murderous oppression of the Soviet regime in the countries of Eastern Europe. In the Baltic States, occupied by the USSR in 1940-1941 and 1944-1989/91, for instance, tens of thousands of local residents were exiled, many of whom died, and most returned only much later, broken in body and mind, while thousands of others were imprisoned and were killed or died in prison. Local communists, and they were numerous, ruled these countries and blindly obeyed orders from Moscow, but did not plan the annihilation of the three national groups as such. Among the exiled, tortured and killed people, Jews were much more numerous than their percentage in the population (see below). This was brutal and murderous oppression, not genocide either towards them or towards the other ethnic groups. Local communist regimes in Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany and Czechoslovakia were no less brutal towards many of their citizens, although it must be said that a certain proportion of the persecuted had in fact been Nazi collaborators. However, to compare this with the murder of many millions of Europeans by the Nazi regime, and especially with the state-planned genocide of the Jews (Holocaust) in the context of Nazi crimes generally – although the EU statement makes specific mention of

the Holocaust, no doubt as to make the acceptance of the comparison easier - is a distortion of history. It should be remembered that the so-called "Generalplan Ost", developed by Nazi Germany in 1941/1943, planned the annihilation "as such" – to use the terminology of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide - of the three Baltic nations, of Poles and of Czechs by forcible Germanization, expulsion and partial murder; of course, this was not known to the future potential victims. The Jews, on the other hand, were – all of them - to be annihilated, not only in Europe, but everywhere on earth (there is plenty of evidence for that). As far as the Soviets are concerned, with all their brutality, they did not plan the annihilation of ethnic or national groups as such.

The example that I wish to present here is based on the official, English-language, report by the Latvian Historical Commission regarding Soviet crimes in Latvia (*The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations, 1940-1991 – Selected Research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia*, Institute of the History of Latvia, vol. 14, Riga 2005).

There is no doubt that the three Baltic States were, before the war, under tremendous pressure from the two superpowers next-door, Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR. In Latvia, there was traditional and radical opposition to Germans. German barons had ruled and oppressed Latvians for centuries. Latvian communists had been one of the main groups that propelled the Bolsheviks into power in 1917, but independent Latvia between the wars, rightly fearful of Soviet imperialism, had first developed a liberal government, and then had become an authoritarian state under the center-right leadership of Karlis Ulmanis (Lithuania and Estonia developed similarly, and by the 1930ies had also become authoritarian, under Antanas Smetona and Konstantin Päts, respectively). There were home-grown pro-Nazi and pro-Soviet groups in Latvia, as in the other two countries. In 1939, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Latvia came under Soviet influence; in 1940 it was occupied, and annexed by the Soviet Union. One has to recognize that Latvian communists were quite influential, and that parts of the peasantry initially welcomed the division of land executed by the communist regime. Pro-communists in Latvia, under the leadership of Augusts Kirhensteins (just like Justas Paleckis in Lithuania) may not have been central figures in their society, but they were by

no means marginal. There was, however, national oppression, political persecution, the introduction of Soviet-style one-party rule, and in June, 1941, just before the German invasion, brutal deportations to Siberia took place. Therefore, when the Germans attacked, in June, 1941, most Latvians – just like their Baltic neighbors – sided with them. The Germans did not, as many had hoped, grant autonomy, never mind independence. Nevertheless, there was massive collaboration in the persecution and murder of the Jews in Lithuania and Latvia especially, and most Jews were killed, under German supervision, by Lithuanians and Latvians. Baltic police battalions, recruited by the Germans, included Latvian ones, were a very important part of the German murder machine murdering Jews in Belarus, and even in Poland and the Ukraine. However, that did not change German colonialist policies towards the Baltic peoples, including Latvia, nor did the establishment of Latvian SS units, by conscription, late in the war, after the Jews had been, to all intents and purposes, annihilated.

Slowly, Latvian opposition groups developed. They were neither very impressive nor very efficient, and recent attempts to play them up as a major patriotic and anti-Nazi underground are not very convincing. Soviet partisans, usually led by pro-Soviet or communist Baltic individuals, gained some support. Then the Soviets returned, complete with Latvian Red Army units. The first Soviet occupation lasted one year (1940-1941), whereas the second occupation lasted some 45 years, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, in which the three Baltic republics played an important role.

Did the Soviets commit genocide in the occupied Baltic States, and specifically in Latvia? There were close to two million inhabitants in Latvia in 1939, about 75% of whom were ethnic Latvians; the rest were mainly Russians, Germans, and close to 95.000, or about 5%, were Jews. The Soviets arrested, jailed and persecuted some 3000 persons locally, and deported 15.400 more, during the first occupation. Together, that was less than 1% of the population. The majority of the deportees survived, broken in body and spirit, but they survived. Of these 15.400, 11.7% were Jews, so the number of Jewish victims of this bout of Stalinist oppression was more than twice their proportion in the population. Of the others, not all were ethnic Latvians, of course. During the second, long, occupation, the Soviets deported 43.000 Latvian citizens. Together with the first wave of deportees, the total amounted to some 3.3% of the population – and again, most

of the deportees, though by no means all of them, returned in the end. And though the Germans, with the active participation of many local inhabitants, had in the meantime murdered more than 95% of the local Jews, there were still quite a number of Jews among the deportees of the second wave. One can hardly talk of an anti-Latvian genocide. And, despite the disproportionately large number of Jewish victims of Stalinism, neither can one talk of a genocide of the Jews at Soviet hands.

Latvian national history was falsified by the Soviets, Latvian cultural institutions were transformed and converted into communist propaganda organs, and any hint at national autonomy was brutally suppressed. However, the Latvian language was not forbidden, and the semblance of Latvian ethnic traditions was maintained; at the helm of Latvia stood Latvian communists, though the actual command was in Russian hands. But the Soviets forbade Hebrew, and in time effectively suppressed Yiddish as well. Latvian institutions were transformed, but Jewish institutions were eradicated. There was mass immigration of non-Latvians into Latvia – and it is still unclear whether this was a directed attempt to swamp Latvian ethnicity, or not. In any case, it was brutal oppression, but genocide it most certainly was not. Had there been a genocide, there would have been no chance of a final struggle for independence, which was achieved with the disintegration of communist imperialism. Latvian democrats liberated Latvia.

Two major issues emerge: one, the collaboration of the majority of Latvians (and Lithuanians and Estonians) with the Germans, not necessarily because of any sympathy with Nazi Germany, but because the alternative was the hated Soviet regime – hated because of the experiences of the first occupation. That, again, resulted in the cooperation of large numbers of local people, actively or by silent agreement, in the annihilation of the Jews. Two, and no less problematic, is a disconnect between Baltic perceptions of the past and those of Central and Western Europe, in the perception of the historical role of the USSR in the war against Nazi Germany. This is not to be taken lightly. Baltic – including Latvian – independence was regained as a result of a wholly admirable non-violent struggle against an overwhelmingly strong neighbor. It may therefore indeed be quite natural that it is the Soviet threat that was and is paramount in the minds of Baltic nationals, and hence the equation between Stalinism and Nazism. But historically, this is an error.

The two regimes were both totalitarian, and yet quite different. The greater threat to all of humanity was Nazi Germany, and it was the Soviet Army that liberated Eastern Europe, was the central force that defeated Nazi Germany, and thus saved Europe and the world from the Nazi nightmare. In fact, unintentionally, the Soviets saved the Baltic nations, the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Czechs, and others, from an intended extension of Nazi genocide to these nationalities. This was not intended to lead to total physical annihilation, as with the Jews, but to a disappearance of these groups "as such". The EU statement, implying a straightforward parallel between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, therefore presents an a-historic and distorted picture.

It also implies that the war was initiated by both regimes equally, and that they therefore bear equal responsibility for the death of some 35 million people in Europe alone (if one adds the war in Asia, the total is, according to a number of historians, about 55 million). This is a total perversion of history. In the summer of 1939, Stalin would have sold not only his own mother, but all Russian mothers and grandmothers, for an assurance that Germany would not attack the USSR. He knew very well that his army was disorganized by the purges, and that the USSR was in no condition to withstand a German onslaught alone. Until June, 1939, he was still playing with the possibility of a united front with Britain and France against Nazi Germany; but the negotiations broke down when the Western Powers made it clear that their contribution to any common effort would be strictly limited, and Poland denied the Soviets – rightly, I suppose – the possibility of marching through its territory, the Soviet intention being, it appears, to avoid having Soviet territory endangered by the Germans, and instead to fight on foreign soil. The British told the Soviets that they would be able to contribute one or two divisions, and later on more. The French made it clear that they would defend themselves behind the Maginot Line. The Soviets saw no other way out of the danger but to seek an accommodation with Hitler, especially if they could make territorial gains that would create a new buffer zone west of them.

World War II was started by Nazi Germany, not the Soviet Union, and the responsibility of the 35 million dead in Europe, 29 million of them non-Jews, is that of Nazi Germany, not Stalin. To commemorate victims equally is a distortion.

There is more to it even than that. Communism was a deviation from the ideals of the French Revolution which Marx had admired. Marxism was, from the outset, a contradictory ideology, because it aspired to equality and justice, even to democracy, on the one hand, and from the outset it also included clearly anti-democratic elements, even genocidal ones (articles by Marx and Engels in 1848/9, again in 1863, and the correspondence between them, talked about the elimination of the Czechs, Slovenes, and others, as so-called non-historic nations). The democratic trend came into its own with the development of Marxist social-democratic parties in Central and Western Europe, while the anti-democratic and dictatorial elements became the ideology of the groups out of which communism developed. The USSR, even under Stalin, had these contradictory elements in its basic make-up. The ideal was still the realization of libertarian principles, and the abolition of the State, as Lenin wrote; this can be seen, for instance, in the 1936 Stalin Constitution, a prime example of a wonderfully democratic program. The reality was the exact opposite: oppression, terror, corruption, murder, torture. But very large numbers of Soviet citizens actually believed in the quasi-liberal propaganda, and I think it was, ultimately, the internal contradictions that became the basis for the collapse of the regime. The economic inefficiency, the corruption, and the terror were, in the final analysis, the result of the fact that there was no consistent basis for the communist regime. With the Nazis it was completely different. There, there was a terrible consistency between a racist, terrorist, antisemitic ideology and the way the society was being built. There were no contradictions: world control by war and conquest, and genocidal programs, were the hallmark of the regime. Without military defeat, the Hitler regime would not have disappeared; it would never have collapsed on its own. The Soviet regime did.

It is therefore not that difficult to see how the Soviets in the end were able to collaborate with the West in the defeat of Nazi Germany. They had become an ordinary imperialist dictatorship, embellished by an ideology that bore no relation to real life, employing the usual terroristic methods against real and imagined enemies, but no different from other tyrannies before and after them. However, well over 20 million Soviet citizens died in the war, and it was the Red Army that defeated Nazi Germany, though the West certainly helped. If today, East Europeans can enjoy membership in the

European Union, it is due to the fact that they were oppressed and ruled, for 45 years, by a basically inefficient, corrupt and barbarous dictatorship, but not by the Nazis. They were liberated by the Soviets. The West recognizes that, and so, in fact, do many East Europeans as well: they had to get rid of the Nazis first, in order to begin their tortuous, difficult road of opposition to the Soviets. The Red Army enabled them to do that, though the price was very heavy indeed: 45 years of Soviet dictatorship. That is the paradox. In the end the East Europeans won, deservedly so. But let us not change history because of that.

One certainly should remember the victims of the Soviet regime, and there is every justification for designating special memorials and events to do so. But to put the two regimes on the same level and commemorating the different crimes on the same occasion is totally unacceptable.