

A Litany of Violence in Lithuania:

Understanding the Mass Death of *Litvaks*

during the Holocaust

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***Abstract:** This paper provides insight into why the Jewish population of Lithuania was nearly eliminated during the Holocaust. Lithuanian Jewry was a unique cohort of Jews during WWII relative to others who were scattered throughout Eastern and Western Europe; their wartime experience was appreciably brutal and violent, leading to the mass categorical destruction of 95% of Lithuanian Jews. This paper uses theoretical approaches of political science to answer what explains the extensive elimination of Lithuania's Jewish population.*

Key words: Holocaust, genocide, Lithuanian Jewry, Nazi violence, theoretical application and analysis

Introduction

Decades after the Second World War, the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations ruled to denaturalize and deport Jonas Stlemokas. The former Lithuanian commander was charged for perpetrating genocidal crimes against his Jewish countrymen because "their race, religion, and national origin" did not cohere with the Nazi ideal that he promoted.¹ His involvement in the calamity that befell European Jewry was particular to the Ninth Fort, the site of the largest massacre of Lithuanian Jews that claimed nearly 10,000 lives in one day.² Abba Kovner, a harbinger of the Jewish armed resistance, did not see the violence committed by Stlemokas and his platoon as an isolated act, but presumed it to be the prototype for killing every Jew in the Baltic state. He forecasted them as "fated to be the first in line" of Hitler's trans-European extermination of Jews that took place between 1939 and 1945.³

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¹ Steve Feldman, "Passing Judgment: Judge orders local man deported for wartime activities," *Jewish Exponent*, 30 April 1998.

² Dov Levin, "How the Jewish Police in the Kovno Ghetto Saw Itself," in David Cesarani, *Holocaust: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 72.

³ "The Vilna Ghetto Manifesto," Facing History and Ourselves, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/resistance-during-holocaust/vilna-ghetto-manifesto>.

Those in Lithuania faced agonizing conditions and tormented choices that mostly resulted in death; close to 95% of them perished during the war. What factors explain the all but total destruction of Lithuanian Jews during the Holocaust? Why was their communal death so extensive?

There is no single reason for the near complete elimination of Lithuanian Jews during the Holocaust; myriad factors explain the degree to which the Nazi genocide obliterated them. Extermination procedures unique to Lithuania accelerated the Nazis' killing process, which made for the rapid destruction of Jews in the Baltic state. Further, the perpetrators' ideological detestation for communism and concomitant assumption that Lithuanian Jews were foremost supporters of the neighboring Soviet state motivated them to assuage the Jews' perceived threat through extremely violent measures. Another palpable cause for the devastation of Jewish Lithuania was the intense involvement of local collaborators. These men acted on their own volition to provide Nazi authorities with knowledge and military might that aided in the killing of so many. These social and political dynamics contributed to the near communal extinction of Lithuanian Jews and worked in tandem to resolve the nation's "Jewish Problem."

Background

The Jews of Lithuania, historically known as *Litvaks*, were a unique people in their life and demise. They constituted the largest minority group in Lithuania and after centuries of intellectual, religious and cultural achievements. Lithuania also centered life and development for myriad groups that enriched its lingual, ethnic, religious, and national diversity; alongside Jewish civilians lived Poles, Belarusians, Slavs, and Tatars who claimed some form of national connection to the Baltic state for centuries.⁴ While these cleavages contributed to Lithuania's unique demographic composition they also enhanced regional tensions long before World War II. Each group complicated civil relations by maligning one another with stereotypes and in-group thinking. These attitudes were rife among Lithuanians who not only typecast *Litvaks* according to classic, anti-Semitic Christian dogma but also eventually on Jews' perceived connection to Russian Bolshevism.⁵ Perpetrators of violence during World War II were motivated to act on these perverted conceptions of *Litvaks*, which helps to explain the near total elimination of Lithuania Jews.

Regional tensions emerged long before 1939. An early source came from the Russian Tsar in the late 18th century. Catherine the Great, who reigned between 1762 and 1796, harbored great territorial ambitions to annex Lithuania with the conviction that it was an East Slavic territory that rightfully belonged to the Russian empire; she progressively absorbed the Baltic state a few years into her tenure.⁶ This incorporation along with a litany of "Russification" policies exposed native Lithuanians to the Orthodox Church, the Russian language, and new educational and cultural institutions.⁷ Not only did the Tsar's pervasive influence transform Lithuania's boundaries but also its national identity and consciousness. Indelible to Lithuanians' psyche was the belief that they were part of a nation caught in the interests and subject to rule of

⁴ Paul A. Shapiro and Carl J. Rheins, "Foreword" (paper presented at United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Symposium on Lithuania and the Holocaust, Washington D.C., 2004), i.

⁵ Mohan Rao, "'Scientific' Racism: A Tangled Skein," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38 no. 8 (2003): 698.

⁶ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

other state authorities. This sense of subjugation fomented at the turn of the 20th century when Lithuania became a heavily contested battleground between Europe's two superpowers: Germany and Russia. Their military and ideological contest for supremacy constructed the milieu for the *Litvaks'* eventual demise.

After a series of transformations in government leadership and structure, Lithuania emerged as a newfound republic in the aftermath of World War I. They established independence from Germany, which had controlled Lithuania and surrounding polities during the War as part of its *Ober Ost*— a policy that enabled German paramilitary actors to occupy the Baltic region and rule over its population.⁸ Germany's eventual loss of the territory engendered a feeling of resentment that ultimately motivated the Nazi's to fight for the land against Soviet Russian forces. Since dismantling the Tsar in 1917, Russian revolutionaries endeavored to subsume Lithuania, despite the Baltic state's nascent independence, under a staunch geopolitical campaign to spread Bolshevism throughout Eastern Europe. After succumbing to the Lithuanian-Soviet War in December of 1918, Lithuanians agreed to join the Soviet Union as a de jure independent polity.⁹ The longstanding dual presence of Germany and Russia in Lithuania influenced locals' support for either authority, especially throughout the early 20th century when Lithuanians were forced to choose between Nazism or Bolshevism. In different ways, these paradigmatic ideologies emboldened Lithuanians' already skewed perception of Jews that had long predated World War II and contextualize the near total elimination of *Litvaks* by 1945.

On the eve of the Second World War, Lithuania was home to approximately 250,000 Jews.¹⁰ After Operation Barbarossa in June of 1941, when Stalin relinquished the entire Baltic region to Hitler, Nazi forces immediately began the wholesale extermination of Lithuania's Jews—the first victims of German mass violence after taking over the Soviet domain.¹¹ Most did not live past the acute period of killing between July and November, during which more than 80% of the Jewish population perished in either massacres or forced deportations.¹² By 1945, the number of deaths inflated to around 200,000, leaving only 25,000 Jewish survivors to share the *Litvak's* legacy and commemorate the litany of violence that attempted to extinguish them from history. These staggering numbers testify to how no other Jewish community in Europe was so extensively and comprehensively affected. The intensity and rapidity of violence against Lithuanian Jews began with a particular Nazi policy in 1941.

Factor I: *Aktionen* Policy of Extermination

Relative to Jews in other German-occupied territories, the *Litvaks* experienced a much quicker and more decisive process of killing because of their subjection to *aktionen*—the Nazi's policy of systematic raids that indiscriminately arrested and killed Lithuanian Jews. These massive eruptions of violence quickly transformed into a deadly routine for the destruction of *Litvak* men, women, and children. After Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, a uniform procedure to destroy the Jews of Europe had yet to be finalized and implemented. It was crafted months later at the Wannsee Conference when Reinard Heydrich and other upper-echelon Nazis

⁸ Robert Lewis Koehl, "A Prelude to Hitler's Greater Germany," *American Historical Review* 59 (1953): 59.

⁹ Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, 59.

¹⁰ Dina Porat, "The Holocaust in Lithuania: some unique aspects," in *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, ed. David Cesarani (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² Shapiro and Rheins, i.

designed the Final Solution, the systematic and coordinated plan to annihilate European Jewry.¹³ With no official policy to direct them, Nazi dispatches in Lithuania relied upon their own course of *aktionen*—a systematic, coordinated mode of violence nonetheless. Because of this brutal policy, most Jews in Lithuania were not placed in prisons or ghettos. By foregoing these preliminary stages that characterized Germany's genocide in western, southern and central Europe, the Nazis accelerated the number of *Litvak* victims at an exponential rate within a limited timeframe.

In his meticulous documentation of the war, Adolf Eichmann noted how the decisive majority of Lithuanian Jews were killed by *aktionen* before Heydrich's policy took effect. His records show that 34,000 *Litvaks*, a mere fraction of the nation's prewar communal population, were targets of the Final Solution.¹⁴ Even before the Nazi's began mass deportations from the Baltic region to death camps in neighboring Poland, close to 90,000 Jews were already dead.¹⁵ Such points to the speed and gravity of those *aktionen* responsible for the erasure of predominantly Jewish districts like Rokiskis, Kedainiai and Zagare, as well as larger Jewish communities like in Vilna and Kovno.¹⁶

A particular *aktion* in Ponary pointedly shows how this policy quickly produced a grave outcome for the city's Jews. Herman Kruk, a Jewish prisoner who documented multiple Nazi horrors, chronicled the brutal massacre that took place in the Ponary forest on September, 2 1941. His anthology is a rare account, one of the few available, that articulates the lethal procession of violence that claimed approximately 3,700 Jewish lives in a matter of hours:

They were taken from Lidzki Street to prison and from there to Ponar. On the spot, a group of Lithuanians, commanded by Germans, started shooting them with rifles. They were shot from behind as they walked. Some of them were told to sit on the edge of a ravine and were shot from behind. All the women and children were killed. When asked how many people might have been there, one of them replied several thousands...¹⁷

Kruk's narrative testifies to the rapid, nonselective process of killing that unfolded under Nazi *aktionen*, and gives insight into the reality of Lithuanian Jews who quickly succumbed to this policy in droves after Hitler's invasion. The inimical effect of this genocidal procedure emulates the litany of barbaric violence perpetrated against the *Litvaks*, and is a distinctive feature of their all but total extermination. Aside from pursuing this murderous policy, the Nazi assault on Lithuania's Jewish community was motivated by an ideological battle for supremacy that drove Hitler and his fascist regime to eliminate Stalin's base of *Litvak* support.

¹³ Masha Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania: a History of Remarkable Community, 1316-1945* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1995), 311.

¹⁴ Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 211.

¹⁵ Aya Ben-Naftali, "Collaboration and Resistance: The Ninth Fort as a Test Case," in *Collaboration and Resistance During the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* ed. David Gaunt, Paul Levine and Laura Palosuo (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004) 370.

¹⁶ Karen Sutton, *The massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian collaboration in the final solution, 1941-1944* (Jerusalem; New York: Gefen, 2008), 166.

¹⁷ Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem: chronicles from the Vilna ghetto and the camps, 1939-1944* (New Haven: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2002), 94.

Factor II: Ideological Contempt for Communism and Belief in Jewish-Bolshevism

Nazi mass violence in Lithuania was rooted in Germany's durable hatred for the Soviet Union, along with the myth that Jews were its greatest supporters. German resentment for Russia predated World War II, especially given how each European superpower contested over Lithuania. However, Anti-communist sentiment in Germany gained considerable potency with Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s. His organic nationalism was rooted in the historical myth that communism was inspired and led by the Jews, who sought international domination from their beginning. This charged concept of "Jewish Bolshevism" was pervasive in postwar Germany.¹⁸ Central to their party platform, the Nazis vociferously rejected communism and demonized the Jews as parasitic "destroyers of culture" who supported the Soviet Union to Germany's detriment during World War I.¹⁹ Hitler used this conspiracy to justify Operation Barbarossa in a statement to the German people hours before the invasion:

For more than two decades the Jewish Bolshevik regime in Moscow had tried to set fire not merely to Germany but to all of Europe...the Jewish Bolshevik rulers in Moscow have unswervingly undertaken to force their domination upon us and the other European nations... Now the time has come to confront the plot of the Anglo-Saxon Jewish war-mongers and the equally Jewish rulers of the Bolshevik centre in Moscow.²⁰

Hitler's antipathetic portrayal of the Jews as communists contextualizes the degree of Germany's ideological conflict with the Soviets and reveals the widespread belief that Jews were wedded to the Soviet Union. This Jewish-Bolshevik conflation was not entirely irrational given that Jews, particularly in Lithuania, supported Stalin before Operation Barbarossa.

When the Soviets annexed Lithuania in 1939, after agreeing to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany, most Jews were receptive to the new regime. In numerous Lithuanian towns, Jews greeted the entrance of Soviet troops in the full knowledge that life under Stalin would be far better than occupation by Hitler, who heralded the obliteration of the "Jewish contamination" of Europe—Lithuania included.²¹ Not only did *Litvaks* feel more secure under Soviet authority but they favored the new social reality it provided. The regime's "Sovietization" of the Baltic state restructured virtually every social, educational, political and economic institution in the country.²² This national overhaul gave Jews ample opportunity to express their leftist orientation in the new social and political milieu of the Soviet Lithuanian regime. To be sure, the Jews did not respond uniformly to the Soviet takeover. Some were ambivalent while others rejected Stalin and his politics altogether.²³ However, *Litvaks'* overwhelming support for the new ruling authority was enough to eventually persuade Nazi invaders to launch a campaign of mass violence against them after June 1941.

¹⁸ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin Random House, 1999), 257.

¹⁹ Scott Straus, "Holocaust Lecture One: Rise of Nazi Party, 1918-1938," (lecture, The Comparative Study of Genocide, University of Wisconsin-Madison, October 16, 2017).

²⁰ "The Fuhrer to the German People: 22 June 1941," German Propaganda Archive, accessed December 4, 2017. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hitler4.htm>.

²¹ David Irving, *The War Path: Hitler's Germany, 1933-1939* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1978), xxi.

²² Michael MacQueen, "The Context of Mass Destruction: Agents and Prerequisites of the Holocaust in Lithuania," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12 (1998): 32

²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

A considerable amount of Jews participated in the communist political sphere under Soviet rule, reinforcing the Germans' eventual impulse to eliminate the Jewish-Bolshevik threat. Though a marginal presence, *Litvaks* composed 16.5% of members in the Lithuanian Communist Party, granting them more influence than they enjoyed under the previous Smetona government.²⁴ The Jews also had a similar level of engagement in the *Komosol*, the state's Communist Youth League. While these figures are small, they provoked enough apprehension for Nazis to charge the Soviet Lithuanian regime as a "Jewish Government."²⁵ The Germans' miscalculation of actual Jewish political prowess in Lithuania bred their increasing sense of alarm which amplified in the context of ensuing war, at home and abroad. Their insecurity, derived from a steadfast hatred for communism, advanced the Nazi's pursuit: to destroy communism and Judaism altogether. Also culpable were Lithuanian collaborators who zealously set out to expunge the Jewish people from Lithuania's collective conscience.

Factor III: Intense Involvement of Local Collaborators

Killing between half and two-thirds of their Jewish countrymen, Lithuanian locals played a dominant role in the mass extermination of *Litvaks*. They willingly and enthusiastically participated in the post-Bolshevik purge of Jews. Days after the Soviet retreat in 1941, these men allied with German forces because of their shared perception that Jewry and Bolshevism were an indivisible entity that they needed to destroy.²⁶ To be sure, not all Lithuanians were perpetrators, just as not all Jews were communists. However, locals who did support Hitler became extremely important actors after Nazi officials organized them into paramilitary forces that organized to murder Jews. In these new positions of power, locals instigated a national "self-cleansing" of *Litvaks*, a retributive act for Jews' longstanding pro-Soviet orientation.²⁷ Their widespread, coordinated effort enabled an escalatory process of violence that oppressed, terrorized and ultimately destroyed Lithuania's Jewish population.

Under the auspice of German authority, locals created conditions that barred continued Jewish existence in Lithuania. They aided in *aktion*, particularly by helping Nazi officers to identify and round up targets in various towns throughout the country. With their considerable local knowledge, collaborators disseminated flyers and propagated messages that called upon other Lithuanian nationals to seize and destroy Jewish property.²⁸ Such cruelty came to fruition in, what Kovner termed, the *Kalendar fun Groil*—"the calendar of horrors."²⁹ During this ruthless interval of violence, local men routinely massacred and shot hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of Jews each day.³⁰ Their disposition to violence and capacity to kill en masse reveals how local actors markedly expanded the death toll of Jewish Lithuanians, and emulates their ardent commitment to eliminate the Bolshevik-Jewish threat.

Theoretically, these were ordinary men: volunteers, academics, civil servants, and former officials in the Lithuanian Army were key actors in their auxiliary force.³¹ However, the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ John Mazionis, "Report by US Embassy in Moscow," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 2 (1995): 151.

²⁶ Porat, "The Holocaust in Lithuania," 10.

²⁷ MacQueen, "Context of Mass Destruction," 35.

²⁸ Dina Porat, *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 43.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ben-Naftali, "Collaboration and Resistance," 375.

banality of their demographic profile ran counter to the brutality of their zealous participation in the Labour National Guard, the destructive cohort of 20,000 locals with “nationalist-rightist and anti-Soviet” affiliation.³² After the Nazis assembled them into twenty battalions, Guard dispatches earned a notorious repute for launching merciless attacks against their Jewish compatriots.³³ In a matter of months, they collectively liquidated 220 Jewish *shtetls* across the Baltic state by interrogating, rounding up, assaulting and ultimately slaughtering scores of Jewish civilians.³⁴

This systematic mode of violence was the standardized means of killing during the Great *Aktion*, remembered as the largest murder of Lithuanian Jews during the Holocaust. On October 29, 1941, thousands from Kovno, a historically renowned center for Jewish learning, were abruptly deported to the city’s nearby Ninth Fort killing pit. With consent from Germans in *Einsatzgruppe A*, a special deployment of Nazi security and intelligence officials in the Baltic region, Lithuanians carried out a series of implacable shootings.³⁵ Decades before being brought to justice, Jonas Stlemokas was among those locals at the Ninth Fort who slaughtered what would total 10,000 Jews by the day’s end. His fellow platoon commander recalled the horrific episode in his postwar trial:

The volunteers went to shoot and liquidate the Jews and later surrounded the trenches so that the condemned could not run away. Another group drove the Jews from the fort to the trenches. The shooting continued from 8:00 o’clock in the morning until 8:00 in the evening. We took the clothes of those killed to the am, where we divided them up among ourselves. I got one coat, a towel, a hat, and one pair of socks.³⁶

By giving no explicit mention of violence carried out by Germans, this testimony reflects how locals deliberately chose to participate in the national extermination of Jews. Their volunteerism was not unique to the Ninth Fort massacre, and neither was their acquisition of goods and property after killing Jewish victims. With this incentive, along with a profound skepticism for the communist Jew, Lithuanian collaborators were disposed to enthusiastically kill and do so with haste. These dynamics explain their particular involvement in the Nazi’s genocidal campaign that contributed to the 95% destruction of Lithuanian Jews.

Despite being crucial to the astronomical level of Jewish death in Lithuania, local participation does not entirely explain the destruction of *Litvaks*. Only 23,000 of approximately 2.4 million Lithuanians took part in the massacres.³⁷ Around 1,000 Lithuanians sheltered Jews while the rest of the population remained either apathetic or aggravated the misery of *Litvaks* in less ways than killing. Further, Lithuania did not have a tradition of anti-Jewish pogroms that marred most of Eastern Europe throughout the 19th and early 20th century.³⁸ These considerations are not to diminish the actual impact of Lithuanian brutality during the Holocaust, but provide nuance to the presumption that Lithuanian collaborators were the only tool of Jews’ destruction. While a lethal force, these men were a product of an incredibly complex milieu in which ideological, political and social elements coalesced to exterminate the Jews of Lithuania.

³² Porat, “The Holocaust in Lithuania,” 162.

³³ Porat, *The Fall of a Sparrow*, 59.

³⁴ Mark Levene, *Annihilation: Volume II: The European Rimlands 1939-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 192.

³⁵ MacQueen, “Context of Mass Destruction,” 35.

³⁶ Ben-Naftali, “Collaboration and Resistance,” 377.

³⁷ Sutton, *Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 209.

³⁸ Porat, “The Holocaust in Lithuania,” 166.

Conclusion

A constellation of factors enabled the capacious and quick demise of Jewish Lithuania. Barbaric Nazi raids and massacres executed most of the nation's Jewish population by the end of 1941, months before the Final Solution took effect in the Baltic region. Their *aktionen* policy was unique to the genocide in Lithuania, responsible for killing a third of *Litvaks* in a short period of time after Operation Barbarossa. As a means to rationalize this intensive policy of violence, the Nazi's relied upon an unabashed disdain for communism and the related notion that Jews were its foremost supporters. By conflating Jews with the Bolshevik enemy, Nazi's saw a need to rapidly and decisively obliterate the perceived critical threat that *Litvaks* posed to their military and political apparatus. Seemingly trite Lithuanians were also alarmed by the Jewish presence in their country. With oversight from German authorities, local collaborators willingly joined civil military organizations to eliminate their Jewish neighbors, shopkeepers, teachers and doctors. Their knowledge, network and overall agency engendered a pernicious force that raided, brutalized, and killed nearly 100,000 Jews—half of Lithuania's prewar *Litvak* community.

The synthesis of these social, political and military dynamics help to explain the all but total demise of Lithuanian Jewry. Not only was the sheer magnitude of death a tragedy, but also the scant number of survivors who lived to share the horror. With so few to commemorate the Lithuanian calamity, there is a greater dependency on criminal justice proceedings to provide first-person accounts of the violence. Cases that prosecute offenders like Jonas Stlemokas give insight into the dismal fate of 200,000 men, women and children who were targets of genocide, merely because they were Jewish. With Stlemokas' portrayal of the past, and others like it, one can only attempt to conceive the destitution and destruction of *Litvaks* who, as Abba Kovner correctly surmised, went "like sheep to the slaughter" after June 1941.³⁹

³⁹ "The Vilna Ghetto Manifesto"

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