The Holocaust in Lithuania

The Holocaust in Nazi @-@ occupied Lithuania resulted in the near total destruction of Lithuanian Jews living in the Nazi @-@ controlled Lithuanian and Polish territories (Generalbezirk Litauen of Reichskommissariat Ostland) . Out of approximately 208 @,@ 000 @-@ 210 @,@ 000 Jews , an estimated 190 @,@ 000 ? 195 @,@ 000 were murdered before the end of World War II (wider estimates are sometimes published) , most between June and December 1941 . More than 95 % of Lithuania 's Jewish population was massacred over the three @-@ year German occupation ? a more complete destruction than befell any other country affected by the Holocaust . Historians attribute this to the massive collaboration in the genocide by the Christian locals , though the reasons for this collaboration are still debated . The Holocaust resulted in the largest @-@ ever loss of life in so short a period of time in the history of Lithuania .

The events that took place in the western regions of the USSR occupied by Nazi Germany in the first weeks after the German invasion , including Lithuania , marked the sharp intensification of the Holocaust .

An important component to the Holocaust in Lithuania was that the occupying Nazi German administration fanned antisemitism by blaming the Soviet regime 's recent annexation of Lithuania , a year earlier , on the Jewish community . Another significant factor was the large extent to which the Nazis ' design drew upon the physical organization , preparation and execution of their orders by local Lithuanian auxiliaries of the Nazi occupation regime .

Background

The Soviet Union invaded and occupied and subsequently annexed Lithuania in 1940 . The German invasion of the Soviet Union , on 22 June 1941 , came after a year of Soviet occupation which had culminated in mass deportations across the Baltics only a week before the invasion . The Germans were welcomed as liberators and received support from Lithuania 's irregular militia against retreating Soviet forces . Many Lithuanians believed Germany would allow the re @-@ establishment of the country 's independence . In order to appease the Germans , some people expressed significant antisemitic sentiments . Nazi Germany , which had seized the Lithuanian territories in the first week of the offensive , used this situation to its advantage and indeed in the first days permitted a Lithuanian Provisional Government of the Lithuanian Activist Front to be established . For a brief period it appeared that the Germans were about to grant Lithuania significant autonomy , comparable with that given to Slovak Republic . However , after about a month , the more independently minded Lithuanian organizations were disbanded around August and September 1941 , as the Germans seized more control .

The destruction of Lithuanian Jewry

Estimated number of victims

Prior to the German invasion , the population of Jews was estimated to be about 210 @,@ 000 , although according to data from the Lithuanian statistics department , as of 1 January 1941 there were 208 @,@ 000 Jews . This estimate , based on the officially accounted for prewar emigration within the USSR (approx . 8 @,@ 500) , the number of escapees from Kaunas and Vilnius Ghettos , (1 @,@ 500 @-@ 2 @,@ 000) , as well as the number of the survivors in the concentration camps when they were liberated by the Red Army , (2 @,@ 000 @-@ 3 @,@ 000) , puts the number of Lithuanian Jews murdered in the Holocaust at 195 @,@ 000 to 196 @,@ 000 . It is difficult to estimate the exact number of casualties of the Holocaust and the latter number cannot be final or indisputable . The numbers given by historians differ significantly ranging from 165 @,@ 000 to 254 @,@ 000 , the higher number probably including non @-@ Lithuanian Jews among other Reich (empirical) dissenters labeled as Jewish killed in Lithuania .

The Holocaust events

Chronologically , the genocide in Lithuania can be divided into three phases : phase 1) summer to the end of 1941 ; phase 2) December 1941 ? March 1943 ; phase 3) April 1943 ? mid @-@ July 1944 .

The Lithuanian port city of Klaip?da (Memel in German) had historically been a member of the German Hanseatic League , and had belonged to Germany and East Prussia prior to 1918 . The city was semi @-@ autonomous during the period of Lithuanian independence , and under League of Nations supervision . Approximately 8 @,@ 000 Jews lived in Memel when it was absorbed into the Reich on March 15 , 1939 . Its Jewish residents were expelled , and most fled into Lithuania proper . In 1941 , German killing squads , the Einsatzgruppen , followed the advance of the German army units and immediately began organizing the murder of Jews . Most Lithuanian Jews perished in the first phase during the first months of the occupation and before the end of 1941 . The first recorded action of the Einsatzgruppen (Einsatzgruppe A) took place on June 22 , 1941 , in the border town of Gargzdai (called Gorzdt in Yiddish and Garsden in German) , which was one of the oldest Jewish settlements in the country and only eleven miles from German @-@ annexed Memel . Approximately 800 Jews were shot that day in what is known as the Garsden Massacre . Approximately 100 non @-@ Jewish Lithuanians were also executed , many for trying to aid their Jewish neighbors . About 80 @,@ 000 Jews were killed by October and about 175 @,@ 000 by the end of the year . The majority of Jews in Lithuania were not required to live in ghettos nor sent to the Nazi concentration camps which at that time were just in the preliminary stages of operation . Instead they were shot in pits near their places of residence with the most infamous mass murders taking place in the Ninth Fort near Kaunas and the Ponary Forest near Vilnius . By 1942 about 45 @,@ 000 Jews survived , largely those who had been sent to ghettos and camps . In the second phase , the Holocaust slowed , as Germans decided to use the Jews as forced labor to fuel the German war economy . In the third phase , the destruction of Jews was again given a high priority ; it was in that phase that the remaining ghettos and camps were liquidated .

Two factors contributed to the rapid destruction of Lithuanian Jewry . The first was the significant support for the " de @-@ Jewification " of Lithuania coming from the Lithuanian populace . The second was the German plan for early colonization of Lithuania ? which shared a border with German East Prussia ? in accordance with their Generalplan Ost ; hence the high priority given to the extermination of the relatively small Lithuanian Jewish community .

Participation of local collaborators

The Nazi German administration directed and supported the organized killing of Lithuanian Jews . Local Lithuanian auxiliaries of the Nazi occupation regime carried out logistics for the preparation and execution of the murders under Nazi direction . Nazi SS Brigadeführer Franz Walter Stahlecker arrived in Kaunas on 25 June 1941 and gave agitation speeches in the city to instigate the murder of Jews . Initially this was in the former State Security Department building , but officials there refused to take any action . Later , he gave speeches in the city . In a report of October 15 , Stahlecker wrote that they had succeeded in covering up their vanguard unit (Vorkommando) actions , and it was made to look like it was the initiative of the local population . Groups of partisans , civil units of nationalist @-@ rightist anti @-@ Soviet affiliation , initiated contact with the Germans as soon as they entered the Lithuanian territories . A rogue unit of insurgents headed by Algirdas Klimaitis and encouraged by Germans from the Sicherheitspolizei and Sicherheitsdienst , started anti @-@ Jewish pogroms in Kaunas (Kovno) on the night of 25 ? 26 June 1941 . Over a thousand Jews perished over the next few days in what was the first pogrom in Nazi @-@ occupied Lithuania . Different sources give different figures , one being 1 @,@ 500 and another 3 @,@ 800 , with additional victims in other towns of the region .

On 24 June 1941 , the Lithuanian Security Police (Lietuvos saugumo policija) , subordinate to Nazi Germany 's Security Police and Nazi Germany 's Criminal Police , was created . It would be involved

in various actions against the Jews and other enemies of the Nazi regime . Nazi commanders filed reports purporting the " zeal " of the Lithuanian police battalions surpassed their own . The most notorious Lithuanian unit participating in the Holocaust was the Lithuanian Sonderkommando Squad (Ypatingasis b?rys) from the Vilnius (Vilna , Wilno) area which killed tens of thousands of Jews , Poles and others in the Ponary massacre . Another Lithuanian organization involved in the Holocaust was the Lithuanian Labor Guard . Many Lithuanian supporters of the Nazi policies came from the fascist Iron Wolf organization . Overall , the nationalistic Lithuanian administration was interested in the liquidation of the Jews as a perceived enemy and potential rivals of ethnic Lithuanians and thus not only did not oppose Nazi Holocaust policy but in effect adopted it as their own .

A combination of factors serves as an explanation for participation of some Lithuanians in genocide against Jews . Those factors include national traditions and values , including antisemitism , common throughout contemporary Central Europe , and a more Lithuanian @-@ specific desire for a " pure " Lithuanian nation @-@ state with which the Jewish population was believed to be incompatible . There were a number of additional factors , such as severe economic problems which led to the killing of Jews over personal property . Finally the Jews were seen as having supported the Soviet regime in Lithuania during 1940 ? 1941 . During the period leading up to the German invasion , the Jews were blamed by some for virtually every misfortune that had befallen Lithuania .

The involvement of the local population and institutions , in relatively high numbers , in the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry became a defining factor of the Holocaust in Lithuania .

Not all of the Lithuanian populace supported the killings . Out of a population of close to 3 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 (80 % of it ethnic Lithuanians) , a few thousands took an active part in the killings while many hundreds risked their lives sheltering the Jews . Israel has recognized 723 Lithuanians as Righteous Among the Nations for risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust . In addition , many members of the Polish minority in Lithuania also helped to shelter the Jews . Lithuanians and Poles who risked their lives saving Jews were persecuted and often executed by the Nazis .

= = Comprehension and remembrance = =

The genocide in Lithuania is seen by some historians as one of the earliest large @-@ scale implementations of the Final Solution , leading some scholars to express an opinion that the Holocaust began in Lithuania in the summer of 1941 . ^ Other scholars say the Holocaust started in September 1939 with the onset of the Second World War , or even earlier , on Kristallnacht in 1938 , or , according to the Jewish Virtual Library , when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933 .

The Soviet government , for political reasons , tried to minimize the unique suffering of the Jews . In Lithuania and throughout the Soviet Union , memorials did not mention Jews in particular ; instead they were built to commemorate the suffering of " local inhabitants " . People guilty of Nazi collaboration and crimes against Jews were not punished severely .

Since Lithuania regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 , the debate over Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust has been fraught with difficulty . Modern Lithuanian nationalists stress anti @-@ Soviet resistance , but some Lithuanian partisans , seen in Lithuania as heroes in the struggle against Soviet occupation , were also Nazi collaborators who had cooperated in the murder of Lithuanian Jewry . The post @-@ Soviet Lithuanian government has on a number of occasions stated a commitment to commemorating the Holocaust , combating antisemitism , and bringing Nazi @-@ era war criminals to justice . The National Coalition Supporting Soviet Jewry have said " Lithuania has made slow but significant progress in the prosecution of suspected Lithuanian collaborators in the Nazi genocide " . Lithuania was the first of the newly independent post @-@ Soviet states to legislate for the protection and marking of Holocaust @-@ related sites . In 1995 , president of Lithuania Algirdas Brazauskas speaking before the Israeli Knesset , offered a public apology to the Jewish people for the Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust . On 20 September 2001 , to mark the 60th anniversary of the Holocaust in Lithuania , the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament) held a session during which Alfonsas Eidintas , the historian nominated as the Republic 's next ambassador to Israel , delivered an address accounting for the annihilation of Lithuania 's

Jews .

There has been criticism that Lithuania is dragging its feet on the issue ; in 2001 Dr. Efraim Zuroff , Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center , criticized the Lithuanian government for its unwillingness to prosecute Lithuanians involved in the Holocaust . In 2002 the Simon Wiesenthal Center declared its dissatisfaction with the Lithuanian government ? s efforts and launched a controversial " Operation Last Chance " offering monetary rewards for evidence that leads to the prosecution of war criminals ; this campaign has encountered much resistance in Lithuania and the other former Soviet bloc countries . More recently , in 2008 , the Simon Weisenthal Center which had initially ranked Lithuania high during on @-@ going trials to bring Lithuanian war criminals to justice , noted , in its annual report , no progress and the lack of any real punishment by Lithuanian justice organs for Holocaust perpetrators .

There has been limited debate on the place of the Holocaust in Lithuanian national memory ; historically Lithuanians have denied national participation in the Holocaust or labeled the Lithuanian participants in genocide as fringe extreme elements . The memories of that time and the discussion of those events in Jewish and Lithuanian historiographies are quite different , although Lithuanian historiography in the past two decades has improved , compared to the Soviet historiography , with the works of scholars such as Alfonsas Eidintas , Valentinas Brandi?auskas and Ar?nas Bubnys , among others , being positively reviewed by the Western and Jewish historians . The issue remains controversial to this day . According to Lithuanian historians , the contentious issues involve the role of the Lithuanian Activist Front , the Lithuanian Provisional Government and participation of Lithuanian civilians and volunteers in the Holocaust .