



Context Box Essays

In this document you'll find all essays from the exhibition's context boxes, in the order that they appear.

VILNIUS OVER TIME

Between 1915 and 1922, Vilna changed hands no fewer than seven times. It was multi-ethnic in its social composition: According to the census of 1897, which asked for religious affiliation and language, 23.6% of Vilna's inhabitants were Orthodox Christians, 36.9% Catholics, and 41.3% Jews. The remainder were Muslims, Karaites, and Protestants. For language, 40% of respondents listed Yiddish as their mother tongue, while 30.9% responded Polish, 20% Russian, 4.2% Belarusian, and 2.1% Lithuanian. If anything, these figures may well understate the actual number of Jews, as well as Lithuanians and Belarusians.

Each of these groups sought to control the city, and understood its significance in a different way. The Poles called it Wilno, a symbol of Polish civilization and a stronghold of Polishness in the East, where Polish cultural influence was in decline. For the Lithuanians, Vilnius held a historical significance: it was their ancient capital, and the birthplace of the modern Lithuanian nation. Belarusians, too, loved Vilnya (Russian spelling), which reminded them that once upon a time theirs was the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Then, there were the Jews, immensely proud of their Vilna, the Yerushalayim d'Lite, or the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." To many Jews, Vilna was an almost mythical site, where their history and culture met. A city that was once home to great religious sages like the Vilna Gaon, as well as political revolutionaries. And a city that produced some of the greatest Yiddish and Hebrew cultural works to be found across all of Europe.

During World War I, Vilna was occupied by German forces between 1915 and 1918. In 1919, while the complicated relationships between Lithuanians, Poles, and Soviets continued to stoke national tensions, the Germans ceded Lithuanian territories. The impact of the Russian Revolution—first the overthrow of the Tsar in February of 1917, and then the Bolshevik Revolution later in the same year—was felt far beyond the ever-shifting borders of Russia. The national status of Lithuania and the other Baltic states hung in the balance as Russia became engulfed in a bloody civil war for the next five years. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, emerged victorious. Their promise of a multi-ethnic, multi-national socialist state became Russia's new guiding ethos—at least for a time. Some territories captured during the chaos of the civil war were incorporated into the new USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), which was officially formed in late 1922. These included Ukraine and Belarus. However the Baltic states, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, were able—along with Finland and Poland—to resist a Bolshevik takeover. Poland regained its independence in 1918 after 123 years of foreign occupation.

Following the 1918 German surrender, in the midst of the never-ending conflicts and territorial realignments of the time, Vilna became the capital of an independent Lithuania. Subsequently, during the 1919-20 Polish-Soviet war, it was briefly captured—twice—by the Soviets before it finally came under Polish rule in October 1920. The fighting over the city fostered considerable anti-Jewish violence, particularly during the time immediately after its initial capture by the Poles on April 19, 1919, during which 54-65 Jews were killed. Vilna was finally incorporated into Poland in February 1922, following elections to a local assembly in 'Litwa środkowa' (central Lithuania). The assembly had been established by the Polish General Lucjan Żeligowski after the Polish seizure of Vilna. The capital of Lithuania became Kaunas, and from 1922 until 1939 Vilna was officially a part of Poland.

Damaged significantly by World War I, Vilna's residents were eager to help rebuild its institutions. They founded new community organizations and committees to aid refugees, support labor—particularly agriculture and trades—and rebuild cultural institutions. Financial aid from abroad, especially from the United States and the Netherlands, also helped support the reconstruction of Jewish institutions in Vilna. During this period, Vilna remained a hub for Jewish life in Eastern Europe, particularly for those involved in the arts or intellectual circles. Russian culture had dominated the educational system before 1915, appealing to the interests of the Jewish middle class. After 1922, a shift occurred. Polish culture took over in accordance with the territorial realignment. However, it was unclear what the future would hold for Polish Jews in general, and especially those in Vilna.

This transitional period was also marked by the same economic tensions that affected the rest of the world at this time, including the Great Depression in the United States and severe inflation in Germany. After Vilna became part of Poland in 1922, the town was cut off from its traditional economic markets by hostile borders—Lithuania on one side and the Soviet Union on the other. This had an extremely adverse effect on its economic life. It was particularly detrimental for the local timber, paper, publishing, leather, hosiery, and glove industries, all of which featured Jews in a prominent role. Antisemitism also rose throughout Europe. This often took the form of Judeo-Bolshevism slander: a highly popularized antisemitic accusation that claimed communism was a Jewish movement controlled by Jews, which sought to achieve Jewish domination over social, political, and economic institutions. This slander, started by the defeated White Army during the Russian Civil War, spread throughout the world, reaching the United States in 1921 as well as all European nations. Nazis spread these talking points through pamphlets and other forms of propaganda. But many Lithuanians and Poles also pushed this agenda through popular media and popular culture.

Affected by these propagandistic fears of Bolshevism, and alarmed by the strength of Joseph Stalin's USSR, Soviet culture, ideology, and institutions, many people in the Polish republic felt that what they believed was Jewish support for Bolshevism was dangerous. Antisemitic violence increased markedly around the beginning of the 1930s, and Jewish university students in Vilna were some of the first to be targeted. This took place within the context of the campaign to reduce the number of Jews at Polish universities (and then to exclude them altogether), which the nationalist right in Poland saw as both a desirable goal and also as a means to strengthen its influence among students. Vilna residents feared that another war was coming, but it was impossible for them to know just how devastating it would be.

JEWISH RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS

Vilna was a major center of 18th and 19th-century Jewish religious life and study. Historically, it has become well-known for its opposition to the Hasidic movement. [Hasidism](#) is a Jewish spiritual revival movement known for its dynasties and its willingness to embrace elements of mysticism. Its opponent the [misnagdim](#) (literally “opponents,” who differed from the Hasidism on key matters of prayer, spirituality, and observance), represented a competing vision of Jewish religious orthodoxy. The bitter fight between the two views continued over many decades. While many renowned Torah scholars and respected rabbis made their homes in Vilna, Hasidic *rebbs*—spiritual leaders of particular Hasidic dynasties—could not find a foothold there. Many Jews would travel to Vilna or other major Eastern European cities to pray or study with religious leaders and scholars. Particularly important in the town was the *musar* movement which, while maintaining the misnagdic emphasis on Torah study, stressed religious education focused on personal improvement and the self.

Before both World Wars, there were over a hundred synagogues in Vilna, all of which were important sites of both religious and community life. Jewish people would gather at these sites to pray or celebrate major Jewish holidays, such as Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. They also used the sites to attend lectures and participate in charity work. Families like the Rudashevskis might also have celebrated important life cycle events at one of these synagogues. Such events could include holding *bris milot* (ritual circumcision) ceremonies for the birth of a son, a *bar mitzvah* (upon a boy’s thirteenth birthday) or *bat mitzvah* (upon a girl’s twelfth birthday) ceremony, signing the *ketubah* (ceremonial wedding contract) for a marriage, or sitting *shiva* (a ritual mourning period) for a death. Orthodox Jews might have incorporated other prayers and rituals into their daily life, like keeping kosher in the home, participating in ritual bathing ceremonies (*mikvah*), or studying Torah.

Many Jews, regardless of how observant they were, kept the Sabbath weekly on Friday nights by hosting Shabbat dinner for their families and by adhering to certain Jewish laws stating what one could and could not do on the holy day of rest. The different Jewish holidays, from Hanukkah to Passover, also each have specific prayers, foods, songs, and traditions associated with them.

YIVO IN VILNA

YIVO was founded as the [Yiddish Scientific Institute](#) (*Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut*) by scholars in Berlin and Vilna in 1925, to document and study Jewish life and Yiddish language and culture. The scholars chose Vilna—then an important center of Jewish culture—as the site of the new institute. YIVO’s initial goals were to build Yiddish culture, to document its many forms, and to write new scholarship across many different subjects in Yiddish. To accomplish this task, documents going back to the earliest Jewish presence in Eastern

Europe and up to the present day were necessary. To collect them, a massive network of ordinary Jews known as *zamlers*, was formed across Europe, Russia, North and South America, as well as in the Middle East and Asia. These *zamlers*, or collectors, sent artifacts of daily life, folklore, books, musical scores, political posters, rabbinical writings, diaries, memoirs, community records, works of art and literature, and much more to the Vilna headquarters. Because of this worldwide effort, YIVO became an immense source of pride for everyday Jews. It raised the level of the Yiddish language from that of a “jargon” to a normal European language, and became through its *zamlers* the greatest single repository of documentation about Jewish life in Eastern Europe and Russia in the world, extending into every part of the world where Eastern European Jews had settled. During the Nazi occupation of Vilna, many members of the “Paper Brigade”—Jews in the Vilna Ghetto tasked by the Nazis with sorting through YIVO’s collections and identifying the most valuable items—risked their lives by defying Nazi orders. They smuggled out documents, books, artifacts, and writings, or hid them in the ghetto and saved them from Nazi destruction. Many of the “Paper Brigade” became partisans or otherwise involved in resistance in the ghetto.

[Max Weinreich](#), the founder of YIVO in Vilna, was in Denmark for a conference when World War II broke out in September of 1939. He managed to relocate to the United States and there he reestablished YIVO’s headquarters in New York City during the war. After the war, when the extent of the destruction of Vilna and its Jewish communities became clear, YIVO’s move to New York became permanent.

POLISH POLITICAL PARTIES BEFORE WORLD WAR II

The euphoria that followed the achievement of Polish independence masked, if only briefly, the extent of the divisions that were to mar Poland’s political life throughout the interwar period. The country’s partition before 1914 between the three great dynastic empires of Eastern Europe (Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary) had created distinct political groupings. The groupings differed not only in ideology but also in their view of how the Polish cause could best be advanced, and in their choice of which partitioning power(s) should be sought as an ally. In a post-World War I era, questions of borders and governance—who would govern the Second Polish Republic, and how—were of the utmost importance.

A constitutional system was eventually settled upon as a workable compromise. This system would be expected to balance a strong national government, ideally capable of weathering the storms of regional conflict, against powerful local governments. However, the constitution adopted in March 1921 was highly democratic in character. This sophisticated system did not work well in Poland. The different political traditions, together with the introduction of proportional representation and general political inexperience, led to intense fragmentation. Within the timeline between the achievement of independence in November 1918, and Józef Piłsudski’s coup of May 1926, there were 14 different governments.

As a result of the changing governmental structure, new parties emerged—or evolved out of existing blocs or organizations—to struggle for their place within the nation’s political landscape. Though largely dominated

by the respective nationalist and populist movements—particularly for non-Jews—the coalition-based nature of the new government system allowed for a wide range of political parties that spoke to various ideologies, ethnicities, and interests. Particularly in a time of economic depression, with a nation divided along stark ethnic and cultural lines, individual identification with a minority political party gained new importance, as people believed their presence could be better felt when banding together in smaller groups that had more of their specific interests in common.

Even within a polarized, rapidly changing political world in the interwar period, Poland's many political parties played a crucial role in shaping the country's political, social, and economic environment. Some of the most prominent political parties in interwar Poland included:

National Democracy (Endecja): One of Poland's strongest political movements, the National Democrats (Endeks) promoted right-wing nationalist and conservative views, focusing on national identity and traditional values. Led by Roman Dmowski, the Endeks had been the pro-Russian party, arguing that Germany was Poland's main enemy. During the World War I, the Endeks supported the Western Allies who in 1918 had committed themselves to the establishment of a Polish state where the National Democrats would play the principal role. In the eyes of the Endeks, this new state was to be unitary and national, closely allied with France and serving as a barrier to the revival of the German *Drang nach Osten* ("Drive to the East"), the German intention to expand eastward and colonize eastward Slavic lands. This party had a strong influence on Polish politics and cultural discourse, particularly regarding the promotion of antisemitic rhetoric and action. The National Democrats endorsed the idea that Polish Jews were taking work away from Catholic Poles, and cultivated intense, violent resentment within their base of political support.

While Endeks advocated for certain ethnic minorities, particularly Ukrainians or Belarusians, to either assimilate into Polish culture or leave the country, they did not want Jews to assimilate; they wanted them gone from Poland.



Endecja members participate in an antisemitic demonstration, c. 1937-1938.
Courtesy of International Center for Photograph, gift of Mara Vishniac Kohn, 2013.

Sanation (Sanacja): Though not a political party, the idea of *sanacja* was, at least in theory, opposed to identification with a specific party. Proponents of this idea were effectively the authoritarian ruling party for much of the 1930s. Organized around former military commander Józef Piłsudski's leadership, followers of this political philosophy urged a "cleansing," or *sanacja*, of the nation's morals and politics, and focused in particular on the purging the parliamentary system of its flaws. Piłsudski and his fervent disciples promoted strong, authoritarian leadership, which eventually coalesced into Piłsudski as the acting head of state, with his followers in a group called the Non-Party Bloc of Cooperation with the Government (BBWR).

The Piłsudski regime was an exception among the dictatorships of the interwar years. Piłsudski's main interests lay in foreign policy and army affairs. He had no well-defined political philosophy, so it was only with extreme reluctance that he ordered the military coup that led to him assuming power. His whole political past had lain with the Left, and his bitterest political disputes had been with the Right. He continued to think of himself as a democrat, so to the surprise of some of his supporters he did not establish a dictatorship after the coup. The political movement set up to support the new regime was called the "Non-party Bloc for the Support of the Government." Under Polish conditions, there was much to be said for this semi-autocratic system. It allowed a fair degree of personal freedom, while political parties—apart from Communist organizations—were also allowed a degree of freedom. At the same time, it provided a strong government that enjoyed a continuity of policy, which would be essential if the country was to pursue any consistent plan concerning the national minorities' economic problems or foreign policy. In addition, unlike overtly antisemitic nationalist political leaders, Piłsudski saw Jews as rightful citizens of Poland, rather than unwanted aliens. He did his part to protect them from antisemitic violence. Many Polish Jews mourned his death in 1935.

Nevertheless, in the long run, the *Sanacja* (purification) proved scarcely more successful than its predecessors. Although Piłsudski had come to power with the support of the parties of the Left (the Polish Socialist Party and the two radical peasant groups, the Liberation and the Peasant Party), he increasingly came into conflict with them. At the root of this clash was the Left's desire to exercise more influence over government policy. When the parties of the Left came to the conclusion that Piłsudski was no longer on their side, they began to call more and more insistently for a return to a fully democratic system. After Piłsudski's death in May 1935, the negative features of the regime he had established became even more evident. The government was now split by deep divisions of personality and policy, and became increasingly autocratic. The new constitution, enacted using a very dubious legal procedure in April 1935—just before Piłsudski's death—reduced the powers of parliament and increased those of the president and the supreme commander. At the same time, there had been a strong growth of radical right-wing, antisemitic organizations in Poland during the 1930s, fueled by the inability of the government to deal with the economic crisis. Though the government still legally discouraged anti-Jewish violence, it increasingly claimed that the "Jewish problem" could only be solved through the emigration of the overwhelming majority of the country's three million Jews. It is probable that only the outbreak of war prevented the adoption of anti-Jewish legislation.

The Bund (General Jewish Workers' Alliance – *Algemayne yiddishe arbiter bund*): One of the largest political groups among Polish Jews, the Bund represented a diverse coalition of Jewish people with shared

interests in trade unionism, anti-Zionism, and cultural promotion of Yiddish. It was particularly active and popular in urban centers, like Vilna. While Jewish people were an ethnic minority in interwar Poland—about 10% of the total population—they were frequently clustered together in larger communities than agricultural workers of other ethnicities were, and had large diversity in their political affiliations. Despite popular antisemitic tropes of Jews, including ideas of ill-gotten wealth, Jewish people belonged to all social classes. Many also differed on how to approach cultural issues like assimilation and Zionism. On the eve of World War II, the Bund was the strongest Jewish party in Poland's urban centers of Warsaw, Łódź, and Vilna. After the death of Piłsudski and the support that his successors displayed for state-sponsored antisemitism, even those who were not union members began to support the Bund and its call to defend Jewish rights in Poland. The Bund's major rivals for Jewish political support—the religious Aguda and various Zionist parties—lost support, as they proved unable to protect key priorities for Polish Jews. The Aguda failed to forestall new restrictions on kosher slaughter, while the Zionist parties were unable to keep Britain from imposing new, more stringent restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine.



Celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Bund in Warsaw, Poland.

The Polish Socialist Party (PPS): A left-wing party of interwar Poland, the PPS was originally founded in 1892. It advocated for workers' rights, social justice, and socialism, and was one of the largest and most influential political parties in Poland during the interwar period. Although it was ambivalent about Jewish cultural autonomy, it was the only Polish political party that directly fought antisemitism.

People's Party (PSL): PSL was born of the merger of three smaller peasant-based political parties: one from the political left, one from the center, and one from the right. In coalition, they took a mostly-centrist, populist view, primarily advocating for their base of peasants and farmers on agricultural economic issues and rural communities' rights and welfare. The right wing of the party held certain antisemitic tendencies, but, as the party on the whole became more opposed to the government in the late 1930s, the once-overt antisemitism became less pronounced.

POGROMS

In the 1790s, Catherine II of Russia created the [Pale of Settlement](#): an area between the Baltic and Black Seas where Jews were required to live by law. Throughout the early 1800s, although violence against Jews in the Russian Empire was rare, the government was heavily involved in how Jewish people administered their own communities, ran businesses, and traveled within the empire. The government also monitored their behavior through. For example, traditional Jewish forms of dress were prohibited, and the compulsory enrollment of Jewish men into the army was strictly enforced. However, after the 1881 assassination of Alexander II—the ruling czar of Russia at that time, who was known for his relatively liberal policies, including the removal of some cultural restrictions on Jewish people—antisemitism rose dramatically.

A wave of deadly [pogroms](#) swept through Jewish settlements, particularly in the southwestern provinces of the Russian Empire. Pogroms are acts of mass violence, in this case directed against Jewish people and their property. Sometimes, these acts of violence were tacitly endorsed by the local authorities, who turned a blind eye to what was happening. Other times, it was suspected that governmental officials had a hand in organizing pogroms or stoking violence, likely to deflect governmental criticism onto a convenient scapegoat. Other local authorities tried to suppress pogroms because it reflected badly on them with their superiors.

Approximately 150,000 Jews were killed during pogroms between 1881 and 1921. Within that span, Jewish life within the Pale of Settlement was significantly restricted by Russian officials. Large numbers of Jews were expelled from major Russian cities, were forbidden to buy or use land outside of the Pale, and had to deal with quota systems set in place to limit the number of Jews in Russian universities. As Jewish self-defense became a necessity, the Russian government often tried to use the word pogrom in a disingenuous way. When Jews resisted against Christian violence, Russian officials would call the action a “Jewish pogrom.” Over time, “pogrom” became a useful historical shorthand for experiences of mass Jewish death, invoked in the years leading up to, during, and after the Holocaust.

GERMAN-SOVIET (RIBBENTROP-MOLOTOV) PACT

The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, also called the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, was signed by German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov in two parts. The first part, signed on August 19, 1939, consisted of an economic agreement in which Germany would exchange manufactured goods for Soviet raw materials. The second part was a 10-year nonaggression pact signed on August 23, 1939, which stated that Germany and the USSR would not attack each other. This secret part of the pact set the stage for the eventual division of Poland. Western Poland would be controlled by

Germany, while the Soviets would occupy and control eastern Poland. The arrangement also specified Soviet dominance over Latvia and Estonia, areas that were part of the Russian Empire before World War I. A month later, in September 1939, Germany handed Lithuania over to the Soviets, as well.



LITHUANIA – CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO POWERS

For years, Lithuania had been striving to regain the city of Vilna (called Vilnius in Lithuanian) as its historical capital, seeking to wrest control of it from Poland, which ruled it during the interwar period. After the Soviet Union took Vilna, Stalin offered it to Lithuania with the requirement that Lithuania would allow the Soviet army to enter its territory. This was a calculated move to make the Soviet occupation of the country appear to have been undertaken with the agreement of the Lithuanians. Lithuania, caught between the Nazis and the Soviets, saw no alternative but to accept Stalin's offer. Vilna thus became part of Lithuania – again – in October 1939. Lithuanians rejoiced at having regained their old capital. But, at the same time, an ominous saying spread among them: *"Vilnius is ours, and we are the Russians'."*



The two invading armies, Soviet and German, meet in 1939 in the captured Polish town of Brześć Litewski.
Credit: British Imperial War Museums.

LITHUANIAN ANTISEMITISM

There were no pogroms in Lithuania up until 1939, even during the Russian Civil War. Pogroms ravaged Jewish communities and civilians in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus, but the Lithuanians had a distinctly different perception of Jews than the Poles did, as the main factor in the Lithuanian genocide of Jews was fanatical nationalism, not religious or economic factors.

The Jewish community in Lithuania had flourished under agreements dating back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the late 1300s, where privileges were granted to Jews who lived in certain towns. The Lithuanian Jewish community became known for both its secular cultural approach to Jewish life – with extensive cultural production and a thriving publishing industry – as well as its reputation as a hub for religious intellectuals.

Over time, Jews also ended up with an advantage in business, because Jews often lived in urban centers while Lithuanians lived in the countryside and worked in agriculture. Not all city-dwelling Jews were wealthy, but their economic situations fundamentally differed from those of agrarian peasants. While the majority of ethnic Lithuanians were peasants in 1923, 83% of the country's commercial and retail enterprises were owned by Jews. This gave Lithuanian peasants an easy scapegoat for their economic struggles. In addition, the educated Jews and Lithuanians in the country had different cultural allegiances; while Jewish intellectuals often favored Russian language and culture, the Lithuanian elite preferred Polish culture, with each group expressing very little interest in the other.

There were sporadic outbreaks of antisemitic violence in interwar Lithuania. But by and large, the government cracked down on would-be pogromists. Unlike Poland, the Lithuanian government funded Jewish schools, which offered Lithuanian Jews some measure of reassurance about their place in the nation.

However, as the national economy underwent “Lithuanianization” in the 1930s, Lithuanians became more prominent in the economy. In many cases, they directly replaced Jews in various industries. Perceptive Jews may have realized that their future in Lithuania was tenuous, as the industries that had sustained them became increasingly inaccessible.

On October 31, 1939, less than three days after the Soviets handed Vilna over to the Lithuanians, serious rioting broke out in the city. Partly, these disturbances were provoked among local Poles by Lithuanian authorities, who had set an unfavorable exchange rate for the Polish *zloty*, which was to be withdrawn from circulation. This caused rapid inflation, leading to anti-Jewish violence based on rumors that Jews were hoarding flour. At the same time, disorderly, pro-Soviet groups, which were largely Jewish, assembled to protest the departure of the Soviets.

Both groups found themselves in conflict with the Lithuanian police and army, brought in from Kaunas, who did not know local conditions. Although these conflicts resulted in no deaths, scores of people were injured and Jewish shops were destroyed. The authorities eventually re-established order, arresting 66 rioters. Among them, the police listed 44 Poles and 20 Jews. One man, an ethnic Russian named Boris Filipov, was executed for his part in the rioting. The view that the anti-Jewish violence was initiated by the Lithuanian authorities is not convincing, but there may be some basis to the argument that the Lithuanian forces first attacked Jewish pro-communists, which led to an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence among the local Poles.

The Lithuanian authorities attempted to move the Jewish refugees out of Vilna, where a housing shortage was made worse by the government’s plan to move the capital from Kaunas. This effort was not very successful. In early 1940, only 3,500 refugees had left. Some refugees, with the help of Chiune Sugihara and Jan Zwartendijk, the Japanese and Dutch consuls to Lithuania, respectively, were able to proceed to other countries, while other refugees were able to travel to Palestine or to Sweden.



Antisemitic and anti-Soviet propaganda poster written in Lithuanian, published in 1941. The main text reads, “A Jew is your eternal enemy.” Wikicommons.

JEW, LITHUANIANS, AND COMMUNISM

The Soviet occupation had vastly different consequences for ethnic Lithuanians and Jews. While relationships between Lithuanians and Jews had been marked by antagonism for decades (see the previous context box, “Lithuanian antisemitism” for more information), they turned increasingly violent when the Soviets arrived. For many Vilnius inhabitants, including many Jews, the Soviet occupation represented a complete tragedy: repressions, confiscation of property, terror, and mass deportations to Siberian labor camps. Even Jews who had been known supporters of communism – like Zalman Reyzen of the *Vilner Tog*, or Yosif Chernikhov, a prominent attorney who had defended communists in Polish courts – could not escape the tightening net. Reyzen was murdered by the Soviets, while Chernikhov likely died in Siberia, alongside numerous other Jewish businessmen, political organizers, and Bundist leaders. In total, more than 17,000 innocent people were forcibly deported to Siberian labor camps, including 5,000 children. Around 13.5% of the deportees were Jewish.

Soviet occupation also meant the end of a short-lived period of Lithuanian independence. However, for many Eastern European Jews like Rudashevski, the Soviet occupation did not pose an existential threat in the same way that Nazi fascism did. On the contrary, despite the hardships, it meant the possibility of survival. Jews who witnessed the early Nazi occupation of European nations saw how great powers like France had been unable to withstand the onslaught. If even France could not stand up to them, what power could protect Jews from Nazi persecution? The answer was the Soviet Union.

As a result, many Jews in Vilnius, especially those on the political Left, welcomed the Soviet government in 1940. At the time, most Lithuanian Jews regarded the Soviets as a lesser evil than the Nazis. They were well aware of the character of Nazi rule. The Soviet occupation was certainly greeted by many Jews with some relief. Yet these expressions of joy were largely confined to the younger and more radical parts of the community, like Rudashevski. In fact, Rudashevski wrote enthusiastically about the activities of the Soviet youth group called the Young Pioneers, including its meetings and outings in the green forests around Vilnius in the summer of 1941. There were also those within the Lithuanian Jewish community – concentrated, as it was, in small towns and, for the most part, conservative and religious – who opposed a Bolshevik takeover. There were certainly Jews who strongly opposed the new communist regime. One of them was the Yiddish poet Chaim Grade. In his autobiographical *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, he expresses his sympathy for the Poles in Vilna who mourn the loss of their country in the Cathedral and the Bernadine church, and contrasts their behavior favorably with that of the crowd around a Soviet tank who listen with “gleeful laughter” to the stories recounted by the tank’s commander. His reservations were shared, for more pragmatic reasons, by the better-off section of Lithuanian Jewry who suffered from the socialization of the economy. Of 1,593 firms nationalized in Soviet Lithuania, 1,320 had belonged to Jews; of 986 workshops taken over by the state, 560 had been in Jewish hands.



Lithuanian Security Police oversee the burning of a synagogue. Wikicommons via Bundesarchiv.

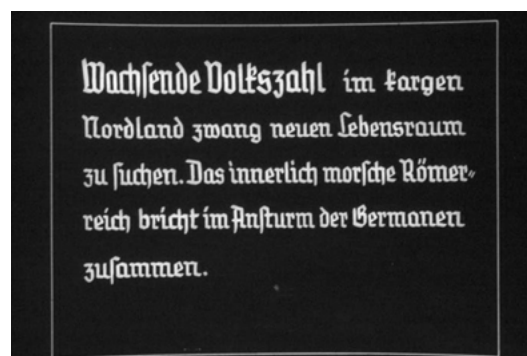
At the same time, Jews working for the Soviet Union in visible roles exacerbated Lithuanian resentment and antisemitism. Under prior Lithuanian laws, Jews could not be employed by local or state governments. The Soviets lifted this and many other antisemitic regulations on work. As the Soviet Union confiscated private property and small businesses, and nationalized Lithuanian and Jewish industries, they frequently hired educated Jews to serve low-level administrative roles in these companies, bringing back old economic resentments between urban Jews and Lithuanian peasants. Even the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, hired Jews. While the top positions in local Soviet administration were reserved for non-Jews and people from the Soviet Union, the propagandistic myth that Jews were agents of communism – and that they benefitted heavily from the Soviet occupation – was impossible to dispel. This is probably because Jews had constituted a significant proportion of the very-small Communist Party of Lithuania. According to the State Security Department (VSD), 346 (35%) of 1,120 party members at the end of 1939 were Jews. 670 were Lithuanians, while the remaining members were Poles, Russians, and Germans. Another 287 Communists, including 145 Jews, were in jail. It is important to note, however, that the Jewish population in Vilna numbered 225,000 people. As much as Jews were a big part of the local communist party, they represented only a very small percentage of the total number of Jews in the city.

Right-wing groups in favor of ethnic purity and Lithuanian independence adopted Nazi rhetoric and embraced their nationalist policies. The Jews of Vilnius, as had historically often been the case, were an easy group to scapegoat onto when projecting national tensions. The “Jewish problem” had first been framed as one of Jewish capitalists exploiting their Lithuanian neighbors. Now, Jews were framed as communists. In both cases, hateful stereotypes were being applied to an entire population with the age-old argument that “all Jews” were like this or that. Jewish participation in the Soviet occupation was not nearly as high as was depicted, and many Jews were not communists. Still the use of projecting guilt through stereotyping was a key Nazi tactic. In this case, deploying stereotypes to cast all Jews as guilty of communist sympathies. This created conditions in which Lithuanians started attacking Jews in Kovno even prior to any orders from the Germans. Eventually, nationalist Lithuanians – many of whom associated with the Lithuanian Activist Front that was formed in Berlin 1940 – collaborated with Nazis to carry out the genocide of the Jews.

LEBENSRAUM, “MANIFEST DESTINY”, NUREMBERG AND JIM CROW LAWS

What do these ideas have in common? Hitler and other Nazis looked west for models to create their policies, and took inspiration from legal structures in the United States to implement these policies in Germany and beyond. The stated aim of Nazism was to acquire an empire of “living space” (*Lebensraum*) in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This would allow growth of the “Aryan race,” which Hitler deemed superior to all others. It is important to note that, in order to retain the support of conservatives with whose help he had achieved power, Hitler skillfully emphasized his short-term foreign policy goal first: ending the “shackles of Versailles.” This condition is how Germans viewed the harsh measures imposed upon them by the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. Hitler’s long-term objective was to create a German empire of 250 million people through the conquest of Bolshevik Russia. First it was necessary for Hitler to consolidate power. In foreign policy, the need to win international acceptance led to moderate actions, and to the appointment of conservative Baron Konstantin von Neurath as Foreign Minister. It was only from 1938 onward that the foreign policy of the Nazis became radicalized.

One of Hitler’s inspirations for the *Lebensraum* policy was the American westward expansion under “Manifest Destiny,” which resulted in the genocide of America’s indigenous population and the expansion of the British and French colonial empires. The phrase “Manifest Destiny” began to circulate in the 19th century, yet the concept behind the phrase originated with the first European immigrants in the United States in the 17th century. Manifest Destiny is defined as “the concept of American exceptionalism, that is, the belief that the United States occupies a special place among the countries of the world.” It was believed to be a settlers’ duty to colonize the continent, conquer and prosper. This is a key reason why Hitler broke the terms of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Hitler always viewed the pact as a temporary, tactical maneuver to maintain a single-front war for as long as possible; his long-term plan had always been German expansion to the East, and subjugation of the Slavic peoples – who were considered genetically and culturally inferior by the Nazis. The Nazis loathed Bolshevism, but Hitler likely considered Stalin and the Soviet forces to be the greatest threat to Germany’s military expansion. Hitler fundamentally mistrusted Stalin and knew that the two forces would collide at some point. The point of the pact then, at least in part, was to put this clash off for as long as possible, while the Nazis focused on their takeover of Central Europe and Poland.



Nazi propaganda slide for a Hitler Youth educational presentation on the history of German culture, discussing *Lebensraum*, or the need for living space. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Hitler would turn to United States policies again to develop the Nuremberg Laws. While Jews had already been forced out of civil service jobs in Germany, the Nuremberg Laws codified the definition of a Jew – and what a Jew, under this new legal definition, could and could not do within the nation. The Nazis looked to the way American legislation defined who was Black to develop their own set of rules to determine how a person should be considered Jewish. They did not go as far as the American Jim Crow laws’ “one-drop” rule, according to which even one drop of so-called “Black blood” made one Black. The Nazi definition, at least initially, legally determined that a person was Jewish if they had three or more Jewish grandparents. So Jewish identity was now determined by the religious affiliation of grandparents. This meant that thousands of people who had converted to another religion were suddenly classified as Jews, even Catholic priests and nuns and Protestant ministers. Those with one Jewish grandparent were held to be *Mischlinge* (of mixed race) of the second degree and those with two Jewish grandparents were held to be *Mischlinge* of the first degree. Individuals from both groups could be recognized as German citizens provided they were neither married to a Jew nor a member of a Jewish religious organization.

Nazis admired the segregationist nature of their American counterparts, but ultimately decided that it was not entirely applicable to their situation. Antisemitism was always central to the *Weltanschauung* of the inner core of the Nazi leadership and to Hitler himself. To them, the myth of the Jewish conspiracy to destroy the German people was a central article of their political faith. In his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, Hitler attacked the Jewish threat to the world and, particularly, to the German nation. In his view, the Jews were responsible for corruption, moral decay, the exploitation of the working class and the German defeat in the First World War. Their power should be ended by the imposition of restrictions that would secure their “removal” (*Entfernung*). This is rather different than the American case, in which the characterization of African Americans was that of a people fundamentally and irredeemably inferior; and in which policies inflicted upon them were, while undoubtedly repressive, not genocidal. In addition, interracial dating, marriage, and pregnancy in the American context was condemned for genetic reasons (a desire to keep races “pure”), rather than because such actions could serve as means for a conspiratorial group to acquire power.

Measures that we would now consider *eugenics*, such as forced sterilization or forced abortions, were deployed in both American and German contexts in similar ways. Still, while the Nazis’ concern with racial purity mirrored a similar anxiety in 20th-century America over keeping white families’ bloodlines “pure,” their suspicions about Jews rising to power ultimately rendered them more interested in the *legal* and *social* mechanisms through which the United States designated some groups as non-citizens. This despite those groups living in the country or in its territories, such as Filipinos and Native Americans. Observations of American law on this topic directly influenced the citizenship portion of the Nuremberg Laws. They were also interested in the model of Jim Crow laws that banned interracial marriages, a law that essentially criminalized *miscegenation* (interracial romantic relations).



A Black worker drinks at a segregated water fountain in the American South. Credit: Library of Congress.

THE LITHUANIAN UPRISING

The Lithuanian Uprising sought to re-establish an independent Lithuanian state. On June 23rd, 1941, a declaration of its restoration was issued, and a provisional Lithuanian government was formed. At the same time, this declaration meant that the Lithuanian government and the insurgents agreed to support the Nazis in their fight against the Soviets. Lithuanians hoped that the Nazis would allow the restoration of Lithuanian statehood and autonomy. These hopes proved to be completely futile: the Lithuanian Provisional Government lasted only six weeks, after which the Nazis took over the occupied country under their full control. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian administration's complicity with Germany, which was initially voluntary, became mandatory.

THE JUDENRAT

Rudashevski was very critical of all Jews who performed official duties for the Germans, such as members of the Judenrat, or Jewish Council of Elders. He saw them as traitors to their people, carrying out the will of the Germans and compromising their morality in the process. Critics of the Judenrat especially resented the privileges granted to members of the council, viewing their complicity with the Germans as a blatant form of corruption. On the other hand, members of the Jewish Councils may have hoped to mitigate the persecution and to save the community by finding some compromise with the Nazi authorities – not understanding that any compromise was, in the end, useless. The first Judenrat in Vilnius was created in July 1941, before the establishment of a [ghetto](#) in Vilnius, which happened two months later. Before World War II, the word “ghetto” in Europe had a very different meaning. In the 1500s and 1600s, it had referred to

neighborhoods set aside for Jews in cities such as Venice, Rome, and Frankfurt. These neighborhoods were the only places where Jews were allowed to live within the cities. The ghettos established by the Nazis were much more sinister. They were more like prisons, and they isolated the Jewish population from non-Jews. The first Judenrat was composed of respected Jewish community leaders, most of whom were shot in August and September of 1941. When the Judenrat was eventually disbanded in 1942, the ghetto police became the primary enforcers of ghetto residents' behavior. Jacob Gens, commander of the Jewish police in the Vilna Ghetto, rose to a position of power because he knew Lithuanian, had been an officer in the Lithuanian Army, and had influential Lithuanian friends. While it is impossible to determine how many of Gens's actions were motivated by self-interest and how much he actually believed in the Judenrat's ability to change the circumstances of Vilna Jews, Gens did believe that if anyone was well-positioned to mitigate the suffering of Jews in the Vilna Ghetto, it was himself.

Members of the ghetto government, and even certain Jewish police, did provide certain benefits to Jews in the ghetto. For example, they provided the Nazis with squads of Jewish workers, who were in turn granted work certificates that offered the men and their families some protection. Able-bodied Jews who could work for the German war effort were considered useful and, therefore, less likely to be deported or killed. The first Judenrat headquarters on Strashun (now Žemaitijos) Street 6 became the meeting point for such squads. Yitskhok's father, Eliah, would also go to work there, and the boy would bring him food to the Judenrat's courtyard. Jacob Gens, the head of the Vilna Ghetto, was known to advocate for more food to be allocated to the groups he saw suffering the most, and would try to alert the ghetto inhabitants prior to inspections by Germans.

The Judenrat's first attempts to negotiate with the Nazis – which resulted in the murders of the council's members – showed that they would be unable to protect the Jewish community in any meaningful way. Fear and tension pervaded the city. The special privileges granted to Judenrat members lasted only as long as it was convenient to the Nazis. Prior to the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, Gens was shot and killed by the Gestapo.



Jacob Gens (center), head of the Vilna Ghetto Jewish police, 1943. Credit: Vilna Ghetto Collection, the National Library of Israel.

THE VILNA GHETTO

Before World War II, the word “ghetto” in Europe had a very different meaning. In the 1500s and 1600s, it had referred to neighborhoods set aside for Jews in cities such as Venice, Rome, and Frankfurt. These neighborhoods were the only places where Jews were allowed to live within the cities. The ghettos established by the Nazis were much more sinister. They were more like prisons, and they isolated the Jewish population from non-Jews.

The Nazis established two separate areas of the ghetto in Vilna. Both ghettos were overcrowded, with a total of around 40,000 people being brought in at the beginning of September 1941. People were crammed into dozens of small rooms, sleeping in attics, cellars, corridors, or simply open-air courtyards. Initially, the ghetto had only 1.5 square meters (about 10 square feet) of room space per person.

The Small Ghetto, located in the territory around the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, was mainly used for the sick, the elderly, women, and children – “unproductive” elements, to the Nazis. The 10,000 people imprisoned there were driven out to Ponar during several “cleansing actions” in just two months, before the end of October 1941. Later, the Germans moved people who could not work from the Large Ghetto to the Small Ghetto, from where they were taken to Ponar and murdered. However, the Large Ghetto was also subject to “cleansing actions” (*aktions*), although less frequently. The Large Ghetto was intended for able-bodied inhabitants and their families, people with practical professions needed by the Nazis (mainly craftsmen or industrial workers). Yitskhok’s father, a professional printer, and his mother, a seamstress, qualified. So, they were sent to the Large Ghetto.



GHETTO WORKERS

The Laborers

The majority of the adults in the ghetto worked in factories or outdoors, forced by the Nazis into hard labor. The work was thankless, the conditions were dangerous, and Nazi supervisors would beat the laborers if their behavior or work were deemed inadequate. This was the day-to-day life of most ghetto inhabitants.



Factory workers in Vilna, probably in the ghetto. Taken from a collection of photographs that were found after the liberation, in the pockets of people who had been murdered in the Klooga camp. Courtesy of the Central Historic Museum in Estonia Yad Vashem Photo Archives 4068/94.

The Specialists

Some educated Jews were chosen for specialized positions under the Nazis. Herman Kruk, a librarian, was permitted to open a library for the residents of the ghetto. Although it was an important amenity for the ghetto residents, it was also an arm of the Nazi state that could be used to control the dissemination of information. In fact, the German authorities eventually ordered all of the Jews in the ghetto to turn all of their books into the library, depriving them of one of their few remaining joys.

The Nazis planned to assemble an archive of Jewish artifacts and documents for the Institute in Frankfurt, Germany, founded in 1939 by the Nazi's Chief Racial Theorist, Alfred Rosenberg. The Institute was devoted to the study of the Jewish culture that they had decimated. In Vilnius, the Nazis looted YIVO and other Jewish institutions for material for the Institute but did not know how to interpret the significance of Jewish objects they collected. Consequently, Herman Kruk led a group consisting of Avrom Sutzkever, Szmerke Kaczerginski, and other influential Vilna academics and cultural figures affiliated with YIVO, to allegedly

“help” the Germans select the “best” materials for shipment to Frankfurt. Thus was born the work of the so-called “Paper Brigade,” which secretly preserved the very records it was charged with turning over to the Germans, smuggling precious documents into hiding places in the ghetto, or bringing them to trusted non-Jews outside of the ghetto, which was possible to do because of YIVO’s location outside of the ghetto. The Brigade was tasked itself with saving the cultural history of the Jewish people, because whatever they did not rescue, the Nazis would either have stolen or destroyed. While forced to witness the loss of many cultural materials, the Brigade preserved untold treasures – many of which are safely housed in the archives of YIVO today and have been digitized in the [Edward Blank YIVO Online Collections Project](#).



Sutzkever and others after the liberation of Vilna with a cart filled with rescued treasures from YIVO.

THE “AKTIONS”

The threat of *aktions*, or attacks on the ghetto designed to capture Jews and take them away to be murdered, hung over the heads of the residents. They were carried out by the Gestapo, together with the Lithuanian police, between September and December 1941. These *aktions* targeted men, women, and children. Jewish men had already been subject to an initial round of mass death in the summer months of 1941, when violent thugs known as *khapunes* – often young Lithuanian men – served as bounty hunters, delivering Jewish men to the Nazis for ten roubles a body. Later in the year, the stated pretext for such *aktions* was to check work certificates. During the *aktions*, the Nazis would call for a certain number of Jews within a certain group (such as the unemployed, the elderly, or children) to turn themselves in; if they refused, members of the community would be taken by force, often in excess of the number initially ordered. Sometimes, their fate was clear: They would be taken to their deaths in Ponar. Other times, they were abducted under the guise of being taken somewhere to work or to rest, when in reality they, too, would wind up murdered in the forest.

Although the *aktions* temporarily ceased after December 1941, the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto had no idea when they would begin again, and rumors constantly circulated about new *aktions* and ghetto liquidation.



THE CHILDREN

The Vilna Ghetto was full of children, many of them newly orphaned. The ghetto administration worked to ensure that they would be cared for and enrolled in schools. Still, since the children were too young to work, their lives – like those of the elderly and disabled – were constantly in danger. Anyone who could not work for the German war effort risked being considered a “useless eater,” someone who cost money to feed but did not serve the Germans’ purposes. Many of these children would be murdered as a result. While they could, the teachers in the Vilna Ghetto made sure that the children had ways to enjoy themselves despite their circumstances, providing needed cultural enrichment in school and through the Youth Club, of which Rudashevski was a member.



Photo of daily ghetto life.

THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD AND LIQUIDATION OF THE GHETTOS

The alliance between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the early stages of World War II, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was never meant to last. Hitler never saw his pact with Stalin as a permanent arrangement, and he broke its terms with Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. In what was known as Operation Barbarossa, German troops launched a massive invasion of the Soviet Union. The attack was met with fierce Soviet resistance. The invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis, and the Soviet Union's realignment with the Allied Powers, led to some of the most ferocious and large-scale battles of World War II, including the Battle of Stalingrad.

While many bloody battles in World War II were waged on land, air, and sea, perhaps none had the same psychological impact as the Battle of Stalingrad. Fought between Soviet and Nazi forces, it was a brutal and significant turning point in the war—and one that would have a dramatic impact on Jews in ghettos across Eastern Europe (including for Rudashevski, in Vilna). Though Soviet forces triumphed in the battle, their victory ensured that defeated Nazi forces would attempt to liquidate the concentration camps before Soviet troops could reach them. They would kill as many Jews as possible and try to hide all traces of their crimes.

Nazi forces, which had been fighting in Soviet territory for over a year, wanted to take control of Stalingrad: a strategically important city on the Volga River bearing the name of the infamous Soviet leader. By capturing Stalingrad, the Nazis intended to significantly weaken Soviet forces, demoralize the Soviet people, block the Volga River shipping route, and open the way to take control of the oil fields in the Caucasus. However, this was no short battle; Soviet and Nazi forces struggled for almost six bloody months, from August 23, 1942, to February 2, 1943.

Stalingrad was under siege, and the city was divided into different areas, with buildings, streets, and factories becoming battlegrounds. Both sides understood the significance of the battle in determining the outcome of the Nazi-Soviet conflict. Accordingly, the Soviet forces, despite being outnumbered, refused to surrender their city to the Nazis. Employing its buildings and ruins as cover, they used their unique knowledge of the city to their advantage. Nazi soldiers reported in their diaries and letters that the courage of the Soviet troops, especially the women, was unbelievable to them. As the battle dragged on, the harsh Russian winter arrived, making things even tougher. The soldiers on both sides had to endure freezing temperatures and limited supplies. Having thought that the battle would be won before winter, the Nazis lacked proper winter-time equipment and clothing. Better prepared for these conditions, the Soviet forces had yet another advantage.



Soviet soldiers during the Battle of Stalingrad, January 1943. Credit: Wikicommons.

Pinned down in Stalingrad, the German forces were eventually surrounded by Soviet armies advancing from the north and the south, which cut off their supply lines. This proved to be the turning point in the battle. The German soldiers were trapped and running out of food, ammunition, and medical supplies. They faced starvation and disease. Many Germans froze to death, while the Soviets received reinforcements and supplies. In February 1943, the German 6th Army surrendered. This was a major victory for the Soviet Union and a significant turning point in World War II. In many ways, it marked the beginning of the collapse of Nazi Germany's control over Eastern Europe.

Rudashevski heard the news of the outcome of the Battle of Stalingrad and rejoiced, celebrating a Nazi defeat and hoping that liberation might soon occur. However, the defeat was also a significant motivating force for the Nazis. In a frenzied rush, they worked to liquidate concentration camps and the ghettos of Eastern Europe, including the Vilna Ghetto, before Soviet forces could reach them.

Thursday the 17th of September [1942]

“The Germans want to conclude their summer campaign by capturing Stalingrad, which would crown the German victories. Tens of thousands of men perish in the giant battles at Stalingrad. The Soviet people are defending Stalin’s city with all their might. We, sitting in the ghetto, read the reports every day and run around looking for good news. Everyone’s attention is now turned to Stalingrad. Everyone is waiting, exhausted, for something concrete, for Germany’s decisive defeat. Everyone is waiting for the longed-for peace when the exhausted world will straighten its back.”

THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

What was the “Final Solution?”

The “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” was the Nazis’ term for their plan to murder all Jews in Europe. It was the realization of what had been Adolf Hitler’s goal from as early as 1922. At that time, he had told journalist Josef Hell that “once I really am in power, my first and foremost task will be the annihilation of the Jews.” However, until the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the idea of annihilating the Jews was more of a genocidal fantasy than a concrete plan.

Though many think of genocide as Hitler’s most urgent priority from the beginning of his rule, the “Final Solution” was actually the last phase of years of discriminatory, violent activity against Europe’s Jews. The Nazi Party came to power in January 1933 and used intensely antisemitic legislation to threaten Jews’ livelihoods, restrict the scope of their participation in society, and create a culture of fear. Initially, Hitler and his associates contemplated deporting all Jews from Europe. The island of Madagascar and the Arctic Circle were among the destinations considered, though this idea never really gained traction.

Violence, including the killing of Jews, certainly occurred before the adoption of the “Final Solution.” However, historians have been unable to pinpoint the precise moment when the murder of all Jews under Nazi control became official policy. During and after the June 1941 “Operation Barbarossa” invasion of the Soviet Union, special Nazi police units known as Einsatzgruppen (often referred to as “mobile killing units”) undertook mass shootings. These operations initially targeted Jewish men, Roma people, and Communist Party officials. But the Germans soon became aware of the effectiveness of this type of mass killing. By making use of Einsatzgruppen units, other Nazi police squads, and local recruits, Nazi military officials realized that soldiers would be willing to shoot even women and children in large numbers.

On December 12th, 1941, some 50 Nazi officials held a top-secret meeting. That same week, a massive Soviet counterattack had effectively ended German hopes of a quick and decisive victory in Russia. Enraged and seeking to escalate the war, Hitler declared war on the United States – and, in addition, seemed to have decided to deal with the “Jewish question” once and for all. Describing the December 12th meeting, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, wrote in his diary: “With respect to the Jewish Question, the Führer has decided to make a clean sweep. He prophesied to the Jews that if they again brought about a world war, they would experience their own annihilation. That wasn’t just a phrase... If the German people have now again sacrificed 160,000 dead on the eastern front, then those responsible for this bloody conflict will have to pay with their lives.”

On January 20th, 1942, a second meeting was held in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. There, top Nazi leaders gathered to set out the guidelines for their policy to annihilate the Jews of Europe, which they described as the “Final Solution.” Given official sanction by Adolf Hitler, they began the enormous and horrifying

task of presenting their plans to various agencies of the Reich government and assigning them to the SS for implementation. From now on, more sophisticated logistics – intended to facilitate more efficient methods of murder – were put in place. These two meetings constituted a defining moment in the period of world history that would later become known as the Holocaust.

Concentration and Extermination Camps



Entrance of Dachau concentration camp.

Imperial Germany had used concentration camps before. During the 1904-1908 genocide of the Herero and Nama people in Namibia, an estimated 80% of the Herero people and 50% of the Nama people died in a rebellion resisting the seizure of their land by the German colonizers. Many others died from starvation and dehydration when they were driven into the Kalahari Desert. Those who were not initially murdered by the Germans and did not perish in these ways were sent to concentration camps, where they were starved and enslaved. German colonial officers also used the concentration camps' inmates to study eugenics. One such officer was Dr. Eugen Fischer, and one of his students was Josef Mengele, who was later responsible for medical experiments in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

The Nazis established a concentration camp in Dachau, Germany in 1933. Initially, these camps were intended for the Nazis' political opponents. The same was true of the first concentration camps in Poland. Until March 1942, the majority of prisoners in them were either non-Jewish Poles who were considered a threat to German rule or Russian prisoners-of-war. Stutthof near Danzig, for example, was opened the day after the invasion of Poland to imprison Polish citizens. Later, some of these camps also held Jewish prisoners. Eventually, many were turned into "death camps," the primary purpose of which was the mass murder of Jews.

At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, it was decided that all European Jews would be transported to "the East," the Soviet-occupied Polish territory newly invaded by the Nazis, to forced-labor concentration camps. The working and living conditions were to be deliberately harsh so that large numbers of them would die from exhaustion, malnutrition, or disease. In this way, the Nazis could extract labor from their prisoners

before disposing of them. Then, as SS General Reinhard Heydrich said during the conference, those who survived this ordeal would “doubtless consist of the elements most capable of resistance. They must be dealt with appropriately...” The officials at the conference estimated that 10 million Jews could be murdered in this fashion.

The mass shootings of Jews in the Soviet Union by SS units and mobile killing squads, sometimes known as “the Holocaust by bullets,” – similar to that carried out in the Ponar forest, as described by Rudashevski – were seen by the Nazis as inefficient. Though it is estimated that the Einsatzgruppen killed over one million Jews, their methods could not be replicated across Europe. Guns would jam or fail to work, and it was very hard psychologically on the troops who were tasked with killing thousands of people in this manner. Accordingly, it was decided to adopt a new approach: industrial-style mass-murder. In the summer of 1941, experiments were carried out at Auschwitz to investigate methods of mass slaughter using poisonous gas. Tens of thousands of physically and mentally disabled people had already been killed in Germany in this way. The first trials at Auschwitz used Zyklon B gas pellets, a cyanide-based insecticide that would later be used in the gas chambers. On this occasion, it took 48 hours to kill the prisoners in a sealed room. Subsequently, the amount of gas used was adjusted to achieve murder within a few minutes.



Can of Zyklon B.



Shoes and other possessions taken from Auschwitz prisoners.



Guard outside of Auschwitz entrance. Prisoners marching in the back.

The Nazis established six death camps in Poland: Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Auschwitz was the largest and most infamous. It consisted of three sections. One of the sections, Birkenau, was the killing center in which the gas chambers were located. Approximately 1,300,000 people were sent to Auschwitz. More than 1,100,000 were murdered. Approximately 960,000 were Jews. Some people sent to Auschwitz were sentenced to forced labor. Others were sent directly to the gas chambers.

The following are the best estimates for the numbers of victims at Auschwitz:

- ▶ Jews (1,095,000 deported to Auschwitz, 960,000 died)
- ▶ Non-Jewish Poles (140,000 - 150,000 deported, 74,000 died)
- ▶ Roma (23,000 deported, 21,000 died)
- ▶ Soviet prisoners of war (15,000 deported and died)
- ▶ Other nationalities (25,000 deported, 10,000 - 15,000 died)

Auschwitz was the only camp in which prisoners had their assigned numbers tattooed onto their skin. Only those who were selected to work were registered and received a number. Prisoners who were sent directly to the gas chambers were not recorded in any official documents.

FAREYNIKTE PARTIZANER ORGANIZATSIE (UNITED PARTISAN ORGANIZATION)

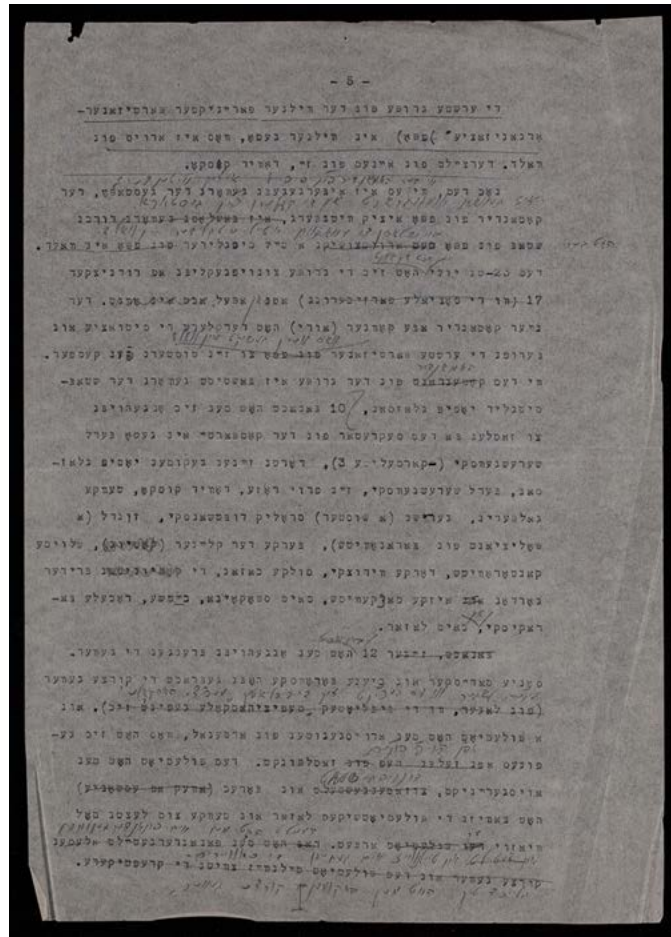
The United Partisan Organization, also known as the FPO, was a group of resistance fighters that formed in the Vilna Ghetto in January 1942. It brought together scattered members of other youth movements to form a larger collective, organized around the principle of armed underground action. Armed resistance existed in some form in most of the major ghettos—including Warsaw, Kovno, Minsk, and Lublin—but took on specific characteristics in each place. In Vilna, for example, partisan fighters first took part in sabotage efforts from within the ghetto, including collecting materials for homemade weaponry and smuggling a homemade bomb out of the ghetto to destroy a German train line. They did not see armed resistance as a way to save the lives of all of the Jews within the ghetto; instead, they sought to defend Jewish life in whatever way possible— and, if necessary, to die an honorable death in struggle.

In the ghetto, the FPO operated under strict protocols of secrecy, its leaders distributing information to members only as needed in order to protect the organization should an individual member be caught. The FPO met in small groups, to gather and build weapons. Unlike their counterparts in the Warsaw Ghetto, who sought to organize an uprising throughout the entire ghetto, FPO members in Vilna never achieved mass resistance on such a scale. Instead, when it eventually became too difficult to continue sabotage efforts from within the ghetto, many of the partisan fighters were sent to the nearby Rudniki and Narocz forests. There, many joined forces with Soviet partisans: fighters that included both former Red Army men from units destroyed by the Nazis and escaped prisoners of war. While Jews did not have an easy time in all Soviet partisan brigades—in many units, they encountered overt hostility—they had a common cause for the sake of survival.

The Soviet partisans were engaged in loosely-organized guerilla warfare. But by the summer of 1943, they were being airdropped both tactical and material support—in the form of arms, reinforcements, and specialists—from the Soviet Union. Jewish partisans, unlike the Soviet partisans they joined forces with, could not plausibly seek help from locals in the countryside, where they hid. The Jewish population of Vilna was either still ghettoized or had been decimated, and many Lithuanian locals responded with hostility to partisan activities taking place near where they lived.

Jewish partisans were also involved in rescue activities significantly more than their Soviet counterparts. Many Soviet partisan commanders forbade rescue activities. At great personal risk, Jewish partisans disobeyed such orders.

Not all partisan camps were organized solely around armed resistance. Some, referred to as “family camps,” primarily helped coordinate civilian escapes from the ghetto and housed escapees in the forest. Though the FPO could not prevent the deaths of thousands of Vilna Jews, its members remained resolute, and many who survived in the forests would eventually participate in the liberation of Vilnius.



Account of the first group of the FPO leaving the Vilna Ghetto and joining the partisans in the forest, as told by Dovid Kusko, December 1943.

LITHUANIA AFTER WORLD WAR II

Soviet forces liberated Vilna from Nazi occupation in July 1944— but, in doing so, replaced one occupying regime with another. During the first Soviet occupation, Lithuania had been incorporated into the Soviet Union as one of its constituent republics—independent in name, but not in practice—which then collapsed in the face of Nazi invasion. After July 1944, it was reincorporated into the USSR as the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, officially one of the republics which made up the Soviet Union.

This transition was not an easy one. The immediate post-war years were marked by a large-scale armed confrontation between Lithuanian national partisans and Soviet troops, causing heavy casualties among partisans, soldiers, and civilians. These partisans sought to maintain national identity and independence from the Soviets, but were heavily outnumbered. The Soviet authorities responded by deporting political opponents, intellectuals, religious leaders, and individuals otherwise seen as hostile. Most of them—perhaps as many as 245,000—were shipped to forced labor camps, or *gulags*, in Siberia.

Despite this serious repression, Lithuania was in certain ways allowed to maintain more of its national identity, at least in terms of culture, than other Soviet republics. The Lithuanian language became the language of higher education, and Vilnius remained the capital of the LSSR, which was a victory for Lithuanian nationalists. The number of Russians who settled in the country was also less than in Latvia and Estonia. In other respects, Lithuania had all of the other hallmarks of Soviet society: collectivized agriculture, nationalized business, and intense surveillance and punishment for opponents of Stalinism and communism. On the other hand, soon after Lithuania's reincorporation into the USSR in July 1944, the Soviet authorities cracked down on all efforts to restore Jewish culture and Jewish institutions in Lithuania.

Lithuania's struggle for sovereignty gained momentum in the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union began to experience its own political upheavals. Under the leadership of Mikhael Gorbachev, his support for the policies of [glasnost](#) and [perestroika](#) allowed the Soviet Union to slowly begin to adopt social and economic reforms, with an emphasis on government transparency. The conditions were increasingly ripe for a movement for democratic reform in Lithuania.

The country eventually declared its independence in March 1990, after an overwhelming majority voted for a parliament supporting a democratic, independent Lithuania. This led to the restoration of statehood following a referendum in February 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in August of that year. Initially, the former Communist Party, which renamed itself the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party, was the largest political force in the country; but, beginning in March 1995, the groups that had spearheaded the struggle for independence came to play the leading role in political life—part of the long and complicated transition away from communism. This marked a new chapter for Lithuania, as it embarked on the path towards democratic governance, economic development, and reconnection with its cultural heritage.