



The Holocaust in the Baltic States: Between History and Memory

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The Holocaust in the Baltic States obliterated a vibrant and diverse Jewish community that had flourished for centuries. On the eve of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, approximately 300,000 Jews lived within the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. By the end of 1944, only a few thousand had survived. While the destruction of Baltic Jewry was a top-down Nazi policy, the process of persecution and mass murder was facilitated to varying degrees by local collaboration, adding a profound layer of horror and complexity to these events.

Key Questions Addressed in the Course

- **Nazi Decision-Making:** What was the Nazis' decision-making process in the region, and how did it evolve?
- **Local Dynamics:** Can regional and local dynamics explain the sharp transition from a period of extraordinary Jewish autonomy to social disintegration and mass violence?
- **Jewish Responses:** How did Jewish communities perceive these events, and how did they react across different times and locations?
- **Historical Memory:** How do WWII and the Holocaust in the Baltic States figure into the transformation of historical memory in the post-Soviet era?

Course Objectives and Approach

Through the reading and analysis of key historical documents alongside the individual voices of survivors, perpetrators, and rescuers, this course provides a comprehensive historical and geographic context of the life and death of Jewish communities in the Baltic States.

By examining both macro- and micro-historical perspectives, the course will: Shed light on the various German forces and local groups that implemented the "Final Solution" in the region; Explore the complex processes that transformed inter-ethnic relations from neighborly to murderous; Gain a deeper understanding of a chapter of Holocaust history that is often overlooked. While the focus on the Baltic States will be thematic, geographical, and chronological, the course will also firmly situate the region within its broader Eastern European context.

Course Requirements

Active reading and participation – 10%

2 response papers – 40%

Term paper – 50%

Course Outline

- 1. Introduction:** history, historiography, context and challenges.
Ezra Mendelson, “Some Remarks on the Jewish Condition in Interwar East-Central Europe”, in: Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schriener & Darius Staliūnas, eds., *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 73–87.
- 2. The Interwar Years:** nation-building and the emergence of independent states, ethnicity, politics and antisemitism, domestic and international crisis of the late 1930s.
Klaus Richter, “Economic Nationalism, Minority Policies, and the 1930s in Lithuania and Latvia,” in *Ethnic Relations in the Baltic Reconsidered*, ed. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2025), 141–166.
Vladas Sirutavičius, “‘A Close, but Very Suspicious and Dangerous Neighbor’: Outbreaks of Antisemitism in Inter-War Lithuania” in *Polin 25: Jews in the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania Since 1772* (2012), pp. 254–263.
Recommended reading: John W. Hiden and David J. Smith, “Looking beyond the Nation-State: A Baltic Vision for National Minorities between the Wars”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41:3, (2006), pp. 387–399.
Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 52–72.
- 3. The End of Independence:** Annexation and Sovietization, the ‘Lesser of two evils’ (?) Violence and mass deportations.
Anton Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins: Essays on the History of Jews in Estonia*, (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2017), pp. 95–113.
Saulius Sužiedėlis, “‘Listen, the Jews are Ruling Us Now’: Antisemitism and National Conflict during the First Soviet Occupation of Lithuania, 1940–1941”, in *Polin 25*, pp. 305–330.
Dov Levin, *Baltic Jews Under the Soviets 1940–1946*, (Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 95–115.
Recommended reading: Paul A. Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 11–45.
- 4. Nazi Occupation:** planning a war of annihilation, pogroms and massacres – homemade or imported? Holocaust by bullets, German and local apparatus.
Christoph Dieckmann, “Lithuania in Summer 1941: The German Invasion and the Kaunas Pogrom”, in Eleazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, & Kai Struve, eds., *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), pp. 355–384.
Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: the missing center*, (Riga: Historical Institute of Latvia; Washington DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996), pp. 203–238.
Recommended reading: Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), pp. 125–140.
- 5. Ghettoization:** rural areas and the cities, choiceless choices, ‘work as hope’, Jewish leadership and everyday life in the ghettos, deportations and liquidation.
Dina Porat, “The Jewish Councils of the Main Ghettos of Lithuania: A Comparison.” *Modern Judaism*, 13:2 (1993), pp. 149–163.

Max Kaufmann, *Churban Lettland: The Destruction of the Jews of Latvia*, (New York: Jewish Survivors of Latvia, Inc., 2010), pp. 168–194.

6. **Armed Resistance and Partisans.**

Dov Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's armed resistance to the Nazis, 1941–1945*, (New York: Holmes & Meier Publication, Inc., 1985), pp. 35–56.

Šarūnas Liekis, “Jewish partisans and Soviet resistance in Lithuania”, in David Gaunt, Paul A. Levine, Laura Palosuo, eds., *Collaboration and resistance during the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 459–478.

Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, pp. 482–504.

Recommended reading: Daniela Ozacky-Stern, “Executions of Jewish Partisans in the Lithuanian Forests: The Case of Natan Ring”, *International journal of military history and historiography*, 40:2 (2020), pp. 219–244.

7. **Neighbors: perpetrators, collaborators and rescuers.**

Michael MacQueen, “Lithuanian Collaboration in the “Final Solution”: Motivations and Case Studies”, in: *Lithuania and the Jews— The Holocaust Chapter Symposium Presentations*, (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), pp. 1–15.

Anton Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins: Essays on the History of Jews in Estonia*, pp. 143–164.

Rūta Vanagaitė, Efraim Zuroff, *Our People: Discovering Lithuania's Hidden Holocaust*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020) – Selected chapters.

8. **Between History and Memory.**

Leonidas Donskis, “The Vanished World of the Litvaks”, *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, 54:1 (2005), pp. 80–85.

Dovid Katz, “The Baltic Movement to Obfuscate the Holocaust”, in: Alex J. Kay, David Stahel, eds., *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 235–261.

Robert Rozett, “Distorting the Holocaust and Whitewashing History: Toward a Typology”, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 13:1 (2019), pp. 23–36.