

Volume 56, No.3 - Fall 2010

Editor of this issue: M. G. Slavėnas

**Book Reviews:**

**Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis. *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews during Summer and Fall of 1941*. Vilnius: Margi Raštai, 2006. ISBN: 9789986093060.**

**Joseph Levinson, ed. *The Shoah (Holocaust) in Lithuania*. Vilnius: The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, 2006. ISBN: 9785415019021.**

**Arūnas Bubnys. *The Holocaust in Lithuania between 1941-1944*. Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2008. ISBN: 9986757665.**

In 1988, Charles S. Maier called the place of the Holocaust in Germany's history *The Unmasterable Past*. In Lithuania, this "unmasterable past" revolves around the accusation that Lithuanians are a nation of "Jew shooters." Fortunately, none of the books under review descends into the muck and mire of contemporary political or cultural prejudices. The first, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, coauthored by Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis, was sponsored in 1998 by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania and constitutes the last volume in a series of three dealing with the Nazi occupation. Its mission is "to search for the historical truth and provide a forum for uncensored discussion of the country's repressive past." The result is a solid, scholarly, bilingual work worthy of high praise, an exhaustive, meticulously researched analysis based on primary source material. The extensive bibliography and the attached facsimiles of documents offer an invaluable resource to any researcher and sources of interest to the casual reader as well. Because of government sponsorship, the reader may suspect that the series on *The Crimes of Totalitarian Regimes in Lithuania: the Nazi Occupation* is the work of a politicized committee. This is not the case. However, the chairman of the committee, Emanuelis Zingeris, is a politician, and he writes an obligatory introduction thanking other government officials and committee members, some of them historians. Zingeris and Ronaldas Račinskas, the executive director, also wrote the conclusion and evaluation section, which reads like an official report with an imperial imprimatur that decrees orthodoxy on a subject whose discourse most realize needs to continue. No doubt the financial and political support is worthy of praise, but Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, the authors, should have provided the conclusion, not a government committee.

Joseph Levinson's work is more popular, intended for a general audience, and does not pretend to be a scholarly treatise. Divided into six sections, the book provides a wide scope of information consisting of memoirs, letters, diary entries, articles by scholars and politicians, excerpts of documents, massacre site maps (30, 31), lists of Lithuanian participants in Hamann's *Rollkommando* death squads (155), police orders, and a plethora of other materials from the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum. Whereas Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis replicate a few original documents in total, Levinson presents edited versions of many more and different types. The author is evenhanded. He also includes material on the ever-growing number of Righteous Gentiles and others who helped Lithuanian Jews.

Section VI, titled "About the Theory of the Two Genocides," is particularly noteworthy. This theory asserts that genocide of the Lithuanian population during the first Soviet occupation was equal to the Shoah during the subsequent Nazi invasion. The prevailing sentiments of many Lithuanians, of 78 ten expressed in the media or privately, are: "We suffered as much or more from Jewish Communists. Why not write about what they did to us and about the thousands of brave Lithuanians who helped Jews regardless?" Indeed, in Section V, "The Righteous Among the Nations," Levinson responds to this sentiment and publishes memoirs and commentaries by Jewish survivors writing reverently about their rescuers, whom one survivor calls the "Just of the Nations" (294). Furthermore, Levinson devotes an entire subsection entitled "Those who Exiled Lithuanians to the USSR" to deal with the common assumptions of who deported, arrested, and persecuted Lithuanians (381-384). He also includes a chapter titled "The Lithuanian Catholic Church and the Shoah in Lithuania" (231-238).

Many Lithuanians are galled when Jewish authors extol Jewish partisans and Jewish members of the Red Army as liberators of Lithuania from the Nazis. In the chapter "Lithuanian Jews in the Struggle against Nazism," Levinson provides evidence of Lithuanian Jews who fought with the British and Western allies, while others fought in the 16th Lithuanian Riflemen's Division of the Soviet Army against "the deadly enemy of the Jewish nation" (268). They killed Nazis, but they also facilitated the Soviet reoccupation of Lithuania. This leads to another dilemma. Ethnic Lithuanians killed Jews during the Holocaust, but many of the Jews killed in the summer and fall of 1941 were Lithuanian citizens. So were many Jewish

partisans who killed Lithuanians. Ethnicity and national identity are not easily reconciled merely because people are citizens of one country.

Arūnas Bubnys's little book, only fifty-one pages long, gives the reader a short survey of the events. Its best attribute is that it speaks to us through dates, numbers, photographs, maps, and other visuals. The survey is organized chronologically and is complete. Bubnys does not include a bibliography or citations, but as a Senior Fellow at the Lithuanian Institute of History and the foremost authority on the period spanning 1939-1944, with several monographs on Nazi-occupied Lithuania to his credit, he gets the facts straight. A short list of suggested readings in English would have enhanced this booklet. The corpus of books and materials in English on the Holocaust in Lithuania has become quite substantial over the years.

All of the authors are circumspect in their evaluation of Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust. They acknowledge that the massacres at the beginning of the war were triggered by the Nazis and that the number of actual "Jew shooters" was relatively small. Many Lithuanians would like to see them characterized as a "handful of criminals" or as people ". . .dragged into the bloody whirl mostly against their own will" (Levinson 396). Surely, one may perhaps view the Klimaitis gang and assorted thugs who engaged in initial atrocities and/or participated at the early killing sites as a "handful of criminals." But organized mass killings continued, and questions linger. While admitting that the Nazis initiated and organized the Final Solution, the timing, speed, and efficiency with which the mass murder of the Jewish population took place throughout the country could not have been accomplished without assistance by the local administration, its police, and the acquiescence of the Lithuanian populace (Bubnys 51).

None of the three books deals directly with the anti-Semitism that surfaced with the rise of Lithuanian nationalism in the nineteenth century and intensified during the interwar period. Liudas Truska and Vygantas Vareikis discussed it in the first volume in the *Nazi Occupation* series, entitled *The Preconditions for the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism in Lithuania*. In other words, Lithuanian anti-Semitism predates the first Soviet occupation. One need not be a specialist to see that anti-Semitism is still a problem. Lithuanian Internet sites are filled with it. Vandals desecrate Jewish gravesites. Many Lithuanian cities have graffiti with swastikas or slogans of "Judens Raus," no doubt drawn by hoodlums, but disturbing nevertheless. The mass media and even some politicians deny and justify the extent of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Levinson quotes from the article "The Right to be Misunderstood, or Us and Them, Them and Us" by Jonas Mikelinckas, a respected writer, who states that "the Jews themselves carry the largest guilt for the fact that Lithuania takes first place in Europe according to the number of Jews killed (90 percent)" (403). Simply put: Stalin ordered the deportation, arrests, and killings of Lithuanians; Hitler ordered the extermination of Jews. The Soviet Union assigned NKVD perpetrators to do their dirty business in Lithuania. Some were Jews, others were Lithuanians. Lithuanians collaborated with both the Communists and the Nazis. Because of the harshness of the first Soviet occupation and mass deportations just prior to the outbreak of the war, the majority of Lithuanians welcomed the Germans. Jews had no choices. Many left with the retreating Soviet forces. Most stayed. This spelled death for as many as a quarter-million of them. Questions arise as to who were their henchmen. The issue of collaboration turns into one of numbers and enthusiasm.

The facsimiles in Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis's books provide incontrovertible evidence of the crucial role played by the Provisional Government and the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) in the first days and weeks of the German occupation (187-271). The LAF has been portrayed alternately as a heroic anti-Soviet underground organization reestablishing Lithuanian independence or as willing lackeys of the Nazi regime and ideology. It was made up of numerous political factions, with Christian Democrats and their parent youth organization *Ateitininkai* in the majority, its leadership in the hands of intellectuals representing the cream of Lithuanian society (Levinson 163- 165). Many were idealists, and some of the key organizers were eventually sent to German concentration camps. They and their descendants do not want to be "tarred" by association with the killings in the summer and fall of 1941. On the other hand, also active in the same resistance movement were regional vigilante groups such as the Iron Wolf in Šakiai, the Lithuanian Liberation Army in Šiauliai, the Black Swastika in Samogitia, indigenous radical Lithuanian fascists called *Voldemarits* (sic), and unaffiliated partisans. As an underground organization, working under the most chaotic conditions of a German assault and a Soviet retreat, the LAF could not control all of these disparate groups. To this day, there are people who insist that the 81 LAF had nothing to do with the murderous events. One may quibble with Levinson's editing of the numerous LAF decrees and reports, some of them secret, but the protocols, decrees, reports, directives, actions, and rhetoric of the LAF and the Provisional Government, the directives of the Kaunas military commandant, announcements by the Vilnius police chief, the 31 August 1941 Regulations on the Status of Jews, and miscellaneous other documents are damning ("Documents Speak," 163-228). Equally emotional is the role of the Battalion to Defend National Work (*Tautinės darbo apsaugos batalionas* – TDA). The TDA was organized by the Provisional Government to unite and control scattered anti-Soviet resistance partisans and was initially charged with the protection of strategic objects from retreating Soviets. However, it was almost immediately co-opted by the Nazis and reorganized into an auxiliary police force (*Hilfspolizei*), with certain units assigned exclusively to transport, police, and execute Jews (Dieckmann/Sužiedėlis 118; 120-121; 175-176). It has been argued that in abnormal times men commit abnormal deeds. Whatever the motives of individual members, some of whom truly believed they were liberating and defending their country, the active participation of TDA units in the early mass killings at Kaunas's Seventh Fort and the subsequent systematic executions in Paneriai, in the countryside, and outside of Lithuania's borders have been irrefutably documented (Dieckman/Sužiedėlis, 136-142; 211-220; Bubnys, 15-20; Levinson 41-53). The history of the TDA, which was renamed and reassigned numerous times, is a quagmire of internal intrigues between the Germans, their surrogates the Iron Wolf, and the Lithuanian Provisional Government. Finally assigned to

fighting Soviet partisans, the TDA began to disintegrate, many members deserted or were captured by the Soviets, and some committed suicides, perhaps seeking atonement for their actions.

No reader will draw the conclusion that Lithuanians took an active part by the thousands. Most were bystanders. Moreover, there is still work to be done. Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis warn: "Until buttressed by reliable accounts providing time, place and at least an approximate number of victims, claims of large-scale pogroms before the advent of the German forces must be treated with caution" (126). Regrettably, with the passage of time, the serious historian will soon be unable to determine with accuracy the numbers and identities of the perpetrators and their victims. Of course, the pogrom at the Lietūkis garage was a savagery regardless of numbers or identities.

Some readers will question whether the authors have overstated Lithuanian responsibility; still others will accuse them of equivocating. Many Lithuanians, especially in today's economic malaise, would like to emphasize only the heroic and decent dimensions of Lithuania's overall history. Others will demand conflation of historical events. Nationalists insist that the first duty of historians is to their nation. In these works, Bubnys, Dieckmann/Sužiedėlis, and Levinson are trying to serve Clio. Unfortunately, the muse of history has been sullied by the vilest of accusations. The authors are neither "traitors" nor "Communist agents." Neither slurs Lithuanians purposely. As historians, Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis try to set the historical record straight. *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews* will remain the definitive work on the subject for years to come. Bubnys provides a short, straightforward historical narrative and commemorative, with pictures that introduce the audience to the Holocaust in Lithuania. Levinson has written and edited a work that includes many of the emotional dimensions of the *Shoah*, and he has done so sympathetically, being as open-minded and fair as possible. His scope is broader; Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis's is more focused and scholarly. The books complement each other. They record, commemorate, and enlighten the reader. All face the same uncomfortable past: the destruction of a community that was once a thriving and integral part of Lithuania.

These three works will not convert readers set in their ways or emotionally invested in customary or inflammatory rationales. Extremists on both sides are convinced they know the truth. Lithuanian and Jewish politicians and journalists provoke unhistorical arguments based on preexisting prejudices. To be sure, not everything is cut and dried, but there is more to be gained by openly confronting the past, even one as difficult as this. The international community does not require *mea culpas* in perpetuity from a generation of Lithuanians born too late to have taken part in the Holocaust, but it does expect a serious commitment and an honest attempt at history.

A related issue needs addressing here. These books, all published in Lithuania, do not seem to have been well marketed to American readers. Although written in English and of special value pedagogically, they have not been widely reviewed or advertised on popular American websites like *Amazon.com* or *Borders.com*. The average American reader is likely to remain unaware of their existence and will continue to rely on dubious Internet sources for the history of this period in Lithuania.

**Virgil Krapauskas**