

Lithuania

Largest and southernmost of the Baltic states. Jews lived in Lithuania since the fourteenth century. From the seventeenth century Lithuania's rabbinical academies were world-renowned, and during the nineteenth century the country was a center of Jewish culture, religion, and Zionism. After World War I Lithuania became an independent state.

In the non-aggression and territorial agreements made by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union just days before World War II broke out in September 1939, Lithuania was relegated to the Soviet sphere (see also Nazi-Soviet Pact). On October 30 of that year control over Vilna was returned to Lithuania from Poland. At that time, Lithuania's Jewish population grew by about 100,000 to 250,000. This number included about 15,000 Jewish refugees who had fled to Vilna from Nazi-occupied Poland. Most of Lithuania's population was angered by the Nazi-Soviet pact, which took away their country's independence. They let out their anger on the country's Jews with attacks on them and their property.

On June 15, 1940 the Soviet army moved in and took control of Lithuania; about seven weeks later Lithuania was officially annexed to the Soviet Union. Lithuania's Jews were affected profoundly when it became a Soviet republic. On one hand, Jewish representatives were asked to join the government, and Jews were allowed to attend institutions of higher learning without restriction. On the other hand, many of their businesses were nationalized, and Jewish political, cultural, and welfare organizations were closed down. On June 14, 1941 the Soviets expelled tens of thousands of Lithuanians whom they considered to be "enemies of the people." Among them were some 7,000 Jews. Although the Jews suffered very greatly under the Soviets, their fellow Lithuanians considered them to be supporters of the Soviets. As a result, many Lithuanians, including members of the nationalist Lithuanian Activist Front, harassed the country's Jews.

On June 22, 1941 Germany invaded its former ally, the Soviet Union, and Soviet-held territories such as Lithuania. Most of the Lithuanian population welcomed the Germans, as they felt that the Germans would grant them

independence, and many willingly collaborated with the German invaders. Even before the Germans finished conquering Lithuania, the Lithuanians carried out pogroms against the Jews in at least 40 localities. Jews were killed, injured, and raped, and rabbis were brutalized. However, the Germans never intended to award Lithuania its independence: Lithuania was made part of the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* administration, and its name was changed to *Generalbezirk Litauen* (General District of Lithuania).

Just weeks after the Germans arrived, they instituted a systematic campaign to exterminate all of Lithuanian Jewry, led by *Einsatzkommando* 3 of *Einsatzgruppe* A. Many of the stages of the annihilation, including rounding up the Jews, guarding them, and transporting them to the extermination sites, were performed by Lithuanian soldiers and police.

During the summer of 1941 most of the Jews of the provinces were murdered. From September to November most of the Jews in the big cities (who had been imprisoned in ghettos when the Germans arrived) were also slaughtered. By late 1941 only 40,000 Jews were left in Lithuania; these were localized in four ghettos (in Vilna, Kovno Siauliai, and Svencionys) and several labor camps. During the summer and fall of 1943 the ghettos in Vilna and Svencionys were liquidated, while those in Kovno and Siauliai became Concentration Camps. Approximately 15,000 Jews were sent to labor camps in Latvia and Estonia, where they perished, and some 5,000 Jews were sent to Extermination Camps.

Before the Germans retreated from Lithuania in the summer of 1944, they transferred about 10,000 Jews from the Kovno and Siauliai camps to concentration camps in Germany. Those who tried to resist were murdered. By the time Germany surrendered to the Allies in 1945, only a few thousand Lithuanian Jews had survived.