



The "Final Solution" in Lithuania in the Light of German Documentation

YITZHAK ARAD

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The rapid advance of the German Army, the collapse of the Soviet regime and the ignorance of what awaited them prevented the Jews of Lithuania from fleeing to the USSR. Only about 15,000 Jews, most of whom were Soviet officials, managed to escape, thus between 220,000 and 225,000 Jews remained in Lithuania after its occupation by the Germans.¹

¹ About 150,000 Jews lived in Lithuania. Their number increased by 80,000 with the incorporation of Vilna and part of its environs into Lithuania in the fall of 1939, and about 15,000 refugees reached Lithuania from occupied Poland during the latter months of that year. Thus the total number of Jews in Lithuania was approximately 245,000, of whom between 4,000 — 6,000 emigrated during the months prior to the Nazi invasion, and a similar number were deported to the Soviet Union in June 1941. For the number of people who fled from Lithuania before the German invasion see Dov Levin, *Lochamim ve'omdim al nafsham* (They Fought Back), Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 38–39 (hereafter — Levin); Yitzhak Arad, *Shoat yehudei Vilna ve'ha'ma'avak nokhah ha'khillayon* (The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews of Vilna), doctoral dissertation submitted to Tel-Aviv University, 1974, p. 49 (hereafter — Arad).

The Lithuanian revolt broke out on the day of the invasion. Thousands of civilians as well as soldiers of the Lithuanian Corps, which was part of the Red Army, participated in the uprising. The Lithuanians ambushed the retreating Soviet soldiers and began to murder Jews.² While the Wehrmacht set up a military administration in Lithuania, appointing army officers as governors of cities and towns, the Lithuanians established a provisional government in Kovno.

In accordance with Hitler's order of August 20, the military administration in Lithuania and Latvia was replaced on September 1, 1941 by a civilian administration, headed by Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich Minister for the Eastern Occupied Territories, whose headquarters were in Berlin. In fact, however, the civilian administration had been established in Ostland one month prior to the date specified in Hitler's order. By July 27, 1941, Heinrich Lohse, the *Reichskommissar* of Ostland, had already taken up temporary residence in Kovno and had begun supervising the work of the *Generalkommissare* and *Gebietskommissare* in the occupied areas.

The establishment of the German civilian administration a month before the official date was made possible by an agreement reached on July 14 between Rosenberg and the *Wehrmacht*. Accordingly the various departments of the civilian administration would start functioning in the Eastern territories without waiting for the official order, and neither the German Army nor the civilian administration would recognize the local governments or armies established in the Baltic countries. The High Command did not want the army to become involved in the political problems which had arisen as a result of the establishment of the Lithuanian and Latvian governments.³

² *Documents Accuse*, compiled and commented by B. Baranauskas and K. Rukšėnas. Edited by E. Rozauskas. Vilnius, 1970, pp. 93-94 (hereafter—*Documents Accuse*); Summary Report by Jäger, Commander of *Einsatzkommando* 3, December 1, 1941 (hereafter — Jäger Report), Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter — YVA), 0-53/1, p. 6.

³ Alexander Dallin, *The German Rule in Russia 1941-45*, London, 1957, pp. 85, 185-186, 189; Trial of Gewecke, YVA, 04/20-66-2, pp. 13-14, 40.

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Lithuania was divided as follows: the city of Kovno, the surrounding area thereof; the city of Vilna, the surrounding area thereof; the city and area of Shavli (Šiauliai); the city and area of Panevėžys. The civilian administration in each of the areas was headed by a *Gebietskommissar*.⁴

Police Major-General Visotski commanded the S.S. and Police in Lithuania until the middle of 1943, when he was succeeded by S.S. Brigadier and Police Major-General Harm, who was in charge of all the branches of the S.S. and the German and Lithuanian Police. Upon the establishment of the civilian administration, S.S. *Standartenführer* Jäger, the commanding officer of Einsatzkommando 3, which had operated in Lithuania since July 2, 1941, and had engaged mainly in the extermination of Jews, was appointed head of the Security Police and the S.D. in Lithuania, a post he retained until 1943, when he was succeeded by *Obersturmführer* Fuchs. *Hauptsturmführer* Heinrich Schmitz was in charge of Jewish affairs in the S.S. and Police Command in Lithuania from July 1941 to July 1944. While the various branches of the S.S. were officially under the control of the civilian administration, in effect they operated independently according to instructions from S.S. headquarters in Berlin. This procedure was based on Hitler's order of July 17, 1941, whereby Heinrich Himmler was made responsible for all security activities in the Eastern territories under civilian administration and thus had the right to issue orders directly to

⁴ Document signed by von Renteln, listing those appointed as *Gebietskommissare*, Documents Accuse, p. 103. They were as follows: Cramer — City of Kovno; Lentzen — Area of Kovno; Hans Hingst — City of Vilna; Horst Wulff — Area of Vilna; Hans Gewecke — Shavli; Walter Neum — Panevėžys.

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the local officials of the Ministry for the Eastern Occupied Territories.⁵

Supplementing the German civilian administration and the S.S. in Lithuania were regional and rear-base commands of the German Army which functioned independently, especially in such matters as logistics, supplies, and transportation. The proliferation of German authorities and the absence of any precise delineation of their spheres of responsibility led to constant friction among the various agencies.

On July 28, 1941 von Renteln announced that he was assuming control of "the territory of the former Republic of Lithuania" on behalf of the Reich and shortly thereafter the German civilian administration began to dissolve the Lithuanian political institutions which had been recently established. Simultaneously on July 30, 1941, the Germans began disarming the "partisan" units which had been organized as regular police regiments under the command of Franz Lechthaler of the German police.⁶

On August 5, 1941 the members of the Provisional Lithuanian Government were summoned to von Renteln, who informed them that they would henceforth cease to function as such and would become "general advisors" (*Generalräte*), to the civilian administration. Juozas Ambrazevičius, the acting Lithuanian Prime Minister, refused to accept the appointment and resigned on August 9.⁷ Thus the hopes of the Lithuanians to attain a form of independence were dashed.

⁵ The names and various posts of the German war criminals who operated in Lithuania are listed in Documents Accuse, pp. 285-297; a report on war criminals who served in Lithuania was submitted by the Director of the Central Administration for Justice at Ludwigsburg, Germany, YVA, KR-27/4.

⁶ In his letter to the Lithuanian commander of Kovno, Lechthaler stated: "In accordance with the order of the Military Commander of Ostland, I took over command of the Lithuanian Order Service and all the partisan detachments on July 30, 1941," Documents Accuse, p. 105.

⁷ Documents Accuse, p. 101; Speech of Juozas Ambrazevičius, the Prime Minister of the Lithuanian Provisional Government, on August 5, 1941.

Anti-Jewish Policy

The overall plan, delineation of functions and organizational structure of the machinery of destruction for the extermination of Lithuanian Jewry were established by the central authorities of the Third Reich as part of the "Final Solution" of the Jewish problem in Europe. The administration in Lithuania determined the pace and scope of the extermination in accordance with local conditions and requirements, sometimes taking its own interests into consideration, a policy which often led to conflicts among the various German authorities.

The implementation of the "Final Solution" in Lithuania can be divided into three periods:

A. *The First Period: End of June–November 1941.*

Mass liquidation — the murder of 173,000–177,000 Lithuanian Jews. At the end of this period some 43,000 Jews remained alive in Lithuania in the ghettos of Vilna, Kovno, Shavli and Svencian (Švenčionys).

B. *The Second Period: December 1941–July 1943.*

German policy during this period aimed at maximum exploitation of the Jewish labor force. At the same time "selective" and local liquidation was carried out.

C. *The Third Period: August 1943–July 1944.*

Dissolution of the ghettos and transfer of exclusive control over the Jews to the S.S. Able-bodied Jews were placed in concentration camps which had been set up in Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Children, women unfit for work and elderly people were murdered. At the end of this period, on the eve of the German retreat, the survivors of Lithuanian Jewry were liquidated or deported to camps in Germany.

Concerning the cessation of the activities of the Provisional Government, *ibid.*, p. 104–105; for a list of the Councillors General, their names and functions, see *Gitlerovskaya okupatsiya v Litve*, Sbornik statyei, Vilnius, 1966, p. 36 (hereafter – *Gitlerovskaya okupatsiya*).

A. *The First Period: End of June–November 1941*

The main objective during this period was the total annihilation of the Jews, with the rate of extermination dictated by the physical ability of the murder squads. The Jews were scattered in hundreds of settlements, ranging from those with several Jewish families to large communities such as Vilna and Kovno, which had tens of thousands of Jews. The liquidation was carried out in three stages: by the Lithuanians; by the mobile killing units, *Einsatzgruppen* (under the military administration); and by the Security Police and S.S. (under the civilian administration).

Stage 1 — Murders by the Lithuanians (June 23–July 3)

The pogroms initiated and carried out by the Lithuanians, with the encouragement of the mobile killing units, are characteristic of this stage. A manifesto published by the anti-Soviet "Lithuanian Activist Front" on the day of the German invasion declared:

"... The crucial day of reckoning has come for the Jews at last. Lithuania must be liberated not only from Asiatic Bolshevik slavery but also from the Jewish yoke of long standing..."⁸

Thousands of Lithuanians responded to this call. A report by the commander of *Einsatzgruppe A* states:

"In Lithuania this was achieved for the first time by partisan activists in Kauen [Kovno]. . . Klimaitis, the leader of the partisan unit mentioned above, who was designated for this purpose primarily, succeeded in launching pogroms on the basis of advice given to him by a small advanced detachment operating in Kauen. In the first pogrom during the night of June 25 to 26, the Lithuanian partisans did away with more than 1,500 Jews, set fire to several synagogues or destroyed them by other means, and burned down a Jewish residential quarter consisting of about 60 houses. During the following nights, approximately 2,300 Jews were rendered harmless in a similar way. In other parts of Lithuania, similar actions followed the example of Kauen,

⁸ For the text of the leaflet issued by the LAF in Berlin, see Documents Accuse, p. 124.

though on a smaller scale, and extending to the Communists who had been left behind.”⁹

This report refers to the pogroms which took place in Kovno — in the suburb of Slobodka (Vilijampolė) where 800 people were murdered, and in the garage of the “Lietūkis” company where 60 Jews were killed, as well as the murder of thousands in Fort VII. In addition, during the days June 30 and July 1, about 1,000 Jews were murdered in Shavli and massacres were also perpetrated at Panevėžys, Plungė, Kėdainiai, Švenčionys and elsewhere. In many cases pogroms were organized after the flight of the Soviet governing bodies even before the entry of the *Wehrmacht* and thousands of Jews were slain throughout Lithuania as they tried to flee with the Red Army. From partial reports in our possession it may be assumed that the number of Jews murdered during this period was between eight and ten thousand.¹⁰

Mass murders of Jews were not, however, carried out in Vilna, although the Lithuanians in that city were encouraged “to begin the savage killing of the Jews”¹¹ by a vanguard unit of *Einsatzkommando* 7, headed by Nebe, the commander of *Einsatzgruppe* B. The Lithuanians, who were a minority in Vilna — the majority of the population were Poles — were anxious to prove to the German military administration that they were in full control of the situation. Mass attacks on Jews were liable to cause chaos in the city and imperil their position.

A German report on the situation in Vilna in those days states:

- ⁹ Summary report compiled by the commander E. Stahlecker, October 15, 1941, Nuremberg Documents L-180, p. 21 (hereafter — Stahlecker).
- ¹⁰ Jäger notes in his report (p. 6), that 4,000 Jews were murdered by the Lithuanians during the first weeks of the occupation in the areas of Lithuania whose center was in Kovno. (The Shavli area, North-west and Eastern Lithuania, and Vilna were not included in the Jäger Report; thousands of Jews were killed in these areas as well.)
- ¹¹ Trial of Filbert, Commander of *Einsatzkommando* 9, YVA, 04/20-19-10, p. 59 (hereafter — Filbert).

"The Lithuanian activists are trying in all possible ways to exploit the unclear situation, and to give the city of Wilna [Vilna] a purely Lithuanian character; by decorating the city with eye-catching Lithuanian national flags . . .".¹²

According to another German report, "As far as the Lithuanian population in Vilna is concerned, the Jewish problem is secondary to the Polish one . . .".¹³

Stage 2 — Murders by the EINSATZGRUPPEN under the military administration — (July 1941)

On July 2, 1941 *Einsatzkommando* 9 arrived in Vilna, and *Einsatzkommando* 3 reached Kovno; a few days later *Einsatzkommando* 2 arrived in Shavli. They were divided into smaller mobile units, and their area of operation encompassed the whole of Lithuania. Thousands of Lithuanian volunteers assisted them in carrying out the murders.

Jews were kidnapped off the streets or taken from their homes and told that they were being taken for labor. They were then transported outside the city or town, where they were shot and buried. The executions were carried out at Ponary (Paneriai) near Vilna, Forts VII and IX near Kovno, the Kužiai forest outside Shavli, the Vidzgiris forest near Alytus, the Kaizerlingas [Staniūnai] forest outside Panevėžys, etc. This wave of massacres in which the overwhelming majority of the victims were males, encompassed most of the settlements in the country. The killing of Jews upon the initiative of the Lithuanians continued in places which the *Einsatzgruppen* did not reach, or in which they did not operate.

The Jews were murdered in groups ranging from tens to several hundreds. An action on a larger scale took place at Fort VII on July 6, when 2,500 Jews were slain. During this period, a total of 15,000–17,000 Jews were killed.¹⁴ At the same time, the military

¹² *Einsatzkommando* Report, July 9, 1941, pp. 10–12.

¹³ Stahlecker, p. 112.

¹⁴ According to the Jäger Report, 4,243 Jews were killed in the month of July by *Einsatzkommando* 3. Filbert (p. 40) reports that 5,000 Jews were

administration issued anti-Jewish orders which included, among other provisions, the wearing of distinctive marks (yellow star of David or white ribbon), restrictions of movement, restrictions concerning commercial activities in markets, shops, etc.

Stage 3 — Massacres during the period of civilian administration — (August–November 1941)

In Kovno, on July 27, 1941, Lohse met for the first time with the provincial and district *Kommissars* under his control and issued verbal instructions regarding the German policy towards the Jews in the Eastern territories and reported on the implementation of the “Final Solution” by the Security Police.

The first comprehensive set of instructions on this matter — published by Lohse in Riga on August 18, 1941 — was entitled, “Provisional Directives for the Treatment of Jews in the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*.” The first part reads as follows:

“For the implementation of the Final Solution of the Jewish problem in the territory of Ostland, the instructions which I issued in Kauen on July 27, 1941 are to be enforced. If in the course of their implementation further measures are taken, especially by the Security Police, provisional directives listed below do not apply to them. The exclusive aim of these *provisional* directives is to ensure that minimum measures are taken by the *Generalkommissare* and *Gebietskommissare* as long as there is no possibility of continuing the implementation of the Final Solution of the Jewish problem.”¹⁵

The first section stated specifically that the main objective of the Germans’ policy vis-à-vis the Jews was extermination. All the other measures listed in the document were merely provisional until the process of extermination could be completed. They were divided

slain in Vilna by *Einsatzkommando 9* during the month of July, before Vilna came under the jurisdiction of *Einsatzkommando 3*. In the course of the murder actions carried out by *Einsatzkommando 2* in the Shavli area in northwest Lithuania, a total of 13,000–14,000 Jews were murdered. It should be assumed that 2,000–3,000 Jews throughout Lithuania were murdered by the local population.

¹⁵ YVA, O-18/133, p. 1.

into two categories: those measures which were to be carried out at once throughout Ostland, and those whose implementation was dependent on local conditions and especially economic considerations. The latter were to be instituted in accordance with the decision of *Generalkommissare* who were empowered to delegate their authority in these matters to the *Gebietskommissare*.

The measures which were to be implemented immediately were listed in paragraph 4: a census of the Jewish population, the yellow star decree, prohibitions against changes of residence, admission into public institutions, and employment in certain professions, and the seizure of Jewish property, including property held by non-Jews.

Paragraph 5 called for the "cleansing" of the countryside (Flachland), *ergo*, the extermination of Jews in the rural towns and villages. In the course of the extermination, the Jewish population of the large cities was to be concentrated in ghettos, where the Jews would be granted "autonomy" — self-government under a *Judenrat* with a Jewish police force to maintain internal public order. As far as the quality and quantity of the food which was to be supplied to the Jews, only the following was to be allowed into the ghetto:

- (1) food which the population at large could do without;
- (2) no more than was needed to provide a minimal existence.

The application of paragraph 5 was left to the discretion of the *Generalkommissare* and/or *Gebietskommissare*, who were given the authority to determine when and where to liquidate the Jews.

On August 1, 1941, five days before it was disbanded by von Renteln, the *Reichskommissar* for Lithuania, the Provisional Lithuanian Government published a "Jewish Law" with instructions regarding the treatment of Jews throughout Lithuania. The statute was signed by the Acting Prime Minister, J. Ambrazevičius, and the Minister of Internal Affairs, J. Šlepetys.

The Jews were divided into two categories:

— Communists and their sympathizers who had been active

during the Soviet regime (who were to be arrested and brought to trial);

— the general Jewish population.

The statute made the wearing of the yellow badge compulsory, and decreed the establishment of Jewish ghettos, restriction of movement, as well as restrictions on the use of property, etc. Jews who had been awarded high Lithuanian decorations, or had fought for Lithuanian independence were exempted from the restrictions in the "Jewish Law." There was no reference to the extermination of Jews in the document.¹⁶ The "Jewish Law," however, had no practical significance, since the German administration did not recognize the Provisional Lithuanian Government.

The systematic destruction of Lithuanian Jewry, regardless of age, sex, professional or physical ability, began in August 1941. In the large Jewish communities of Vilna and Kovno, the massacres were carried out by members of the local Security Police and S.D. together with special Lithuanian detachments under their command. A mobile killing unit of the Security Police and S.D. commanded by *Obersturmführer* Hamann and assisted by local Lithuanian elements was activated elsewhere.¹⁷ The Germans gave the orders during these actions, in addition to serving as organizers and supervisors. The actual murders at the pits were perpetrated by Germans and Lithuanians. Small Jewish settlements were wiped out in one operation, while larger communities such as Panevėžys, Rokiškis, Ukmergė, and Utena, were annihilated in two or three actions. While the liquidation was being carried out, ghettos were established for the Jews in the large cities. In Vilna and Kovno the murders took place over a span of several months and thousands of persons lost their lives in each of the actions.

About 30,000 Jews were immured in the Kovno ghetto on August 15, 1941; about 5,000 Jews were ghettoized in Shavli at the end of August and some 40,000 in Vilna on September 6. Two

¹⁶ Documents Accuse, pp. 144–146.

¹⁷ Jäger Report, p. 7.

separate ghettos were established in each city — the "Large Ghetto" and the "Small Ghetto" in Kovno, "Ghetto No. 1" and "Ghetto No. 2" in Vilna, and the ghetto in "Trakai" and the ghetto in "Caucasus" in Shavli. In these ghettos, thousands of Jews were employed in various government-owned institutions and factories, some of which were important for the war effort, and their replacement by non-Jewish workers took time.

The first to be liquidated were the unemployed, and they were followed by the non-essential workers. Afterwards, the skilled artisans and personnel of the factories producing for the war effort were to be murdered.

The various certificates distributed to the Jews by the administration ("white" documents handed out in Kovno in mid-September and "yellow" ones distributed in Vilna at the beginning of October) were a means of classifying and identifying the candidates for extermination. The establishment of two separate ghettos, one which was usually for artisans and "essential" workers and the other which was a general ghetto, facilitated the classification of the Jews. This device also helped deceive the Jews in the ghetto for "essential" workers as to the Germans' true intentions.

During this phase of the massacres, which lasted from August to November 1941, about 111,000 Jews were put to death in the area covered by *Einsatzkommando* 3 and another approximately 46,000 were murdered by *Einsatzkommando* 2. Another 2,000–3,000 Jews were murdered in actions carried out by the local Lithuanian police and irregular formations and thus the total number of victims was over 150,000. In addition, 5,000 Jews who had been deported to Lithuania from Germany and Austria were murdered in Kovno at the end of November.¹⁸

¹⁸ The Jäger Report gives details of actions in which 107,259 Lithuanian Jews were murdered during this period, in addition to the 5,000 German Jews who were killed in Fort IX in Kovno. It does not, however, list the action which was carried out in Vilna on *Yom Kippur* in which about 4,000 Jews were killed. Stahlecker notes that in the Shavli area, where *Einsatzkommando* 2 was active, 41,000 Jews were killed. His report covers

Lithuania was the first country in occupied Europe in which mass extermination of Jews took place. During the first four and a half months of the German occupation — from the end of June to the beginning of November 1941 — more than 80% of Lithuanian Jewry was killed. This “achievement” was made possible by the fact that the *Einsatzgruppen*, S.D. and Security Police units, who carried out the mass murder and who all together numbered only several hundred men, were assisted by thousands of volunteers from among the local populace. Thus, for example, *Brigadeführer* Stahlecker, the commander of *Einsatzgruppe A*, wrote in this report of October 15, 1941: “The active anti-Semitism which flared up quickly after the German occupation did not falter. Lithuanians are voluntarily and untiringly at our disposal for all measures against Jews; sometimes they even execute such measures on their own.”¹⁹ In a summary report on the operations of his unit dated December 1, 1941. Jäger stated:

“The goal to clear Lithuania of Jews could be achieved only thanks to the setting up of a flying squad of tried men under S.S.-*Obersturmführer* Hamann who adopted my goal without any reservations, and managed to secure the co-operation of the Lithuanian partisans and the respective civil offices.”²⁰

The total number of Jews murdered in Lithuania from the end of June to November 1941 was as follows:

the period until October 15, 1941. *Einsatzkommando 3* was assigned to the Shavli area only at the beginning of October, after all the Jews in the district had been murdered, apart from those who survived in the city of Shavli. Thus since all the Jews in the Shavli area were put to death by *Einsatzkommando 2*, their number is not included in the Jäger Report. The report of Albinas Karalius a Lithuanian, who was in charge of the Šakiai District, and of Balys Vilčinskis, the local police chief, notes that 890 Jews were murdered in Šakiai on September 13, 1941 and another 650 were killed in Kudirkos Naumištis on September 16, 1941. Documents Accuse, p. 233.

¹⁹ Stahlecker, p. 64.

²⁰ Jäger Report, p. 7.

1. By Lithuanians — end of June — beginning of July	8,000–10,000
2. By the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> and Lithuanians — during July	15,000–17,000
3. Massacres carried out under the civilian administration — August–November 1941	150,000
<i>Total</i>	173,000–177,000

The massacres, which had begun in August were suspended in November 1941. (In Vilna they were stopped after the action of November 3–5;²¹ in Kovno the last mass action took place on October 28–29, and at Shavli in early September.) By the end of 1941, only about 43,000 of the 220,000–225,000 Jews who were in Lithuania at the time of the German occupation, remained alive, with the survivors residing in four ghettos: about 20,000 in Vilna, approximately 17,500 in Kovno, some 5,000 in Shavli and about 500 in Švenčionys. Several thousand, especially from the Vilna region, managed to flee to Byelorussia, where the situation of the Jews was better.²²

What brought about the suspension of the extermination campaign at the end of 1941? The lull was the result of the controversy within the German administration over whether to liquidate all the Jews in Lithuania, or to spare those who were working in German installations and factories. This conflict, which was waged

²¹ According to the Jäger Report (p. 7) 4,500 Jews survived in Shavli, 15,000 in Kovno and 15,000 in Vilna. Actually a slightly larger number had survived. For the number of Jews in Vilna, see Arad, pp. 279–287. According to a census conducted in the Kovno ghetto in November 1941 following the final action, 17,412 Jews remained in the ghetto. Leib Garfunkel, *Kovno ha'yehudit be'khubana*, Jerusalem, 5719 (1959), p. 83 (hereafter — Garfunkel). About 500 Jews remained in the ghetto in Švenčionys in Eastern Lithuania. This ghetto is not mentioned in the Jäger Report.

²² Three "small" actions took place in Vilna in December, in which about 900 Jews were murdered. Arad, pp. 213–220.

from September to November, involved all, including the highest, levels of three of the German authorities operating in Ostland — the civilian administration, the S.S. and the *Wehrmacht*.

The initial intervention by the civilian administration in the campaign of total extermination conducted by *Einsatzkommando 3* apparently took place in Shavli. The mobile killing unit commanded by *Obersturmführer* Hamann arrived in that city in early September. Gewecke, the *Gebietskommissar* of Shavli, prevented the commencement of the operation on the grounds that the Jews were employed in important economic enterprises and their liquidation would lead to a suspension of production. Through his superior officer Jäger, Hamann complained to *Generalkommissar von Renteln* about Gewecke's interference; subsequently von Renteln demanded a report from the latter. In his report of September 10, 1941 the *Gebietskommissar* wrote:

“. . . When all the deportation actions have been completed 4,000 Jews, including members of their families, who are needed as skilled workers, will remain the Schaulen [Shavli] region . . . It is impossible to carry on work without Jews. This is especially the case in the leather-tanning industry. Every single artisan in this industry is Jewish . . . On the basis of the conversation I had with you and in the light of this report, you may be convinced that we have acted in the Jewish question in the Schaulen region with the necessary intensiveness and with National-Socialist stubbornness.”²³

Von Renteln apparently supported the stand of the Security Police and S.D. Gustav Herrmann, who held a senior post in the German Labor Office (*Arbeitsamt*) of the *Generalkommissariat*, testified that “. . . From close acquaintance I am able to state that the *Generalkommissar* von Renteln supported the killing of all Jews; he is a sworn hater of Jews . . .”²⁴ Gewecke was also aware of the stand von Renteln had adopted in his dispute with the Security Police and the S.D., and on September 11 he wrote a

²³ YVA, O/18/6-142.

²⁴ Testimony of Gustav Herrmann, YVA, M-1/E-6, pp. 1-2 (hereafter — Herrmann).

personal letter to Lohse, the *Reichskommissar* of Ostland, enclosing a copy of his report of the previous day to von Renteln, and asking for the latter's intervention.²⁵

Peschel, chief of the Labor Office, wrote to von Renteln in September or the beginning of October, urging him to allow the surviving Jews to continue working, and he approached the *Wehrmacht* authorities in Kovno with the same request. *Gebietskommissar* Cramer, favored leaving the Jewish artisans alive. Thus, Herrman reported on a meeting (which was attended by von Renteln, Jäger, Cramer, Peschel, the Lithuanian First Councillor General in Lithuania, Petras Kubiliūnas and others) that took place in Kovno, at which it was decided to write to Riga and urge that the Jewish artisans and their families be left alive. Peshel went to Riga to intervene personally on behalf of those Jews who dwelt in the ghettos of Vilna, Kovno and Shavli. An affirmative reply was received in Kovno on October 20 or 21. The Security Police and S.D. agreed to spare the artisans, but they insisted on the liquidation of intellectuals and members of the liberal professions as well as of those physically unfit for work.²⁶

Appeals, addressed to Lohse concerning the suspension of the killing of the Jews of Liepaja, also arrived from other regions of Ostland. Alnor, the *Gebietskommissar* for Liepaja, wrote to *General-kommissar* Drechsler, on October 11, 1941 that: "The liquidation of the Jews which was resumed last week aroused dissatisfaction . . . especially the shooting of women and children which awakened general opposition . . . Even the officers ask me if it was necessary to liquidate children . . ."²⁷ Drechsler apparently passed this report on to Lohse, who forbade the continuation of extermination in Liepaja. In fact, the Security Police and S.D.

²⁵ YVA, O/18-6/144.

²⁶ Herrmann, pp. 3-4.

²⁷ *My obvinyaem*, Dokumenty 1 materialy o zlodeyaniyakh gitlerovskikh okupantov i latyshskikh burzhuznykh natsionalistov v Latviskoy Sovietskoy Sotsialisticheskoy Respublike 1941-1945, Riga, 1967, pp. 182-183 (hereafter — *My obvinyaem*).

complained about him to the Reich Minister for the Eastern Occupied Territories in Berlin and Lohse was requested to report on the incident in a letter dated October 31, and signed by Dr. Leibbrand, head of the Political Department, which he received from the Reich Ministry. In his reply Lohse wrote *inter alia*:

"I have forbidden the wild executions of Jews in Liepaja because the manner in which they were carried out was not justifiable.

I should like to be informed whether your inquiry of October 31 is to be regarded as a directive to liquidate all Jews in the East? Shall this take place without regard as to age and sex and economic interests (of the *Wehrmacht*, for instance, in specialists in the armament industry)?

Of course the cleansing of the East of Jews is a necessary task; its solution, however, must be harmonized with the necessities of war production.

So far I have been unable to find such a directive either in the regulations regarding the Jewish question in the "Brown Portfolio" or in other decrees."²⁸

The reply from Berlin dated December 18, 1941 read as follows:

"Clarification of the Jewish question has most likely been achieved by now through verbal discussions. Economic considerations should fundamentally remain unconsidered in the settlement of the problem. Moreover, it is requested that questions arising be settled directly with the Senior S.S. and Police leader."²⁹

This reply to Lohse laid down two important principles: First, that economic considerations should not be taken into account in determining whether to allow Jews to survive; second, that the decision whether to kill the Jews or maintain the ghetto was left to the local authorities in Ostland, in conjunction with the S.S.

Even before the reply from Berlin was received, it was decided that some of the Jews in Ostland would be left alive. In this case the intervention of the *Wehrmacht* ordinance and supply com-

²⁸ YVA, O/18-156. The "brown file" mentioned by Lohse was published by the Ministry for the Eastern Occupied Territories in Berlin on September 3, 1941, and included *inter alia* directives on the treatment of Jews in those territories.

²⁹ Nuremberg Documents, PS-3666.

manders was decisive. Trampedach, head of the Political Department (Department II a) in Riga, recorded:

"On November 7, 1941, Mey, an officer in the Quartermaster-General Command in Ostland, appeared before me and swore that Jewish artisans employed in workshops and other armament factories of the *Wehrmacht* were being liquidated in Wilna, and that it was impossible to replace them by local workers. In these factories vehicles of combat units are repaired."³⁰

On the same day (November seventh), Trampedach sent a telegram to the *Gebietskommissar* for Vilna with copies to the commander of the *Wehrmacht* in Ostland, senior S.S. and Police officials and the *Generalkommissar* for Lithuania, stating:

"I demand the prevention by all means of the removal of the Jewish labor force from the supervision of the *Wehrmacht*, which has no replacements."³¹

Thus, the following order was promulgated in early December:

"The head of the Maintenance Division of the *Wehrmacht* Command for Ostland complains that, in the course of the process of liquidation, Jewish skilled workers in armament factories and workshops, who cannot be replaced at present, are being taken away from the *Wehrmacht*.

I unequivocally demand that the liquidation of Jews employed as skilled workers in the armament factories and workshops of the *Wehrmacht* be stopped as there is no possibility of replacing them by other local workers at the present time. It should be determined with the *Gebietskommissare* (Social Administration Department) which Jewish workers cannot be replaced by others.

Arrangements should be made to train local workers as replacements as quickly as possible.

This order also refers to Jewish skilled workers in factories which do not serve the *Wehrmacht* directly, but perform important tasks for the war economy."

(Illegible signature)³²

30 YVA, O/18-165.

31 YVA, O/18-157; Arad, pp. 239-240.

32 YVA, O/18/203.

On the basis of this order the mass extermination was suspended, and the Jewish survivors were concentrated in large ghettos in Vilna, Kovno and Shavli and in a smaller ghetto in Švenčionys in Eastern Lithuania.

In a summary report on the activities of *Einsatzkommando 3*, which was submitted on December 1941, *Standartenführer* Jäger wrote:

"I can state today that the goal of the solution of the Jewish problem in Lithuania has been reached by *Einsatzkommando 3*. There are no longer any Jews in Lithuania except the working Jews and their families which total

in Schaulen some 4,500
in Kauen some 15,000
in Wilna some 15,000

I intended to kill off these working Jews and their families, too, but met with the strongest protest from the civil administration (*Reichskommissar*), and I received an order from the *Wehrmacht* prohibiting me from murdering these Jews and their families . . .

I consider the bulk of the actions against the Jews to be finished as far as EK 3 is concerned. The working Jews and Jewesses left alive for the time being are badly needed, and I presume that even when winter is over this Jewish labor force will still be badly needed . . .".³³

According to the report, apparently submitted in late December, summing up the activities of *Einsatzgruppe A* which operated in Ostland:

"The goal of the systematic cleansing operation in Ostland was to effect as complete a purge of the Jews as possible in accordance with the basic order. This objective was achieved in the main . . . the remnants surviving in the Baltic states are needed to perform urgent work requirements . . .".³⁴

It was Lohse who decided to discontinue the extermination in the wake of the *Wehrmacht's* demands and the requests from various elements in the civilian administration. The letter sent to him

³³ Jäger Report, p. 7.

³⁴ Nuremberg Documents, PS-2273.

from Berlin on December 15, 1941 brought about no significant changes.

B. *The Second Period: December 1941–July 1943*

The anti-Jewish policy of the German administration in Lithuania during this period was effected by the increasing need for manpower, and the demand to send workers to the German war industry. Nonetheless, nothing was done to train non-Jews to replace the Jewish skilled artisans. On November 7, 1941, Hermann Goering, who was in charge of the Four-Year Plan, promulgated an order concerning the "Utilization of Manpower in the Occupied Territories in the East and Dispatch of Workers from these Territories for Employment in Industry in Germany." In the wake of this decree, Rosenberg, the Minister for the Eastern Occupied Territories, issued an order on December 19, 1941 making labor service compulsory for all persons aged 18 to 45 years in the territories in the East under civilian administration.³⁵

In the wake of the difficulties encountered in the recruitment of manpower, Franz Sauckel, who was in charge of conscription and utilization of manpower in Germany and the occupied territories, addressed the *Reichskommissare* in the Eastern areas on March 31, 1942 and demanded that all possible measures be taken to implement the order.³⁶ During the first half of April 1942 a transport of 4,200 persons from Vilna and its environs was sent to Germany. On May 1, an order was published to draft 30,000 Lithuanians to work in the war industries in Germany and additional decrees concerning labor conscription for the war industries of the Reich and the transportation system were issued in Lithuania on May 2 and 4. Inhabitants of Lithuania were also required to work cutting peat, felling trees in the woods and doing seasonal agricultural

³⁵ *Prestupnye tseli — prestupnye sredstva*. Dokumenty ob okupatsionoy politike fashistskoy Germanii na teritorii SSR (1941–1944), Moskva, 1968, pp. 208–214 (hereafter — *Prestupnye sredstva*); *My obvinyaem*, p. 221.

³⁶ *Prestupnye sredstva*, p. 219.

work.³⁷ As a result, the resistance of the local populace to German rule increased,³⁸ and the labor force provided by Jews in the ghettos became a factor to be taken into consideration by the local administration. Instead of attempting to force the non-Jewish population to provide more laborers, the authorities preferred to continue to allow the ghettos to exist. While the Jewish workers did not fulfill all the Germans' needs, they nonetheless did greatly ease the situation. Moreover, there were Jewish artisans for whom there were no substitutes whatsoever. An added consideration was the fact that the utilization of Jewish manpower was much cheaper than that of non-Jews, as Jewish laborers received approximately one-third of the pay given to non-Jewish employees. The average monthly wage for Jews was 25–35 *Reichsmarks* as opposed to about 100 *Reichsmarks* for non-Jews. Jewish labor was also a substantial source of revenue for the administration. Non-German local institutions and factories paid the administration a monthly sum equivalent to the wages paid to the Jewish workers.³⁹

The German administration steadily increased the utilization of Jewish labor and expanded the areas of employment. The number of Jews working in factories and establishments outside the ghetto rose, and the workshops inside the ghetto which manufactured for the administration were expanded. In addition, Jews were sent to labor camps where they were put to work cutting peat and felling trees in the forests. They maintained contact with the ghetto from which they received food and medication. Occasionally there were exchanges of workers between the ghetto and the camps. Thus, for example, five hundred inmates of the Kovno ghetto were sent to a labor camp in Riga, on February 7, 1942 and another 370 were

³⁷ Gitlerovskaya okupatsiya, pp. 74–76; Report No. 10 of the Security Police, July 3, 1942, YVA, DN/33–1.

³⁸ YVA, DN/33–1.

³⁹ Report on the *Gebietskommissar* of Vilna which lists the wages and payment orders, YVA, Wiesenthal Collection; Arad, pp. 351–352.

shipped there on October 22, 1942. Their fate was the same as that of the Jews in Riga.⁴⁰

The number of workers among the ghetto inmates rose steadily, even though the population did not increase, as women and youth aged 13 and above were enlisted and the number of workers employed in services in the ghetto was reduced. Working through the Judenrat and the Jewish police, the German authorities increased the economic exploitation of the ghetto. They fostered the belief among the Jews that their work was essential; and as the number of Jewish workers increased, so too did the Jews' confidence that the ghetto would not be liquidated.⁴¹

The Selective Actions and the Liquidation of Small Ghettos and Labor Camps

The murder of individual Jews and of groups of ghetto inmates accused of various crimes continued throughout this period. Jews were executed for purchasing food and bringing it illegally into the ghetto, for failing to wear the yellow badge, for possessing "Aryan" documents or for hiding outside the ghetto. Jewish women were executed on charges of cohabiting with Germans, although in most cases they had been compelled to do so by their German employers. On July 26, 1942 eighty-four elderly people and chronic invalids from the Vilna ghetto were murdered in Ponary.⁴²

In March 1942, part of Byelorussia was annexed to Lithuania and placed under the command of Horst Wulff, the *Gebietskommissar* of Vilna. These areas included the township of Ašmena and several townlets with small Jewish communities. Until then there had been no mass killings in these settlements, except for the slaying of groups of males by the *Einsatzgruppen* and the local

⁴⁰ Garfunkel, pp. 126–127, 135; Josef Gar, *Umkum fun der yidisher Kovne*, München, 1948, pp. 94, 126 (hereafter-Gar)

⁴¹ Arad, pp. 354–355, 410–417; Garfunkel, pp. 83–85, 89, 92–100; Eliezer Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, Jerusalem, 1953 (hereafter — Yerushalmi).

⁴² Arad, pp. 418–419; Garfunkel, pp. 119–121.

police (Byelorussians, Poles and Lithuanians) in the summer and fall of 1941. The Germans decided to concentrate the Jews in the larger ghettos of Ašmena, Švenčionys, Mikališkės, and Salos and several smaller ghettos were wiped out during these round-ups. The ghetto of Kiemeliškės, which had approximately 200 inhabitants, was liquidated on October 22, 1942 and most of the Jews were shot in the vicinity of the township. Over 400 elderly persons and sick people from the Ašmena ghetto were killed the next day.⁴³

The situation of the Jews in these areas worsened during the spring and early summer of 1943. The change resulted from developments in Lithuania, particularly in the Vilna region, and can mainly be attributed to the growth of the Soviet partisan movement in Eastern Lithuania and the Jewish reaction to partisan activities. The German defeat at Stalingrad, the disappointment of the Lithuanians at not having been granted any autonomy, the attempts to draft Lithuanians into the army, and the resettlement of Germans in Lithuania — all led to increased Lithuanian opposition to the German regime. In Vilna the Germans convened the officers who had served in the Lithuanian Army and offered them an opportunity to volunteer for a Lithuanian Legion to be established within the framework of the German Army, but the officers refused. The underground Lithuanian press, regardless of political leanings and including those who had formerly collaborated with the Germans, called upon the local populace to flee to the forests if any attempt was made to forcibly conscript Lithuanians. In reprisal the German administration closed down the universities of Vilna and Kovno as well as many secondary schools, and embarked upon a reign of terror. Demonstrations, clashes and large-scale arrests took place in Vilna, Kovno and other places. The administration reacted vehemently⁴⁴ and the atmosphere of terror indirectly affected the administration's policy towards the Jews.

With the increase of Soviet partisan activity in the areas of

⁴³ Arad, pp. 422.

⁴⁴ Gitlerovskaya okupatsiya, pp. 38–39; Documents Accuse, pp. 31–33.

Western Byelorussia and Eastern Lithuania in late 1942 and during the months of February and March 1943,⁴⁵ the German security police decided to transfer the working residents of these areas to Germany. Rem, the commander of the Security Police and S.D. in Ostland, published an order to this effect as early as November 16, 1942.⁴⁶ This policy naturally had implications for the Jews in the ghettos of Švenčionys, Mikališkes, Salos and Ašmena as well as for those in other labor camps.

In February 1943, the German administration decided to liquidate these three ghettos and the labor camps since they attributed the increase in partisan activity, to some extent, to Jews who had escaped from these places. In his report on the mass extermination of Jews in Byelorussia in the summer of 1942, *Generalkommissar* Kube stated: "Consequently, after the completion of the actions there is no longer any danger that in the future the partisans will rely principally on the Jews . . .".⁴⁷

To avoid arousing suspicions among the Jews, and to prevent mass escapes, the Jewish police of the Vilna ghetto were ordered to remove the Jews from these ghettos and transfer them to Vilna and Kovno. In early March 1943, Müller, a high official of the *Gebietskommissariat* at Kovno, instructed the local Judenrat to prepare accommodations for 3,000 Jews who were to be brought to the ghetto. During the period from March 26 to April 2, about 1,200–1,300 Jews were transferred to the Vilna ghetto from Ašmena, Mikališkés and Švenčionys. Approximately 1,500 persons were also sent from Ašmena to the camps at Žasliai, Žiežmariai, Kena and Naujoji Vilnia.

A trainload of Jews from Ašmena and Mikališkés, and Salos

⁴⁵ YVA, DN/33-1 of February 5, 1943; report No. 41, February 12, 1943; reports Nos. 42, 46, 47 contain many accounts of partisan activity in these areas.

⁴⁶ *Prestupnye sredstva*, p. 237. The order states as follows: "On November 3, 1942 the *Reichsführer* of the S.S. ordered that the entire working population in the areas in which bands were active be arrested and sent to Germany for labor."

⁴⁷ YVA, 04/53/2, document 531, p. 2.

which left Salos during the evening hours of April 4 en route to Kovno, arrived in Vilna during the early hours of the night. There the railway cars were connected to others bearing 340 Jews from the Vilna ghetto who had registered or had been compelled to register for transfer to Kovno in accordance with the notice published in the ghetto regarding reunification with relatives in Kovno. The train, which set out before midnight, stopped at Ponary. Here the Jewish policemen were taken off the train by Lithuanian policemen who brought them to the Security Police headquarters in Vilna, where they were kept in custody until midday. Meanwhile, at dawn the coaches were opened one by one and the people taken to the pits and shot. Hundreds tried to escape but were murdered at the railroad station and in the surrounding fields.

The train from Švenčionys left Švenčionėliai on April 4 at nightfall and arrived in Vilna before dawn on the morning of April 5. Five cars, with a total of about 250 people who were to be sent to the labor camp at Bezdony, were disconnected from the train, and the remainder continued to Ponary. They reached Ponary in the morning hours while the shooting of the people from Salos was being completed. When the train stopped they burst forth from the cars and began to flee, resisting the Germans and Lithuanians who surrounded them and fired into the crowd. Altogether about 3,800 Jews were murdered on that day at Ponary. About thirty people, mostly women and children, escaped and reached the Vilna ghetto. There were a number of dead and wounded among the Germans and Lithuanians who took part in the operation.

On April 8, 1943 the Security Police issued an order forbidding Jews from staying in the Vilna area, Švenčionys, Ašmena and Eišiškės. The dispatch of workers to these areas by the Labor Offices in the ghettos was made subject to the approval of the Security Police.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Arad, pp. 437-442.

In a report submitted by the Chief of the German Security Police and S.D. in Lithuania to the Reich Security Main Office in April 1943, it was stated:

"During the month covered by the present report, the Byelorussian areas incorporated into the General District of Lithuania . . . which are under constant partisan menace are now completely free of Jews. As a result we now have a border zone 50 to 80 kilometers wide which is free of any Jews.

The Jews who resided in the areas in question were concentrated in one place and selected for work, those who were found to be unfit for work, some 4,000, underwent special treatment at Ponary on April 5, 1943 . . .".⁴⁹

According to the report the selection was made before the transport was sent to Ponary and those 4,000 Jews who were killed had previously been found "unfit for work." This was untrue, however, as thousands of those murdered were undoubtedly able-bodied persons.

Müller, who was chief of the Jewish Department of the Security Police and S.D. in Lithuania, was present at the extermination in Ponary. This action had been planned for February 1943 but was postponed until the end of March — beginning of April.⁵⁰ It is probable that the postponement was due to the general unrest in Lithuania in March and the punitive actions taken in Eastern Lithuania in February 1943 against farmers who failed to surrender their crops to the Germans.⁵¹ Large forces of police were engaged in these operations.

It would appear that the Germans intended to kill part of the inhabitants of the ghetto and to transfer the able-bodied Jews to

⁴⁹ Documents Accuse, pp. 271–272.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 267. According to the report of the Security Police and S.D. in Lithuania on its activities in February 1943, "The cleansing of Jews in the frontier area between Lithuania and Byelorussia in which the Jews have violated the regulations restricting them to ghettos could not be completed yet."

⁵¹ Documents Accuse, p. 268; Yerushalmi, pp. 178, 191, 194–195; Hermann Kruk, *Togbukh fun Vilner geto*, New York, 1961, p. 518 (hereafter — Kruk).

the ghettos of Vilna and Kovno and to work camps. The report cited above indicates that a general directive had been issued not to kill those fit for work. In Kovno there were requests for additional Jewish laborers and the March 1943 report of the Security Police and S.D. spoke of a demand for 600 more Jewish artisans, of urgent orders which the *Wehrmacht* placed with the ghetto workshops and of the employment of women and children in order to fill these orders. Additional requests for Jewish labor, especially at the airfield, came from Shavli during March, and for this purpose children aged 14 and over as well as women, were drafted for labor. Several days after the massacre at Ponary, the Labor Office in the Vilna ghetto was asked to provide 100 workers for the *Gebietskommissariat* in the very zone in which the ghettos had been liquidated!⁵²

Nonetheless, the decision was made to destroy all the survivors in the small ghettos in Eastern Lithuania, including those who were still able to work. Armed underground groups operated in the ghettos that were destroyed and groups of young men from some of these ghettos went to the forests to join the partisans. The Germans undoubtedly received information to this effect and it influenced their decision to kill the Jews instead of bringing them to Kovno.⁵³

The Germans assigned the task of transferring the Jewish inmates to Kovno to the chief of the Jewish police in the Vilna ghetto,

⁵² Documents Accuse, p. 268; Yerushalmi, pp. 191, 194–195.

⁵³ A group of 22 armed youngsters left the Švenčionys ghetto for the forests during the night of March 6, 1943, and smaller groups also left other ghettos. Garfunkel (p. 140) notes that reports reached the Kovno ghetto that Cramer “had agreed to the arrival of the Jews to the ghetto and to their accommodation therein, but the Gestapo refused at the last moment to acquiesce due to the information it possessed concerning the links between these Jews and the Russian partisans. Consequently, the order was ultimately given to wipe out all of them.” Kruk (p. 547–548) writes that the Chief of the Security Police and S.D. in Vilna stated that the Jews of Ašmena and Švenčionys were liquidated because of the connections between the ghetto youths and the partisans.

Jacob Gens. In this manner they hoped to deceive the Jews and prevent mass flight to the forests and the partisans. The "reward" given was the 1,200–1,300 Jews brought to Vilna and the transfer of about another 1,750 to the labor camps.

In the work camps in the vicinity of Vilna, where Jews from the local ghetto and other ghettos were engaged in cutting down trees and digging peat, armed underground groups were organized, which made contact with the Soviet partisans, and escaped into the forests. As a retaliatory measure, the camp at Baltoji-Volké was liquidated on June 28 or 29, 1943, and 67 of its 300 workers were shot on the spot because six of their comrades had fled to the woods. On July 8 the camp at Kena was liquidated and its 240 Jewish inmates were murdered. A day later, on July 9, the camp at Bezdonyš was liquidated and its 350 inmates were killed on the spot. When the news of the murders at Kena and Bezdonyš reached the Jews in the Riešė camp, most of them escaped and returned to the Vilna ghetto. The last camp in the vicinity of Vilna was at Naujoji-Vilnia. It was destroyed at the end of July and its occupants were taken to Ponary, where they were shot to death.⁵⁴ The inmates of the other camps, such as Sorok-Tatar (Totoriškės) Žiežmariai and Riešė, were returned to the Vilna and Kovno ghettos.

During this period the German administration in Eastern Lithuania also adopted a strong-arm policy against the non-Jewish population. Punitive measures were taken against entire villages as well as against individuals for reasons of non-compliance with

⁵⁴ Kruk, p. 601; Yerushalmi, p. 269. Six Jewish workers from the Baltoji Voke camp escaped into the forests four days before the camp was liquidated, after having stolen arms from the Lithuanian guards. They joined a group of resistance fighters from the Vilna ghetto who had passed through their camp en route to the forests. Several days prior to the liquidation of the camp at (Naujoji Vilna) fourteen of its inmates escaped and joined an underground group from the Vilna ghetto which had fled to the forests. There was an armed underground group in the Bezdonyš camp of whose existence the Germans were probably aware.

the instructions issued concerning conscription of labor, assistance to deserters and aid to the partisans operating in the region.⁵⁵

The policy of murder and terror failed to achieve its purposes. The liquidation of the Jews in the smaller ghettos and work camps led to the strengthening and expansion of the armed underground. The Jewish underground in the Vilna ghetto maintained contact with the Communist underground and with Jewish partisans who infiltrated into the ghetto and smuggled groups of youths out to the forests. The German Security Police was aware of the ramified clandestine activities which were centered in the Vilna ghetto, where Jews were arrested for possessing arms or while in the process of acquiring them. The arrest and death of Witenberg, the leader of the Jewish underground, in the wake of the discovery of the non-Jewish Communist underground outside the ghetto, and the clashes inside the ghetto during the course of his arrest, provided additional information. A similar result occurred, when following Witenberg's death, a group of F.P.O. fighters led by J. Glazman, fell into a German ambush while on their way to the woods.

The Germans responded by intensifying their campaign of terror. An order was issued concerning collective responsibility and families and leaders of labor groups were executed.⁵⁶ In the eyes of the German administration the Vilna ghetto was a center of partisan activity, in contrast to the more "tranquil" ghettos of Kovno

⁵⁵ Wulff, the *Gebietskommissar* of Vilna, published a proclamation to the local population on August 12, in which he explained the reasons for the punitive actions which were carried out and emphasized that the German administration would not tolerate Eastern Lithuania being turned into an arena for partisan activity. Documents Accuse, pp. 268-270; An original copy of the proclamation is in the "Moreshet" Archives, D-485; YVA, O-4/53/2, Document No. 740.

⁵⁶ The order on "collective responsibility" stipulated that family members and fellow laborers in the work camps of those who fled into the forests would be executed. Thirty-two persons who were relatives of escapees into the forests, as well as chiefs of labor groups, were killed on July 25, 1943. For an account of the death of Witenberg and the activity of the Glazman group see Arad, p. 468-480.

and Shavli. All the extermination operations carried out in the ghettos of Eastern Lithuania during the period between January 1942 and July 1943 were undertaken upon the initiative of the German administration in Lithuania.

C. *The Third Period: August 1943–July 1944*

The fate of the ghettos in Lithuania was sealed by Himmler's order of June 21, 1943 to liquidate the ghettos in Ostland and set up concentration camps.⁵⁷ This order was issued shortly after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Strict supervision in the concentration camps was supposed to foil any attempts at clandestine organization and revolt. The deterioration of the military situation in the first half of 1943, the lifting of the siege of Leningrad, the military threat to Ostland, and the urgent need for manpower in Estonia were among the factors leading to the promulgation of the order and its timing. The practical implication was the transfer of the ghetto inmates from Lithuania to camps in Estonia and Latvia, among them a central camp outside Riga for those Jews who were working in army factories.

The civilian administration in Ostland had no desire to hand over its Jewish workers to the camps which were under the exclusive jurisdiction of the S.S. Economic Administrative Main Office, and it decided to set up small concentration camps on the sites of the former ghettos, a decision which was contrary to the letter and spirit of Himmler's order. The Jewish workers were a significant source of income for the treasury of the civilian administration, especially after the liquidation of the ghettos in the Eastern region, which had a detrimental effect on the financial situation. The conflict between the civilian administration and the S.S. authorities over the income from Jewish labor continued until the end of German rule in Ostland.⁵⁸

Himmler's order of June 21, 1943 made general provision for

⁵⁷ Nuremberg Documents, PS-2403.

⁵⁸ YVA, O-4/53/b, Document No. 810; Nuremberg Documents, PS-2074.

the liquidation of the ghettos, the establishment of concentration camps, the dispatch of the ghetto inmates to camps in Estonia and the extermination of Jews who were not needed for labor. The administration in Lithuania, however, had the authority to determine the methods by which these orders would be carried out.

The liquidation decree affected three ghettos in the General District of Lithuania, namely, Vilna, Kovno and Shavli. From early August, until the end of September the inhabitants of the Vilna ghetto were deported to Estonia and Latvia, or were murdered. On August 1, about 1,000 people were seized and sent to Estonia, another approximately 1,500 were sent on August 24 and about 5,200 on September 5. The ghetto was liquidated on September 23 and 24. Out of the approximately 10,000 Jews remaining, some 3,500 were sent to Estonia and Latvia, about 3,500 women and children were deported to the deaths camps in the General Government and several hundred elderly and sick people were murdered at Ponary. About 1,500 Jews hid in bunkers in the area of the ghetto and on the Aryan side, or fled to the forests or to the partisans.⁵⁹ Approximately 2,200 Jews were left behind in four labor camps in Vilna. The Kovno and Shavli ghettos were turned into concentration camps. The Germans carried out actions against the children and elderly people in these ghettos, but the majority of the inmates remained there until a few weeks before these cities were liberated by the Soviet Army in July 1944. The question is: Why did the fate of the Jews of the Vilna ghetto differ from that of the Jews in the Kovno and Shavli ghettos in September 1943?

The reasons which led the German administration to liquidate the Vilna ghetto are found in a report by the commander of the Security Police and S.D. in Lithuania dated September 1, 1943:

"It was still impossible in the month under review [August] to fully carry out the new arrangements concerning the utilization of Jews for labor. We did not have enough time to register all the Jewish workers and send them to the concentration camps as there are not yet any

⁵⁹ Arad, pp. 487, 490, 498, 515.

concentration camps and the five or six auxiliary camps, intended for essential military installations, are still in a stage of construction or expansion. In order to prevent the panic among the Jews from reaching a climax, which might cause resistance and mass flight, it was agreed with the S.S. Economic Administrative Main Office and the Police that it was necessary in the first place to remove the Jews from Vilna.

Two transports have already been directed to places in which quarries are being dug. Other transports will leave in early September. The ghetto workshops will then have to be moved to Kovno. The Kovno ghetto must be expanded and turned into a concentration camp. The workshops of the ghetto have been enlarged, and five to six concentration camps were adapted for urgent military work (at airfields, military construction, transportation, peat production, a brick factory and a rubber plant). It is necessary to send responsible S.S. men, officers, sergeants and privates to Kovno and Vilna in order to supervise the execution of the planned projects.

Jews were absolutely forbidden to go about alone. Their transit passes were taken away from them and invalidated; leaving the ghetto and returning from work was permitted only for large groups. The Jews learned about the planned measures and an atmosphere of panic and a fear of forthcoming executions, spread. Several hundred Jews in Vilna tried to escape. Some were shot to death together with their families, but the majority were captured, and others returned of their own free will; about 30–40 Jews managed to get away. There were also difficulties when the families were being separated. In order to carry out the planned measures additional police and guards will be needed.”⁶⁰

The Security Police wanted to surprise the Jews in Vilna and catch them unprepared, as they feared that if the Jews knew in advance of what was about to happen they would resist and resort to mass flight. The Security Police had received reports on the existence of an active underground in the ghetto, following the “Witenberg Affair,” and as a result of an ambush in which the Germans caught a group of ghetto fighters on their way to the forests; Jews with arms were arrested several weeks before the first deportation to Estonia.

The October 1, 1943 report of the Commander of the Security

⁶⁰ *Masinės žudynes Lietuvoje, Dokumentu rinkinys, Vilnius, pp. 243–244.*

Police and S.D. relates the following about the continuation of the action:

“Only one change occurred regarding the solution of the Jewish question during the month under review [September]: the handling of arrangements concerning the utilization of Jews as labor was taken over by the S.S. Economic Administrative Main Office and the Police. In view of the numerous demands for manpower in places where quarries are being dug, and due to the well known problems in the Vilna ghetto, the ghetto was entirely evacuated. Several times it was necessary to use force to smash the serious resistance of the Jews. The establishment sustained losses in the last operation. One Unterführer was killed and one wounded . . . Objections were raised at first in Kovno by the *Gebietskommissar* of the city, but these were removed upon the arrival of S.S. *Standartenführer* Bechel. During the concentration of the Jews of Kovno the number of labor battalions was reduced from 93 to 44. A plan has been worked out for the establishment of eight concentration camps as follows:

- 2,500 Jews in the barracks at Aleksotas [= Kovno]
- 1,200 Jews in the barracks of the artillery at Šančiai [= Kovno]
- 1,200 Jews in Ežerėlis
 - 600 Jews in the garage at Petrašiūnai
 - 500 Jews at Palemonas [Panemunė in the original]
 - 500 Jews in the rubber factory in Kovno
 - 400 Jews at Marijampolė (peat)
 - 400 Jews at Kaišiadorys
- 2,000 Jews in the workshops in the Kovno ghetto

In addition the possibility of sending an additional 2,000 able-bodied Jews from Kovno to work in Vaivara is being considered.”⁶¹

Thus it appears from the above that the administration sought to achieve two goals by liquidating the Vilna ghetto; firstly, to fulfill the demand for manpower in Estonia; second, the elimination of a center of resistance and a source of reinforcements for the partisans.

The Kovno and Shavli ghettos were transferred to the jurisdiction of the S.S. during the second half of September 1943. They served as the central concentration camps controlling the smaller

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 244–245.

camps which were situated near the work sites to which some of the inmates of the central camps were transferred. Living conditions became more difficult but were considerably better than those in the infamous concentration camps. Men and women were not separated in the central camps, but in the labor camps at the work sites the sexes were segregated. The living and working conditions in the latter — living quarters, food, attitude of the Nazi superiors — were generally far worse than those in the central camps. The children and elderly people were taken out of the camps and murdered.

Hauptsturmführers Forster and Schlaff were in charge of the Shavli ghetto. During the last week of September some 1,500 able-bodied men and women were taken from the ghetto and sent to the labor camps set up near the work sites: Shavli airfield, Linkaičiai, Daugeliai, Pavenčiai and Akmenė. The central camp at Shavli remained on the site of the ghetto but was reduced in size. The Jews who lived in the "Trakai" quarter were moved to the "Caucasus" ghetto, and the sentries around the central camp were reinforced by S.S. men, some of whom were stationed inside. On November 5, about 800 individuals—575 children, 191 elderly persons and the remainder sick and invalids — were deported to the death camps in the General Government, leaving about 2,000 Jews in the central camp.⁶²

Hauptsturmbannführer Wilhelm Gecke was the governor of the Kovno ghetto. On October 25, about 2,800 people were removed from the ghetto ostensibly for transfer to the work site at Ežerėlis outside Kovno, but they were actually shipped to camps in Estonia. Children and physically unfit adults were taken off the train at the Kovno railway station and sent to the death camps in Poland. About five to six thousand people were taken out of the Kovno ghetto from the end of November to the end of December, and transported to new camps erected near the work sites in and around Kovno, as well as to the old camps at Aleksotas, near the

⁶² Yerushalmi, pp. 270–271, 275, 292, 302–306.

airfield, Šančiai, Petrašiūnai, Palemonas, Kaišiadorys, Kėdainiai etc. Old Slobodka was excluded from the Kovno concentration camp and the thousands of Jews living there were moved to the remaining area of the camp on December 22, 1943. After the people were sent to the labor camps, only seven to eight thousand Jews remained in the central camp in Kovno.⁶³

On March 27, 1944 an action against children and old people was carried out in the Kovno camps. Approximately 1,000 people, the majority of whom were children, were taken out of the central camp and transported by rail to the extermination camps in the General Government. On the following day, another 300 children and elderly people were rounded up and killed at Fort IX. Similar actions were held in the labor camps and about 500 children and old people were executed. Simultaneously all 130 members of the Jewish police in the central camp in Kovno were arrested and taken to Fort IX, where they were told to help in uncovering the hiding places in the ghetto and in providing information on the activities of the underground. The commander of the police, his two deputies and another 37 policemen were executed on the spot when they refused to collaborate with the Germans. The 90 others were returned to the central camp. The ghetto police was disbanded and in its place the Germans established the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* (order service) which was directly subordinate to the S.S. command in charge of the camp. On April 4, 1944 all the members of the *Judenrat* were arrested and led to Fort IX. After being interrogated and tortured for several days they were released. The *Judenrat* was officially dissolved on April 5, and the Germans appointed Dr. Elkes, chairman of the previous *Judenrat*, as the *Oberjude* of the Kovno concentration camp.⁶⁴ With these measures against the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police, the *Kasernierung* (incarceration) of Kovno Jewry, which had lasted from September 1943 until the beginning

⁶³ Garfunkel, pp. 176–183; Gar, pp. 204–215.

⁶⁴ Garfunkel, pp. 176–183; Gar, pp. 204–215.

of April 1944, was completed. In Shavli the process took only a month and a half — from the second half of September until the beginning of November 1943.

Actions were also carried out against the children and old people among the 2,200 Jewish inmates of the camps in Vilna. On March 27, at the same time that an action was taking place in Kovno, a group of about 200 persons, which was composed of children but which also included several elderly and sick people, was transferred to Kovno, where they were attached to a transport of local Jewish children headed for the death camps.⁶⁵

For military reasons, a large camp which held people of various nationalities, including 3,000 Jews from camps in Estonia and Latvia, was established at the Panevėžys airfield. Jews from Germany, Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were among the inmates, in addition to those from Lithuania and Latvia. In May 1944 about 250 men from the camp near the Shavli airport were sent to the Panevėžys camp. A camp belonging to the Todt Organization was erected at Joniškis, on the Latvian frontier, at the end of 1943 and about 600 Jews from Smorgon in the Vilna region worked there. In April 1944 the camp was taken over by the S.S., which was responsible for the camps in the Shavli area.⁶⁶

During the German evacuation of Lithuania the fate of the Jewish prisoners was in the hands of the local S.S. who were directly responsible for the camps. About 2,000 Jews from Vilna were taken to Ponary and executed on July 2 and 3, 1944; 150–200 people managed to escape, or hide in bunkers until Vilna was liberated on July 13, 1944. In Shavli and Kovno the situation was different. On July 7–8 the Jews in the camps in the Kovno region were brought to the central camp and between July 12 and 14, were transported to Stutthof in Eastern Prussia, some by boat on the Neiman River to the Baltic Sea, and others by train. Tens of Jews were murdered and many hundreds were caught during

⁶⁵ Arad, pp. 526–527.

⁶⁶ Yerushalmi, pp. 301, 328–329, 379, 385, 402–403.

the searches and blowing-up of houses in the area of the Kovno ghetto, after the Jews were evacuated. Kovno was liberated on August 1, 1944. Several hundred Jews who had hidden in bunkers and hideouts outside the ghetto, were in the city at the time of its liberation. From July 10 to 15, 1944 about 4,000 local Jews from the camps and approximately 3,000 from the camps at Panevėžys and Joniškis were assembled in Shavli. On July 15–17 they were evacuated in several transports to the camps in Eastern Prussia. About 100 Jews who remained in Shavli were killed on the spot. The city was liberated on July 27.⁶⁷

Erasing the Traces

The site of the mass murder of Lithuanian Jewry were under the constant supervision of the German administration and its medical units, in accordance with a special order issued in April 1942. From time to time inspections were carried out in the area to make certain that the large pits were covered with sufficient layers of earth, that there were no cracks, depressions, and the like, and that the nearby sources of water were not endangered in any way. The sites of the largest murders, such as Ponary in Vilna and Fort IX in Kovno were under the constant supervision of the German Security Police.⁶⁸

In mid-1942 a special unit named Commando 1005, under *Standartenführer* Blobel, was established within the framework of the S.S. Its job was to destroy the mass graves in the occupied territories in the East and thus erase all traces of the massacres committed by the Germans and their collaborators. A special commando led by *Obersturmführer* Radif was assigned the task of cremating the bodies in the mass graves at Fort IX and Ponary. Seventy to eighty Jews, among them Jewish prisoners of war who had served in the Red Army, were brought to each of these places

⁶⁷ Arad, pp. 528–529; Garfunkel, pp. 190–198; Gar, pp. 230–243; Yerushalmi, pp. 385–387, 392.

⁶⁸ Documents Accuse, pp. 260–262.

and kept under close guard. They opened the mass graves, took out the bodies and cremated them in huge bonfires. The operation began during the months of September–October 1943.

In spite of the strict supervision, many Jews escaped from these places. On December 25, 1943 more than 60 of the Jewish prisoners escaped from Fort IX and on April 15, 1944 about 40 fled from Ponary. Most were caught and murdered, but some managed to reach the partisans and gave evidence as to what had happened in these places. The Germans continued burning the corpses until shortly before their retreat from Lithuania. Tens of thousands of bodies were burnt at Fort IX and Ponary, prior to the German evacuation, and tens of thousands of bodies remained untouched in the pits. Those engaged in burning the bodies were murdered by the S.S. before these places were evacuated.⁶⁹

SUMMATION

The German policy towards Lithuanian Jewry was dictated by the general goal of total extermination, as determined by the S.S. and the Ministry for Eastern Occupied Territories in Berlin. During the first phase of the German occupation, from late June until the end of 1941, the extermination was carried out regardless of the age, sex, occupation or physical fitness of the victims. The rate of extermination was determined by the working capacity of the *Einsatzkommando* units and their Lithuanian collaborators. Small settlements of several thousand Jews were liquidated in one or two actions, whereas in larger concentrations, such as Vilna and Kovno, the killings took place over a much longer period of time. While the extermination was being carried out, thousands of Jews were exploited as forced laborers, especially for the German Army and as skilled workers in various factories. The local German

⁶⁹ Arad, pp. 528–529; Garfunkel, pp. 190–198; Gar, pp. 230–243; Yerushalmi, pp. 385, 387, 392.

administration, especially the German maintenance authorities, discovered that it was worthwhile employing Jewish workers and that in certain factories it was even imperative to use Jewish artisans due to a lack of non-Jewish replacements. Under their pressure the extermination was suspended at the end of 1941 and the Jews were concentrated in a few ghettos.

The year 1942 passed without any massacres taking place and with the increased utilization of Jewish workers. The growth of partisan activity in Eastern Lithuania at the outset of 1943, and the fact that the German authorities believed that local Jews were helping to strengthen the partisan movement, brought about the liquidation of the small ghettos and labor camps in Eastern Lithuania and the murder of most of their inmates.

Himmler's order of June 21, 1943 sealed the fate of the large Lithuanian ghettos. The German administration in Ostland and Lithuania partially executed the order, taking into account local interests and considerations. The Vilna ghetto was totally liquidated due to its mutinous image in the eyes of the authorities. Some of its occupants were sent to Estonia and Latvia and others were deported to the death camps in Poland. The Kovno and Shavli ghettos were converted into concentration camps. The children and the elderly were murdered, but most of the inmates remained there until their evacuation to Germany just before the area was liberated by the Red Army in July 1944.

Of the 220,000–225,000 Jews who were in the area of the *General-kommissariat* of Lithuania at the time of the German invasion, only 2,000–3,000 were alive on the day of liberation, one third of whom were partisans operating in the forests. Several thousand of the Jews who had been deported from the camps near Kovno and Shavli, and those from the Vilna ghetto who had been deported to Estonia, were sent to concentration camps in Germany. The great majority of these, however, perished due to the severe conditions in the camps or were murdered by their German guards. Thus very few Lithuanian Jews survived the Holocaust.