SUMMARY. The long history of Jewish-Lithuanian relations was influenced by the changing social and economic realities and thus depended largely on the situational context, in which the two communities interacted with each other. The relationship that until the middle of the nineteenth century could be characterized by pre-modern social and economic contacts within an agrarian and traditional system had been inherited from the Grand Duchy period. After the middle of the nineteenth century, the emergence of modern and politicized Lithuanian nationalism changed the way in which Lithuanians came to view Jews. Attitudes towards Jews ranged from clerical anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism to tolerance within a secular framework. During the interwar period Jewish society was confronted by the necessity of adapting to a radically new reality: a state, in which formerly marginalized Lithuanian speakers quickly formed a majority in the country’s urban centres, exerted political power, became competitors in the economy and professions. Despite the Smetona government’s suppression of anti-Semitic outbreaks and the relatively low level of violence against Jews, anti-Semitism increased among the educated elite during the late 1930s. The domestic and international crises of 1939–1940 transformed Lithuanian-Jewish relations radically. The first Soviet occupation of Lithuania in June 1940 sharply escalated the violent rhetoric against Jews: they were increasingly attacked as traitors to the country and the main source of Bolshevism. The myth of “Jewish power” became a wide-spread meme among many Lithuanians and gained further credibility as resistance to Soviet power intensified. The Lithuanian Activist Front propagated the ideas of Jewish treason and Communist collaboration in its propaganda. However, it is true that there were brief periods when Jews represented a considerable part of the LCP (Lithuanian Communist Party) compared to the percentage of Jews within Lithuania. A closer study of the ethnic breakdown of the LCP reveals a complex situation, influenced by the constantly changing reality. The real levers of power were not at the disposal of insufficiently educated local Communists, but in the hands of Stalinist cadres, which were loyal to the Kremlin. Before June 1941, Soviet Lithuania was mainly controlled by Russophone newcomers from the USSR. The situational context of the foreign invasion, which evolved in diametrically opposite geopolitical directions, a number of narratives based on the myths of anti-Semitic disloyalty, and political extremism created a toxic atmosphere on the eve of the Holocaust.

KEYWORDS: Jews, Lithuanian-Jewish relations, anti-Semitism, Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Lithuanian Communist Party.

1 This article is based on the paper entitled “Lietuvių ir žydų Holokausto išvakarėse 1939–1940 m.,” which was prepared for the Conference, “Casablanca of the North: Refugees and Rescuers in Kaunas, 1939–1940,” and read in English in Kaunas, May 17, 2016. It includes some of the selected material from the author’s previous research on the subject.
BEFORE 1939

The last months before the Soviet occupation that took place in June 1940, and the subsequent period of annexation and Sovietization, form the prehistory of the Holocaust in Lithuania, the bloodiest page in the history of the nation. The year 1939 was marked by increasing domestic tensions, including deterioration in Lithuanian-Jewish relations, which accompanied a growing uncertainty about the future of the Lithuanian state. However, it would be wrong to view this brief period as somehow characteristic of the centuries-long relationship between the two communities. In the predominantly agrarian world of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania the different national/religious communities, primarily, Catholic Lithuanian and Belarusian peasants, the Polonized nobility and townspeople, the petty gentry (szlachta), and the Jews, all lived as separate “castes” or estates. The social and economic interaction of these communities was regulated by law and tradition. Lithuanians and Jews, despite their frequent contacts in the economic sphere, had little or no interest in each other’s spiritual and cultural worlds. Intimate personal relationships, such as intermarriage, were exceedingly rare. Mutual Stereotypes of brutish Christian peasants and crafty Jewish retailers were deeply rooted in the different cultures and have remained unchanged in the minds of many people to this day. To put it more simply, before the second half of the nineteenth century Lithuanians and Jews had lived in the situation that was succinctly summarized by Isaac Bashevis Singer. According to him, in the small towns of Eastern Europe, Gentiles and Jews lived alongside each other, but not with each other. The emergence of the Lithuanian national intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth-century meant the escape of Lithuanian-language culture from its village milieu, which enhanced a new dynamic of the relations between Lithuanians and the other national communities, especially the Polonized upper classes and the Jews. On the eve of the Great War, Lithuanian attitudes toward the Poles were marked by hostility, while the relations with Jews underwent a more complex process.

The Lithuanian-speaking society was not of single mind regarding the Jews. It should be noted that the tolerant and saintly Jurgis Matulaitis (aka Jerzy Matulewicz), the Bishop of Vilnius, did his best to suppress anti-Semitic excesses in the city, particularly the pogroms carried out by the Polish legionnaires in April 1919. However, his behaviour was in marked contrast to the views expressed by theologian Rev. Justinas Pranaitis, who penned the infamous anti-Judaic tract, “The Jewish Talmud on Christianity,” and participated as an “expert” supporting the Tsarist prosecution in the infamous Beilis case (1912). Born and raised in the peasant
households in the southwestern Lithuanian countryside, Matulaitis and Pranañtis were both devout graduates of the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. For its part, the left wing of the Lithuanian national movements, the Social Democrats in particular, tended to favour Jews. During the 1906 elections to the Dūma Lithuanians and Jewish political leaders negotiated a unified slate of candidates. On the other hand, traditional anti-Judaic prejudices persisted, while the modernization of Lithuanian society also created favourable conditions for the emergence of modern anti-Semitic attitudes. Vincas Kudirka, the author of the country’s national anthem and one of the foremost leaders of the secular wing of the national movement, came under the influence of Western anti-Jewish writers, such as Édouard Drumont. Kudirka excoriated the Jews for their alleged economic tyranny over Lithuanian villagers, and even couched his animosity regarding the Jewish race arguing that the malevolent nature of the Jews was inherent and could not be changed through education or assimilation. In 1914, the Rev. Antanas Maliauskas published his work “Jews from an Economic and Social Perspective,” where he argues that Jews were cheaters by nature and morally corrupted the societies in which they were embedded.²

The emergence of the Republic of Lithuania after the Great War produced a polity in which Lithuanian-speaking society, long marginalized in cultural, economic and social terms, asserted its political power. The principle of majority rule decisively transformed the inter-ethnic dynamics in the country, including Lithuanian-Jewish relations. For the first time Lithuanian became an official state language. Lithuanians streamed into urban centres that had previously been under Jewish, Polish and German economic and cultural influence. By 1923, Lithuanians represented a majority in all major towns (with the exception of Klaipėda). The demographic revolution did not dispense with conflicts and there was a noticeable albeit brief upsurge in anti-Semitic rhetoric in the early 1920s. We could agree with historian Solomonas Atamukas, who states the following: “Although there were anti-Semitic elements in Lithuania, they did not rise to an organized social movement until the 1930s.”³ This latter decade witnessed two contradictory processes: the growing linguistic “Lithuanianization” of the country’s Jews, especially the youth, and the concurrent emergence of a more virulent strain of anti-Semitism. The competition in the areas of trade, commerce, industry and the professions were a major source of Lithuanian-Jewish tensions. Since ethnic Lithuanians had been strongly marginalized in these spheres before the Great War, the

² For the latest scholarly survey, see: Staliñnas D. Enemies for a Day: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Jewish Violence in Lithuania under the Tsars. Budapest, 2015.
interwar government of the Republic was naturally eager to address the imbalance in the policies, which were in the spirit of the so-called “affirmative action” programs, started in the United States during the 1960s. As elsewhere in Europe, anti-Semitism and right-wing radicalism grew stronger on the eve of World War II. In Lithuania this was reflected by a sharpening rhetoric of “Lithuanian for the Lithuanians,” and the depiction of Jews in the press as a harmful and threatening force. The manifestations of such pungent remarks frequently appeared in the newspapers, such as the weekly Verslas (Commerce) and Žemė (Land of Our Fathers). Although there were calls to “solve the Jewish problem.” The writer Vytautas Alantas demanded that Jews should be segregated at the Palanga sea-side resort so that Lithuanians would be protected from the “Jewish uncleanliness.”4 In 1934, the first of a number of conflicts, involving Lithuanian and Jewish students, broke out as a result of the distribution of the anti-Semitic leaflets, and a breakout of vandalism, directed at Jewish properties. At the same time the opposition to the dictatorship of Antanas Smetona was becoming more organized and radical. The Lithuanian Activist Movement (Lietuvių aktyvistų sąjūdis), which was active in 1938–1939, urged Lithuania to foster closer ties to the Axis powers and was not averse to exploiting anti-Semitic and racist themes.5

Lithuania’s problems of the 1930s should not be the reason to view the First Republic as a place of violent and systematic persecution. There is no report of any fatalities that could have occurred as a result of the anti-Jewish actions during the interwar years (1920-1940), when the government exerted full control. Smetona’s dictatorship did not pass a single anti-Semitic statute. On the contrary, his government provided modest financial support for Jewish religious and cultural institutions. Lithuanian Jews recognized that their situation was better in Lithuania than that in other countries, particularly Poland. The major factor in guaranteeing the physical safety for the Jewish community was the relatively tolerant attitude of the older generation of Lithuanian leaders towards the national minorities and their fear of Nazism. In April 1933, Valentinas Gustainis, a veteran journalist and close associate of the country’s president, warned of the threat of Nazi racism and even presumed that Hitler’s policies could lead to the extermination of weaker nations with the use of modern “methods of extermination,” including the “various horrible gasses.” He penned his insights in Vairas (The Helm), the political and cultural journal of the Lithuanian Nationalist Union.6

Union in December 1933, and again in January 1935, Lithuania’s President ridiculed Nazi dogmas and warned of the dangers of unbridled racism. Smetona attacked H. Stuart Chamberlain’s racist theories, arguing that it was not possible “to speak seriously about national or racial purity.” The President emphasized the rights of minorities who were, after all, “our citizens.” In 1934, one of the most popular novels, *Immerselbe atsijauchina* (The Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe), by Ignas Šeinius, lampooned Nazi racial pseudoscience and the anti-Semitic politics of the Third Reich. For his part, the interior minister Kazys Skučas was resolute in suppressing anti-Jewish agitation. Smetona, the mayor of Panevėžys T. Chodakauskas and the rector of Vytautas Magnus University, among others, advocated understanding between the nationalities. To present the situation in the right light, at the end of the era of the First Republic a certain level of acceptance of Jewish integration into the society was met by a rise of an exclusive Lithuanian ethno-nationalism, while, at the same time, traditional forms of religious anti-Judaism and economic anti-Semitism persisted. One of the ironies of the late 1930s was the fact that many of the conservative clique, who surrounded the Leader of the Nation, urged tolerance towards the Jews, while the opposition, including its Catholic and democratic wings were more likely to be drawn into more extreme nationalist and anti-Jewish positions. However, in the end, it was the situational context, which was of considerable importance in determining how Lithuanians perceived Jews and, especially the latter community’s place in Lithuanian society. The situation in 1939–1940 was particularly ominous.

**THE STATE IN DANGER: LITHUANIANS AND JEWS 1939–1940**

On the eve of the collapse of the First Republic, the dangerous geopolitical situation, along with political and social tensions, adversely affected social stability. The largest isolated anti-Jewish riot, which resulted in some injuries and numerous arrests broke out in the town of Leipalingis in June 1939. Smetona’s State Security Department launched a thorough investigation and reported the findings:

In order to illustrate the anti-Semitic mood in the Leipalingis area, it’s main characteristic is that no one is condemning the excesses committed, but, on the contrary, everyone is praising the riot. It is said that severe punishments for the rioters will provoke even greater anti-Semitic excesses. Also, after the event, typical rumours were spread. It was said that, in return for the smashed Jewish windows in Leipalingis, Hitler had presented

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8 See: *Verslas*, 1935 January 10 and 17.
a gift to Lithuania – a sort of expensive airplane. And if at least a few Jews had been finished off, then he would have returned the entire Klaipėda District to Lithuania. The farmers are spreading these rumors in all seriousness.\(^9\)

In Eastern Europe, the outbreak of World War II not only “triggered successive regime changes,” but also “unleashed local conflicts and nationalist movements.” Millions of people “suddenly faced fateful decisions about what to do and how to act.” It may be difficult to generalize popular attitudes and behaviour, but it is clear that the attitudes and behaviour became even more “highly situational” than in the interwar period.\(^10\) In Lithuania, the outbreak of war in September 1939 brought in a significant influx of refugees, including many Jews.\(^11\) The introduction of Soviet military bases, as a result of the Lithuanian–Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty of October 1939, fueled the growing realization that the country’s independence was in danger.

Minister of Internal Affairs Skučas was acutely aware of the threat of anti-Semitic agitation and publicly vowed that the government would take strict measures to suppress “the latest outbursts of the irresponsible elements against Jewish citizens which have taken place in a few provincial towns.” The general expressed the hope that larger masses of the Lithuanian nation and the “intelligentsia of conscience” would resist anti-Semitic behaviour, inspired by foreign influences, and he cautioned the press not to “incite ethnic passions.”\(^12\) On October 11–12, 1939 an uncontrolled pro-Soviet leftist demonstration, mostly consisting of Jews, in support of the mutual assistance pact with the USSR, erupted outside the Soviet mission in Kaunas and led to clashes with the police and anti-Communist bystanders.\(^13\) The incident intensified anti-Semitic political rhetoric and further identified Jews with Bolshevism in public opinion. The government attempted to exert a moderating influence, announcing that “the excesses of certain Jewish young people cannot be allowed to harm and disturb good Lithuanian-Jewish mutual relations.” The liberal Lietuvos žinios (Lithuanian News) issued an editorial opposing racism and ethnic incitement, but the Catholic daily XX Amžius (Twentieth Century) demanded that Jewish society “discipline its own.”\(^14\) In November 1939, the new rector of Vytautas Magnus University Stasys Šalkauskis declared that the “complicated and thorny

\(^9\) 1939 June 30 report by J. Lembergas. LCVA, f. 378, ap. 11, b. 206.
\(^12\) Apžvalga, 1939, July 2.
\(^14\) Apžvalga, 1939 October 22.
issue of the Jews is a real challenge for moral and social development,” and then explained that “one must admit that the wave of anti-Semitism, which has inundated the entire world in recent years, has found some resonance among us as well… especially among the less educated part of our society.”

The restoration of Lithuania’s ancient capital, the only unambiguously positive element in the Soviet-Lithuanian mutual assistance pact, also produced inter-ethnic strains. On October 31, 1939, within 72 hours of the arrival of Lithuanian troops, serious disorders broke out in Vilnius, reportedly caused by rumours that Jewish storekeepers were hoarding flour and were poised to raise food prices drastically. There were clashes with the Lithuanian police and military, as well as violent confrontations between Poles and Jews, in addition to protests against the Lithuanian “occupation” of the region. There is no basis for the assertion found in some contemporary sources that the Lithuanian authorities inspired the pogroms in the city. As the rioting subsided, General Skučas published a statement in which he claimed that the violence was mainly caused by the Polish-Jewish tensions, which, he declared, had been “abnormal and strained for some time” due to Polish anti-Semitism, and pledged to abolish the anti-Semitic discrimination that had been practiced by the previous Polish regime. Some of the ruffians, who had participated in anti-Semitic rioting, were imprisoned, and one of them, Boris Filipow, was executed. The latter punishment was reportedly “greeted with satisfaction by the Jews.”

The issue of anti-Semitism itself emerged as a weapon in the Polish-Lithuanian struggle of 1939–1940, once again pointing up how circumstances shaped Lithuanian perception of Jews. The press reported widely on manifestations of Polish anti-Semitism, which was supposedly intensified by the jealousy of the Polish people of the widespread aid that Jewish refugees were receiving from abroad. The Lithuanian authorities sought support for their Vilnius policy among Jews, but succeeded in gaining the approval of only part of the Jewish population. Lithuanians hoped that Jews would use Yiddish only within their community and gradually adopt Lithuanian, rather than Polish, as their new second language, but their hopes failed.

In view of the uncertain and dangerous mood within the country, Jewish circles responded to official Lithuanian reassurances with public declarations of loyalty and reminders of the state’s multi-cultural reality. In May 1940, Jewish Lithuanian army veterans assembled in Vilnius, where prominent leaders of the country’s Jewish community, despite the indications to the contrary, affirmed generally good

15 Apžvalga, 1939 November 3.
Jewish-Lithuanian relations and urged the avoidance of “misunderstandings.” The participants could not foresee the radical and certainly deadly, deterioration in Lithuanian-Jewish relations that would arise as a result of the Soviet invasion only after a month.

To sum up, Lithuanian-Jewish relations during the period (1918–1940) of the First Republic reflect a dynamic and complex history replete with contradictory processes and counterintuitive narratives. The reorientation of part of Jewish society towards a positive view of Lithuanian culture collided with a growing ethnic Lithuanian nationalism. The situation was worsened by the situational context: the escalating European-wide wartime political and social crisis, which led to a disappointment in liberal democracy and a growing appeal of both left and right political extremism. For example, a number of younger intellectuals, even from among movements not normally associated with extreme views, became fascinated with authoritarian and racist notions. The Catholic philosopher of the younger generation Antanas Maceina proposed the idea of an “organic state,” according to which the population would be divided into first-class (Lithuanians) and second-class citizens (national minorities). Among Jews, there was at the same time a perceptible shift to Zionism and a renewed interest in emigration to Palestine.

THE END OF INDEPENDENCE: LITHUANIANS AND JEWS DURING THE PERIOD OF SUGIHARA

If one could characterize Lithuanian-Jewish interactions of the late 1930s as ambiguous and contradictory, reflecting both positive and adverse developments, the Soviet invasion of June 15, 1940 and the subsequent annexation of Lithuania were unequivocally disastrous for the relations between the two communities. There was an ironic postscript to the end of Lithuanian independence. Smetona, once viewed as a friend of the Jews, who had “escaped like the greatest coward,” was now vilified as an anti-Semite. In the new “People’s Lithuania” General Skučas and the former president, who had suppressed anti-Jewish disturbances and calmed society, became “fascists.” The instantly Sovietized Apžvalga (Review), the weekly newspaper, which had once been the oracle of Jewish Lithuanian patriotism, suggested that “the provocateurs from Kaunas had contributed to the anti-Jewish excesses that had occurred when Lithuania took Vilnius.” Parroting the new line, the paper

suggested that a veritable St. Bartholomew’s Night for the Jews had been averted by “the healthy instincts of Lithuania’s masses,” a gross inversion of reality.

The historical record looks different: the interwar conservative dictatorship had shielded Jews from violent anti-Semites. The supposedly “fascist” Smetona had not only protected the country against the most egregious political extremes of left and right, but had, to a great extent, contained anti-Semitic violence, allowed cultural diversity, condemned Nazi racism and rejected official discrimination. The view among Jews that the Smetona’s government had stood “like an iron wall against all sorts of persecutions” was not an uncommon meme of the 1930s. By contrast, the new “people’s power,” with its shrill proclamations of international brotherhood, raised political repression, and ethnic animosity to the levels that the restive subjects of Antanas Smetona could scarcely have imagined.

The very first hours of the Soviet invasion widened the chasm between Jews and Lithuanians. Starkly divergent geopolitical orientations separated the country’s nations. Many, if not most, Jews understandably preferred the Soviet forces to a potential Nazi takeover. For many Lithuanians, however, the Soviet tanks, which crushed their cherished independence, were nothing less than an abomination. Insecurity and confusion gripped the populace. The expectation of an imminent Russo-German conflict was noted by the authorities, who were watching the public mood: as early as the first week of the invasion, the fear of war was so widespread that a hoarding spree emptied the stores. It also dawned on those whose hatred towards the new Soviet reality was so great that, unless they were incurably naïve, the only salvation they could see was to come from the West.

Anti-Jewish feelings escalated rapidly, this time without opposition from the now disestablished elites. The newly formed People’s Government (Liaudies vyriausybė), engineered by the Soviet mission in Kaunas as a Trojan horse, was rudderless in the face of the Kremlin’s pressure. The government’s masquerade as a popular democratic alternative to Smetona was short-lived. The acting prime minister, the celebrated writer Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius, feared that the aggressive behaviour of the Soviets and their collaborators had begun to evoke an ugly response. On June 27, he protested to Nikolay Pozdnyakov, the Kremlin’s envoy, that the “methods and tempo” of change were leading to social discontent and economic collapse. Krėvė-Mickevičius resented his humiliating role as “an executor of the directives of the <Soviet> Mission” and warned that he could not be held responsible for the people’s reaction to Sovietization. He also complained that the legalization of the Communist Party was a dangerous political mistake, because “it had aroused panic among a population which was perturbed by the behaviour of the Jews, who were treating Lithuanian statehood with contempt.” Well-known for his leftist and pro-Soviet sympathies, Krėvė-Mickevičius was not an anti-Semite, but his attitude
was widely shared, especially by those who had observed the enthusiasm, with which many young Jews greeted the Red Army. Colonel Jonas Andrašiūnas, an officer charged with escorting an armoured Soviet unit into the town of Plungė, wrote that “hitherto unknown passions and attitudes suddenly appeared” in the town on the day of the occupation. As the colonel remembered:

<My> car was in the lead followed by numerous Russian tanks. When we reached the outskirts of Plungė, I noticed that quite a few people had gathered, mostly Jews of the town. Since I was first in line, they assumed that I was the commander of the Soviet tank unit and showered flowers both on my car and the tanks behind me. The blossoms were fresh, the shouts and greetings were expressed in Russian. It is true to say that not everyone was doing this, but such exalted enthusiasm was shown especially by young Jewish boys and girls. I watched as the excited young Jews leaped into the Lithuanian gardens, tore up the flowers and threw them on my car and the Soviet tanks that were creeping behind me.

A trifle? Perhaps, but the impression back then was horrendous, it stayed in my memory as a burned mark. Part of Plungė’s population were exulting, others were weeping. I saw a young Lithuanian farm girl sobbing as the Jews tore up her flowers. It seemed as if two peoples split up, separated, never to live in peace again.18

Many contemporary sources recount that the fraudulent elections to the so-called People’s Diet produced further friction among the country’s national communities. The hastily formed Union of Labour, the only permitted political organization, won all 79 seats to the parliament. Anti-Soviet voters, who objected to this charade, defaced their ballots or stuffed their own scribblings into ballot boxes. Out of thirty such messages preserved in one collection, fourteen contained anti-Semitic slogans: “Jews to Palestine,” “Beat the Jews, save Lithuania”, “Down with the Jewish government,” and the like.19 It is clear that the general antipathy to the Kremlin and anti-Jewish attitudes often, if not always, went hand in hand.

Organized political resistance to the Soviet occupation was infused with anti-Semitic themes as well. In November 1940, anti-Soviet émigrés formed the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF, Lietuvių aktyvistų frontas), a coalition representing the spectrum of interwar non-Communist Lithuanian parties. Despite the presence of moderates in the group, the attitude of the Front’s leader Kazys Škirpa, Lithuania’s envoy in Berlin, shows how anti-Jewish attitudes sharpened. Formerly a prominent member of a left-of-center populist agrarian party, Škirpa was fortunate enough to avoid arrest when he visited Kaunas soon after the Soviet invasion and hastily returned to Belin to record his impressions. As evidence of the anti-Jewish mood he cited a fist-fight between a Lithuanian soldier and Jewish worker, which grew into

19 Paleckis Collection, LYA, f. 3377, ap. 58, b. 593.
a window-smashing pogrom in the town of Marijampolė, and reported to other Lithuanian diplomats his outrage caused by Jewish behaviour:

The only ones who still feel good <in the current situation> are the Jews. It goes without saying that, just as did Communists among them before, very many new ones have now appeared. Also, fearing the Reich, many Jews, who basically do not hold Communist convictions, are more inclined to think that it is better to align with Soviet Russia and submit to Communism. For this reason, in the various street demonstrations it is the Jews who above all express sympathy for Soviet Russia, completely forgetting that just yesterday they were licking the Lithuanians’ soles, expressing loyalty to Lithuania for its liberalism towards the Jews. Lithuanian society, of course, is indignant at this Jewish fawning over the Russians and thus each day is more and more infected with anti-Semitism, especially since the Jews, emphasizing their loyalty to the Soviets, often publicly insult Lithuanians, particularly former government officials... The Russian language, as in Tsarist times, has once again become for the Jews a means of expression of Russian patriotism.20

Many Lithuanians accused the Jews of being ungrateful guests who had “stabbed in the back” the nation whose bounty they had enjoyed over the centuries. Even more dangerous was the increasingly popular conviction that Jews and Bolshevism were one single element. In the spring of 1941, as Škirpa and the LAF sought Berlin’s help in restoring a Lithuanian state allied to the Reich, the writer Bronys Raila proposed a political program for the organization, which included the expropriation of Lithuania’s Jews. The Front drafted leaflets and appeals to the Lithuanian people urging them to rebel against “the Jewish yoke.”21

The political process of the country’s Sovietization contributed considerably to interethnic tensions, but, more important, it also provided fuel for the myth of “Jewish power.” In part, the myth was enforced by the “flower-throwing” scene noted above, as well as the sudden public prominence of Jews in political life. On the eve of the Soviet occupation, Jews made up a considerable part of the Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP) underground. (Smetona’s government had estimated that during the 1930s the proportion of Jews within the Party ranged from one-third to one-half). During the first weeks of the occupation, Jews represented a majority of Communists in Kaunas: by mid-July, 76% of the comrades were registered in the city. An estimated 40–50% of new candidates in the small towns were also Jews. However, these numbers should not be considered stable percentages denoting the national composition of the LCP during the twelve months of the

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20 July 1, 1940, Škirpa’s Letter to Šaulys, Balutis and Klimas. Hoover Institution, Turauskas Collection, Box 3, 1 July 1940, 10. The Marijampolė riot appears in a number of police reports.

first Soviet occupation. Above all, it is important to stress that the Communists and their supporters made up a minuscule part of the Lithuanian Jewish population, which mainly tended towards a Zionist and Orthodox orientation. Nonetheless, the subject of Jews and Communists during 1940–1941 is laden with ugly connotations.

During the Nazi invasion of Lithuania, the leadership of the anti-Communist insurgents publicly proclaimed that “Jews and Bolsheviks are one and the same.” The Judeo-Bolshevik narrative constituted the most successful element of Nazi propaganda during the Holocaust. There is thus clearly a need for a forthright and scholarly analysis of “ethnic power” under the Soviets. Some canards, such as the accusation that “most NKVD torturers were Jews”, can easily be refuted. However, caution is in order. The archival evidence on LCP membership is easily manipulated and can produce contradictory images. Some statistics are largely useless, for example, the January 1941 numbers for the LCP compiled by the Party. On January 1, 1941, about two-thirds out of the nearly 2,500 candidates and members were recorded as ethnic Lithuanian, nearly one-sixth as Jewish, and another one-sixth as Russophone (that is, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian). By the end of the same month, a new accounting of Lithuania’s 3,138 Communists showed a changing tendency: the percentage of Russophones had doubled (30.7%), while the proportion of Lithuanians had declined from two-thirds to 52.3%; the Jewish ratio changed very slightly, 15.2%. However, one should be wary of concluding that ethnic Lithuanians held the reins of power during the first year of Soviet occupation. The educational level of the rank-and-file comrades was shockingly low. The aforementioned listing of the republic’s Communists of January 1 indicated that only 29 (1.2%) had acquired higher education and only 78 (3.1%) were secondary school graduates. The majority (1,296, or 52.1%) had obtained primary education, which in Lithuania consisted of the first four grades. More than a third (36.2%) of Party members and candidates were listed as “literate but without completion of primary schooling.” This was undoubtedly a gathering of the least educated politicians in Lithuanian history. We can see a Party membership of minimally educated comrades who were incapable of addressing any significant issues. Furthermore, the statistical participation of Lithuanians in the People’s Diet, the Republic’s Supreme Soviet and government bodies did not reflect any real distribution of power, since under the prevailing system the latter institutions were simply conduits for carrying out the Party’s decisions. The

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22 LCP statistics January 1941 LYA, f. 1771, ap. 1, b. 170; LYA, f. 1771, ap 1., b. 162, l. 4; also LCP Congress questionnaire, LVOA, ap. 2, b. 19.

23 LYA, f. 1771, ap. 2, b. 250, l. 21.
situation in 1941 is outside the scope of this article, but it should be noted that by June of 1941, recent arrivals from the USSR, primarily of Russian and Ukrainian background, had come to dominate all the important levers of power within the Party and security structures, largely at the expense of local cadres. There is no longer any need to rely on memoirs and one-sided tendentious contemporary impressions, since studies based on the LCP archives have now definitively described the ethnic make-up and internal dynamics of the Party during the Soviet occupation of 1940–1941.24

Another important fact to keep in mind is that the Soviet regime destroyed much of the religious, political and social infrastructure of Jewish society. Thousands of manufactories and commercial enterprises were nationalized during the first year, the majority of them were Jewish-owned, while middlemen were eliminated as “the great exploiters of the working class.”25 On the other hand, a number of previous bourgeois owners returned to economic life as socialist directors of the very same, and now state-owned, enterprises. To anti-Semitic minds, this reaffirmed the conviction that Jews were behind the big money in any social system, encouraging the notion that Jews were more favourably inclined towards Soviet rule and suffered less than Lithuanians. Hebrew-language schools in the republic were closed after the Soviet invasion, although a smaller number of Yiddish institutions were allowed to operate. Only twelve of the 23 Jewish secondary schools, which had functioned under Smetona in the spring of 1940, were still operating a year later. Seventy-nine of the 217 banned public organizations were Jewish. Most Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals ceased publication. Lithuania’s world-famous yeshivas were closed and Jewish religious holidays, which had official status under Smetona, were declared regular working days.26

All of these policies constituted a grievous blow against an essentially conservative and nationally-minded Jewish society. Out of the nearly 30,000 Lithuanian citizens repressed by the Soviet authorities before the Nazi invasion, more than 2,600 were Jews, approximately reflecting the actual Jewish percentage of the population. More importantly, the number of Lithuanian Jews who were deported,


25 Tarybų Lietuva, 1940 October 1 and October 4.

26 Atamukas S. Ibid., 221–223.
imprisoned or otherwise persecuted by the Soviet authorities considerably out-numbered the representatives of so-called “Jewish power” within the LCP.\textsuperscript{27}

Contrary to impressions prevalent among Lithuanians, Jewish society was hardly a monolith in its relationship to the new regime. The flowery welcome given the Soviet troops in Kaunas by many young Jews did not reflect the attitude of the older and more conservative elements in the community. Most Lithuanians were unaware that there were in fact anti-Soviet Jewish underground movements. On March 29, 1941, Major Piotr Gladkov, the Peoples’ Commissar of State Security of the Lithuanian SSR, reported “On the Counter-revolutionary Activity of Jewish Nationalist Organizations,” which enumerated the “Zionist, bourgeois, revisionists, Betarists and other formations.” Soviet security observed that “at the present time Jewish counter-revolutionary elements have begun to ally themselves with other anti-Soviet elements regardless of nationality.” Soviet security discovered a “Jewish nationalist counter-revolutionary element” in the remaining synagogues and rabbinical schools, which was “educating the Jewish people in a spirit of hatred of Communism.” The police arrested 89 Jewish counter-revolutionaries at the end of 1940. In the spring of 1941, the NKVD uncovered Bundist, Betarist and Zionist circles in Kaunas, Vilnius, Ukmergė, Kėdainiai and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{28}

None of this had much impact on how many, if not most, Lithuanians misperceived the role of Jews in 1939–1940.\textsuperscript{29} The extreme atmosphere, which intensified after the Soviet invasion of June 1940, utterly discredited any moderate political discourse. The shameful capitulation to the foreign invasion inflamed a desire to assert resistance and, at the same time, cultivated hatred of the elements that had allegedly betrayed the nation, with special animus reserved towards the Jews. The political movements of extreme left and right, which had existed on the margins during the Smetona dictatorship, gained credibility. The older political leadership with close ties to Western cultural values, which had urged moderation in inter-ethnic relations was effectively demolished in 1940. One did not have to be a Nazi sympathizer to grasp that the only realistic path to salvation from Soviet terror was a war between the West <read: Germany> and the USSR. In considering the state of Jewish-Lithuanian relations at the time of Sugihara’s consulate one must

\textsuperscript{27} For a discussion of the ethnic dimension of the Soviet repressions and the June 1941 deportations; see Davoliūtė V. Multidirectional memory and the deportation of Lithuanian Jews. Ethnicity Studies, 2. 2015, 131–150.

\textsuperscript{28} March 29, 1941, Gladkov, O kontrrevoliutcionnoi deyatelnosti evreiskikh natsionalisticheskikh organizatsii. LYA, f. K1, ap. 10, b. 4, l. 179–198. Document provided courtesy of Solomonas Atamukas.

consider the situational context of foreign invasion, diametrically opposed geopolitical orientations, mythical anti-Semitic narratives of betrayal, and political extremism. At least for Lithuania, it is difficult to imagine a witches’ brew of malevolent forces more toxic than the reality created by Soviet tanks in 1940.

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