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Breaking the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, German killing squads known as Einsatzgruppen moved into Lithuania, murdering masses of Jews along the way. Lithuania’s northern location meant that Germany established fewer ghettos; however, they continued to kill Jews using other deadly means. For the Jews in Lithuania, Einsatzgruppen and gassing were the bigger threat. After the German invasion of Lithuania in 1941, Jews in larger cities experienced ghettoization; however, most Lithuanian Jews experienced mass killings and later, gassing.

Before Germany invaded Poland starting World War II, it signed a pact with the Soviet Union known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, secretly dividing Poland between the two countries. Lithuanians lived under Soviet rule for approximately two years, but then Germany broke the pact and invaded the Soviet Union. Almost overnight, Lithuania fell under German rule, one in which Jews weren’t treated equally. Like in Poland, Germany established ghettos immediately after the invasion, but because of Lithuania’s northern location, most Lithuanian Jews experienced Einsatzgruppen shooting actions instead.

Although ghettos were not the primary “solution” for killing Jews in Lithuania, Germany did establish a small number post-invasion; it established four ghettos - Vilna, Kovno, Siauliai, and Svencionys (“Lithuania”). On September 6, 1941, Germany established the Vilna Ghetto and for Jews like Yitskhok Rudashevski, it meant his family had to pack up their things and leave overnight for their new “home” (Rudashevski 199). In his diary, Rudashevski wrote about the confusion and worry Jews in his village experienced when they learned the news. Furthermore, he wrote of groups of Jews that hid together, including his own family, so they wouldn’t be discovered and put into ghettos (Rudashevski 194). He recorded every invasion, occupation, repression, and mass murder during his time in the ghettos (Rudasveski 194). He mentioned that
after the first few days of ghettoization, Jews became crueler towards one another. Living conditions were “miserable, with severe food shortages, outbreaks of disease, and overcrowding” ("Lithuania"). Rudashevski himself developed a fever from the quick spread of disease which was a problem within the ghetto (Rudashevski 201). Germany established ghettos in the cities, but for Jews in rural areas, ghettoization wasn’t the fear. Jews in rural areas experienced Einsatzgruppen shooting actions.

While technically part of the German Army, Einsatzgruppen members also consisted of local Lithuanians who assisted the Germans. The responsibility of the Einsatzgruppen was to round up and kill masses of Jews, or find and kill Jews that had broken German laws (Einsatzgruppe A and Einsatzgruppe D). When killing Jews, soldiers either lined up face-to-face with the Jews and shot them, or had them kneel at a ditch where they would fall into a mass grave after being shot (Einsatzgruppen Maps). Most soldiers received minimal training, but not all of them knew the “right way” to shoot and kill quickly. Sometimes, killings didn’t go as planned and the soldiers assigned to these jobs became mentally distressed. Nevertheless, shooting actions continued (Browning 371). The killing squads murdered thousands of people within short time periods, some as short as three days (Einsatzgruppe A). The Einsatzgruppen and local Lithuanians in Einsatzkommando 3, led by Karl Jäger, killed 137,346 Jews within six months (Jäger 6). Furthermore, none of the Jews killed were work Jews because there were orders for them not to be shot (Jäger 7). There were over one million victims of the Einsatzgruppen in valleys in and around Lithuania and in other Soviet-occupied countries (Yitzhak 8). However, in the end, Nazi high command deemed this extermination method “inefficient” and a waste of bullets, and shifted its policy.
Though shooting was the main method of murder in Lithuania, the Germans made one last effort to exterminate the Jews - gassing. The Nazis first tested gassing as a killing method in Germany on the mentally ill and disabled, and found it to be both effective and efficient. In fact, 70,000 Germans died in that manner (Arad 9). Outside Germany, they experimented with other different types of killing, including injections and explosions, and cremated them afterwards (Arad 10). They determined very quickly that explosives were inefficient because they killed a differing number of people per time, and they had to use multiple explosions to kill all the people (Arad 10). They decided that gassing was more efficient, faster, and saved on war resources than their other previous solutions.

First the Nazis gave gas vans to Einsatzgruppen to murder Jews using carbon monoxide (Arad 10). Soldiers loaded Jews into vans and drove around until they died, ending at pre-dug graves where they placed the bodies. The process took approximately 15-30 minutes. While carbon monoxide worked, there were better gassing options, specifically Zyklon B. The Nazis first tried it at Auschwitz, and it lived up to their standards for both efficiency and effectiveness (Arad 11). As a result, they built permanent gassing facilities at Belżec, Sobibor, and Treblinka to carry out the killings. Gassing was the Nazis’ final effort to exterminate the Jews, and in the end, millions died in gas chambers.

After the war ended, Lithuania established very few memorials to honor the thousands of Jews the Nazis murdered. According to The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, there are Holocaust museums that should be put into place in some of the key historical sites in Eastern European countries that are not. It also says that the memorial services that exist should do a better job of honoring the victims (Liphshiz). However, there is a day of remembrance and an annual
march to honor all of the Jews who died in Lithuania. Many students and teachers attend this event to teach and learn about the Holocaust. The country is also trying to establish a museum at the location of the Vilna Ghetto Library (BNS/TBT Staff).

While Lithuania has tried to memorialize its Holocaust victims, there are some political problems that still exist - the largest being denying the involvement of the local Lithuanians during the Holocaust. Arunas Gumuliauskas, a member of Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis’ Lithuanian Farmers and Green’s Union party, wants to pass a bill saying that local Lithuanians did not take part in the Holocaust because they were a Soviet-occupied territory and therefore were enslaved and not allowed to participate. Rabbi Goldschmidt wants to change that bill, saying that facts are facts and that people cannot change history (Algemeiner Staff). Overall, it may be said that more memorials are needed to honor the lives of all of the Jews that died in the Holocaust.

Lithuania’s struggles with memorializing the Holocaust illustrate its complicated history caught between the Soviets and the Nazis. Like all other European Jews, Lithuanian Jews experienced the Holocaust and all its brutality. After the German invasion of Lithuania in 1941, Jews in larger cities experienced ghettoization; however, most Lithuanian Jews experienced mass killings and gassing. By the end of the Holocaust, the Nazis killed approximately 90 percent of Lithuania’s Jews (“Lithuania”). Rudashevski experienced the first of these actions - the ghettos - and wrote about the confusion and sadness it brought upon Jews, which was true of all the methods of extermination. The Nazis used three different methods to exterminate the Jews, each evolving until they achieved maximum efficiency. It started with ghettos, then moved on to shooting, and finally moved to the “Final Solution,” gassing Jews in the millions.
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