



German Bundeswehr tanks during a NATO exercise near Papradė, north of Vilnius. All 850 Jewish residents were murdered there in 1941.
DPA/KAY NIETFELD



Historically fraught

85 years after the invasion of the USSR, the stationing of German soldiers in Lithuania evokes memories of the massacre of Jews. What is the Bundeswehr doing?

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With the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Hitler's Germany launched the largest and most destructive military campaign in world history. Three and a half million German soldiers crossed the border between the Baltic and Black Seas over a stretch of 1,600 kilometers.

The German leadership had conceived "Operation Barbarossa" as a blitzkrieg. The end of their fantasies of victory came just as suddenly. By October, the Wehrmacht's offensive on Moscow had stalled, coming to a complete standstill in mud and ice. In Lithuania, which had been officially annexed by the Soviet Union on August 3, 1940—in accordance with the Hitler-Stalin Pact—the German invasion marked the beginning of a distinct chapter of the Holocaust. Of the approximately 220,000 Jews living there, at least 200,000 were murdered.

In Lithuania, entire communities were also systematically exterminated for the first time. By August 1941, the rural Jewish population had been almost completely wiped out; by November, the urban population had been as well. Local collaborators participated with zeal. Historians speak of a record "extermination efficiency" of 95 percent.

The Lithuanian population had enthusiastically welcomed the Wehrmacht. The Nazis, who had made the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" a national goal, encountered pronounced anti-Semitism there. The "Lithuanian Activist Front," active in Berlin since 1940, had prepared itself to seize power in the wake of the Wehrmacht. Like many Ukrainians, quite a few Lithuanians clung to the hope that Hitler would enable them to establish their own state. The nationalist forces envisioned a community renewed according to a fascist model—without Jews.

Fascist State In his seminal work published in 2011, "German Occupation Policy in Lithuania 1941–1944," historian Christoph Dieckmann identifies the Lithuanian quest for a homogeneous nation-state as the central motive for cooperation with the German occupiers. From both the German and Lithuanian perspectives, Dieckmann argues, "expectations and objectives overlapped to a sufficient degree." Above all, the "shared anti-Soviet, anti-Polish, and anti-Jewish orientation" served as "shared definitions of the enemy," leading to Lithuanian participation in "various mass crimes."

Unlike in Ukraine, there had been no pogroms in Lithuania prior to the German invasion. Yet Lithuanian nationalists readily took up the encouragement of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office, and killed some 800 Jews in the very first days of German rule.

In Vilnius, 70,000 Jews had fallen into German hands. There, as early as June 29, 1941, the Lithuanian Citizens' Committee discussed the establishment of a ghetto. The German civil administration, which replaced the military administration on August 1, consisted of only a few people. The looting and plundering of Jewish property, Dieckmann writes, was the area "in which the involvement of Lithuania's non-Jewish society in the persecution of Jews was most extensive."

For instance, members of the local Lithuanian commissions for the liquidation of Jewish property made sure they themselves did not miss out. Lithuanians acquired Jewish property at bargain prices or stole it, usually immediately after the Jews were transported to nearby execution sites, and then moved into the vacant houses. Since the German occupiers themselves claimed some of the looted goods, an order was issued to prevent such appropriations. According to Dieckmann, enforcement failed because the Germans "were dependent on those who were themselves involved in the looting to enforce the ban."

In September 1941, the ghetto was relocated from Vilnius to the outskirts. The vast majority of the approximately 40,000 to 60,000 people herded there were systematically shot in the nearby forests of Paneriai (Ponary). The few who managed to escape sought to join Soviet partisan groups. Many suffered from (officially banned) anti-Semitism there as well.

According to Dieckmann, eleven partisan groups were active in the forests of Rudniki (Rūdninkai) south of Vilnius alone, four of which consisted predominantly of Jews. They built fortified earthen shelters, organized their survival, raided villages and German granaries to procure food, smuggled weapons or stole them from the Lithuanian self-defense forces, and carried out acts of sabotage against the German-Lithuanian murderous alliance. They cut telephone wires, destroyed bridges, or blocked roads.

Dieckmann describes the Jewish units in the forests as unique because they preserved their autonomy and culture for a time: "They spoke Yiddish with one another, did not hide their Jewish identity or their Zionist ideals, and had an unusually high proportion of women."

Only the hideout of one of the Yiddish-speaking groups, known as the "Fort," remains in ruins. Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky (1922–2024), a former resident and partisan, guided thousands of visitors to the earthen caves over the years. She explained their history—not only during the German occupation but also in the fight against the efforts by many to forget or distort history.

In the fall of 1944, the Soviet Army had driven the Germans out again and reestablished the Soviet regime, which was hated by many Lithuanians. On March 11, 1990, Lithuania became the first of the 15 Soviet republics to break away from Moscow and declare its independence. In 2004, the reborn Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia joined NATO.

Against this historical backdrop, the physical reminders of Jewish resistance have been a source of unease ever since the German Armed Forces, under a NATO mandate, deployed a permanent 5,000-strong combat brigade to Lithuania. The main base and barracks are located in that very Rudniki Forest. The earthen bunkers of the "fort" will become part of the training area to be used by the Bundeswehr in the future. It serves as a training ground for the Lithuanian armed forces. The Lithuanian population welcomes the permanent presence of German combat troops.

Defense Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) describes the brigade as a core project of the "turning point" and emphasizes the need for a credible deterrent against "revisionist and imperialist Russia" under President Putin.

But the descendants of the former resistance fighters are concerned, and they are not alone: Will the last traces—already neglected by the Lithuanian government—that commemorate the heroism of those who tried to resist an enemy determined to commit genocide be preserved, or will they be permanently crushed by German soldiers and tanks?

These warnings are reaching the public through, among other channels, the independent online portal DefendingHistory.com, founded in 2009 by Professor Dovid Katz, a Yiddish and Holocaust scholar. A post from April 26, 2026, states: "This is a great opportunity for Germany—and for the thousands of young soldiers being sent 'back to the East'—to educate themselves about the Holocaust in Lithuania and beyond, and to enlighten others about it. Including the extraordinary history of Jewish resistance."

Fania Brantsovsky was also concerned about the "forgetting or distortion of history" in recent times. The former partisan and Holocaust survivor was honored in Lithuania, the Soviet Union, and Germany for her educational work as an eyewitness; the German President awarded her the Federal Cross of Merit. She died in 2024 at the age of 102. Yet in the years before her death, she was also defamed as a "traitor" to Lithuanian interests and accused of alleged "war crimes," without any formal charges being filed. The allegations centered on acts of sabotage by partisans.

Political Education The campaigns against Fania Brantsovsky and other Jewish resistance fighters began with Lithuania's accession to NATO, coinciding with the rise of far-right to fascist forces in the country. In 2011, the Israeli Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem withdrew the planned invitation from the Lithuanian prime minister because Lithuanian police forces had also become involved in anti-Jewish incitement. In December 2025, a Lithuanian court convicted Remigijus Zemaitytis, chairman of the co-governing populist party Dawn of the Nemunas, of anti-Semitic incitement and trivializing Nazi German crimes.

Because the Bundeswehr is stationed near the former partisan camp, it must address the question of how it intends to deal with the legacy of Jewish resistance. In November, the Left Party faction in the Bundestag attempted to obtain information from the federal government through a parliamentary inquiry.

The response stated in general terms that critical engagement with the Nazi era, the Holocaust, and the role of the Wehrmacht under Nazism is "a fundamental component of historical and political education in the Bundeswehr." Like all units, Panzerbrigade 45 regularly conducts historical and political education. Reference is made to Panzerbrigade 45's collaboration with the Jewish non-governmental organization MACEVA, which is dedicated to the preservation of Jewish cemeteries in Lithuania.

And specifically? Once the training area is put into use starting in 2027, "the local history of the site is to gain significance within the framework of these training programs." The German government supports the preservation of the former partisan camp as a place of learning and remembrance: "The Lithuanian government has been asked to assess the area's eligibility for protection and to take this into account in further planning. As the future user of the training area, the Bundeswehr will advocate for the protection and preservation of this historic site."

Incidentally, Lithuania is responsible for the infrastructure; the property with the historic forest camp borders directly on the training area used by Lithuanian forces. Lithuania intends to install signage in the area in question. It is to be excluded from exercises and remain accessible to the public. In other words: This has little to nothing to do with us or our Bundeswehr.

Signage, then. This case, downplayed as harmless, reveals the historical burdens that the new German-Lithuanian combat partnership on NATO's eastern flank carries with it. The evasive handling of the legacy of the Jewish resistance is likely to provide fresh ammunition for the Russian narrative—which also legitimizes the war in Ukraine—of the fight against fascism.