

***Crisis, War, and the Holocaust in Lithuania***

by Saulius Sužiedėlis (Newton: Academic Studies Press, 2025), 626 pages

*Reviewed by Karen L. Sutton*

*Associate Professor of History, Touro Lander College for Women, New York*



In his hefty new book on the Holocaust in Lithuania, historian Saulius Sužiedėlis marshals extensive documentation on the darkest period in his country's history. In acknowledging that support for his research came from the Lithuanian government-sponsored International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, Sužiedėlis essentially announces to the informed reader that his conclusions are unlikely to be a product of objective scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

His book will certainly not disappoint those who underwrote the publication or those who share their views. There is no denying that this imposing and meticulously documented opus presents a wide range of perspectives, including poignant poetry by Jews who perished at the hands of their Lithuanian neighbors. But neither Sužiedėlis' painstaking research nor the craftsmanship of an experienced scholar and author, capable of combining genuine literary talent with command of copious factual detail, are enough to overcome the study's fundamental tendentiousness.

Both at home and abroad, the state-sponsored commission that was the principal backer of Sužiedėlis' book promoted the notion that Lithuanian aid to the Germans in 1941 was merely a symmetrical counterpart to the purported Jewish support for the Soviets in 1940, framing it as a form of retaliation. This specious claim has metastasized across the anti-Russian world, establishing the ideological and intellectual foundation for the export of contemporary East European revisionism. More troubling still is that Sužiedėlis' supporters actually include prominent institutions in Western countries who appear willing to laud his rewriting of history and praise his candor in expressing that the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) and the Lithuanian Nationalist Party "as supporters of the New Europe failed to appreciate the conundrum of offering themselves as junior allies to the Third Reich," while "still others never acknowledged that the turn towards Germany had been a morally compromising proposition, let alone a political quagmire" (p. 406). Using the term "morally compromising position" as a characterization of the Lithuanian leadership's "turn toward Germany" vastly minimizes the monumental historical importance of the implications behind that statement and downgrades the role of Lithuanian leadership

in facilitating the Final Solution. It fails to confront the many state efforts (the latest, a “collegium” in the nation’s parliament in 2025) to glorify the LAF and the (Nazi puppet) provisional government leaders as national heroes who stoically did what was necessary to curry German favor, even if it meant initiating the mass murder of their Jewish countrymen in 1941.

As a co-publisher of his latest work, the United States Holocaust Museum was apparently satisfied with Sužiedėlis’ interpretations and conclusions. Despite the horrors so graphically depicted in his book, the author consistently weighs in on the light side on the scale of collective Lithuanian responsibility. Although he may have engendered some uneasiness among “ultranationalist” Lithuanian scholars, something that he is said to have anticipated, the response of the fabled YIVO Institute can only be described as positive. Its official website describes the book as the first scholarly English-language study on the subject and conveniently provides a direct link to purchase it. Over the years, Sužiedėlis has delivered lectures at YIVO and contributed to their academic discourse on the Holocaust in Lithuania.

Although both occupations inflicted tragic consequences on so-called “enemies of the state,” fundamental differences make it impossible to study them under a single rubric. Imposing glib commonalities on wholly distinct miscarriages of justice is not only illogical but constitutes a serious historical error. The symmetrical formula—often labeled “Double Genocide” and, in a sense, codified by the 2008 Prague Declaration—has inflicted significant intellectual damage and has obstructed the pursuit of justice.<sup>2</sup>

In the preface to the book, we read that “most Jews who died during the Holocaust were not killed by their neighbors in any literal sense” (p. xi). The author encourages readers to believe that this was true in Lithuania, suggesting, implicitly, that it somehow mitigates responsibility for widespread participation in massacres—even in the days before the first German invaders arrived in many locations. In reality, countless eyewitness accounts, such as Kazimierz Sakowicz’s chilling *Ponary Diary* (rediscovered and first published in the Polish original by Rachel Margolis),<sup>3</sup> provide the names of neighbors who stood at the edge of the pits, rifles cocked and ready.

In 2004, Michael McQueen, chief investigator of the US Government OSI, concluded in his report concerning the killings and lootings in rural villages that Lithuanians inflicted brutal violence on their long-time Jewish neighbors. There is a vast corpus of testimony in local *Yizkor* [memorial] books and elsewhere on that murderous violence. Given the growing number of translations, the author’s inability to use Hebrew and Yiddish sources cannot serve as an excuse for that omission.

At the outset, Sužiedėlis boldly asserts that “absent the German occupation, the Holocaust in Lithuania is inconceivable” (p. ix). German records of 1941, particularly those compiled by Franz Stahlecker, Commander of Einsatzgruppen A, state that although the Germans encouraged and instigated “the spontaneous actions” against Jews following the launch of their invasion on June 22, 1941, it was the Lithuanians who initiated the actions. The infamous Lietukis Garage Massacre on June 27 stands out for its savagery; the entrails of Jewish victims were strewn across the floor. In some photos of that event, a crowd of young people appears to be cheering on their “national heroes” who are committing the atrocities.

The Lithuanian scholar Alfonsas Eidintas and his co-authors noted in their 2013 history of Lithuania, “In Lithuania, the SS found ‘local units’—insurgents or otherwise partisans—already actively operating; all that remained was to arrive at an agreement with some of them.”<sup>4</sup> To be sure, while Nazi Germany provided the framework for destruction, Lithuanian partisans and “white arm-banders” [*baltaraiščiai*] initiated massacres even before any explicit German orders to murder women and children has been issued. It is important to note that criminal law generally places the same guilt on those who carry out the crime as it does on those who induce others to murder. Thus, the complex relationship between German instigation and Lithuanian initiation during the 1941 massacres does not lessen the latter’s guilt. The validity of Sužiedėlis’ opening statement that most Jews were “not killed by their neighbors in any literal sense” becomes a matter of semantics. Whether the Lithuanians would have killed the Jews in their midst without German prompting is a matter of conjecture. Ultimately, Sužiedėlis’ assertion of the inconceivability of the Holocaust without the Germans is irrelevant to the fact that in many cases the Lithuanians were the ones who initiated the slaughter of their Jewish neighbors.

What is equally unfounded, and frankly shocking, is the author’s claim concerning the number of Jews murdered during the early days of the German invasion, in many cases even before the arrival of German forces and before their authority in any given location had been established. He states that a “realistic account suggests that two thousand Lithuanian Jews died in the pogroms, summary executions, and individual murders before the onset of the shooting at the Seventh Fort,” although he is astute enough to add that “it is difficult to gauge the magnitude of anti-Jewish assaults in the smaller towns and countryside.” According to Eidintas, 5,000 Jews were killed by local Lithuanian partisans in the immediate days following the launch of Operation Barbarossa. German scholar Christopher Dieckman gives a figure of about 10,000 dead. Other historians, including the Lithuanian-born Israeli scholars Yitzhak Arad and Dov Levin, concur with the estimate of 10,000. Sužiedėlis cites both these authors on matters that suit him, but not on this.

Although Sužiedėlis quotes extensively from the Stahlecker report to lay the burden of guilt on the Germans, he consistently downplays certain statements from those same early documents. In one, for example, we learn that the Einsatzgruppen decided that since the Lithuanians were proving themselves such capable executioners, the German killing squads could sit back and let the Lithuanians do their work for them. German army officers stated that they found the slaughter so undisciplined and frenzied as to jeopardize an orderly occupation. Commander of Army Group North General Field Marshall Ritter von Leeb ordered Field Marshall Georg von Küchler of the 18<sup>th</sup> Army to stop the barbaric public “spontaneous self-cleansing operations” of the first days.

By June 28, the Germans had disarmed most Lithuanian partisans and incorporated them into Einsatzkommando 3 under Standartenfuhrer SS Karl Jäger and Einsatzkommando 1b under Otto Ehrlinger. Several German operational reports refer to these combined Lithuanian-German mobile killing forces and document their subsequent actions in the countryside of Lithuania and Belarus. These Lithuanian auxiliary units included twenty-six Schutzmannschaft battalions with approximately 20,000 men responsible for internal security and anti-partisan operations in Lithuania and parts of Belarus and Ukraine. The infamous 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> battalions participated significantly in the rounding up and shooting of Jews. The Lithuanian Security Police [*Saugumo policija*] included a 900-man force collaborating with German SD and Sicherheitspolizei, operating against the resistance and participating in the Holocaust. The *Ypatingasis būrys* [Special Squad] was a Vilnius-based SD Unit of about 300 men who played a major role in the massacres at the largest killing site Ponary (Lithuanian Paneriai). Other uses of Lithuanian personnel in the mass killings include the Forest Rangers, random guard units, Construction Battalions, and the short-lived Lithuanian Territorial Defense Forces. Lithuanians also worked as ghetto and concentration camp guards both on their native soil and in Belarus and Poland. Much of this is part of Jäger’s report on the extermination of Lithuanian Jews, dated December 1, 1941, which is also under-analyzed in the narrative.

In his discussion of murders at Ponary, Sužiedėlis reduces the death toll from an established 70,000 Jews murdered there to 50,000. He states that the adjusted figure is based on more accurate information contained in previously inaccessible files. In particular, he relies on the Jonas Reivytiis File, which is an account written by the Vilnius Security Police [*Saugumas*]. Although these materials from Lithuanian sources may provide new evidence, there are limitations to their accuracy. In recording the exact number of Jews murdered, Lithuanians had good reason to lower the figures. The coveting of Jewish property was a primary motivation for Lithuanian killers. Underreporting these murders was a facile means of accumulating plunder. Likewise, new examinations of activities of Aktion 1005 in 1943–44—another new source presented by Sužiedėlis and other revisionist historian for downgrading the number of victims—is of limited

use in revealing the number of bodies buried. One must remember that as efficient as the Germans were at mass murder, they were also efficient in concealing their deeds. The incineration of the bodies of their victims late in the war is evidence of that fact.

Modern forensic and geophysical investigation have largely affirmed or slightly increased the estimated death toll at Ponary by uncovering previously unknown burial sites and providing a more detailed understanding of the site's layout. The author's attempt to provide "more exact" data (by lowering the figures) is not supported by his claims of uncovering "new evidence." In 2016, a research team using ground-penetrating radar discovered a thirteenth burial pit that was previously undocumented. It increased Ponary's capacity by as many as 10,000 bodies. Modern forensic mapping now places the total number of its victims (Jewish and non-Jewish) at around 100,000, a figure long accepted by mainstream Western historiography.<sup>5</sup>

The author underestimates the deadly enmity that many Lithuanians felt towards the Jews during this period. This transcended the supposed need to curry favor with the Germans to gain support for their national aspirations, which focused on regaining Lithuanian independence. It was obsessive Jew-hatred that precipitated the destruction of Lithuanian Jews at the hands of a minority of Christian neighbors along with the passive hatred of Jews by much of the society. Ignoring much readily available evidence from the 1930s, Sužiedėlis does not acknowledge the fact that Jews were already a despised people, particularly in the eyes of the nationalist elite. Instead, he blames the Germans alone for inciting the local population to commit acts of lethal violence. This conclusion is unacceptable and must be identified for what it is—a flagrant attempt to whitewash history.

Among Sužiedėlis' most egregious omissions is an accurate representation of the leaflets of the Lithuanian Activist Front, which was formed in 1940 (in Berlin) to promote the reconstitution of a Lithuanian state. The virulent antisemitism that erupted in Lithuania makes sense only when viewed as the outgrowth of a particular national movement, a popular expression of the sentiments of a nation with respect to its own history and destiny.

The first telegram to Berlin from the newly formed provisional government in Kaunas on June 23, 1941, contains little allowance for a view that these written documents are not a call for the actual genocide of the Jewish people but rather just a rote rehashing of loose-tongued antisemitic tropes. It contains the words: "Let us use this occasion to get rid of the Jews." Unbelievably, elite elements in current Lithuanian society continue to campaign for June 23 to be celebrated as a kind of national holiday with proposals including a permanent "collegium" in the nation's parliament. Equally incredible (and sad) is the abject silence of Western Holocaust scholars and organizations who participate

in lavishly funded state memorial events and are the recipients of various honors may make it “awkward” for them to speak out.

In his *The Holocaust in Lithuania*, Joseph Levinson provides a much more extensive series of texts from the appeals of the LAF.<sup>6</sup> In those leaflets one reads: “Enough of the Jews baking their matzos in Lithuanian blood”; “Judases, your days are numbered”; “After being raped and mauled by you, Lithuania is ready to rise up. Freedom will come to us over your corpses.”<sup>7</sup> But Sužiedėlis casually dismisses the evidence that these are legitimate claims for genocide. He states, quite astoundingly: “There is no evidence that Škirpa [a founder of the LAF, then in Berlin awaiting the German invasion] and his circle intended the physical extermination of Lithuania’s Jewish population. But the calls for expropriation and expulsion injected a radical component into the political rhetoric in the struggle for Lithuania’s independence” (p. 147). Beyond this offensive snippet of Holocaust apologetics, the author seems unable to abandon the belief that those whose principal *de facto* accomplishment was initiating the mass murder that marked the beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania can still somehow be recast as “national freedom fighters.”

The fact that established Jewish institutions and historians minimize the number of Lithuanian perpetrators and whitewash their motivations, or help cover up the pre-German-arrival massacres of the week of June 23, 1941, for what they perceive as today’s greater political good (or honors on luxurious trips to Vilnius), is worse than a lapse into ahistorical interpretation. It is a travesty from a moral and ethical viewpoint. Those who transform the executioners of Jews into freedom fighters undermine the roots of fundamental understanding of the Holocaust (indeed, one begins to read in scholarly journals that the established consensus is really the “Soviet-Russian narrative”). To depict the leaders and enablers of the newly founded Nazi-puppet government of June 1941 as heroes rather than as murderers of innocent people is unjust. The vast majority killed—whether Orthodox, Zionist, Socialist, or middle-class—had nothing to do with Communism, and their murder cannot be depicted as an “insurrection” against the (fleeing) Soviets. These are historical facts that cannot be denied or ignored by even the most artful dodger of this historical record, Sužiedėlis himself.

Finally, although Sužiedėlis proudly announces that Lithuania has proportionately the highest number of Righteous Among the Nations of any country except the Netherlands, he does not mention that the Netherlands also has the highest rate of Jews annihilated in any Western nation (75 percent). Lithuania, the second runner-up in percentages for rescuers, also has what is among the highest percentage of murder in all of Holocaust-era Europe: 95–96 percent (or 96.4 percent, depending on details of counting criteria; the only slighter higher percentages are the other two Baltic states, which had much smaller Jewish populations). His account would have been timelier and more expedient to the cause of

reconciliation had he examined the efforts of the Righteous Gentiles, those 924 honored by Yad Vashem.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The posthumously published book on Holocaust negationism that includes a history of the commission, by the late (and mourned) Prof. Michael Shafir is eagerly awaited by many in this discipline.
- <sup>2</sup> See Dovid Katz, "The Baltic Movement to Obfuscate the Holocaust," *Mass Violence in Nazi Occupied Europe: New Debates and Perspectives*, Alex J. Kay and David Stahel (eds.) (Bloomington, 2018) pp. 235–61. The Vilnius-based Katz has been one of the most forceful and eloquent voices in the decades-long struggle against Lithuanian Holocaust obfuscation.
- <sup>3</sup> Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary, 1941–1945: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, trans. Laurence Weinbaum (New Haven, 2005).
- <sup>4</sup> Alfonsas Eidintas, Alfredas Bumblauskas, Antanas Kulakauskas, and Mindaugas Tamošaitis, *The History of Lithuania*, trans. Skirma Kondratas and Ramūnas Kondratas (Vilnius, 2013). This volume was published in cooperation with the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- <sup>5</sup> The 2016 investigation is primarily known as the "Discovering a Holocaust Era Escape Tunnel: GPR Investigation at Ponar Lithuania." This study is an international collaboration led by Dr. Richard Freund (University of Hartford) and Dr. Harry Jol (University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire).
- <sup>6</sup> Christopher Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944* (Göttingen, 2011). Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in Lithuania*, (New York, 1982); Dov Levin, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania*, trans. Adam Teller (Jerusalem, 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> Joseph Levinson, *The Shoah (Holocaust) in Lithuania*, trans. Jonas Steponaitis and Darius James Ross (Vilnius, 2006).