

Review of the Study *The preconditions of Holocaust: the upsurge of Anti – Semitism in Lithuania in the years of Soviet occupation (1940 – 1941) of Liudas Truska*

by Michael MacQueen

Prof. Truska set himself three tasks in this essay: to research the position of the Jews of Lithuania in the first Soviet occupation, and their role in the Soviet system; to analyze Lithuanian-Jewish relations and the evolution of anti-Semitism in 1940-41; and to reveal the origins of the myth of "Jewish guilt" and to expose the basic falsehoods on which this myth was based. It is my feeling that he is substantially successful at the accomplishment of these goals, the third perhaps most successfully. It is clear that these topics are far larger than the confines of the essay format. Where he has been most successful is his outlining the need for further work, based on the documentary means he exploited in crafting this essay.

No period in Lithuanian history carries emotional charge than the period of the first Soviet occupation, and yet it remains, from the perspective of serious historiography, one of the least studied. Saulius Sužiedelis has shown from his work that we must regard the histories and memoirist literature on this period done in the emigration with deep skepticism, and Leonidas Donskis' use of the metaphor of the submerged mass of an iceberg to describe the unknown dimensions of this period of history is entirely appropriate. Valentinas Brandišauskas' work on the LAF was a courageous step, and Truska shows how much more there is to expose on the question of the LAF and anti-Semitism.

Truska makes convincing use of primary source materials, particularly the records of the NKVD, to demonstrate that Jewish responses to Soviet occupation were as varied as the responses demonstrated among the Lithuanian population and that it is as wrong to characterize the Jews as responding collectively to Soviet rule as it is to regard the Lithuanians doing so. Jewish responses ranged from support to passive accommodation to resistance to the new regime. As Truska shows, given the awareness of their awkward position, Jewish resistance which developed to Soviet rule took on different forms than Lithuanian resistance (and might be compared to later Lithuanian resistance to German rule, where military resistance to the Germans was ruled out since it was viewed as the equivalent of aid to the Red Army).

Truska's examination of Lithuanian responses is equally fascinating, in particular his analysis of the content of the leaflets distributed by Lithuanian underground organizations before the German invasion. Reading across the range, from the leaflet of the "Lietuvos antižydiško komitetas" with its message that the Soviet system and anti-Semitism were compatible, to the others, he creates the vivid impression that anti-Semitism existed as a separate social force which was quite independent of the immediate political context. This was in fact the thrust of Stalin's policies towards the Jews of the annexed territories at the time, which were focused on the destruction of the Jews as a coherent community. Jewish civil society, as also Lithuanian, had to be destroyed in order for the Soviet system of total social penetration to flourish.

One area which I feel needs more attention, since Lithuania was still a predominantly peasant land at the time, is the situation in the countryside during the first Soviet occupation. Truska detailed the rates of participation of Jews in the vykoms and apkoms and other forms of party organization. What role did they play in the Soviet land reform? How much of a role did the rural tensions which the land reform produced play in the bloody explosions which followed 22 June 1941? Again, this is an area which could probably be best explored through the records of the Soviet security apparatus, which Truska shows are perhaps the most solid source for exploring the internal dynamics of Soviet-occupied Lithuania.

Another area which requires further research and analysis and fitting into the scheme laid out by Truska is the matter of Lithuanian-on-Lithuanian violence, like that which occurred in north central Lithuania, centered on Kupiškis, where hundreds of Komsomol youth and others were murdered in June-August 1941 (NB: The Jäger Report shows 488 non-Jews killed at Rokiškis up to 14 August 1941 - this has to be a mistake, it should be Kupiškis. Also, though Jäger shows that only 56 of these were Lithuanians, the death records held at the Vilnius Vital Statistics Archive show that more than one hundred Lithuanians were killed by shooting at Kupiškis, and the deaths of many more Lithuanians there were not registered). Were these killings the product of the same murderous energy which fired the mass killing of Jews? Why was it that in some places Lithuanian collaborators with the Soviets were treated harshly, and in other with leniency?

I was particularly impressed by Truska's exploration of the concept of scapegoat. What did Lithuanians who participated in the killing of Jews purchase with the blood of the scapegoat? Did they purchase relief from the revulsion at their own collaboration with Soviet authority? And at this point I would draw in the discussion of the controversial appeal "Brangus vergaujantieji broliai" and its demand that collaborators purchase their forgiveness with the blood of "at least one Jew." Regardless that this appeal may have only been read by a few, it was, I would suggest, in fact a motivation for some of the persons involved in the killing. An example: Antanas Gecevičius, whose extradition is now being sought from Scotland to stand trial in Vilnius for crimes committed while he was a platoon commander in the 2nd PPT Battalion in Belarus. Saugumas records (LCVA, fondas R 681, apy. 1, byl. 2, l. 419 and 443) based on captured NKVD documents show that he had served the DVM as a police agent from September 1940 through May 1941. Perhaps people were deported to Siberia as the result of his police activities? Did he purchase forgiveness with blood?

Another question I would pose to Truska and to other interested historians concerns the ability to measure social demoralization. We seem to be in agreement that the successive blows which Lithuanian society endured - the Polish ultimatum, the loss of Klaipėda, the Soviet ultimatum and Smetona's exile, the social atomisation of Soviet rule, then followed by the hammer blow of German invasion, produced a profound social demoralization, an atmosphere which nourished the development of negative phenomena such as anti-Semitism, opportunism and collaboration. Can we apply statistical analysis to surviving records (such as police data on arrests for drunkenness and hooliganism) to test and measure this hypothesis?

Truska's article is a valuable piece of scholarship which should serve as a guide to those who wish to clarify the controversial and burning questions of this turbulent period of history. His arguments and collected facts should change how the period is viewed, although their popular acceptance may not be an easy process.