Republic of Lithuania Country Report

Table of contents:

Slightly larger than West Virginia, Lithuania borders Latvia, Belarus, Poland, the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, and the Baltic Sea. Its centuries-old Jewish community remains active despite its near total destruction during the Holocaust. *Read more.*

With its long history of nationhood, including two decades of independence prior to forced annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940, Lithuania's transition from Soviet rule to a new European identity was comparatively fast. *Read more.*

Lithuania is a multi-party parliamentary democracy, in which its 141-member unicameral Parliament (*Seimas*) holds the most legislative power. *Read more.*

Independent Lithuania's foreign policy has stressed integration with the West, and close cooperation with its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Estonia. *Read more.*

The United States and Lithuania maintain close ties, dating back to American support for Lithuanian sovereignty during the long years of Soviet occupation. *Read more.*

Israel opened its first embassy to Lithuania in 2015. Lithuania has an ambassador and an embassy in Tel Aviv. *Read more.*

Lithuania's Jewish history is rich and vibrant, dating back centuries. The capital Vilnius was once called the Jerusalem of the North. The community remains active but divided on a number of key issues. *Read more.*

Executive Summary:

With its long history of nationhood, including two decades of independence prior to forced annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940, Lithuania's transition from Soviet rule to a new European identity was comparatively fast. Aided by the relatively small size of its ethnic Russian minority, which has helped keep internal tensions low, Lithuania joined the European Union and NATO in 2004, meeting a key post-independence goal. After a rocky start in the 1990s, Lithuania's economy has reoriented toward the West and grew quickly until the late 2000s global financial crisis. Lithuania's closest ties are to its Baltic neighbors, the EU, and Russia.

Jewish history in Lithuania is long and notable. Vilnius (formerly Vilna) was once a famous center of European Jewry (known as "the Northern Jerusalem"), but the present Jewish community is a fraction of its pre-war size.

History

Lithuania, slightly larger than West Virginia, borders Latvia, Belarus, Poland, the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, and the Baltic Sea. The medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a large and powerful state, fighting off Teutonic knights and, in commonwealth with Poland, once dominated the region between the Black and Baltic Seas. During the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, Lithuania was divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. After more than a century of rule by the Russian Empire, which suppressed several revolts and imposed Russification policies, Lithuania declared its independence in February 1918. This lasted until 1940, when the Soviet Union forcibly incorporated Lithuania. The United States never recognized the Soviet annexation of Lithuania.

The brutal Soviet occupation, in which thousands of Lithuanians were deported, executed, or exiled, caused many Lithuanians to welcome and collaborate with invading German troops in 1941. Some Lithuanians fought with the Germans against the Soviets in hope of gaining national independence. During the Holocaust the Nazis and local collaborators exterminated 90% of Lithuania's sizable Jewish community. The anti-Nazi resistance in Lithuania was the strongest of all such Baltic movements and

Statistics:

Population: 2,868,149 (Jul. 2019 est.)
Size: 65,300 sq. km

Capital: Vilnius (Vilna)

Major cities: Vilnius, Kaunas (Kovno), Klaipeda, Siauliai, Penevezys (Ponevitch)

Jewish population: 10,500 (Right of Return)

Head of State: President Gitanas Nausėda

Head of Government: Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte

Foreign Minister: Gabrielius Landsbergis

Ambassador to United States: Audra Plepyte

U.S. Ambassador to Lithuania: Robert Stuart Gilchrist

Freedom House Rating: Free

included Jewish partisan units; Israel has recognized more than 800 Lithuanians as "Righteous Among the Nations" for risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

After World War II, Lithuania's society and economy underwent Sovietization, which included purges, deportations and the imprisonment of 100,000 or more Lithu-anians.

Gorbachev's reforms allowed the formation of the popular "Sajudis" reform movement in Lithuania in 1988, which proved instrumental in Lithuania's push for greater democratic and national rights. After the Lithuanian Communist Party broke with Moscow in 1989 and joined the reformers, Lithuania became the first Soviet Republic to declare independence on March

Ethnic Composition

- Lithuanian 84%
- Polish 6.1%
- Russian 4.9%
- Belarusian 1.1%
- other 3.9%

11, 1990. The Soviet government bitterly contested this declaration, but Lithuania tenaciously pursued self-determination. Lithuania (along with Estonia and Latvia) gained international recognition from the United Nations in September 1991, during the final months of the USSR. The last Russian troops left in 1993.

Lithuania's key goal of reintegrating into Western institutions to bolster its independence, security, and European identity was completed with its accessions to NATO and the European Union in 2004.

Religion

- Roman Catholic 79%
- Russian Orthodox 4.1%
- Protestant 1.9%
- other 5.5%
- none 9.5%
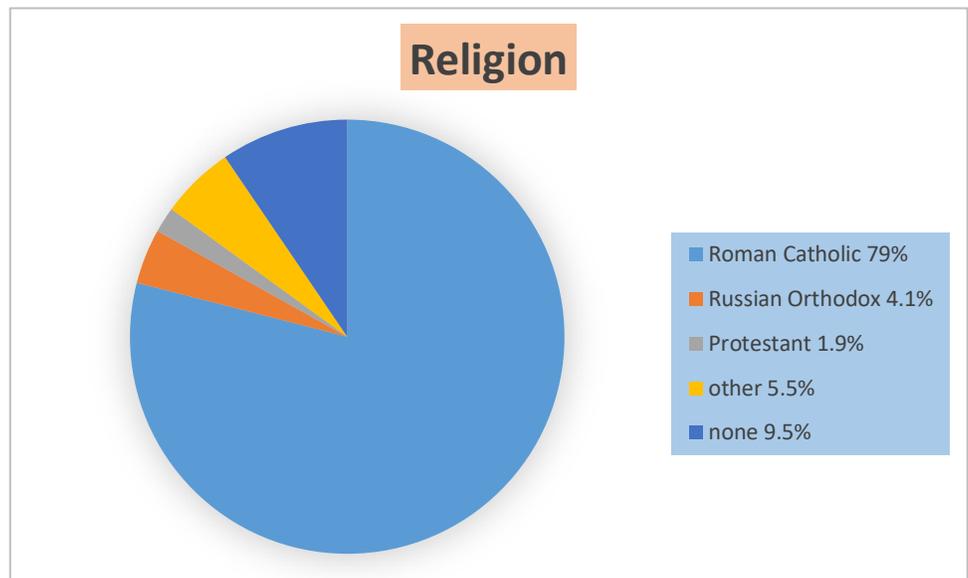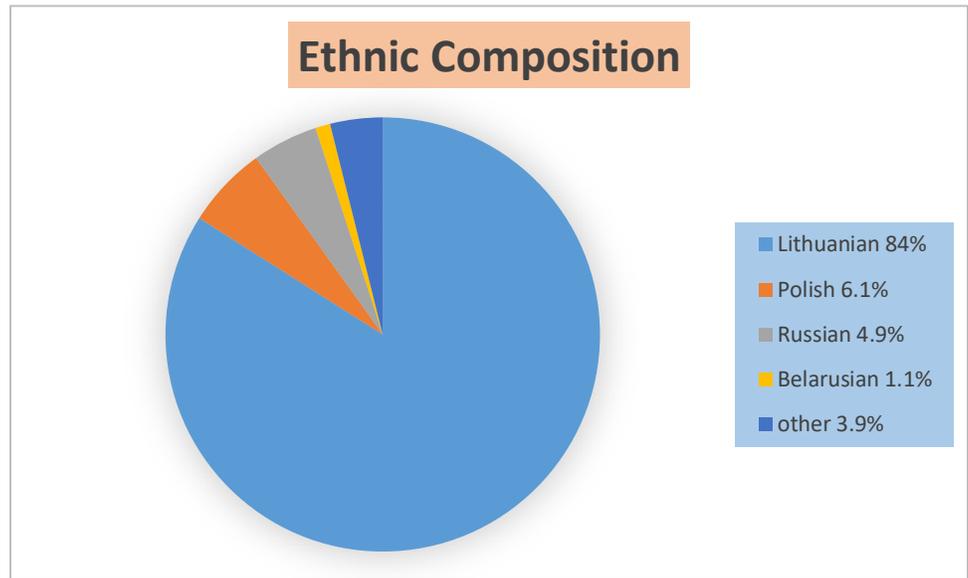
Political Situation:

Lithuania is a multi-party, semi-presidential, representative democracy, in which its 141-member unicameral Parliament (Seimas) holds the most power. The Seimas, whose deputies are elected to four-year terms, adopts and amends the constitution, passes laws, approves the President's appointment of

the Prime Minister, and elects the Supreme Court. The President, popularly elected for a five-year term, nominates the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, and all judges, and may request that the Constitutional Court review acts of the Seimas. A party must receive at least 5% of the national vote to secure parliamentary representation.

Currency: 0.89 Euro = $1
GDP: $52.468 billion (2018 est.)
GDP per capita: $18,856 (2018 est.)
GDP Growth: 2.4% (2018)

The Lithuanian constitution grants its citizens freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion. These rights are generally respected in practice. Unlike Estonia or Latvia, which host far larger Russian-speaking populations, Lithuania automatically granted its Russian-speaking minority citizenship upon independence.

The current head of state, Dalia Grybauskaitė, is Lithuania's first female president. She first took office after winning a May 2009 election in a landslide, with 68% of the votes, and won reelection in 2014. She was previously Finance Minister and also served as the European Commissioner for Financial Programming and the Budget.

Frequent changes in Lithuania's government between conservative, centrist, and social democratic ruling coalitions have reflected popular dissatisfaction with the economic situation, corruption, and slow progress toward Western integration.

Lithuania's 2012 parliamentary elections prompted an investigation into 27 cases of possible irregularities, especially cases of vote buying. The Social Democratic Party received 38 seats and became the largest faction in the Lithuanian Parliament. After the elections, the winning Social Democratic Party, with its designated Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius, formed a coalition with the Labor Party and Order and Justice.

In October 2016, Lithuania's parliamentary elections unexpectedly gave the centrist Peasants and Greens Union, which previously had held only one seat, won a 54-seat plurality. The largest party in the Seimas before the election, the Social Democratic Party, finished third with 17 seats, and its major rival, the conservative and nationalist Homeland Union, came second with 31 seats. Observers have explained this political shift as an expression of economic and social dissatisfaction. The Lithuanian Peasants and Greens Union formed a coalition with the Social Democratic Party.

Presidential elections were held in Lithuania on 12 May 2019, with a second round held on 26 May 2019. Due to a constitutional limit of two terms in office, incumbent president Dalia Grybauskaitė was unable to run, having won the 2009 and 2014 elections.

As no candidate obtained 50% of the vote in the first round, a second round was held between the top two candidates, Ingrida Šimonytė and Gitanas Nausėda. Nausėda was elected with 67% of the vote and was inaugurated as President of Lithuania on 12 July

Economic Situation:

The Lithuanian economy endured an initially difficult transition to privatization and the free market due to its integration with the former Soviet Union. However, after shifting export markets to the EU, the economy recovered and experienced strong growth. Although Lithuania remained relatively poor by EU standards, growing trade with its EU partners, rising domestic consumption and foreign investment, and progress in privatizing state enterprises produced increasing prosperity.

The fallout from the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis greatly affected the Lithuanian economy. The country had 7-8.9% GDP growth in previous years, which dropped to 3.2% in 2008, mainly due to foreign capital, the driving force behind the Lithuanian economy, fleeing the country. The economy shrank 12.6% in the first quarter of 2009 with the unemployment rate rising to 13.4% by 2010. Employers drastically cut salaries to reduce spending.

A highly industrialized country with a well-developed agricultural sector, Lithuania has few natural resources but boasts a strategic location astride key trade and transit routes between Western and Eastern Europe. Its Baltic seaport of Klaipeda is an ice-free port.

Additionally, tamed inflation, a demonstrated commitment to democracy and the rule of law, and a highly educated population have brought increased foreign direct investment. Lithuania's main trade partners are Russia, Germany, Sweden, and Latvia. Lithuania has reduced its foreign debt and enacted labor and bankruptcy reforms and banking privatization.

The private sector accounts for over 80% of Lithuanian GDP, with significant foreign investment and ownership. Lithuania joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, and pegged its national currency, the lita, to the euro in 2002. Lithuania adopted the euro in January 2015.

Lithuania recorded government debt of 39.7% of the country's GDP in 2018, down from an all-time high of 42.7% in 2015. Moody's has maintained Lithuania's A3 rating for 2018 and has declared the economy to be stable. Moody's predicts GDP growth of 3.5% in 2017 and 3.4% in 2018. However, an aging population and low birthrate have led to a demographic crisis in Lithuania that could negatively impact the economy over time.

Lithuania joined NATO in 2004, EU in 2004, Schengen in 2007 and OECD in 2018.

As of 2018, Lithuanian mean wealth per adult is $24,600, while total national wealth is US$57 billion. As of 2018, the average gross (pre-tax) monthly salary in Lithuania is 970 euros (US$1,100) translating to 750 euros net (after tax), while average pension is 307 euros per month. Average wage adjusted for purchasing power parity, is around 1912 USD per month, one of the lowest in EU. Although, cost of

living in the country also is sufficiently less with the price level for household final consumption expenditure (HFCE) – 63, being 39% lower than EU average – 102 in 2016.

Information technology production is growing in the country, reaching 1.9 billion euros in 2016. In 2017 only, 35 FinTech companies came to Lithuania – a result of Lithuanian government and Bank of Lithuania simplified procedures for obtaining licences for the activities of e-money and payment institutions. Europe's first international Blockchain Centre launched in Vilnius in 2018. Lithuania has granted a total of 39 e-money licenses, second in the EU only to the U.K. with 128 licenses. In 2018 Google setup a payment company in Lithuania.

Foreign Policy:

Lithuania's foreign policy stresses Western integration and close cooperation with its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Estonia. This includes coordination of education systems, integration of stock markets, agreements on security and trade, and the creation of a Baltic energy market. The Nordic and Baltic states have also cooperated under the NB8 (Nordic-Baltic 8) formula since 1992, discussing common economic and foreign policy and regional issues.

Lithuania has played an important regional role in promoting democracy. It has joined with the United States and other European nations in urging the government of Belarus to enact political and economic reforms. Many Belarusian organizations aligned with the opposition, including numerous human rights groups, are anchored in Vilnius as their existence in Belarus has been threatened. Lithuanian troops have participated since the early 1990s in international peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

In May 2014, the Lithuanian Parliament adopted a Resolution on Foreign Policy that reiterated its goal to more actively participate in European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, increase defense budget expenditures to 2% of GDP, and actively integrate with the EU energy market. Lithuania's electric grid now connects to Poland and Sweden and a new liquid natural gas (LNG) base has opened in the port city of Klaipeda, moving Lithuania away from dependence on Russian energy supplies.

Lithuania's relationship with Russia has been complex and largely dominated by trade and transit issues related to Lithuania's border with the Baltic-Russian exclave of Kaliningrad (formerly Konigsberg, the northern half of German East Prussia, annexed by the USSR after World War II).

Lithuania adopted a simplified transit regime for Russians going to and from Kaliningrad in the 1990s, but its 2003 imposition of a visa requirement for Russians en route to the exclave (required for its EU accession in 2004) led to friction with Russia, which complained of being isolated from Europe.
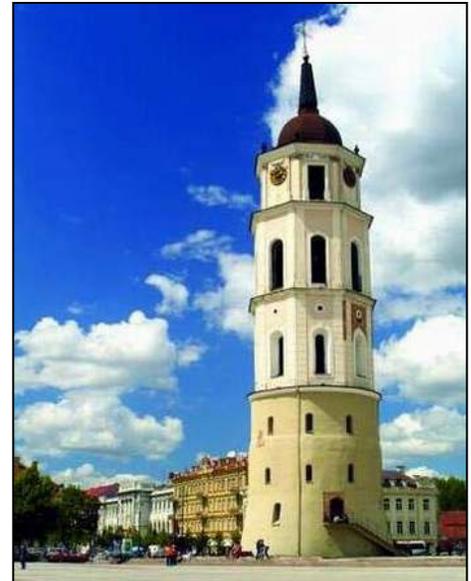
After the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, President Grybauskaitė expressed Lithuania's solidarity with Ukraine and its concern about Russian expansion. Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius has voiced Lithuania's strong support for sanctions against Russia.

In April 2014, Russia banned certain Lithuanian imports. In March 2014, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, Lithuania withdrew its Moscow ambassador for consultations, and condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine. In May 2014, Russia unilaterally terminated a bilateral national security agreement. However, by January 2015, Lithuania had appointed a new ambassador to Moscow.

Historic bell tower in Cathedral Square, Vilnius

In 2016, Lithuania's Defense Council decided to reinstate mandatory conscription on a permanent basis, over growing feelings of insecurity in Russia's shadow (Russia maintains a large military installation in the adjoining Kaliningrad Oblast). In 2017, anxiety grew over Russia and Belarus' joint *Zapad* military exercises. President Grybauskaitė has said the goal of the exercises "is to frighten [Lithuania]." Lithuania participated as an official observer of the exercises, which lasted from September 14-20, 2017 in Belarus.

In 2018 Lithuania, along with Latvia and Estonia were awarded the Peace of Westphalia Prize [de] – for their exceptional model of democratic development and contribution to peace in the continent.

Following the Lukashenko government's crackdown after the disputed 2020 Belarus Presidential elections, which were widely regarded as unfree and unfair, Belarusian opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya fled to Lithuania.] On 12 August Lithuania opened its borders to all Belarusians for humanitarian purposes due to the crackdown on protests. Two days later on August 14, Lithuania became the first EU state to openly reject the legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenko as the President of Belarus. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda said "We can not call Mr. Lukashenko legitimate because there were no free democratic elections in Belarus".

Relations with the United States:

The United States and Lithuania maintain close ties, dating back to unwavering U.S. support for Lithuanian sovereignty during the long years of Soviet occupation, bolstered by support from America's large Lithuanian émigré community. The United States granted the Baltics permanent normal trade relation status following the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Lithuania cooperates closely with the United States on trade and security issues. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Lithuania opened its airspace and airports to U.S. military flights for operations in Afghanistan, and 40 Lithuanian special forces troops deployed to Afghanistan in November 2002. By July 2005, Lithuania had 120 troops serving in Iraq as part of the Polish and Danish contingents.

In conjunction with the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the Lithuanian and U.S. governments signed the Agreement on the Protection and Preservation of Certain Cultural Properties on October 15, 2002.

In November 2002, following NATO's historic Prague summit, President Bush made the first visit of a U.S. President to Lithuania. He reiterated U.S. support for Baltic membership in NATO, and called for support against Iraq and other dictatorial regimes.

In May 2005, President Bush met with the Presidents of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and called the Soviet domination of postwar Eastern Europe "one of the greatest wrongs of history." President Bush hosted President Vaclav Adamkus in the White House in February 2007, thanking him for supporting U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, and promising to ask Congress to include Lithuania in the U.S. Visa Waiver program, which Lithuania joined in late 2008.

Presidents Bush and Adamkus in 2002 (left), and in 2005 (right)

In 2017, U.S.-Lithuania trade amounted to $2.1 billion (including $1.18 billion in Lithuanian exports and $463 million in imports). As of 2014, the U.S. is the 17th largest supplier of direct investment in Lithuania; U.S. direct investment in 2014 was $170 million.

In May 2013, Lithuania's President visited the U.S. and met with Speaker of the House John Boehner and the House and Senate foreign affairs and defense committee chairmen, to discuss regional and energy security issues, including U.S.-Lithuanian military cooperation.

In August 2013, the Lithuanian President, together with the leaders of Estonia and Latvia, met with President Obama in Washington to discuss energy security, economic cooperation, and relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia. They also discussed threats to regional security and negotiations on the transatlantic trade agreement.

In March 2014, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Lithuania and met with the Lithuanian President to discuss security of the Baltic States and the situation in Ukraine.

In August 2017, Lithuania received liquid natural gas from the United States as part of an energy deal meant to increase Lithuania's energy independence from Russia.

In July 2017, Vice President Mike Pence met with President Grybauskaitė and other Baltic leaders in Estonia, where he affirmed the United States' commitment to NATO and collective defense in the region and vowed to protect Lithuania from the threat of Russian aggression.

In 2019 a plan of defense cooperation was signed between the U.S. and Baltic states. The five year plan will include financial help to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Relations with Israel:

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) speaks with his Lithuanian counterpart Saulius Skvernelis in Vilnius, Lithuania, on August 23, 2018

Since 1989, over 6,000 Lithuanian Jews have immigrated to Israel. Lithuania has had an ambassador and an embassy in Tel Aviv since 1992. Israel opened its first embassy in Lithuania in March of 2015. Before that, the Jewish state was represented in Lithuania by Israel's embassy in the capital of neighboring Latvia.

In 1995, President Algirdas Brazauskas paid an official visit to Israel, and in September 2005, Israeli President Moshe Katsav visited Lithuania as part of the first-ever state visit by the Israeli President to the Baltics. The two governments have bilateral agreements allowing visa-free travel, protecting investments, and promoting cooperation in communication, health, culture, science, and education.

In February 2008, during an official visit to Israel, Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Petras Vaitiekūnas and Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni agreed to seek a more active economic cooperation between the countries. Minister Vaitiekūnas visited Yad Vashem.

In December 2008, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Vygaudas Ušackas met with Israeli Ambassador Chen Ivri. During their conversation, the Ambassador raised the issues of restitution of Jewish communal property and the decisions on the former cemetery in Šnipiškės.

Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Lithuania in July 2013. In September 2015, Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius visited Israel and met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In October 2015, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė opened the first ever Israeli Litvak Forum in Tel Aviv.

Foreign Minister Linkevičius visited Israel in September 2017 and met with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Rivlin, and other Israeli leaders. He pledged his support for Israel and urged his European partners to reconsider their positions on the Iran deal. Lithuania typically votes pro-Israel in the United Nations. Bilateral trade between Lithuania and Israel amounted to 270 million euros in 2016.

In August 2018 the PM of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu visited Lithuania. One of the points of his journey became the Memorial in Paneriai. About 70 thousand Jews were killed in this region in WW2. Netanyahu's grandfather was almost murdered here.

Also, the Israel PM requested the Lithuanian Government to transfer remains of Jewish sage the Vilna Gaon to Israel. In February 2019, Lithuania rejects the request. Arnoldas Pikzirnis, Mr. Skvernelis's national security advisor, told AFP that the request to transfer the remains to Israel had been denied because the "Vilna Gaon is an inseparable part of Lithuania's Jewish community and Lithuania history."

In March 2019, the Prime Minister of Lithuania Saulius Skvernelis who runs for President claimed that in case he will win the election, he will think about relocation of the Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius replied that the current position of the country regarding this issue ramains.

From March to May 2019, in Israel is taking place the Festival of Lithuanian culture. The Lithuanian Minister of Culture Mindaugas Kvietkauskas attended the opening of the festival.

Jewish Community:

Jewish history in Lithuania is rich and vibrant, dating back centuries. The first Jews in the area may have come from the Byzantine Empire and the Empire of the Khazars to the south and east. The bulk of Lithuanian Jewry arrived from Western and Central Europe in the 12th century and the years following, often at the invitation of local rulers and fleeing persecution.

Because Lithuania adopted Christianity relatively late (13th-14th centuries), anti-Semitism was historically weaker there than in Western and Central Europe, helping to further foster Jewish settlement in the region.

Lithuania's Grand Dukes actively encouraged Jewish immigration, recognizing the utility of Jewish merchants, artisans, and traders to national development. Some Lithuanian Jews were granted the special title of "Servi Camarae Regis" ("Servants of the Royal Chambers"), conferring certain privileges.

Vilnius, known as "Vilna" in Polish and Yiddish, grew into a legendary hub of yeshivas and Jewish learning, generating a rich body of rabbinic scholarship and an analytical, intellectual approach to Torah and Talmud study still known as the 'Lithuanian' method. The famous rabbi, scholar, and Kabbalist, Elijah Ben Judah Solomon Zalman, better known as the Gaon of Vilna, lived his entire life in Vilna in the 1700s.
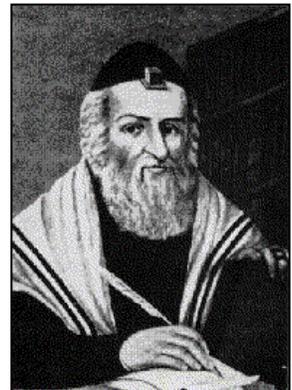
The Gaon of Vilna

During the 18th-early 20th centuries, Lithuania was a major center of Jewish intellectual activity. Vilnius was as much as 20-40% Jewish at points in its history. Before World War II, it was home to 100,000 Jews, and nicknamed "the Jerusalem of the North." Lithuanian Jewry became known for its distinctive "Litvak"

culture, centered around a stoic and intellectual approach to Judaism, as opposed to the more emotional and spontaneous Hassidism.

By the end of the 19th century, Jews were believed to be 10-15% of Lithuania's total population. Many Lithuanian Jews emigrated in the 1930s to the United States and South Africa, as a result of economic hardships and the growing authoritarianism of Lithuania's pre-war government. On the eve of World War II, Lithuanian Jewry numbered close to 250,000. The vast majority of Jews were murdered during the Nazi occupation, often with the participation of Lithuanian auxiliary police and military units. Mass executions of the Vilna ghetto were conducted at Paneriai (Ponary) forest outside the city, while the Kovno ghetto was liquidated at Ninth Fort. Both of these sites have memorials to commemorate these tragedies.

The majority of Lithuania's Jewish population still lives in Vilnius, with smaller communities in Kaunas (Kovno), Klaipeda, and Siauliai, among others. The Jewish community of Lithuania now numbers from 3,000-4,000, including resettled Lithuanian Jews, as well as Russian-speaking Jews from elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Renaldas Vaisbrodas, director of the Lithuanian Jewish Community (LJC), and Faina Kukliansky, the chair of the LJC, are headquartered in Vilnius. In 2013, Ms. Kukliansky replaced Simonas Alperavičius, the former longstanding chairman of the JCL. The JCL is an umbrella for Jewish organizations including the Union of Youth and Students, the Children's' Club "ILAN", the Gesher Community Center, the Jewish Cultural Club, the Union of Former Ghetto and Concentration Camp Prisoners, the Union of the Second World War Veterans, the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), the Welfare Center, the Ezra Medical Center, the fraternal lodge of B'nai B'rith, Feierlech Dance and Music Group, and Maccabi Sports Club.

JCL publishes the online newspaper *Jerusalem of Lithuania* at www.izb.com, in English and Lithuanian. JCL is supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/ "Joint"), Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Baltic Jewish Forum, B'nai B'rith International, Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, American Fund for Latvian and Lithuanian Jews, and other organizations and individuals.

The Association of Jewish Religious Communities is an umbrella organization for communities in Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, and Plunge. U.S.-born Rabbi Sholom Krinsky is the chief Chabad Lubavitch representative and has been based in Vilnius since 1994. Chabad Lubavitch runs the Bais Menachem Jewish Day School, and other Jewish education programs in Vilnius, including a nursery and kindergarten, a social center, and a kosher kitchen. These programs are affiliated with the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS.

In 2009, the third World Litvak Congress convened in Vilnius, with delegates from 14 countries. Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė visited the Congress, and presented remarks on compensation to the Jewish community for former communal property confiscated by Soviets and Nazis.

Vilna, 1937

The fourth World Litvak Congress took place in 2013 and commemorated the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto in September 1943.

The Limmud-Keshet Seminar of Jewish Communities in the Baltic Countries began in 2004, and is held annually. The seminar includes lectures and workshops on Jewish history, religion, traditions, philosophy, art, humor, and Yiddish, and includes a strong focus on youth participation and education.

The Lithuanian Jewish community has conducted a tolerance campaign called "Bagel Shop" against public expressions of anti-Semitism since 2009. Statistics from 2010 showed that 17% of pre-trial investigations concerning hate crimes were related to anti-Semitism and/or xenophobia.

The Jewish community maintains good relations with the Lithuanian government. State-supported Jewish institutions include a kindergarten, a school named after Sholom Aleichem, a library, and the Jewish Gaon State Museum of Lithuania. Permanent exhibitions at the state museum include collections of Jewish fine art and historical materials, a Holocaust exhibit, a memorial dedicated to victims killed at Ponary during the Holocaust, and a history of Jews during the interwar period and the Holocaust at the Tarbut Gymnasium. The Vilnius Yiddish Institute was established in 2001 at the Vilnius State University, and its Martynas Mažvydas National Library includes a significant Judaica section.

In February 2019, Šilutė Hugo Sheu museum published a book The "Jewish Community of Švėkšna from the 17th to the 20th Century".

In August 2019, the Lithuanian Jewish Community Center briefly closed amid threats of anti-Semitism through phone calls and letters. The threats were in response to Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Šimašius remove a plaque honoring Jonas Noreika, a high-ranking police officer who is believed to have personally overseen the murder of Jews. He has been honored in Lithuania as a hero for fighting against the Soviet Union, alongside Nazi forces. Within two days the center was re-opened following calls from NCSEJ and Lithuanian Prime Minister, Saulius Skvernelis.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is a concern in Lithuania. Incidents occur somewhat regularly, often during Jewish holidays or significant local anniversaries. Lithuanian nationalists often identify Jews with Russian and Communist "occupiers." The difficult issue of the local population's complicity in the Holocaust complicates Jewish-Lithuanian relations: a higher percentage of Lithuania's Jewish population was destroyed than almost anywhere else in occupied Europe.

Incidents of anti-Semitic rhetoric since 2000 have included derogatory comments by politicians, epithets yelled at Israeli teams during sporting events, burning of Israeli flags, vandalized Jewish buildings, memorials, and cemeteries, displays of Nazi flags, anti-Semitic cartoons and articles in the media, and individuals dressing as Nazis for parades and events.

Examples of anti-Semitism in Lithuanian media have included a cartoon of a hook-nosed Jew and a homosexual holding a globe between them with the caption, "Who controls the World?", and an article titled, "The Rabbis are Wreaking Havoc in Lithuania."

During 2011 a number of anti-Semitic incidents took place, such as desecration of the Ninth Fort in Kaunas; vandalism of the Ponary Memorial and the Plunge memorial wall, and the hanging of a banner with anti-Semitic slogans, including "Hitler was right" near a synagogue in Kaunas.

In October 2012, Julius Panka, a candidate from the small right-wing Nationalist Union party, published an anti-Semitic leaflet online including a caricature of a Jew and criticism of the government's decision to compensate the Jewish community for confiscated properties. Another candidate from the same party, Marius Galinis, appeared in an ad with an almost-shaved head, dressed in a suit with a swastika.

In April 2013, swastikas and other anti-Semitic slogans were found near the former Jewish ghetto in Vilnius. In May 2013, another incident took place in Panevezys, when an unknown group desecrated an entrance to the Jewish community building. Local authorities investigated both of the incidents, but perpetrators have not been identified.

In June 2015, Lithuanian police reported a swastika painted on a Jewish monument in Kaunas. Throughout the year, most anti-Semitic expression was found online; however, the police were instructed to take measures against all kinds of illegal activities and in August 2015, they arrested a man suspected of putting the head of a pig in front of a synagogue five years earlier.

A few hundred Lithuanian nationalists hold annual marches in February and March in Kaunas and Vilnius, often featuring right-wing and Nazi symbols.

In April 2015, the March of the Living (a Holocaust remembrance) took place at the Paneriai Memorial in Vilnius. In September 2015, Speaker of the Parliament Loreta Graužinienė participated in the annual commemoration ceremony at the Paneriai Memorial.

In April 2016, the Holocaust Memorial in Vilkaviškis, in southwestern Lithuania, was vandalized. In May 2016, the community sent a letter to the government demanding an end to abuses of the site at Ninth Fort, which has recently been partially privatized and is used for events including weddings and other receptions.

In November 2016, Kukliansky headed a campaign to remove a plaque memorializing Jonas Noreika, a notorious Lithuanian nationalist who participated in the killing of Jews during the Holocaust.

At the 2017 March of the Living at the Paneriai Memorial in Vilnius, the Prime Minister of Lithuania, the Minister of Culture, the Lithuanian Ambassador to Israel, and the Deputy Foreign Minister participated with thousands of other Litvak citizens to honor the victims of the Holocaust.

Criticism of the Vilnius Museum of Genocide Victims arose in March 2018 due to its equivocation of the Holocaust and Soviet occupation. Only one room is dedicated to discussing the Holocaust, while the others feature exhibits on the KGB and Soviet security forces. Tensions also remain over a government plan to renovate the Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports, which the Soviets originally built over a Jewish cemetery.

In July 2019, city workers in Vilnius removed a plaque honoring a Nazi collaborator that has been at the center of lawsuits and numerous protest campaigns.

Holocaust Education and Commemoration

Beginning in 1994, Lithuania has observed a National Memorial Day for Holocaust Victims on September 23, commemorating the victims of the destruction of the Vilnius ghetto, who the Nazis murdered at Paneriai in 1943.

In 1998, President Adamkus established the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. This historical commission promotes research, education, and commemoration. The American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith International, along with other Jewish organizations, are represented on the Commission.

In September 2002, the Lithuanian historical commission convened an international conference, "The Holocaust in Lithuania: Aspects of Modern History, Education, and Justice." Events included a ceremony at the Paneriai memorial just outside Vilnius, which marks the site where 70,000 Jews were shot and killed in 1943. During the conference, the government approved a plan to restore sections of the historic Jewish quarter in Vilnius, and the historical commission signed an agreement to provide Holocaust-related teacher training in Lithuania.

In 2003, Lithuania became a member state of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In April 2005, the Holocaust Investigation Center at Israel's Yad Vashem Memorial signed a cooperation agreement with the Vilnius International Commission for Investigation of Nazi and Soviet Occupational Crimes.

The Government of Lithuania passed a resolution declaring 2011 to be the official Year of Remembrance for Holocaust Victims in Lithuania. The Jewish community and government held several projects that promoted Holocaust education.

Lithuania's Genocide and Resistance Research Center has developed a list of 1,070 Lithuanians who might have contributed to fighting against the Holocaust in the country between 1941 and 1944. In September 2013, President Grybauskaitė awarded the Life Saving Cross to forty-seven individuals for rescuing Jews

from the Holocaust. More than 800 Lithuanians have been recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations" by the State of Israel.

In 2013, Lithuania held a ceremony to observe the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto. Commemoration events took place at the president's office, the parliament, and at the Paneriai memorial, attended by President Grybauskaitė, Prime Minister Butkevičius, Speaker of Parliament Vydas Gedvilas, and others.

In October 2017, the Lithuanian government found a trove of Jewish documents and manuscripts thought to have been destroyed in the Holocaust. The rare materials included a postcards and letter from Marc Chagall and Sholem Aleichem. Lithuanian officials have worked closely with the YIVO Institute in New York to preserve the materials.

In February 2017, it was announced that a new Jewish museum will open in the city of Seduva, designed by the same team that created the POLIN Museum in Warsaw.

Restitution

Lithuania was the first of the newly independent post-Soviet states to enact laws to designate and protect Holocaust-related sites. A 1997 law provided for the restitution of private property to Lithuanian citizens. In October 2000, a state-funded commission helped convene the Vilnius International Forum on Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Assets, which was attended by 37 national delegations as well as representatives from the Council of Europe.

The Seimas passed a bill in 2000 providing for the transfer of historic Torah scrolls, housed in the Mažvydas National Library, to local and foreign Jewish communities and organizations. In 2002, at a Vilnius ceremony, the Lithuanian government relinquished more than 300 Torah scrolls and sacred books saved and hidden during the Nazi occupation. The scrolls included texts of the Vilna Gaon from the 18th century. An international delegation, headed by Israel's deputy foreign minister and one of Israel's two chief rabbis, accepted the Torahs.

In 2011, a $53 million restitution package was announced, to be paid out over 10 years, for communal property seized during the Holocaust. The law also provided $1.1 million for one-time payments to individuals.

The World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) meets regularly with Lithuanian officials, including the President, Speaker of Parliament, Foreign Minister, and ambassadors. Meetings take place in the United States, Lithuania, and Israel. WJRO continues to work with the government to ensure proper allocation of restitution.

War Crimes

The Lithuanian Catholic Church condemned anti-Semitism at a March 2000 bishops' conference. The Church expressed regret that during the German occupation, "a portion of the faithful failed to demonstrate charity to the persecuted Jews, did not grasp any opportunity to defend them, and lacked the determination to influence those who aided the Nazis."

Lithuania has made little progress in the prosecution of suspected Lithuanian collaborators in the Nazi genocide. In February 2001, Kazys Gimzauskas was convicted of war crimes, though the court did not sentence him, citing his poor health. Gimzauskas is the only war criminal convicted by Lithuania or any Soviet successor state to date. The Simon Wiesenthal Center has criticized the government for its policy of equating the Soviet occupation and Holocaust as a "double genocide." According to Efraim Zuroff, the Center's chief Nazi hunter, Lithuanian officials have yet to successfully prosecute any one of the 20,000 Lithuanians who collaborated during the Holocaust. Of the three who have faced trial, none were found guilty.

Dissatisfied with the Lithuanian government's efforts to address the past, the Simon Wiesenthal Center launched "Operation Last Chance" in July 2002, offering monetary rewards for individuals supplying evidence that leads to the successful prosecution of war criminals. This controversial campaign has encountered much resistance in Lithuania and the other Baltic countries.

In November 2005, the general prosecutor's office announced that 84-year old Algimantas Daiilide would be tried in Vilnius for collaborating with Nazis in the Holocaust during the war. Daiilide was deported from the United States to Germany in 2003 after it was discovered that he had hidden his past. He is accused of being a member of a local wartime police unit that actively participated in the Holocaust.

In 2017, a Lithuanian publisher withdrew works by author Rūta Vanagaitė, whose 2016 book "Our People" discusses the collaboration of Lithuanians with Nazi forces in perpetrating the Holocaust, citing statements by her regarding Lithuanian war crimes and collaboration as "unacceptable…and incompatible with [our] values." In 2018, the Lithuanian parliament considered a government-sponsored bill that would ban selling material that "distorts historical facts" about the nation, seeking to limit free speech about the Holocaust in Lithuania.