

Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, Jurgita Šiaučiušaitė-Verbickienė (eds.), *Lietuvos Žydai. Istorinė studija*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2012, 567 p. ISBN 978-9955-23-634-4

Jewish history in Lithuania stretches back hundreds of years and, in particular in the past half-millennium or so, Lithuania or ‘Lita’, however defined, was home for one of the most dynamic Jewish communities on earth. Lita was not a clearly delineated area, but a broad region reaching, more or less, from ethnic Polish to Russian territories. While it would be inaccurate and ahistorical to identify Lita with the present-day Lithuanian Republic, the history of Jews in historical Lithuania should obviously be a major concern for Lithuanians in formulating their own historical identity. In this task, the collection under review here should make a major positive contribution.

This volume aims to cover the entirety of Lithuanian Jewish history, from the late 14th century to the present day, by presenting five chronological units that include essays on various aspects of Jewish life in Lithuania. Obviously, such an ambitious study could hardly be written by a single author. While the bulk of the essays are by Lithuanian specialists, these are joined by American, Israeli and German historians. A large portion of the book (over one third) is devoted to the period 1918–1945, probably reflecting reader interest and the state of historiography. A number of maps, tables and illustrations also enrich the book.

This collection begins with a useful historiographical essay including both classic works from the 19th century (and earlier) to the present day. One weakness here is the absence, on the whole, of German and Polish-language works. Possibly this absence reflects the authors’ conception of their target audience. In any case, the essay provides a useful overview of historiography and, perhaps even more importantly, a large bibliography of works in Russian, Lithuanian, Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

Jurgita Šiaučiušaitė-Verbickienė authored the first unit, covering roughly the first four centuries of Jewish life in Lithuania. Here she draws on her own earlier work on Jews in the grand duchy, and provides a good deal of detail on their legal and social situation. One chapter here is devoted to Jewish autonomy, including the *kahal* and *vaad*. Other chapters look at economic life, Jewish competition with Christians, and how this competition strained relations between the two groups. A final section looks at Jewish religion and scholarship, including the Vilnius Gaon. It is difficult, at least for this reviewer, to find serious problems in this interesting

and informative unit. I would question, however, the author's use of the words 'society' (*visuomenė*) and 'integration' in this early period. While some voices were raised in the 18th (mainly late 18th ...) century on the possibility of integrating Jews into a future 'society' here, neither integration nor 'society' in the normal sense of the word yet existed. It seems more reasonable to speak of 'castes' or 'estates' as a way of understanding the social-political life of this place and time. However, the author may well be using 'society' as a shorthand for 'inhabitants' or 'subjects', and her main object, of course, is to give an overview of Jewish history here. Another possible weakness is the fact that Jews here are nearly always presented as objects, of economic forces, political privileges (or the revocation of them), Christian conceptions of them, rather than the subjects of history. The one exception to this tendency is the chapter on spiritual and intellectual life. Possibly because of the dearth of sources, the social and internal life of the Lithuanian Jews (aside from institutional life) is almost absent.

The book's second unit covers the period of Russian rule over the region. A number of authors cover demography and economy, press and literature, education (traditional and modern), religious/intellectual life (*Haskalah* vs. *Hassidism*), and political life. Three essays by Darius Staliūnas look at the 'Jewish question', cooperation between Lithuanians and Jews, and antisemitism. These essays are all excellent if of necessity somewhat superficial, at least, the reader is often left wanting to know more detail and depth on the subject at hand. The authors' different approaches and writing styles also contribute to a somewhat choppy read. Still, each essay is packed with information and insight. The extensive footnotes also provide a rich bibliography. In short, it is difficult to think of a better short introduction to Jewish history in the Lithuanian lands of the Russian Empire.

Unit three covers the short interwar period, 1918–1940. Again a number of authors provide essays on different topics. One could question why these two decades receive almost as much coverage as the entire pre-1795 or the Imperial period, but again, this probably reflects current interests and historiography. Vladas Sirutavičius provides an excellent and even-handed overview of politics. As he points out, the 'honeymoon' period of extensive Jewish autonomy within the new Lithuanian Republic only lasted a few years, but even into the undemocratic 1930s, while the Lithuanian government privileged ethnic Lithuanians in various respects, it did not tolerate overt antisemitic behaviour, much less violence. In this respect, the situation in Lithuania was certainly no worse than, and on the whole better than, in neighbouring states. Economically, as the next essay shows, Jews in Lithuania saw their relative position decline, but not hugely (from ca. 28% to ca. 24% of the total economy). Probably most radical was the social-educational transformation of Lithuanian Jews in this period. While in 1918 only a few Jews were fluent in Lithuanian, by 1939 acculturation had made significant inroads, even while most Jews continued

to speak Yiddish or other languages more fluently than Lithuanian. At the same time, as in most contemporary European countries, antisemitism grew in these years. The specifics and reasons for this phenomenon in the Lithuanian state are well stated here in a short essay. This unit ends with a short overview of Jewish culture in the period (including Vilnius), and a look at Jews in the Klaipėda region.

The controversial and painful period of the Second World War is addressed by Arūnas Bubnys in three short chapters: on the first Soviet period (1940–1941), the Holocaust (1941–1944), and Jewish anti-Nazi resistance. While these essays are informative, the selection of Bubnys rather than a specialist in Jewish history to cover this topic seems strange. The essays are, however, unimpeachable from a scholarly point of view, though the almost total avoidance of the painful issue of Lithuanian collaboration is problematic. Perhaps, given the limited space available in this single volume, the editors preferred to limit coverage of this highly controversial period to a sober, factual overview. It is regrettable, however, that findings from Christoph Dieckmann's important two-volume study *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941-1944* were not integrated into this section.

Two short essays consider the post-Holocaust period. Samuel Barnai provides information about professional, educational and cultural realities for Soviet Lithuanian Jews. According to figures he cites, even in 1979 among Jews living in the Lithuanian SSR, less than 5% were native speakers of Lithuanian. It would have been interesting to know, however, to what extent Lithuanian Jews used Russian vs. Lithuanian in everyday life, and to what extent survivors of the Holocaust and postwar emigrants saw themselves as members of a single community. Sirutavičius discusses the contribution of Lithuanian Jews to the Lithuanian patriotic movement under Perestroika. Discussions and evaluations of the Holocaust during this exciting period are also considered, albeit briefly. Strangely, no essay covers the post-independence period: possibly because these decades are too recent to be considered history? Considering the reinvigoration of Jewish life and Jewish studies, even the controversies between Chabad and the 'old' Jewish community in Vilnius, it seems regrettable that a final chapter on this most recent period could not have been attempted.

To sum up, this is an admirable and rich collection of scholarly essays. It will be very useful to anyone interested in Jewish history in this region. Its weaknesses are probably inevitable in such an ambitious overview, and do not detract from its overall value. For the study of Lithuanian Jewry, this collected volume promises to become a 'first stop' for specialists and general audiences alike.

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