



reading

BOOKS ABOUT LITHUANIA

Not surprisingly, Lithuania's literature, both fiction and non-fiction, often focuses on its extraordinary and often tragic twentieth-century history. Recommended here are some powerful accounts of the Shoah in Lithuania and the Soviet occupation. But as you prepare to explore this Baltic nation, you might also want to read about its multi-cultural capital, its most famous rabbi, or check out *Vilnius Poker*, an example of contemporary Lithuanian writing at its most inventive and mad.

Fiction

Collishaw, Stephan. *The Last Girl* (2003)

An elderly poet living in Vilnius in the 1990s is haunted by memories of how he betrayed, fifty years earlier, a young Jewish woman called Rachael. This British novel was named by the *Independent* newspaper as one of the books of the year, while the *Guardian* called it a "story that so successfully encompasses passion, morality, history, and art."

Gavelis, Ricardas. *Vilnius Poker* (1989)

A post-modern murder mystery not for the faint of heart, this somewhat unhinged novel was written in the last days of Soviet rule over Lithuania. It caused a sensation when it was published in Lithuania in 1989. Twenty years later, it was translated into English and described by reviewers as "brilliant and brutal." Its title derives from its view that "Life in Vilnius is a giant poker game, played by madmen."

Kanovich, Grigory. *Shtetl. A Love Song* (2012)

This autobiographic novel is both a love song and a Kaddish to the Lithuanian shtetl of Kanovich's childhood. It brings together family history and eyewitness accounts with an imagined reconstruction of the people and culture of the Jonava shtetl before the Nazi devastation. It has been acclaimed as one of the great pieces of writing about Lithuanian Jews.

Karpinowitz, Abraham. *Vilna My Vilna* (2015)

In 1937, Karpinowitz left Vilna (Vilnius). When he returned seven years later, the city's Jewish life had been virtually destroyed. These fifteen short stories, originally written in Yiddish, bring back to life this lost Jewish community. They focus not on the city's famous rabbis and scholars but on the poor and the underworld, bringing humanity and empathy to its tales of Jewish prostitutes, cobblers, fishwives, barbers, and thieves.

Sabaliauskaite, Kristina. *Vilnius, Wilno, Vilna* (2015)

Although the critically-acclaimed Sabaliauskaite is contemporary Lithuania's most widely-read author, this collection of three short stories is her first work to be translated into English. The story representing Vilnius, the Lithuanian name for the city, is told from the perspective of a former member of the Communist secret police. Wilno, the Polish name for the city, revolves around a group of young Polish girls. Perhaps most powerful is the tale of an elderly Jewish businessman returning to the city that he and Jews knew as Vilna.

Sepetys, Ruta. *Between Shades of Grey* (2011)

This piece of young adult fiction tells the story of Lina, a young artist from a well-to do family. In 1941, she, her mother, and brother are seized by the Soviet secret police and deported to a forced labor camp in Siberia. An international best-seller and prize-winner, the *New York Times* describes this book by the Lithuanian-American Sepetys as a "superlative first novel."



reading

BOOKS ABOUT LITHUANIA

L I T H U A N I A

Non-Fiction

Ashbourne, Alexandra. *Lithuania: The Rebirth of a Nation, 1991-1994* (1999)

An examination of Lithuania in the first years following the end of Communist rule. It includes many discussions with Lithuanian citizens describing the dramatic lead-up to independence and the difficulties the country faced in overcoming a legacy of Soviet domination.

Briedis, Laimondas. *Vilnius. City of Strangers* (2009)

Written in an accessible, attractive style, this is a history of Vilnius from its beginnings in the 14th century to modern times. The title refers to the multi-cultural nature of the city including its large Polish population and long Jewish heritage.

Cassedy, Ellen. *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (2012)

An award-winning account of a woman's journey to Lithuania and her attempt to understand her family's experience during the Holocaust. What begins as a personal story broadens into a wider examination of the Shoah in Lithuania and a revealing account of how the country deals with it today. It includes a wide range of voice and perspectives and was highly praised for its balance, sensitivity, and insights.

Dieckmann, Christoph and Saulius Suzidelis. *Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews During Summer and Fall of 1941: Sources and Analysis* (2006)

This is an important academic work on the most murderous period of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Between June and December of 1941, the majority of the country's Jews were killed by the Nazis and Lithuanian collaborators. Based

on official sources, it analyzes, in a detailed but devastating manner, Nazi planning for the destruction, the key stages of the genocide, and the units involved in perpetuating it.

Fishman, David. *The Book Smugglers* (2017)

A true-life tale of poets turned partisans living in the Vilna ghetto during World War Two. They risk all to try to stymie Nazi efforts to loot and destroy Vilna's remarkable collection of rare Jewish books and manuscripts.

Levin, Dov. *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania* (2000)

Levin was a survivor of the Kaunas ghetto, a partisan fighter, and a leading historian of Lithuanian Jewry. This book examines the Jewish community from medieval to modern times, highlighting its diversity and creativity. Reflecting the author's mastery of Hebrew, Yiddish, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, and German-language sources, it provides an original account of the interwar and Holocaust periods. It also examines the culture and character of the "Litvak": Lithuanian Jews such as the Vilna Gaon who became renowned for their intellectual, rational approach to religion and the world.

Stern, Eliyahi. *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (2014)

There have been many books about the great scholar and rabbi known as the Vilna Gaon. One of the most recent and ambitious is this biography. It looks at the Gaon's famed intellect, eccentric personality, and role as leader of Vilna's Jewish community. It also argues against the common view of the Gaon as a defender of rabbinic Judaism against innovation and presents him instead as a modernizing, even radical, figure.