



Timeline

L I T H U A N I A

LITHUANIA THROUGH THE AGES

Over its long history, Lithuania has experienced independence, alliance, and subjugation. Most traumatically, the country was one of the European lands most exposed to the traumas of the twentieth century, as it was swapped between its Nazi and Soviet overlords. This timeline notes the destruction of those years including the catastrophic results of the Holocaust. But it also highlights some of the brighter achievements of Lithuanian life, including the remarkable creativity of its Jewish population. Many of the dates and figures provided are approximate only.

■ General timeline ■ Jewish timeline

THE BALTIC TRIBES

- BCE** — **9000** First human inhabitation.
- **2000** Ancestors of the Balts move to the area.
- CE** — **700 CE** Lithuanian language becomes distinct from Latvian, its closest relative.
Tribal life and pagan customs continue for many centuries.
First Jews, probably traders from the east, arrive.
- **1100** Tribal groupings: Highlanders in east and south west, lowlanders in west.
A larger group of German Jews settle in area.

A POWERFUL, LARGE LITHUANIA

- **1230** Highlander leader Mingdaugas unites the Lithuanian tribes.
Mingdaugas creates the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a powerful state.
- **1263** Mingdaugas assassinated.
Christian invasion by Livonian Order and Teutonic Knights.
Lithuania fights them off and emerges as one of Europe's largest countries.
It includes present-day Belarus, Ukraine, parts of Poland and Russia.
Jewish community remains poor and isolated.
- **1320** Vilnius founded.
- **1365** Lithuania Grand Duke Jogalia agrees to be also King of Poland.
Lithuania becomes last European country to adopt Christianity.
- **1388** *Charter by Grand Duke grants Jews rights and self-rule.*
Community becomes wealthier than Jews in Poland and Germany.
- **1410** Lithuania, in alliance with Polish Kingdom, defeats Prussian Teutonic Knights.
Vilnius, with population of 25,000, is one of Europe's biggest cities.
- **1495** *Jewish position deteriorates with new ruler. Jews expelled from country.*
- **1503** *Jews permitted to return. Community re-establishes itself.*



timeline

LITHUANIA THROUGH THE AGES

A PARTNER IN A POLISH EMPIRE

- **1569** The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth formed.
Lithuania, the junior partner of a powerful European empire.
Polish gentry and culture flourish in Lithuania, especially in Vilnius.
- **1579** Vilnius University established.
Nobles enjoy power & privilege: they elect king, control parliament.
Jewish population 120,000, Yiddish-speaking, religious, strong ties to Polish Jews.
- **1630** Great Synagogue of Vilna (Vilnius) built.
Lithuania a center of Jewish religious thought and learning.
- **1654** The Deluge: Commonwealth invaded by Sweden and Russia.
Jewish economy and infrastructure damaged by wars and instability.
- **1721** Lithuania population drops by 40% due to wars, famines, and plagues.
*Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon, recognized as great leader & scholar.
Develops Lithuania's legendary yeshiva system and mode of study.
He leads the misnagdim, the fierce opponents of the Hassidic movement.*

UNDER THE RUSSIAN TSARS

- **1795** Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth ends as lands carved up by rival powers.
Most of Lithuania now part of Russian Empire. Klaipeda in west goes to Prussia.
- **1830** Lithuanian resistance to Russian rule, including from Catholic church.
*Vilnius (Vilna), the Jerusalem of the North, has 40,000 Jews.
Extensive commerce, welfare, and education infrastructure in Vilnius.
Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), rise of secular Yiddish and Hebrew literature.*
- **1861** Serfs emancipated.
- **1863** Lithuanian rebellion against Russian rule fails, Tsarist repression deepens.
- **1867** Lithuanians begin migrating to US.
- **1881** Wave of pogroms in Russian Empire after assassination of Tsar Alexander II.
Many Lithuania Jews emigrate to US, South Africa, Land of Israel.
- **1900** Vilnius industrial center, population of 160,000, heavy Polish influence.
*75,000 Jews in Vilnius & 100 synagogues. (Only Choral Synagogue active today.)
Increasing prosperity and professionalisation but most Jews still poor.
Jewish culture thrives, including Zionist, Bundist, & Communist groups.*

INDEPENDENCE BETWEEN THE WARS

- **1914** World War One: Lithuania part of Russian Empire fighting Germany.
Mass expulsion of Jews after rumors of spying for Germany.
- **1915** Russian forces retreat & Germany occupies all of Lithuania.
Remaining Jews suffer famine and hunger but charitable system continues.



timeline

LITHUANIA THROUGH THE AGES

- 1918** Germany defeated. Lithuania declares independence with Vilnius as capital. Two-year period of instability and wars against Poland and Communist Russia.
- 1920** Poland conquers Vilnius; it remains part of Poland until 1939. Independent Lithuania, with Kaunas as capital, stabilizes itself. Becomes one of the first countries in world to allow women the vote. *A brief Golden Age for Lithuanian Jews with equal rights & thriving community. Huge numbers of Jews return from exile in Russia. Vilnius, under Poland, remains a key Jewish center, with 80,000 Jews.*
- 1926** Right-wing coup installs authoritarian leader. Political parties banned. *Jewish position and communal rights weaken with rise in anti-Semitism.*
- 1939** Klaipeda in west Lithuania with its large German population seized by Nazis. Soviet Union conquers Vilnius from Poland and returns it to Lithuanian control. In return, Soviets demand right to install their troops in Lithuania. Secret Nazi-Soviet plans that USSR will conquer Lithuania. *Jewish population 160,000: about 7% of Lithuania.*

THE BLOODLANDS: WORLD WAR TWO & THE HOLOCAUST

- 1940** Soviets occupy Lithuania and incorporate it into USSR. 38,000 Lithuanians including political and social elite deported to Russia. Many others killed as Soviets ruthlessly assert control. *Jewish national activity prohibited. Many Jews flee Soviet rule. But Jews from Nazi-occupied Poland flee to Lithuania. Population now 250,000.*
- 1941** Nazis betray their Soviet allies, invade USSR, and occupy Lithuania. Germans are welcomed as liberators by many Lithuanian nationalists. *Even before German occupation complete, Lithuanians begin pogroms. Nazis, with Lithuanian assistance, carry out mass shootings of Jews. Most of country's Jews killed by end of year, including at Ponar Forest.*
- 1942** 40,000 Jews remain in ghettos and labor camps. *"Not Like Sheep to the Slaughter": Abba Kovner leads ghetto fighters.*
- 1943** The ghettos liquidated. Jews sent to death or labor camps.
- 1944** Germans retreat. Lithuania again incorporated into USSR. *Over 90% of Lithuania's Jews killed in Holocaust, one of the highest rates. Many survivors leave country, including for Palestine.*

SOVIET RULE AND RESISTANCE

- 1944** Soviets resume killings and mass deportations of Lithuanian nationalists. 475,000 Lithuanians, including Jews, killed during World War Two. Lithuanian guerrilla warfare against Soviets begins. Will last until 1952.



timeline

LITHUANIA THROUGH THE AGES

- **1948** 31,917 Lithuanians deported to Siberia and far east in single night.
Jewish communal and religious life severely restricted.
Communists authorities downplay Jewish aspect of the Holocaust.
- **1953** With death of Stalin, mass arrests diminish and some freeing of culture.
- **1959** *Jewish population 24,672. 69 % speak Yiddish as mother tongue.*
- **1970** Soviet-planned urbanization. Half country lives in towns, was 28% in 1950.
- **1974** Opposition to Soviets, including in Catholic Church, both open & underground.
Several thousand Jews allowed to emigrate, mainly to Israel.
- **1987** USSR under Gorbachev permits greater Lithuanian freedom of expression.
Lithuania at heart of push for independence from USSR.
- **1989** Gorbachev allows elections. Non-communist nationalists win.
Hands across the Baltics: Huge, non-violent independence protests.
Total population 3.7 million. Will diminish in following years.
Jewish population dropped to 12,312. 35% native-Yiddish speakers.
- INDEPENDENT AGAIN**
- **1990** Lithuania becomes first Soviet satellite to declare independence.
- **1991** USSR refuses to accept. 13 Lithuanian protesters killed by Soviet troops.
Communist rule in USSR collapses. Independence achieved.
Migration continues. By 2004, fewer than 4,000 Jews in country.
- **1992** Democratic elections: Ex-Communists surprisingly triumph.
- **1993** Last Russian soldiers leave country.
- **1994** Old Town of Vilnius named UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- **1995** Independence blues: Corruption scandals, unemployment, 1000 % inflation.
Lithuanian President visits Israel to apologize for country's role in Holocaust.
- **1997** Large-scale privatization and economic reforms launched.
- **2000** The Baltic Tiger: One of the world's fastest-growing economies.
- **2004** Lithuania joins EU and NATO.
- **2009** Economy badly affected by global economic crisis.
Dalia Grybauskaitė elected first woman president.
- **2017** *Publishers destroy book that discusses Lithuanian collaboration in Holocaust.*
- **2018** Lithuania rated 36th most democratic nation out of 167.
893 Lithuanians have been honored by Israel for saving Jews during World War Two
- **Today** Population 2.8 million, down from 3.7 million in 1989.
84% ethnic Lithuanian, 7% Poles (mainly in Vilnius), 6% Russian.
Jewish population: 3,600, mainly in Vilnius and Kaunas. 0.1% of total population.
Two active synagogues, including Choral Synagogue in Vilnius.