

**Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas (eds.), *A Pragmatic Alliance. Jewish-Lithuanian Political Cooperation at the Beginning of the 20th Century*, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press 2011, pp. 400.**

by *Klaus Richter*

From a linguistic point of view, the history of Lithuania prior to the end of the Second World War poses a challenge. Jews, Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, Belarusians, Latvians and Germans made Lithuania part of the multi-ethnic belt stretching from the Baltic Sea coast to the Balkans. As each of these groups had its own language (or more than one, e.g. Hebrew and Yiddish in the case of the Lithuanian Jews), researching on multi-ethnic Lithuania becomes a complicated task. Moreover, the broader trend in Central Eastern Europe after 1990/91 to write history as national history has enforced the exclusion of Jews and other minorities. Vice versa, books on the history of the Lithuanian Jews tended to show little understanding for the life of ethnic Lithuanians, focusing instead on conflicts and anti-Jewish violence.

The book discussed here serves as a remarkable indicator for a reversal of this trend. Over the last years, Jewish history has experienced an upsurge on the Lithuanian book market, but hardly has there been a volume that has so inextricably connected the development of political ideas and movements of both Lithuanians and Jews. This was only possible because all contributors to this volume have used a wide array of sources in all the relevant languages such as Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish and German.

Editors *Darius Staliūnas* and *Vladas Sirutavičius* determine the main aim of this volume to deconstruct the “ethnocentric view [...] that prevailed in Lithuanian historiography for a long time” (1) and define as main common questions for the articles what role the groups assigned to each other in their respective political plans, and what attitudes the respective elites adopted towards each other, while at the same time stressing the importance of territorial concepts. The volume covers roughly the time period from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the year 1923 when the League of Nations accepted the incorporation of Vilnius into Poland. This year, according to the editors, marked a turning point, as Lithuanians had considered Jews to be important allies only as long as the Vilnius question had remained an open issue. This period is characterized by political transitions and ruptures: the Revolution of 1905, the creation of the Imperial Duma and the First World War, which was followed by the emergence of an independent Lithuanian state on a national basis, struggling

for survival between Bolsheviks and the new Polish state. Although Lithuanian activists considered Jews a valuable ally against the Poles, the editors state that economic anti-Semitism played a vital role for Lithuanian nationalism and had a significant influence on the cooperation between Jews and Lithuanians, which was thus more “reminiscent of a pragmatic, that is convenient alliance, rather than a firm union based on common principles” (15).

The first article, written by *Mordechai Zalkin*, analyzes the “silence of sources” (22) regarding Jews and Lithuanians, i.e. the reasons why the Lithuanian nationalist movement was practically absent in Jewish pre-World War I writing. He attributes this to the fact that everyday interactions made the Lithuanian peasantry much more important for Jews than Lithuanian intellectuals. Jews described Lithuanian peasants as part of an organic Lithuanian territorial space, which was part of a larger “Litvakland” (34). Lithuanian “high culture” thus went largely unnoticed; the idea of “assimilation” into Lithuanian culture remained unthinkable. According to Zalkin, it was only with the emergence of independent Lithuania that there was a growing interest of Jews in Lithuanian culture, which led to “a limited partnership accompanied by preserving their Jewish identity and interests” (37).

*Darius Staliūnas* sees the turn of the century and the emergence of a political sphere as the crucial turning point in the relations between Jews and Lithuanians, a process which culminated in the elections for the Imperial Duma. The ensuing co-operation of Jewish and Lithuanian political parties was, according to Staliūnas, rather a result of common anti-Polish views than of common goals. Moreover, the co-operation was hampered by reasonable doubts of Jews whether Lithuanian politicians were at all capable of organizing the Lithuanian peasantry, who were regarded as uncivilized and under the influence of local authorities, landowners and Catholic priests. *Vladimir Levin* further delves into Lithuanian-Jewish political co-operation in the late Imperial period. Illustrating the different concepts political activists (especially of the Jewish socialist Bund party) had of territorial entities such as “Lithuania”, “Poland” and “Russia”, Levin emphasizes that Lithuanians and Jews co-operated in all four Duma electoral campaigns, as both groups were situated roughly on the “progressive”, “oppositional” side of the political spectrum. Levin particularly elaborates on the contacts between the Lithuanian Social Democrat Party (LSDP) and the Bund. While Jewish politicians regarded Lithuanians merely as “brothers in misery” (92), their co-operation did in fact create a “firm basis” (108) for future co-operation in post-war independent Lithuania.

*Marcos Silber* analyzes the development of political attitudes of Jewish politicians towards the emerging independent Lithuanian state at the end of World War I. In detail, Silber looks at four different visions of a future Lithuania: those of Folkism, Bundism, Russian Zionism and German Zionism. However, all these designs came to a halt when the German occupants set up a purely Lithuanian council to develop plans for a Lithuanian state on an ethnonational basis. Such a state seemed a “frightful choice” (149) for Lithuanian Jews, who were eager to create a state more congruent with the historical *Lite*, i.e., the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The unreliability of Bolshevik Russia, however, led to the abandonment of such ideas and the acceptance of a Lithuanian state offering strong minority rights. *Eglė Bendikaitė* further elaborates on the position of the Zionists in Lithuania regarding visions of a future post-World War I Lithuania and focuses on the work of Jewish lawyer Simshon Rozenboim. Bendikaitė convincingly claims that the realization that *Lite* was unattainable was the main impetus for Jews to turn towards Lithuanians as political allies, with the attempt to include Vilnius in the future state becoming the strongest bond between those two groups.

*Vladas Sirutavičius* pays a close look at the elections to the Constituent Seimas in early 1920, which has been mythologized as a national manifestation of Lithuanians with a voter turnout of more than 90%. Sirutavičius de-constructs this myth on the basis of the fact that precise population figures of post-war Lithuania remain unknown. Regarding Jewish-Lithuanian relations, Sirutavičius shows that the Lithuanian press ran a campaign for electoral participation, which states that the Jews, who were allegedly better organized than the Lithuanians, would be overrepresented in the Seimas. *Theodore R. Weeks*, on the other hand, analyzes the situation of Jews in Vilnius, which in 1920 was occupied by Polish troops. This, Weeks argues, rendered the option by then preferred by Jews – Vilnius as the capital of a Lithuanian state – obsolete. Moreover, Weeks quotes sources that indicate that Jews abstained from taking part in the 1922 Sejm elections in Vilnius due to a heightened anti-Semitic atmosphere in the city. Week’s article shows that neither Poles nor Lithuanians were seriously interested in Jewish concepts of a multi-ethnic Vilnius as the capital of a multi-ethnic state and Jews thus “had to choose between two mutually exclusive nation programs, neither of which was their own” (222).

The book is a valuable addition to the corpus of recently published studies on Jewish-Christian relations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and almost a pioneering work regarding the history of Lithuania. One of its achievements is that it reveals several desiderata and starting points for future research, one of which would be a more transnationally oriented approach on the relations of Jews and other ethnic groups in whole *Lite* and putting this territorial concept into

perspective with Lithuanian and Polish federal concepts, which evolved at the end of World War I and have been neglected in the national narratives thus far. For now, this volume stands as the first wholehearted attempt at writing a common Jewish-Lithuanian history, which neither “integrates” Jews into “Lithuanian history” nor the other way around. Thus, the book manages to show to what extent co-operation between the groups was possible and how conceivable mutual active support in general was.

*Klaus Richter, German Historical Institute Warsaw (DHI Warsaw)*