BOOK REVIEWS

Vladas Sirutavičius and Darius Staliūnas, eds., *A Pragmatic Alliance: Jewish-Lithuanian Political Cooperation at the Beginning of the 20th Century*. Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2011. Pp. 274. ISBN 978-615-5053-17-7

No doubt more than a few readers will be surprised at the title of this collection of essays. Given the fate of European Jewry, cooperation between Jews and their Gentile neighbours is probably not the first notion which enters the minds of the broader public when it considers the history of the 20th century. More often than not, Jewish-Lithuanian relations in particular evoke a collective memory of persecution, pogroms and the Holocaust. In many minds, the history of Jewish-Lithuanian relations is simply a subset of the history of anti-Semitism. Two other, somewhat more uplifting themes dominate the narratives. One is that of an idyllic earlier period of peaceful, if not cosy, relations between the Lithuanian peasantry and their Jewish merchants, a frequent theme in many Lithuanian accounts, but also one reflected in a number of Jewish memoirs. A more credible historic theme concerns the impressive cultural legacy of the Litvak world, from paeans to the great Vilna Gaon to the modern miracle of the YIVO, the great scholarly achievement of Lithuanian Jewry.

To their credit, the editors of *A Pragmatic Alliance*, both scholars of the younger generation and well-regarded specialists of the modern period at the Lithuanian Institute of History, have constructed a volume of research essays reflecting a history which does not fit easily into any of the above-mentioned standard narratives of the past. Two aspects of the studies in question stand out. First, there is the extraordinary richness of the sources. The footnotes list a veritable legion of primary and secondary works in English, Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, German, Yiddish and Hebrew. Especially noteworthy is the archival material from Vilnius, Jerusalem, Moscow, St Petersburg, Kiev and New York. Second, the authors have managed to produce a historical tapestry of this crucial period which is refreshingly free of any kind of *Sonderweg*, the idea of a 'special path' to the Holocaust, which seeks to paint the genocide as the inevitable culmination of centuries-long Jew hatred specific to Germany and Eastern Europe. *A Pragmatic Alliance* will disappoint those looking for heroes and villains. There were, to be sure, many miscalculations and misunderstandings, not surprising given the horrendously complex and turbulent world of the early 20th century.

As late as the middle of the 19th century, the relationship of the Lithuanian peasants and Jews was essentially 'pre-modern', situated within the framework of a stratified semi-feudal society entrenched as it was within a traditional agrarian world. In Zygmunt Bauman's expression, Lithuania's Jews constituted a unique caste, one estate among others, occupying a place as social inferiors, beholden to the aristocracy, inhabiting an economic space next to, and sometimes above, the peasantry, often as agents of the landowners. Social interaction among the various estates (read also: ethnic/national communities) was ritualised and regulated by law and custom. The advent of 'modernity', especially industrialisation and the emergence of national movements, altered relations between Lithuania's various ethno-religious groups and undermined the traditional structures. The Revolution of 1905 accelerated the process, while the Great War and its aftermath completed the destruction of the old order. *A Pragmatic Alliance* recounts the efforts of Lithuania's national communities to forge some sort of political entity which would replace both Russian autocracy and the German occupation of 1915–18. It is an intricate story of national and social tensions and the futile attempts to create a Lithuanian political entity which would satisfy the conflicting Lithuanian, Jewish, Polish and Belarusian visions of a new polity.

Since the subtitle of the volume is committed to an analysis of 'Jewish-Lithuanian political cooperation', most of the authors deal with the two communities' differing visions for the Lithuania which was expected to emerge from the Great War. The revolutionary period of the early 20th century is dealt with by two historians: Darius Staliūnas, a senior researcher at the Lithuanian Institute of History, and Vladimir Levin, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Staliūnas's 'Collaboration of Lithuanians and Jews during the Elections to the First and Second Dumas' points out that while the Lithuanian-Jewish experience of forming a single election bloc in Kaunas *gubernia* 'was recalled in later years and served as an argument for future cooperation', the reality was far more prosaic. Anti-Polish calculations, based in part on the 'logic of the "lesser evil"' (63), played a more important part in cooperative political ventures than any sense of common purpose.

Levin's essay on 'Lithuanians in Jewish Politics of the Late Imperial Period', emphasises that while Vilnius played a central role in Jewish life within the Russian Empire, 'the Lithuanians occupied a marginal place in Jewish political discourse' (77). In addition to the fact that the Poles were the main focus of concern for Jewish politicians, there was also the fact of the 'absence of social contacts between Jews and Lithuanians and ignorance of the Lithuanian language' (78). With the few exceptions noted by Levin, Jews took little notice of the Lithuanian national movement. Despite considerable cooperation based on a common Marxist platform, the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) and the Jewish Bund competed

for influence. In Kaunas, Levin points out that some Jews romanticised 'the Lithuanian people as oppressed in the social and national senses'. But in Suwałki gubernia, it was the prominence of Roman Dmowski's anti-Semitic National National Democrats, who exerted a strong influence in the Polish 'borderlands' (*kresy*), that drew Jews to support Lithuanian candidates. An interesting aspect of Levin's essay is his portrayal of the Lithuanian Duma delegate Andrius Bulota (1872–1941), who defended the rights of Jews in the Tsarist parliament. In an otherwise fine essay, Levin is wrong on one point, his assertion that the 'Great Vilnius Assembly [of 1905] did not mention ethnic groups in the future Lithuanian autonomous entity' (91). In fact, the Assembly publicly referred to the rights of Lithuania's 'other nations' to be treated equally.

The insightful essay by Mordechai Zalkin, a professor of modern Jewish history at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and a foremost authority on Jewish-Lithuanian cultural relations, 'Lithuanian Jewry and the Lithuanian National Movement', explains why the Litvaks showed little interest and understanding of the emerging Lithuanian national movement of the 19th century. 'In the exilic Jews' consciousness,' he writes, 'any situation was considered to be of a temporary nature which – according to the historical experience – might become disastrous at any given moment' (24). Despite the lack of significant anti-Jewish violence in the Lithuanian lands before the Holocaust, Jews could not be sure what would replace the Russian imperial regime which, in the lands of the Litvaks, provided a relatively 'secure and stable' environment, in stark contrast to the violence in parts of Ukraine and Bessarabia. Many, if not most, Jews viewed 'Lithuania as an organic and natural *Lebensraum*, and of the autochthonic Lithuanians as part of this natural environment but not as a nation' (25–26). To them, the world of the ethnic Lithuanians was 'rather strange and even primitive' (27). This attitude encouraged a condescending albeit at times romanticised attitude towards the Lithuanian peasantry which continued to some extent into the interwar period. According to Zalkin, Jewish discussion of Lithuanian national aspirations was confined to a relatively small group of intelligentsia, although the number of Jews who supported a Lithuanian state increased after the Second World War. But even among the latter the emphasis was on maintaining a Jewish identity within their new country rather than integration.

Dr Marcos Silber of the University of Haifa explains what was, perhaps the central political problem in Lithuanian-Jewish relations in the aftermath of the Great War in his essay 'Lithuania? But which? The Changing Political Attitude of the Jewish Political Elite in East Central Europe toward Emerging Lithuania, 1015–1919'. The conundrum lay in the 'contested meaning' of Lithuania. For most Jews, 'Lithuania' was defined as 'Lite' or the land of the Yiddish-speaking Litvaks which roughly coincided with the post-Lublin Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1569–1795).

Lithuanian speakers made up a minority of the population in this region. Silber analyses the stance of the various Jewish political groupings which had a stake in a future Lithuanian state: the supporters of Simon Dubnow (Folkists), the Zionists and the Bund. Despite their differences, most of the Jewish elite opposed the establishment of a smaller Lithuania whose borders would include primarily ethnic Lithuanians: they preferred either an autonomous 'Lite' within a democratic, federal Russia, or a multinational confederate state based on the borders of the old Grand Duchy, with broad autonomy for the four major nationalities: Poles, Jews, Belarusians and Lithuanians, in other words 'a Lithuanian nationalities state instead of an ethnonational Lithuania' (137). The Jews protested against the powers granted the Lithuanian-dominated Council of Lithuania (the Taryba) by the German administration (Oberost), considering it unrepresentative. In the end, however, despite the fact that 'a full sovereign ethnonational Lithuanian nationalising state [separate from Russia] was seen as a frightful choice', the Folkists and Zionists were forced to accept 'the idea of a fully sovereign Lithuanian state that would accommodate its minorities in an egalitarian way' (149).

Eglė Bendikaite of the Lithuanian Institute of History, who has published extensively on Lithuanian Zionism, contributes an essay on 'The Zionist Perspective in the Struggle for Lite, 1916–1918'. Her work, partly based on the Central Zionist Archive (CZA) in Jerusalem, concludes that the 'unchanging Zionist priorities – to ensure the civic, political, and national rights of the country's Jews ... did not radically contradict the Lithuanian conception of statehood' (176). The Zionists were forced to recognise the emergence of a state dominated by Lithuanians, and sought to achieve Jewish national autonomy within the new reality. In the view of Lithuanian Zionists, the new Lithuania was preferable to inclusion within a larger polity dominated by the Poles. For his part, Vladas Sirutavičius examines the 'Lithuanian Administration and the Participation of Jews in the Elections to the Constituent Seimas'. According to Sirutavičius, some 44,700 voters cast ballots for the Jewish Popular Union in the elections to the Constituent Seimas in 1920, and about 55,000 cast votes for Jewish candidates to the First Seimas in 1922. While the elections were democratic and mostly fair, ethnic tensions surfaced: Jews were accused of collaborating with the Germans and disloyalty to the Lithuanian state. Some Lithuanians feared that the Jews would use their political acumen to achieve 'Jewish rule' in the new republic. Nonetheless, the Lithuanian government of the early 1920s was aware of the need for support in the international arena, and tended towards a more liberal policy regarding the Jewish minority.

Finally, Theodore R. Weeks, a professor of history at Southern Illinois University who has written widely on the nationalities of Russia's western borderlands, contributes insights on the Vilnius question. In the essay 'Be-

tween Poland and Lithuania: Jews and the Vilnius Question, 1918–1925’, he reveals the difficult situation of Jewish leaders trapped between rival Polish and Lithuanian claims to the Grand Duchy’s historic capital. The most interesting part of the essay deals with the situation following General Lucjan Żeligowski’s seizure of Vilnius in October of 1920 and the creation of the mini-state of ‘Middle Lithuania’ (Litwa Środkowa), a Manchukuo-like fig leaf intended to facilitate Poland’s incorporation of the city and its environs. Weeks posits ‘considerable evidence’ that Vilnius Jews preferred Lithuanian rule, but they were loathe to antagonise the Poles. In December 1920 the Jewish newspaper *Unzer Tog* was still proposing that Vilnius remain in Lithuania, with the four major nationalities receiving equal status. Weeks concludes, however, ‘In the end, between 1918 and 1925, the Jews of Vilnius found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between two mutually exclusive national programs, neither of which was their own’ (222).

The essays in *A Pragmatic Alliance* are enriched by several documents which support the conclusions outlined in the preceding essays. The first, with an introduction by Dr Staliūnas, includes the 24 April 1917 minutes of the meeting of Petrograd’s Jews from the Kaunas, Vilnius, Suwałki and Grodno gubernias on the issue of choosing delegates to the Provisional Committee for Lithuania’s Administration established by Russia’s Lithuanians in March 1917. The document reveals that while Jews were wary about joining a body dominated by ethnic Lithuanians, they were nonetheless amenable to compromise. Šarūnas Liekis and Eglė Bendikaitė introduce several documents from the CZA which provide specific examples of the often contradictory Zionist attitude towards the political ambitions of the Lithuanians.

In more ways than one, *A Pragmatic Alliance* is an important addition to the historiography of Lithuanian Jewry. The collaboration of Lithuanian, Jewish and Western scholars on this project is a welcome departure from the old pattern of Jews writing about Jews (and usually ignoring Lithuanian-language sources), and Lithuanians writing for Lithuanians (normally without consulting Yiddish and Hebrew materials). Everyone who writes about the region now understands the importance of including the vast array of materials in all languages. Lithuanians who know Yiddish, and Israeli scholars with a command of Lithuanian, while not particularly numerous, are no longer oddities. One should include one discordant note here: stylistically, the essays by those with a weaker command of English should have undergone more strenuous editing. While the English of monographs published in Eastern Europe has improved considerably over the last two decades, there is still work to be done here. But readers and historians would be small-minded in paying attention to these foibles: the historic material and intelligence of interpretation of the essayists easily trump this one weakness.

The new research evident in *A Pragmatic Alliance* undermines some of the more simplistic and comfortable stereotypes prevalent in past accounts: Jews in full-throated support of the new Lithuanian republic, Lithuanians determined to suppress Jewish national goals. In fact, both sides exhibited a wide variety of responses: pragmatic and occasionally successful attempts at cooperation and even alliance, deep distrust of each other's motives and, sadly, too little understanding of the Other's cultural world. As neighbours, they did not really live *with* each other. And as most of the essays in this collection point up, there was an inherent contradiction in the Jewish vision of Greater Lithuania and the Lithuanian goal of an ethnographically smaller state. The proposal for a multinational 'Lite' based on cultural autonomy, however appealing to liberal sentiment, confronted a difficult historic legacy: the enormous gulf separating the national groups in terms of economic and social power. The weakened Polonised nobility still held many landed estates, while Lithuania's Jews, Poles and Germans prevailed among the incipient capitalist class and within the urban occupations. Many of the aristocrats and urbanites viewed with condescension, even contempt, the Lithuanian and Belarusian peasant masses who constituted the vast majority of inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy.

The project of 'Greater Lithuania (Lite)' was thus doomed, no more realistic than the visions of a democratic Russian federation or of a restored Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Publicly, the Lithuanian-speaking intelligentsia recognised the country's multinational heritage; however, most hailed from the countryside and shared their Jewish counterparts' fear of Polish hegemony. While ethnic prejudices played a part, the distrust of federal solutions was rooted in both the historic record and the Lithuanian leaders' personal experiences as economically and socially marginalised peasants. Whatever the benign intentions of its proponents, a Lithuania of ethnic cantons could easily be seen as a recipe for confining the village masses to permanent underclass status. It is not difficult to understand why for Lithuanians, the country's political future made sense only in a nation-state where the lion's share of political power was in the hands of the most numerous class-nation; in other words, 'majority rule'. Only such a government could undertake the policy of economic, educational and political 'affirmative action' which characterised the transformation of Lithuanian society during the interwar period, that is, the empowerment of a previously marginalised majority. There were many reasons for the inability of the First Lithuanian Republic (1920–1940) to adequately bridge the gulf between its Jewish and Gentile citizens. The failure of the vision of a 'Greater Lithuania' was not one of them.

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