

Monika Tomkiewicz, *Ponary były miejscem największej zbrodni dokonanej przez Niemców na północno-wschodnich kresach II RP w okresie II wojny światowej*, Warszawa, 2022. 432 p. ISBN 978-83-8229-459-0

In 2022, the Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN*) published a new and updated edition of a monograph by one of its researchers, Monika Tomkiewicz, entitled *Zbrodnia ponarska, 1941–1944* (The Massacre at Paneriai, 1941–1944). The book is described as ‘the result of research lasting 20 years into crimes enacted against Polish citizens of various nationalities in 1941–1944 at Paneriai and other execution sites in the Vilnius region.’ The monograph first appeared in 2008.

The author discusses the internal structure and operational mechanisms of institutions and agencies of the German occupying government, the process of the mass murder of Vilnius’ Jews, the repressions and terror against Poles and other people who challenged the regime, and the destruction of traces of the crimes committed at Paneriai. There is also an analysis of the activities of the German Security Police and the Special Squad of the German Security Police (*Sonderkommando*) in the Vilnius region, and of the trials of their members after the Second World War. A great deal of attention is given to the activities of Lithuanian institutions that cooperated with the Nazis.

Although after the publication of this research in 2008 the author worked on other topics, Paneriai remains within her field of interest. She has managed to identify 53 new surnames of Polish anti-Nazi underground activists who were shot dead at Paneriai: to date, in total, 406 are known. According to the author herself, most importantly with this new edition, she has tried to present an updated list of victims of Polish nationality killed at Paneriai, to give the dates of the arrest and execution of some individuals, and the reasons for it, and to share data about those guilty of the killings.

In the new edition, readers will find new lists of surnames of victims and perpetrators of repressions and murders, new maps, and a description of illustrations (one of them, No 48, which, in my view, based on the landscape, is not Paneriai, should be checked, isn’t it Liepāja?¹).

¹ E. Klee, W. Dressen, Volker Riess (eds.), *The Good Old Days. The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (William S. Konecky Associates, 1991), pp. 128–132.

The author also acknowledges the latest Lithuanian historiography on this topic: studies of the massacre sites at Paneriai conducted between 2015 and 2019 by Lithuanian historians, archaeologists and geophysicists; and Arūnas Bubnys' publication about the Vilnius Special Squad (*Sonderkommando*). However, Zigmas Vitkus' monograph narrowly missed being included.²

Zbrodnia ponarska, published in 2008, is based on Tomkiewicz's dissertation, defended at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. It was probably the first scholarly work on such a scale about the mass murder by the Nazis (Germans) and their local collaborators (Lithuanians) of Jews, Poles and Soviet prisoners of war in eastern Lithuania. Until then, Helena Pasierbska (1921–2010), a former member of the Polish anti-Nazi underground, had written most about Paneriai, but her research could only to a certain extent be called academic.³

When Tomkiewicz's *Zbrodnia ponarska* was first published, the theme of Paneriai had only been touched on in Lithuanian historiography in the general context of Second World War research.⁴ There was also still a lack of sources. At that time (2008), Kazimierz Sakowicz's *Ponary Diary* had not yet been translated, even though the recollections of Herman Kruk and Grigorijus Šuras had already come out in Lithuanian.⁵ In general, little information about Paneriai was circulating at the time in Lithuania in the public sphere, even though its name would occasionally appear in the press.⁶

² S. Sarcevičius, S. Staniulis, N. Dobrotin et al., *Nusikaltimų pėdsakai neišnyksta: masinės žudynės Panerių miške 1941–1944 metais* (Vilnius, 2021); A. Bubnys, *Vokiečių saugumo policijos ir SD Vilniaus Ypatingasis būrys* (Vilnius, 2019); Z. Vitkus, *Atminties miškas: Paneriai istorijoje, kultūroje ir politikoje* (Vilnius, 2022).

³ H. Pasierbska, 'Złowieszcze Ponary', *Czerwony Sztandar*, 1989 października 31, No 251; eadem, 'Ponary – największe miejsce kaźni koło Wilna (1941–1944)', *Studia i Materiały*, No 3 (Warszawa, 1993); eadem, *Wilenska Golgota* (Sopot, 1993); eadem, *Ponary i inne miejsca męczeństwa Polaków z Wileńszczyzny w latach 1941–1944* (Łowicz, 2005). For more detail about the activities of Rodzina Ponarska, the memory community inspired by H. Pasierbska, see Jonas Malinauskas' introduction to the new essay by Józef Mackiewicz 'Paneriai-bazė', *Naujasis Židinys-Aidai*, No 7 (2015), pp. 24–25.

⁴ A. Bubnys, *Vokiečių okupuota Lietuva. 1941–1944* (Vilnius, 1998).

⁵ H. Kruk, *Paskutinės Lietuvos Jeruzalės dienos. Vilniaus geto ir stovyklų kronikos 1939–1944* (Vilnius, 2004); G. Šuras, *Užrašai. Vilniaus geto kronika 1941–1944* (Vilnius, 1997).

⁶ R. Čekutis, 'Paneriaus trūksta valstybės dėmesio', *Atgimimas*, No 5 (2001).

Today, with the latest edition of Tomkiewicz's book, the situation is fundamentally different. The mass murder site at Paneriai has been examined thoroughly: both the actual physical location of the massacres, and Paneriai as a 'place of memory' (Pierre Nora's articulated meaning as an important place of symbolic significance to a society's identity and memory culture (*lieu de mémoire*)).⁷ At the same time, we have Arūnas Bubnys' research into the activities of the Polish underground during the Second World War in eastern Lithuania.⁸

The strength of this research by Tomkiewicz, and by others, concerning Vilnius under Nazi German occupation is in the variety of sources, its comprehensive factography, and its systematic approach. Both this book and another one, published five years ago, *Lukiškių kalėjimas Vilniuje 1939–1953 metais* ('Lukiškės Prison in Vilnius in 1939–1953', 2018), I would say, make for compulsory reading for anyone interested in the history of Vilnius and its region during the Second World War. More than just the same geographical space unites these two books. During the Nazi occupation, Lukiškės Prison was indeed merely a halfway stop on the way to Paneriai.

On picking up the new edition of this particularly valuable book, I was mostly concerned with two things: to see what new material was included in the new publication, and to reflect on the author's view of the period of the Nazi occupation in eastern Lithuania. Her attitude turns out to be best revealed in the first part of the book, which, compared to the 2008 edition, has remained unchanged.

Tomkiewicz speaks about the victims, Poles and Jews, as if they were citizens of the Second Polish Republic. This is plausibly self-evident: as of 1 September 1939, these people were citizens of the Republic of Poland, and most of them identified with the state and its destiny. However, one might ask (without necessarily expecting an immediate response) what their (that is, at least three quarters of the population of the Vilnius region) legal status was on 15 June 1940? In the Lithuanian discourse, these people are referred to as citizens of the Republic of Lithuania.

The author begins her book with a broad discussion of the history of interwar Vilnius and eastern Lithuania, devoting a fair amount of attention to the problematic relations between Lithuanians and Poles, and

⁷ P. Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, special issue: *Memory and Counter-Memory*, No 26 (1989).

⁸ A. Bubnys, *Pasipriešinimo judėjimai Lietuvoje Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais: lenkų pogrindis 1939–1945 m.* (Vilnius, 2015).

by extension, between Lithuania and Poland (pp. 21–28). Her attention to the interwar context is certainly understandable, but the fact that the author begins her book with this particular problem may encourage readers to think that this specific period is where we should search for the roots of what happened in eastern Lithuania in 1941–1944, that is, in the complex relations between Lithuanians and Poles.

Incidentally, Piotr Niwiński, another IPN historian, began his discourse from a similar point of view (relations between Lithuanians and Poles in Vilnius, and the ‘Polishness’ of Vilnius), in a booklet that provoked much discussion in Lithuania, and in which, consciously or otherwise, he led readers to think that Paneriai was simply a continuation of the prewar Lithuanian-Polish conflict.⁹

The reviewer could at this point ask whether, when searching for the roots of what happened at Paneriai, it would be fitting to stress not so much the complicated relations between Lithuanians and Poles, but rather Nazi (German) policy (its perpetrators, of course, exploited the preexisting tensions between Lithuanians and Poles, which is what the more perceptive Lithuanian and Polish intelligentsia understood), and to highlight the Nazis’ decrees, in the implementation of which Lithuanian institutions cooperated, instead of tackling ‘the Vilnius Question’, and relations between nationalities in the ‘Wilno voivodeship’?

While agreeing with the fact that the policy of the Lithuanian government in Vilnius, which had been restored by the USSR, was clumsy and unwise in 1939–1940, I nonetheless want to note that the author is for some reason not inclined to mention the limitations of the other side: attacks by Polish youths, and demonstrations, immediately after the Lithuanian army entered Vilnius, public demonstrations of disrespect towards Lithuanians, which caused such alarm to Józef Mackiewicz,¹⁰ and the Jewish pogrom organised by Polish radicals in Vilnius on 31 October, which went on for several days.

When discussing ‘relations between nationalities in the Wilno voivodeship’ in the interwar years, the author also omits facts relating to what we would today call the clumsy and unwise anti-Lithuanian activities of Polish government authorities (especially after the death of Józef Piłsudski), and the behaviour of some Polish students towards their Jewish citizen colleagues in the same Second Polish Republic in the auditoriums of Vilnius University. Nor does she speak about the terror

⁹ P. Niwiński, *Ponary – miejsce „ludzkiej rzeźni”* (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2011), p. 4.

¹⁰ J. Mackiewicz, *Tiesa akių nebado* (Vilnius, 2015), pp. 108–109.

perpetrated by the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, or *AK*) in 1941–1944 against Lithuanians in the Vilnius region in rural locations (or was it perhaps not terror?).

The more attentive readers may also notice that the author, when speaking about the period of the Nazi occupation, does not analyse the role played by *chapūnai* in the persecution of Jews in Vilnius, saving Jews in return for money, trading in the property of executed Jews (in this, Lithuanian members of Sonderkommando acted in unison with some Paneriai Poles; see the diary of K. Sakowicz), or the generally unfavourable atmosphere towards saving Jews in the region. All of this would, of course, question the Polish-hero and Polish-victim narrative; however, at the same time, it would allow for a more accurate image of the past.

We should also draw attention to the fact that *Zbrodnia Ponarska* is overall a Polish-centric book. Tomkiewicz undoubtedly pays due attention to the Holocaust (the scrupulous analysis of the number of victims is impressive, pp. 176–219). Nonetheless, the monograph is dominated by the martyrology of ethnic Poles, and readers may get the impression that Paneriai was a site for the massacre of Poles, and the main victims of the terror by the Nazis and their collaborators (Lithuanians) were all citizens of the Second Polish Republic.

The Polish-centric approach inherent in this book is also evidenced by another aspect: if I am not mistaken, the 2008 edition of *Zbrodnia Ponarska* was presented to an exclusively Polish audience, in Vilnius, Šalčininkai, Nemenčinė and Lentvaris (question: would Lithuanian institutions have wanted to host such an event? Very likely not). The first presentation of the book took place on 24 November 2008 at the Adomas Mickevičius Gymnasium in Vilnius, then at the Polish Cultural Centre, and later at the Vilnius branch of the University of Białystok. Subsequent launches were held in Polish schools in Lithuania.¹¹ It is inevitably interesting, and perhaps even somewhat strange, that a dry scholarly monograph was deemed appropriate for promotion specifically in schools.

Furthermore, the fact that after the book's launch, the author, the procurator of the Republic of Poland Elżbieta Rojowska, and other staff from the Gdansk branch of the IPN, went to Paneriai to pay their respects to the victims, shows that the new edition was not just a regular scholarly study, but also as politics of memory. It is worth noting

¹¹ Promocja książki 'Zbrodnia w Ponarach 1941–1944' w Wilnie – 24–28 listopada 2008 r., <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/2696,Promocja-ksiazki-Zbrodnia-w-Ponarach-1941-1944-w-Wilnie-24-28-listopada-2008-r.html> (accessed on 10 July 2023).

that at the time, the IPN had already become, in the words of Alvydas Nikžentaitis, 'a gathering place largely for conservative historians or traditional nationalists',¹² while the culture of memory of Poland itself started to be based on Polish figures representing the nation's heroic fight and victimhood (overlooking any shadowy personas, like Zygmunt Szendzielarz (Łupaszka) and a whole confused, viscous situation in Vilnius region during the war and after it.

Attentive readers will certainly notice that the author fails to mention the soldiers in the Lithuanian Territorial Defence Force (*Lietuvos vietinė rinktinė*) who were shot dead at Paneriai in May 1944. Compared to the Jews shot at Paneriai, 86 people is, of course, a lower number; however, the murderers and the Lithuanian guards at the Lukiškės Prison are named, after all. Is this simply an oversight, or is it the subconscious influence of the conservative Polish narrative? Had a list been included, it would have been clear that the author was thinking about *all* readers, and not just *Polish* readers.

Generally speaking, when reading Tomkiewicz's monograph, the reader, whether they are conservative or liberal, can sense the author's particular inclination towards the activities of the Home Army; this could explain why some of the more controversial nuances are omitted, such as the war crimes committed by Lithuanian policemen at Glitiškės on 20 June 1944 (p. 137). On that day, as we know, 39 Polish civilians were shot dead. It is known that the massacre was carried out after the Home Army had, on that day, after a clash, found and killed two injured Lithuanian soldiers, and then desecrated their bodies.¹³ Tomkiewicz writes that they 'died from their injuries'. Moreover, the author, who is usually very attentive to detail, describes the Home Army's retaliatory crime in Dubingiai, on 23 June, in a rather general way (as a 'pacification' (*spacyfikowanie*) campaign), mentioning among the 27 victims, only together with the Lithuanians and most likely by accident, the killed 'Polish woman Anna Gorska and her four-year-old son' (p. 137) (it is known that the Home Army partisans used lists of victims that had been compiled in advance).

What is also troubling is that in her book, the author does not question, and continues to assert, the image formed by Helena Pasierbska of

¹² A. Nikžentaitis, *Valstybė ir atmintis. Atminties kultūros ir jų reguliavimo būdai Lietuvoje, Vidurio ir Rytų Europoje* (Vilnius, 2011), pp. 195–196.

¹³ A. Bubnys, *Pasipriešinimo judėjimai*, p. 197.

the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union as an alleged 'anti-Semitic and chauvinist organisation'.¹⁴ If an assiduous assessment were to be made, many of the patriotic organisations that operated in European countries during the interwar years (including Poland itself) may be called chauvinist, such as the scouts, or members of Polish student organisations.¹⁵ Incidentally, researchers even point out that the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union had members who were Jews, i.e. the organisation was not closed or cliquish by nature, even though some of its members did indeed hold anti-Semitic views (as did parts of society).¹⁶

In general, the use of the term 'riflemen' in the Polish discourse when talking about the massacre at Paneriai is somewhat confusing. It is known that the local populace did call members of the Special Squad 'riflemen' (*strzelcy Ponarskie*); but this, it is thought, was solely on account of the specific nature of their 'task', to shoot (*strzelanie*, *strzelac*), rather than their connections with the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. The link mentioned in Pasierbska's writing between the 'Paneriai riflemen' and members of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union probably emerged later; just about everything in her work relating to the activities of Lithuanians in Vilnius and the First Republic of Lithuania is viewed negatively.

I shall remind readers that the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union ceased to exist on 15 July 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviets, so it would be inaccurate to talk about riflemen persecuting Poles in 1943–1944. Some members of the Vilnius Special Squad *were* part of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union before the war, as were participants in the June Uprising; however, the question arises, are we dealing with the same history here? Generally speaking, I am inclined to think that Glitiškės and Dubingiai did not result from radical Lithuanian or Polish nationalism, but were actually expressions of brutalisation, the universal,

¹⁴ Monika Tomkiewicz: Ponary były miejscem największej zbrodni dokonanej przez Niemców na północno-wschodnich kresach II RP w okresie II wojny światowej, <https://histmag.org/Monika-Tomkiewicz-Ponary-byly-miejscem-najwiekszej-zbrodni-dokonanej-przez-Niemcow-na-polnocno-wschodnich-kresach-II-RP-w-okresie-II-wojny-swiatowej-24419> (accessed on 18 July 2023).

¹⁵ R. Žepkaitė, *Vilniaus istorijos atkarpa, 1939–1940 m.* (Vilnius, 1990), p. 107.

¹⁶ H. Vitkus, 'Sąjungininkai ir (ar) priešai: tautinių mažumų įvaizdžiai Lietuvos šaulių sąjungos, Latvijos Aizsargų ir Estijos Kaitseilių ideologijose', in: *Paramilitarism in the Eastern Baltics, 1918–1940: Case Studies and Comparisons = Paramilitarizmas Rytų Baltijos regione 1918–1940: atvejo studijos ir lyginimai* (Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipėdensis, vol. XXVIII). Eds. V. Jokubauskas, V. Safronovas, V. Vareikis (Klaipėda, 2014), p. 250.

archaic traits of seeking vengeance and scapegoat mechanisms in action (but these are matters of a different [psychological] level).¹⁷

In summary, Tomkiewicz's diligently written and perfectly systematic monograph (she has sorted through an enormous quantity of archive material from memory institutions in various countries) perhaps lacks only one thing, a reflection on the 'Polish' (or 'IPN-ish?') perspective: is what happened at Paneriai and other locations in eastern Lithuania an outcome of the earlier Lithuanian-Polish conflict? Were the victims really citizens of the Second Polish Republic? Were Lithuanians the only ones who cooperated with the Germans in the Vilnius region? Were not relations between Germans, Lithuanians and Poles more complex after all, being based on various trajectories of mutual exploitation?

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¹⁷ For more detail, see R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (John Hopkins University Press, 1979).