

(Im)Possibility of Justice: Holocaust and War Crimes Trials in Soviet Lithuania in the 1960s

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The project aims through the analysis of the trial process, which took place in Klaipėda in the year of 1964, to newly evaluate war crimes trials related to the Holocaust in Soviet Lithuania and their political dimensions in the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War. In the 1964 Klaipėda trial, which was orchestrated by the Soviet authorities, seven local defendants, including a Catholic priest, were convicted of executing 3,000 people, mostly Jews, in the neighborhood town Skuodas and its surroundings in the summer of 1941. Seventy witnesses testified during the pre-trial process, including Lithuanian Jewish victims. The trial was also broadly covered in national and regional media as well as presented through a documentary film.

This paper using micro-historical approach and archival sources (trial transcripts, press releases, oral history testimonies) will analyze this judicial proceeding from two perspectives. On the one hand, the trial will be investigated as an ideological tool of the Soviet regime directed at fighting its enemies, both on national and international arena. It will be argued that this trial was planned not solely as a local judicial event; its transnational dimension will also be uncovered. On the other hand, this paper will challenge the assumption that war crimes trials in Soviet Lithuania served only as ideological weapons against the anti-Soviet resistance. War experiences testified in the investigation protocols, courtroom and media reports reveal that this trial managed to create an alternative space for sharing traumatic memories. Thus, this paper, using the example of the 1964 Klaipėda trial, will show that in the 1960s, war crimes trials in Soviet Lithuania became sites where not only different Holocaust experiences were shared publicly by Jewish survivors but also where the process of mourning through witnessing took place.