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Whose City? Vilnius during World War I between Poles, Russians, Jews, and Lithuanians

Theodore Weeks

The First World War transformed East-Central Europe. A region dominated by old-regime, multi-national empires in 1914 became by the early 1920s the birthplace of a number of young—or “resurrected”—would-be nation-states. The city of Vilnius reflects these radical changes. A provincial city in the Russian Empire inhabited by various national groups before the war, by 1917 was a pawn in the increasingly vociferous nationalist arguments between Poles and Lithuanians. While Russians had at least half-heartedly claimed the city as “their own” before 1914, such arguments vanished with the departure of Russian authorities in 1915. As for the Jews, who in 1914 were probably the single largest ethnic group in the city, their livelihoods were particularly hard hit by the war. At war’s end they would be forced into a defensive position in the Polish-Lithuanian struggle that would determine the city’s future.

Looking at the historiography of World War I in Eastern Europe, perhaps its most salient feature is the lack of interest that historians have shown in the conflict. To be sure, in recent years this gap in the historiography has been somewhat filled, but when compared with French, English, Belgian, or German historiography on the war, coverage remains meager.¹ For the national states that emerged after 1918, the war is relegated to a kind of antechamber to independence. In the USSR, World War I was treated primarily as one main cause for the revolution of October 1917; despite some increased interest in recent years, the war remains of peripheral interest when compared to western Europe or even North America.² Specifically for Vilnius, there is a striking dearth of information, whether in primary sources or in the historiography, about the

1 See excellent recent studies, see for example, Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Oleg V. Budnitskii, *Mirovoi krizis 1914–1920 godov i sud’ba vostochnoevropetskogo evreistva* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005); Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Nasza wojna. Tom I: Imperia* (Warsaw: Fokzal, 2014); Katia Bruish and Nikolaus Kater, eds., *Bol’shaia voina Rossii: Sotsial’nyi poriadok, publichnaia komunikatsiia i nasilie na rubezhe tsarskoi i sovetskoi epokh* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014); David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front 1914–1917* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2015); D. C. B. Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia: The March to World War I and Revolution* (New York: Viking, 2015).

2 For a sophisticated argument on how (and how not) the war was (and is) remembered in Russia, see Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

first year of the war. Several books analyze German policy in the city and its region but even general accounts leap from August 1914 (war's outbreak) to 1915 (taking of Kaunas).³ Published memoirs, such as that of the future Lithuanian foreign minister Petras Klimas, also tend to start in late 1914 or even in summer 1915.⁴ The somewhat scanty coverage of the period 1914–1915 here reflects the relative lack of sources.

The “war enthusiasm” shown elsewhere in Europe (though the extent of this phenomenon has been challenged in recent years) also appeared in Russia, though not in Vilna.⁵ Poles and Jews had little reason to be enthusiastic for an empire that treated them, at best, as second-class citizens, and the Russian population of Vilna was overwhelmingly made up of officials and soldiers. At best, some patriotic Poles hoped that the war would weaken the empire and thereby make a rebirth of an independent Poland possible. The few politically-thinking Lithuanians in Vilnius also harbored hopes for more cultural autonomy at war's end. Jews for the most part simply tried to keep their heads down and earn a living—the latter being increasingly difficult due to the war's severing of commercial and trade connections.

At the beginning of the war, all inhabitants, whether Poles, Jews, or Lithuanians, hastened to declare their loyalty to the tsar and their support in the conflict, but it was clear that if the war should go badly, their support might easily switch to the other side.⁶ Like Poles in Warsaw and other cities, Vilnius Poles had to consider which side had more to offer the Poles. In his diary Stanisław Cywiński noted that in November and December 1914 “*rusofilstwo*” was still quite prominent among Poles in the city.⁷ Writing after the war, Polish activist and writer Wanda Dobaczewska agreed that Poles had expressed support for the Russian war effort early in the war, but she added that in Wilno pro-Russian enthusiasm never reached the heights seen in Warsaw: “In Wilno no one ever threw flowers at Cossacks.”⁸ However, there seems little reason to think that many Warsaw Poles felt much enthusiasm about Russian troops, whether Cossacks or of other units.

The largest ethnic group in Vilnius, the Jews, saw little possibility of any good coming from the war and Jewish anti-Russian feeling was considerably stimulated by the brutal treatment of Jewish civilians by the Russian military

3 See, for example, Pranas Čepėnas, *Naujujų laikų Lietuvos istorija* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), II: 25ff.

4 Petras Klimas, *Dienoraštis 1915–1919* (Chicago: AM & M Publications, 1988).

5 Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

6 Wiktor Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe during World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1984), pp. 100–111.

7 Stanisław Cywiński, *Kartki z pamiętnika (1914–1920)* (Wilno: Drukarnia Dziennika Wileńskiego, 1931), pp. 10–12.

8 Wanda Dobaczewska, *Wilno i Wileńszczyzna w latach 1914–1920* (Wilno: Dziennik Urzędowy Kuratorjum Okr. Szk. Wileńskiego, 1934), p. 12.

authorities.⁹ A sympathetic (though not particularly pro-Jewish) Polish observer wrote in August 1915 that “the non-politicized Jewish masses instinctively favored the Germans and in their souls warmly desired Russian defeats. This was more than Germanophilism: this was an idealization of the Germans...”¹⁰ There is much to support this view, including memories in 1941 that perhaps the Germans would not be so bad, given their decent behavior in the first war.¹¹ German Jews also “idealized” traditional Lithuanian Jews, most famously in the illustrated book by novelist Arnold Zweig.¹²

Polish journalist Czesław Jankowski’s diary remarks on early Polish support for the Russian war effort, describes battles for Warsaw in November 1914 and its fall to the Germans in early August 1915, speaks of orders to carry out obligatory (though paid) labor to strengthen Vilnius’s defenses in July 1915 and requisitioned livestock being driven through town.¹³ After the German army entered Kaunas—barely one hundred kilometers from Vilnius—on August 18, 1915 it was clear that Vilnius was next in line. The evacuation of banks, government offices, and even the monuments to Empress Catherine the Great and Governor-General Count M. N. Murav’ev were set in motion.¹⁴

By August 1915 it was clear that the days of Russian rule in Vilna were numbered. On August 15 an eleven pm curfew was announced that was to begin on August 18. After this curfew all streetlights would be turned out, all windows had to be covered with black paper (to block out interior light), and no one was permitted on the street. All able-bodied men from eighteen to fifty years of age still resident in the city were required to report at local police stations to be organized into work battalions to dig defense trenches around

9 On these forcible evictions by the Russian military of thousands of Jewish civilians from their homes near the front lines, see Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 16–23 and *passim*. In general on the tragic position of East-European Jews during World War I, see Frank Schuster, *Zwischen allen Fronten: Osteuropäische Juden während des Ersten Weltkrieges (1914–1919)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004).

10 “Poufny memoriał Michała Römera z sierpnia 1915” edited and published by Wiktor Sukiennicki under the title “Wilno na schyłku rządów carskich,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* (1970), p. 119.

11 For an interesting attempt to counter the memory of the “decent German soldier” in the first war, see K. A. Laisvydas [pseud. for Antanas Venclova], *Po Liudendorfo batu. 1915–1918 metų vokiečių okupacija Lietuvoje* (Moscow: LTSR valstybinė leidykla, 1942).

12 Arnold Zweig, *Das ostjüdische Antlitz* (Berlin: Welt-Verlag, 1920). An English translation with interesting foreword was published as *The Face of East European Jewry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

13 Czesław Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień. Warszawa 1914–1915 Wilno* (Wilno: Wydawnictwo Kazimierza Rutkiego, 1923), pp. 20–68.

14 Petras Ruseckas, ed., *Lietuva Didžiąjame Kare* (Wilno: Wydawnictwo “Vilniaus Žodis,” 1939), p. 12; Cywiński, *Kartki z pamiętnika*, p. 19 (entry for August 12–15): “Zdjęto w Wilnie pomniki Katarzyny ir Puszkina. Murawjew stoi jeszcze. Ach, żeby Moskali stąd wyszli i nigdy już nie wrócili!”

the city.¹⁵ Perhaps in an unconscious admission that they could not themselves keep order, that month the Russian authorities allowed a volunteer city police force (“militia”) to be organized.

One Jewish militia member, the teacher and writer, Hirsz Abramowicz recalled that by joining the militia, men hoped to protect themselves and their families from deportations into Russia. As Abramowicz recalled, most members of the militia were Polish, but with a few Jews as well. Their duties were to regulate traffic and in general to maintain public order.¹⁶ By early September, the city was full of rumors of impending deportation, aerial bombing, and worse. The Russian authorities’ mass expulsion of Jews from Kaunas was well known; Vilnius Jews feared similar treatment. Many fled from the city as the Russian troops withdrew and the Germans approached, fearing reprisals and brutality from the Russians now that their military defeat seemed assured. German bombs were dropped on the city, newspapers ceased to appear, and daily life was heavily disrupted. On September 15 one eyewitness wrote, “Vilnius is already becoming cut off from the world.” On September 18 the retreating Russians attempted to blow up the bridges over the Neris river, but in their haste only succeeded in damaging them. The same day the Germans entered the city.¹⁷

THE FIRST MONTHS OF GERMAN OCCUPATION

When the Russians evacuated Vilnius, very few residents regretted their departure. Under the Germans, it was felt, life would at least be more orderly and predictable. Patriotic Poles and Lithuanians also hoped that the German occupation would be a first step toward independence or at least autonomy. In any case, the arrival of German troops was seen—at first—as a liberation.¹⁸ Jews, meanwhile, tended to see Germans as more civilized than Russians and hoped for better treatment than under the tsarist regime. After all, Germany had granted Jews equal rights generations earlier, something that the Russian Empire never got around to doing.

15 “Wilnas Leidenzeit im Krieg” in *Das Litauen-Buch: eine Auslese aus der Zeitung der 10. Armee* (N. p. [Wilna]: Druck und Verlag Zeitung der 10. Armee, 1918), pp. 116–117. This account ends with the German entry into the city; unfortunately Vilnius’s *Leiden* were at that point far from being over. On the military operations from the German point of view, see Erich von Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919), pp. 197–202.

16 Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), pp. 177–178.

17 Pelikšas Bugailiškis’s diary in Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, pp. 18–25.

18 Wanda Dobaczewska, “Nastroje Wileńskie w latach wojny” in Stefan Burhardt, *P. O. W. na ziemiach W. X. Litewskiego 1919–1934: szkice i wspomnienia* (Wilno: Wydawn. Wileńsko-Nowogródzkiego okręgu związku peowiaków, 1934), p. 16.

On Saturday, September 18, German troops began to stream into the city across the damaged but still intact Green Bridge. Czesław Jankowski noted in his diary, "After a month's siege, the Germans forced the Russians to withdraw to the east and took Vilnius—without a shot." Jankowski also commented on the apparent lack of major damage to buildings in the city and noted that despite the numerous explosions heard in the night, both the railroad station and the gasworks remained intact. By noon a proclamation in five languages announcing the German occupation of Vilnius was being plastered along the city's streets.¹⁹

The proclamation signed by Graf Pfeil began by announcing that "German forces have expelled the Russian army from the Polish city Wilno," noting that the city was "always a pearl in the glorious Kingdom of Poland." No other national group aside from Poles was mentioned in this enthusiastically pro-Polish proclamation, giving the impression that the city and its surroundings were populated exclusively by Poles. As one might expect, Graf Pfeil also warned against any attacks on German soldiers but did this, so to speak, apologetically, ending "I do not wish to carry out any punitive measures (*Strafgewalt*) in Wilno. God bless Poland!"²⁰ Abramowicz noted tartly that despite the generous words (for Poles, anyway) in Pfeil's proclamation, "This Prussian 'freedom' endured for barely an hour," and this proclamation was soon taken down and replaced by far stricter words.²¹

Abramowicz's "hour" may be a figure of speech, but the tenor of German proclamations did change quickly, and for the worse. On September 21 residents of Vilnius were informed that any messenger pigeons (*Brieftauben*) had to be killed within two days and further declared that "it is forbidden for women to sell themselves to German soldiers," causing local wags to wonder whether this was a suggestion that Vilnius's female population offer themselves for free.²² More restrictions followed, from obligatory muzzles on dogs (loose animals would be "caught and killed") and a hefty 30 Mark fee (in cities) for obligatory registration, to a prohibition of street trade in food and drink, to restrictions on public gatherings.²³ In short, it was clear that life under German occupation was to be more orderly, but possibly even more trying, than the previous year under Russian rule.

19 Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień*, pp. 235–237.

20 Graf Pfeil announcement "An die Einwohnerschaft von Wilno!" (German version) in Stefan Glaser, *Okupacja niemiecka na Litwie w latach 1915–1918. Stosunki prawne* (Lwów: Wydawnictwo Wschód, 1929), pp. 159–160.

21 Abramowicz, *Profiles*, pp. 180–181.

22 Lietuvos Mokslo Akademijos Biblioteka, Rankraščių skyrius [Lithuanian Academy of Sciences Library, Manuscript Division, Vilnius; LMAB], f. 23–23, l. 9. The German text is much more expressive: "Den Frauenzimmern wird es verboten, sich deutschen Soldaten feil zu bieten." (The admonition appeared also in Polish and Lithuanian, along with the warning that those [presumably prostitutes] with venereal disease would be arrested).

23 *Ibid.*, ll. 10–25.

As Graf Pfeil's initial pro-Polish proclamation had shown, the Germans were vitally interested in using nationalist feelings among the local population to their own advantage. But Graf Pfeil's wrong-footed praise of Poles alone also showed how tone-deaf the Germans were to the actual dynamics of national sentiment in this territory. General Erich von Ludendorff's assessment of the nationality situation in the region reflects German priorities: "The Lithuanians believed the hour of deliverance was at hand, and when the good times they anticipated did not materialize, owing to the cruel exigencies of war, they became suspicious once more, and turned against us. The Poles were hostile, as they feared, quite justifiably, a pro-Lithuanian policy on our part. The White Ruthenians were of no account, as the Poles had robbed them of their nationality and given nothing in return... The Jew did not know what attitude to adopt, but he gave us no trouble, and we were at least able to converse with him, which was hardly ever possible with the Poles, Lithuanians, and Letts."²⁴

The Polish attitude toward the Germans was not, at least initially, so negative as Ludendorff indicated in his memoirs.²⁵ Fundamentally, however, Polish and German interests did not coincide. The Poles mainly wished to incorporate the Wilno region into an independent Poland while the German occupying authorities were more concerned about immediate considerations: waging a war, feeding and supplying soldiers, and maintaining public order. And the German military could never quite disguise its general contempt for Poles and Polish national inspirations, a fact that constantly enraged Poles. A report by a certain von Beckerath to Hindenburg of May 1916 indicated that while some Poles were dissatisfied with German policies, on the whole the German occupying authorities had to take the Poles into consideration as they made up the "relative majority" in Vilnius and its region.²⁶ Von Beckerath may have been trying to put a good face on the situation. Writing at the end of September 1915, Czesław Jankowski noted down in his diary some of the main reasons for increasingly strained relations between Poles and the German occupiers: the quartering of officers and soldiers in Polish homes, the indiscriminate and outrageous thievery of German soldiers (sometimes under the guise of requisitions "compensated" by worthless scraps of paper), and the ignoring of the "citizens' committee" set up by (mainly) Poles to help administer the city.²⁷ To put matters baldly, the Poles made up the majority of well-to-do and educated people in Wilno and the region, and it was precisely these people that German

24 Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story* I, pp. 221–222.

25 An excellent account of Polish Wilno in the first months of the German occupation is Andrzej Puksztó, "Wilno pod koniec roku 1915—na początku 1916. Polskie czy niepolskie?" *Przegląd Wschodni* 8:1 (2002), pp. 39–56. For a general cultural-social history of the city in this period, see A. Puksztó, *Między stołecznością a partykularizmem. Wielonarodowościowe społeczeństwo Wilna w latach 1915–1920* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2006).

26 L. A. [Ludwik Abramowicz], ed., *Litwa podczas wojny. Zbiór dokumentów* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Departamentu Spraw Politycznych, 1918), pp. 7–12.

27 Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień*, pp. 277–283.

policy of occupation, confiscation, and restrictions hit most painfully. Polish complaints about the German occupation would only increase in subsequent years.

Jews also experienced the German occupation as a painful intrusion into their livelihoods and daily lives. Even Jankowski who as a sympathizer with the National Democrats could hardly be suspected of pro-Jewish sentiments, noted that "At the present time [September 29, 1915] the most irritated and embittered are the Jews. For example, when Jews petitioned to the city commander von Treskow against an order that they keep stores closed on the sabbath, the commander rejected their petition, remarking that he hadn't had a Sunday off for a year: 'This is war, gentlemen!'"²⁸ The German military authorities were not so much antisemitic as simply ignorant and intolerant of Jewish religious requirements, for example in requiring that all corpses be buried enclosed in a coffin (which of course violates Jewish religious law). The Germans restricted trade which had been nearly a Jewish monopoly in the region, requiring that grain, fruit, nuts, and even fish be sold (at very low prices) to the occupying authorities. In such a situation, with hunger and even starvation a real and growing possibility, the inevitable consequence was a thriving black market in which Jews as experienced merchants and traders played an important role. Despite draconian threats and punishments, the Germans were unable to control the market (or to feed both army and local population) and succeeded mainly in antagonizing the local Jews. But, as Hirsz Abramowicz noted in his memoirs of that period, "The German occupation during World War I oppressed everyone more or less equally." Jews were not singled out for special restrictions and in some cases survived better under German occupation than Polish townspeople, in particular because of the similarity between Yiddish and German.²⁹ While antisemitism did grow during the war, this cannot be based on any favoritism shown Jews by the Germans. On the contrary, the economic policies of the German occupation hurt Jews more than any other ethnic group.

Nor were Lithuanians particularly happy about the German occupation. To begin with there was the provocative description by Graf Pfeil of Vilnius as a Polish city. To be sure, the actual numbers of ethnic Lithuanians in Vilnius were small, almost certainly under 10% of the total population. But this annoying fact never prevented Lithuanian patriots from claiming the city as the capital for a future Lithuanian state. The Germans, however, seemed almost unaware of the existence of the Lithuanian claims to Vilnius. As we have seen in the von Backerath memorandum, they did not take the Lithuanian national movement very seriously, quite aside from the Vilnius question. A protest signed by leaders of the Lithuanian national movement on the occasion of a

28 Ibid., pp. 279–280.

29 Abramowicz, *Profiles*, pp. 186–202. Another excellent source on Jewish life in Vilnius during World War I is Sh. An-shki, ed., *Pinkas far der geschikhte fun vilne in di yorn fun milhome un okupatsie* (Vilne: n. p., 1922).

German census of Vilnius argued that since their arrival in the city, the Germans had “further encouraged aggressive Polish policies.”³⁰ The Poles would have been utterly astonished at such an interpretation of German policies. A year later, in summer 1917, one of the most prominent Lithuanian leaders, the fiery polonophobe Dr. Jonas Basanavičius penned a pamphlet in which he documented the sufferings of Lithuanians under German occupation, from peasants having their land and produce confiscated to the spread of disease occasioned by chronic hunger and germs introduced by German soldiers to attempts to “germanize” Vilnius by putting up German language signs in the city.³¹ In short, at least as early as 1916 the Lithuanians were just as unhappy with the German occupation as their Polish and Jewish neighbors were.

In great part the dissatisfaction stemmed from the terrible economic dislocations of the period. As we have seen, the disruptions of trade caused by war, combined with the German army’s enormous requirements for foodstuffs—and voraciously ill-considered confiscation policies—meant that hunger threatened the general population as early as 1916 (and only got worse after that point). Already in July 1915, two months before Vilnius had been occupied, the Germans ordered all grain crops confiscated and established strict price controls. This order was extended to the Lithuanian territories and Vilnius with the advance of the German armies.³² According to the order, merchants were obliged to accept both German and Russian currencies at the exchange rate—favorable to the Germans—of first 1.5 marks to a ruble, later put up to two marks to the ruble.³³ A new “Ostrubel” was also introduced in an effort to prop up money supply, but locals with anything to sell (usually illegally as the Germans had forbidden or strictly regulated nearly all trade) generally refused to accept the German script. After all, very little could be bought outside the black market. Requisitions of grain, fruit, meat, horses (for haulage), potatoes, and essentially any other food items, were frequent, onerous, and never coordinated, leading to extreme frustration boarding on despair on the part of landowners and peasants.³⁴ These highly restrictive policies had both economic and political outcomes, both very negative. Economically the German attempt to

30 “Lietuvių atstovų pareiškimas Vilniaus miesto vokiečių valdžiai dėl gyventojų surašymo” (dated March 19, 1916) in Edmundas Gimžauskas, ed., *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais 1915-1918. Lietuvos nepriklausomos valstybės genėzė* (Vilnius: LII, 2006), pp. 64–65.

31 Dr. J. Basanavičius, *Iš lietuvių gyvenimo 1915–1917 m. po vokiečių jungu* (Vilnius: “Švyturio” spaustuvė, 1919).

32 LMAB, f. 23–23, ll. 62–64.

33 LMAB, f. 23–23, ll. 16, 153. In general on the currency policies of the period, see Borys Paszkiewicz, “‘Ostrubel’ i ‘Ostmarka.’ O pieniądzu okupacji niemieckiej na Litwie,” *Biuletyn Numizmatyczny* 7 (1982), pp. 130–134.

34 On the economic policy of the Germans, see Gerd Linde, *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im ersten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965), pp. 52–68; and Glaser, *Okupacja niemiecka*, pp. 131–142 (“Rekwizycje i kontrybucje”).

seize total control over the economy meant that peasants and landowners had little initiative to produce foodstuffs, which would lead to dire shortages in late 1916 and 1917. Politically the German restrictions alienated every national group so that by 1917 the initially at least potentially favorable attitudes toward the Germans on the part of Lithuanians and Jews, and to a lesser extent Poles, had been almost totally extinguished. In short, in economic and political policies the German military was its own worst enemy and utterly incapable of winning “hearts and minds” of people under its occupation.

In cultural policy, the Germans initially adopted a fairly liberal line. A decree of December 1915 stated explicitly that “The language of instruction should be the mother tongue [of the pupils].” The same decree forbade the use of Russian as a language of instruction (though the language could be taught as a subject in secondary schools and it was specifically noted that “Weißrussisch” was *not* Russian and thus could be used) and expressed the expectation that “as soon as possible all educators (*Lehrpersonen*) will acquire a knowledge of the German language.”³⁵ Pukszo points out that by the end of 1915 there were four Polish Gymnasia [high schools], eight “partial” Gymnasia (with only a four-year course), and thirty elementary schools operating in Vilnius. These Polish schools together enrolled over 5000 pupils.³⁶ On a practical level Jewish schools continued to operate as before with the main change that Russian-language schools now switched over to Yiddish or Hebrew. The Germans frowned on the use of Yiddish in schools and attempted to introduce “pure” German, but rather unsuccessfully.³⁷

There was no restriction on Lithuanian-language schools in Vilnius and a “People’s University” with lectures in Lithuanian was set up in the city.³⁸ The Germans undercut, however, any Lithuanian gratitude by later forbidding the “People’s University.” Their unsubtle efforts to force schools to serve the German cause (both in the sense of propagandizing local populations and as centers of Germanization) further antagonized members of all nationalities.³⁹ Liulevicius concludes, “Ultimately, schools policies were another failure, for natives fell back on a tradition of clandestine schooling, and education became a focal point for sullen resistance.”⁴⁰

Another German policy that angered and alienated the local population was their constant and growing demand for labor. As a recent study has

35 LMAB, f. 23–23, ll. 120–124; in general on the legal situation of schools under German occupation, see Glaser, *Okupacja niemiecka*, pp. 143–148 (“Szkolnictwo”).

36 Pukszo, “Wilno pod koniec roku 1915,” pp. 50–52.

37 Abramowicz, *Profiles*, p. 203.

38 Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, pp. 79, 88.

39 The order forbidding any kind of university course in Vilnius was issued on February 19, 1916. The document is given in Lithuanian translation in *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1965), p. 558.

40 Vejas Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 127.

shown, thousands of Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews were obliged to work for the Germans building roads, cutting trees, and other types of physical labor. While this work was in principle paid, like the compensation given for confiscated goods and crops, the pay was rarely adequate and the forced labor often required individuals to spend weeks or longer away from their homes. And, like most unfree labor, these work battalions were on the whole of questionable utility to the German work effort.⁴¹ It is not unfair to see German labor policies as a form of “confiscation of labor” just as fruits of the earth, draft animals, etc. were confiscated from peasants and landowners.

WAR FATIGUE, 1916–1917

Already by late 1915, few inhabitants of Vilnius could have any illusions about the nature and impact of the German occupation. The primary—indeed, almost exclusive—consideration for the German occupiers was to serve the war effort. They were on the whole uninterested in restricting language use (except for teaching in Russian) but they also did not expend resources for this purpose. The German occupiers expected local residents to behave like good Prussians: to pay taxes, surrender a good deal of their produce to feed German soldiers, and remain quiet. Given the hard conditions of life in Germany itself, one could hardly expect provisions and everyday life to be easier in occupied territories. For local inhabitants, however, the deprivations of the war could not be justified by patriotic appeals. At the same time, the Germans did sponsor a surprising number of cultural events, publications, concerts, and the like. For most local residents, however, these cultural activities remained a luxury far removed from their everyday life of inadequate nourishment and uncertainty as to what the future would bring.

In 1916 the population of Vilnius was exhausted and hungry, unhappy with the German occupation, and longing for peace. Conditions would deteriorate further in the following year. The 1917 revolutions in Petrograd only complicated the situation, the first (in March, new style) appearing initially to invigorate the Russian war effort (and allowing Woodrow Wilson to bring in the USA on the allied side) but the Bolshevik coup in November knocked Russia out of the war entirely. On the level of everyday life, however, the “sullen resistance” mentioned by Liulevicius continued with little change. In 1916 inhabitants of the German-occupied *Ober Ost* had endured compulsory labor duties, confiscation of crops and horses, new taxes on everything from dogs to matches, and the closing off of private fishing, trade in foodstuffs of any kind, and even the ownership of bicycles (which were confiscated by the Germans). In 1917 belts were further tightened with the introduction of new taxes on salt,

41 Christoph Westerhoff, *Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg: Deutsche Arbeitskräftepolitik im besetzten Polen und Litauen, 1914–1918* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012).

new confiscations of horses and crops, and the German authorities' decision as of July 24, 1917 not to accept Russian rubles any longer.

An indication of the widespread misery in Vilnius was the steep drop in the city's population, from over 200,000 at war's begin to around 139,000 by September 1917. Of these, 110,000 were being fed (barely) in the 130 public soup kitchens set up by citizens' committees in the city.⁴² Help from international charities and assistance from relatives in North America were cut off after the American entry into the war in April 1917.

Both anecdotal and statistical evidence shows that 1917 was the single worst year of the war for all Vilnius residents, regardless of nationality. Among Jews, for example, mortality in 1917 was over three times higher than in the pre-war period while births plummeted to less than one third of the 1911–1913 figures.⁴³ Among Polish residents mortality in the first three months of 1917 was over double 1915 figures and a Polish report on the state of the city in spring 1917 argued that the combined effect of requisitions, forced labor, and increased taxes was "simply the annihilation of the country (*zagłada kraju*)."⁴⁴ Lithuanian writer Liūdas Gira's diary for February and March 1917 is full of complaints of the cold (and that with inadequate heating children would not show up for school) and steadily increasing prices for every form of sustenance.⁴⁵ Haikl Lunsky probably put it best when he wrote just after the war that while the year 1914 had been filled with the wails and lamentations of families as their young men were taken from them for the war effort, by 1917 no one even had the energy to whimper any more.⁴⁶

1917–1918: THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

On November 5, 1916 the Central Powers announced the formation of an independent Polish state without, however, allowing Poles to actually assume control of administration in any region. Furthermore, the startling events in Petrograd encouraged both Polish and Lithuanian movements to press for more concessions. As Tomas Balkelis has recently pointed out, it was only during the actual war years that Lithuanian patriots began to demand independence (as opposed to some form of autonomy).⁴⁷ While the demand for in-

42 Ruseckas, ed., *Lietuva Didžiąjame Kare*, pp. 16–23.

43 Cemach Szabad, "Ruch naturalny ludności żydowskiej w Wilnie w ciągu ostatnich lat 18-tu (1911–1928)," *Księga pamiątkowa I Krajowego Zjazdu Lekarskiego 'TOZ-u'* (Warsaw: Nakładem Centralu Tozu, 1929), pp. 83–85.

44 "Referat o ogólnem położeniu miasta" (spring 1917) in *Litwa za rządów ks. Isenburga* (Cracow: Nakładem Krakowskiego Oddziału Zjednoczenia Narodowego, 1919), pp. 42–54.

45 Liudas Gira, "Vilniaus gyvenimas po Vokiečiais, 1917 m.," *Mūsų senovė* 2:3 (1922), pp. 410–422.

46 Haikl Lunsky, *Me-hagheto havilnai: tipusim ve-tslalim* (Vilna: Agudat ha-sofrim vaha-zhurnalistikim ha'ivriyim veVilna, 1921), p. 7.

47 Tomas Balkelis, *The Making of Modern Lithuania* (London: Routledge, 2009).

dependence had a longer history among Poles, it was well into the war before such demands could be expressed openly.⁴⁸

One of the most vital questions facing Poles and Lithuanians involved the borders of future states. In late May 1917 a group representing “all Polish political orientations in Lithuania” addressed the German chancellor with a memorandum on the future status of that land. Here the Poles argued that Poles represented the only “native cultural element” and insisted that ethnographic Lithuanian territory was more or less limited to the former Kaunas/Kowno province. Given the dominance of Polish culture among both the educated and the more wealthy population there, however, Lithuania could only exist in a close alliance with Poland. This so-called “memorandum of the 44” (signatories) infuriated Lithuanians partly by its claims but most likely even more by its glib refusal even to recognize Lithuanian claims and Lithuanian culture as a serious adversary.⁴⁹

Lithuanian activists soon made public their rebuttal to the Polish pretensions to the region. Their memorandum (also sent to the German Chancellor) insisted that unlike “aggressive polonism,” Lithuanians did not lay claim to the entire territory of the erstwhile Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but only to the ethnically Lithuanian and (here the argument becomes somewhat murky, of necessity) mixed areas. As for Vilnius itself (not even mentioned in the Poles’ declaration), for some time many nationalities had lived there and if some elements of the “simple people” used the Polish language, one should not conclude that they belonged to the Polish nationality. And even the “Lithuanian nobility” who at present mainly support the Poles did so out of willful ignorance of their own past and Lithuanian roots. Vilnius was located in a mainly Lithuanian ethnographic region and was populated by Lithuanians and polonized Lithuanians—“Polish immigrants” should not be allowed to usurp the proper place of Lithuanians in their own capital city.⁵⁰ In this argument Jews disappear entirely: this is a duel between Polish and Lithuanian state ideas.⁵¹

The future Lithuanian foreign minister, Petras Klimas, describes the growing organization and resoluteness of Lithuanian proto-statehood in Vilnius

48 An excellent short collection of Polish memoirs from the war years is Andrzej Rosner, ed., *Teraz będzie Polska. Wybór z pamiętników z okresu I wojny światowej* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, 1988).

49 This memorandum, along with the Lithuanian response were published together (in the original German) in *Litauen und die Polenfreunde* (Wilno: n. p., 1917); for a Lithuanian translation see Gimžauskas, ed., *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, document 20, pp. 134–138.

50 These arguments echoed—though in much more vociferous form—some of the arguments of the pre-war *krjajowcy*. However, by this point most of those writers had fallen silent. On this movement, see Rimantas Miknys, “Stosunki polsko-litewskie w wizji krajowców,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* 104 (1993), pp. 123–129; Zbigniew Solak, *Między Polską i Litwą. Życie i działalność Michała Römera* (Kraków: Arcana, 2004); Dariusz Szpoper, *Gente lithuana, nazione Lithuania: myśl polityczna i działalność Konstacji Skirmuntt (1851–1934)* (Sopot: Arche, 2009).

51 This memorandum is printed (in Lithuanian) in Gimžauskas, ed., *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, document 21, pp. 139–147.

during 1917. To be sure, the Poles had a head start and enjoyed more support among the local elite and nobility, but from summer of 1917—and in particular after the September conference of that year, attended by 264 Lithuanian activists, Lithuanian efforts picked up steam.⁵² The most important outcome of this conference was the formation of a council of twenty representatives, the Lithuanian *Taryba*, a kind of proto-government.⁵³ From this point onward, with the American entry into the war and at year's end the collapse of imperial Russia, events moved quickly: there was even a call (to be sure, from abroad) in November 1917 for Lithuanian independence.⁵⁴

The increasing visibility of the Lithuanian movement disturbed and outraged local Poles. This outrage comes through in various petitions to German authorities and politicians defending the Polish conception insisting on the city's Polish history and identity.⁵⁵ A memorandum drawn up by Władysław Zawadzki of the Vilnius Polish committee (*Komitet Polski w Wilnie*) in early November 1917 foresaw three possibilities for the future of Lithuania: 1) a connection of Lithuania with Poland; 2) Independence for occupied Lithuania; 3) A more loose confederation with Poland. Zawadzki expressed his concern that the individuals he termed "Lietuwi" (because local Poles sometimes—like poet Adam Mickiewicz—could and did refer to themselves as "Litwini" without being ethnically Lithuanian)—"the most chauvinistic and anti-Polish group"—could gain the upper hand in part through their single-mindedness, not to say fanaticism. Zawadzki concluded by insisting that if an independent Lithuania were to arise, the (future) Polish state "must categorically demand that any [future] Lithuania limit itself to lands settled in the majority by Lithuanians..." In particular "Vilnius and its region" (*Wilno i okręg wileński*) must then form part

52 Petras Klimas, "Lietuvos Valstybės Kurimas 1915–1918 metais Vilniuje" in *Pirmasis Nepriklausomos Lietuvos dešimtmetis 1918–1928* ([originally published 1930] London: Nida, 1955), pp. 7–16; Steponas Kairys, *Tau, Lietuva* (Boston: Lietuvių enciklopedijos spaustuvė, 1964), pp. 249–251.

53 For the most important decisions of this conference, see "Lietuvių Vilniaus konferencijos 1917 m. rugsėjo 18–22 d. posėdžių protokolo ištrauka" in Gimžauskas, *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, document 21, pp. 159–161. An excellent study of the relations between Germans and the Lithuanian national movement is A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg. Der Fall Ober Ost 1915–1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1993).

54 Alfred Erich Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 25.

55 Andrzej Pukszo, "Postawy wileńskich Polaków pod niemiecką okupacją w latach 1915–1918," in Tadeusz Bujnicki and Krzysztof Stępnik, *Ostatni obywatele Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005), pp. 281–286. Some Polish political groupings took a more positive stance toward the Lithuanian movement but often made vague references to the close connections previously existing between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, e. g., "Lenkijos politinių judėjimų ir organizacijų deklaracija Lietuvos klausimu" (May 19–22, 1917), in Gimžauskas, ed., *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, document No. 19, pp. 126–128.

of Poland.⁵⁶ Unfortunately for future Polish-Lithuanian relations, this demand clashed directly with the Lithuanian insistence that Vilnius become the capital of a future Lithuanian state.⁵⁷

With the Bolshevik revolution in Petrograd (November 1917, new style) and Russia's exit from the war, it appeared that the Germans now enjoyed a free hand in the east, including Vilnius. Poles in the city were well aware of Lithuanian claims and feared that they could even succeed in gaining control over Wilno with German connivance. On January 13, 1918 Stanisław Cywiński wrote in his diary, "The fate of Wilno lies in the balance ... it would be truly a scandal and stupidity if Wilno were to become the capital of Lithuania!—all because the Lithuanians do not want to come to an agreement with the Poles!"⁵⁸

Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania seemed an absurdity to Cywiński, but the Taryba saw no real alternative (nor desired to seek one out). On February 16, 1918 Lithuanian leaders announced—characteristically, in Vilnius—the re-establishment of the Lithuanian state.⁵⁹ To be sure, declarations are easy to make but actual states are rather more difficult to create. As Alfred Erich Senn has pointed out, the unilateral declaration of annoyed the Germans but in spring 1918 they recognized Lithuanian independence. The actual statement issued by the Taryba, headed by Basanavičius, declaring the "restoration" of an "independent Lithuanian state, resting on democratic foundations, with its capital in Vilnius."⁶⁰ Despite the Lithuanian proclamation, however, the actual borders of a future Lithuania remained unclear. Nor were Lithuanians in any sense in control of Vilnius. Behind the scenes Lithuanians were negotiating with the German authorities about the creation of their future state, on July 11 selecting Duke Wilhelm von Urach of Württemberg as the future Lithuanian monarch.⁶¹ The collapse of

56 Wiktor Sukiennicki, ed., "Memoriał o sprawie litewskiej złożony przez Władysława Zawadzkiego w Warszawie w listopadzie 1917," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 30 (1974), pp. 77–85; the original text of this memorandum can be found in *Litwa podczas wojny* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Departamentu Spraw Politycznych, 1918), pp. 55–58.

57 See, for example, the discussion in Wilhelm Gaigalat, *Litauen. Das besetzte Gebiet, sein Volk und dessen geistige Strömungen* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Vereinsdruckerei, 1917), *passim* and especially the pages on Lithuanians and Poles, pp. 120–130.

58 Cywiński, *Kartki z pamiętnika*, p. 84.

59 "Lietuvos Taryba skelbia aktą dėl Lietuvos valstybės atkūrimo 1918 02 16" in *Vilniaus miesto istorijos dokumentai*, p. 342; on the discussions leading up to this declaration, see Klimas, "Lietuvos Valstybės Kurimas," pp. 19–25.

60 "Lietuvos Taryba skelbia aktą dėl Lietuvos valstybės atkūrimo" 1918 02 16. See also Jonas Basanavičius, "Dėl vasario 16 dieną paskelbtos Lietuvos nepriklausomybės" in *Vilniaus miesto istorijos skaitiniai*, pp. 478–488.

61 Senn, *The Emergence*, pp. 32–38. Aside from Senn's classic work, this crucial period for the creation of independent Lithuania is very poorly researched in western languages. Even Balkelis's very useful book, cited above, only discusses the post-1914 situation in barely over a dozen pages. For more information by two of the most important diplomatic actors of the period see Juozas Gabrys, *Vers l'Indépendance Lituanienne. Faits, Impressions, Souvenirs 1907–1920* (Lausanne: Librairie Centrale des Nationalités, 1920) and Petras Klimas, *Der*

imperial German in November 1918 prevented him from accepting the Lithuanian crowd as King Mindaugas II.⁶²

THE WAR ENDS, THE WAR CONTINUES: 1918–1920

The year 1918 began with German victory on the Eastern Front and ended with the crushing (though later denied) defeat of German by the Allies. While traditionally World War I ends with this year, in Vilnius and elsewhere east of the Odra river, war conditions continued for at least two more years, making 1918 not war's final year but a period of transition from a relatively stable situation to one of near chaos. The German signing of an armistice officially ending the war on November 11, 1918 was thus something of a non-event in Vilnius and neighboring regions.

The city's economic misery continued unabated as the political situation spiraled out of control. With the Kaiser's abdication and signing of the armistice agreement in November 1918 the German troops in Vilnius found themselves in an impossible situation. Stationed in a foreign land serving a government that no longer existed, surrounded by incomprehensible nationalist struggles, and threatened by foreign intervention from east (Red Army) and west (Poland), the German soldiers simply wanted to get home as quickly as possible. They remained in Vilnius for some weeks longer, evacuating in mid-December, though the soldiers of the 10th army elected their own council (Soviet/Rat) in November of 1918.⁶³

The Red Army marched into Vilnius to fill the power vacuum left by the retreating Germans. Already on December 8, 1918 the central committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania and Belorussia had announced the formation of a "Provisional Revolutionary Workers' Government in Lithuania." Tellingly, the declaration was made in Vilnius.⁶⁴ Also in December elections for the Vilnius Soviet of Workers' Deputies took place. It is noteworthy that the soviet members were divided almost equally between communists and "sympathizers," that is, those who wanted closer links with Soviet Russia, and more independent socialists. Ninety-six members of this first Vilnius soviet belonged in the pro-Bolshevik group while the more independent-minded (though also socialist) Jewish Bund elected sixty deputies, the Menshevik Internationalists twenty-two, and the Lithuanian Social Democrats fifteen. The socialists went

Werdegang des Litauischen Staates von 1915 bis zur Bildung der provisorischen Regierung im November 1918 (Berlin: Pass & Garleb G. m. b. H., 1918).

62 On the exceedingly complicated diplomatic wrangling over Wilhelm von Urach's election as Lithuanian king, see the documents collected in Gimžauskas, *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, pp. 340–404.

63 Senn, *The Emergence*, pp. 61–68; Liulevicius, *War Land*, pp. 214–219.

64 Alfred Erich Senn, "Die bolschewistische Politik in Litauen 1917–1919," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 5 (1957), p. 93.

on to form the “Provisional Revolutionary Workers’ and Poor Peasants’ Government of Lithuania” on December 8, 1918 in Vilna. Interestingly, among the governments’ eight “ministers” were four Lithuanians, two Poles, and two Jews, including Semen Dimanshtein, later to gain fame as a nationality specialist in the USSR and still later purged by Stalin.⁶⁵

While communist agitation was noticeable in the city throughout the chaotic month of December, at the same time the Lithuanians were rushing to set up their own state institutions in the city.⁶⁶ Local Poles hastened to set up “self-defense” units to protect Polish Wilno from Red Army and possible Lithuanian threats.⁶⁷ The German command, according to a document issued in 1919 by members of the German soldiers’ council, favored the Polish conservatives. It is doubtful, however, that at this point the German military cared much about anything other than extricating itself from the region.⁶⁸ In the first days of 1919 both Lithuanian and Polish patriots, recognizing their inability to resist the approaching Red Army, evacuated Vilnius. Residents of the city—still mainly Polish and Jewish with very few industrial workers—were nonetheless shocked when the Red Army entered the city unopposed on the night of January 5, 1919. Abramowicz described life under the Bolsheviks in 1919 as “unbearably hard” with almost nothing to eat and an exodus of Vilners abandoning the city for friends and relatives living in the countryside. Still, after a few weeks the Bolsheviks allowed merchants to open their shops again and the Russian soldiers even set up musical entertainments and—of course—propaganda meetings for the locals.⁶⁹

Bolshevik rule in Vilnius lasted barely three months; the city was then taken by Polish armies led by Józef Piłsudski on April 19, 1919.⁷⁰ Though Polish control of the city did not continue unbroken after this date, the April 1919 “liberation” would be celebrated by Wilno Poles throughout the interwar period.⁷¹ A celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the date in 1934, for example, produced a booklet with poems, photos of military heroes, and recollections of the day. Possibly the exalted tone of the memoirs can be linked to the fact that the city was taken from the Bolsheviks on the day before Easter. Special masses

65 B. Vaitkevičius and Z. Vasiliauskas, *Lithuania in 1918–1919. First Soviets* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1979), pp. 38–40, 56–60.

66 Algirdas Grigaravičius, “Vilnius: 1918 metų gruodžio 20–24 dienos” in *Vilniaus miesto istorijos skaitiniai*, pp. 496–505.

67 Władysław Wejtko, *Samoobrona Litwy i Białorusi. Szkic historyczny* (Wilno: Nakładem Związku Organizacji B. Wojskowych w Wilnie, 1930).

68 *Wilnas Auslieferung an die Polen. Denkschrift des zurückgetretenen Soldatenrats der 10. Armee* (Stuttgart: Jung u. Sohn, 1919).

69 “April 1919” in Abramowicz, *Profiles*, pp. 209–218.

70 Bolesław Waligóra, *Walka o Wilno. Okupacja Litwy i Białorusi w 1918–1919 roku przez Rosję Sowiecką* (Wilno: Wydawnictwo Zarządu Miejskiego, 1938). On the taking of the city by the Polish troops, see Tadeusz Piskor, *Wyprawa wileńska* (Warsaw: Księgarnia wojskowa, 1919).

were held to celebrate the defeat of the Red Army and the return of Wilno to a strong, independent Poland. Of particular importance was the leading role of Józef Piłsudski in the military operation, thereby linking the local-born national hero with the fate of the city.⁷² The taking of Wilno was important not just for local Poles, but possibly even more as an event shaping future eastern frontiers of the Polish Republic.⁷³

For non-Poles living in Vilnius, the memory of April 1919 was considerably more bitter. The Polish entry into the city was accompanied by attacks on Jews that left dozens killed (Jewish sources speak of at least sixty victims) and huge property damage.⁷⁴ Besides the violence—the long-time community leader Jakub Wygodzki wrote of three “horrible days” of attacks from 20 to April 22—many Jews were arrested and, worst of all for future relations, the Jewish community as a whole was treated as complicit with the Soviet occupiers.⁷⁵ The bitter memory of the April 1919 pogrom carried out by Polish soldiers made Vilnius Jews fear for their future under a Polish government and *ipso facto* made them more sympathetic to the Lithuanians.⁷⁶ The Polish authorities denied any specific violence targeting Jewish inhabitants but insisted that Jews had collaborated with the Soviet occupiers. This pogrom, along with those in Lwów, Białystok, and many smaller places, had a disastrous effect on relations between Poles and Jews. To simplify a painful and complex situation, one may say that the Jews feared that the Polish state had no interest in protecting their rights as citizens or even their personal safety. Poles, on the other hand, were angered by what they regarded as exaggerations and anti-Polish biases in

71 For a contemporary account of the re-taking of Wilno from the Soviets, see Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, *Wyprawa wileńska* (Warsaw: Żołnierz polski, 1920); and Zygmunt Nagrodzki, *Wyprawa wileńska roku 1919 we wspomnieniach cywila (Kartki z pamiętnika)* (Wilno: Kurjer Wileński, 1933).

72 Edward Małachowski, ed., *Wilno 1919. IV. 19–1934. Wydawnictwo poświęcone 15-ej Roczniccy odzyskania Wilna* (Wilno: Politechnika robotnicza w Wilnie, 1934).

73 For a political-military history with documents, see Grzegorz Łukomski, Rafał E. Stolarski, *Walka o Wilno. Z dziejów samoobrony Litwy i Białorusi 1918–1919* (Warsaw: “Adiutor,” 1994).

74 On the Vilnius pogrom of April 19–22, 1919, see Schuster, *Zwischen allen Fronten*, pp. 445–448; Frank Golczewski, *Polnisch-jüdische Beziehungen 1881–1922: Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Antisemitismus in Osteuropa* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1981), pp. 229–232; “Report on the Occurrences in Vilna. Presented to the Polish Government by the Jewish Committee of Vilna” [1919] in Sarunas Liekis, Lidia Miliakova, Antony Polonsky, “Three Documents on Anti-Jewish Violence in the Eastern Kresy during the Polish-Soviet Conflict,” *Polin* 14 (2001), pp. 138–149.

75 Jakub Wygodzki, *In shturm: zikhroynes fun di okupatsye-tsaytn* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1926), pp. 152–166. Wygodzki stresses cooperation between soldiers and civilian (presumably Polish) population in robbing and committing atrocities from April 20–22 (pp. 154–156).

76 On efforts within the Jewish community to organize itself in this chaotic period, see Samuel Kassow, “Jewish Communal Politics in Transition: the Vilna *Kehile*, 1919–1920” *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991), pp. 61–91.

the portrayal of this violence.⁷⁷ Neither argument can be dismissed though, as nearly always in such matters, both are one-sided.⁷⁸

Even while the Poles celebrated their military victory, however, the Lithuanians were planning their own return to the city. As Česlovas Laurinavičius has shown, the Lithuanians actually preferred the Poles to the Red Army—at least in April—and may have been willing to compromise with Piłsudski in 1919, but the opportunity was lost.⁷⁹ In February 1919, the Poles set up a “Civilian Administration of the Eastern Lands” to rule the region, including Vilnius. This temporary administration was to exist until September 1920.⁸⁰

Almost immediately, Polish culture made a comeback in the city, with theaters, periodicals, and schools opening in the city.⁸¹ Most importantly, the university—closed for over eighty years—was resurrected as a Polish institution. Officially the university was opened—now bearing the name of its original founder from the sixteenth century, Stefan Batory—by a decree signed by Józef Piłsudski on August 28, 1919.⁸² Between this August declaration and the official opening of the university some six weeks later there was a frantic rush to get the buildings in shape to receive students, organize the university library, and prepare for the festive opening. This inaugural ceremony began on October 10 with special afternoon masses at Ostra Brama Madonna, an obvious Polish symbol, thereby connecting up the modern university with its religious origins. This was followed by a festive mass the following day at the Cathedral, the inauguration ceremony in the university’s Columned Hall (*Sala Kolumnowa*) which involved the head of state (“Naczelnny Wódz,” as Piłsudski was called) handing over to the university rektor the university insignia, and finally

77 Neal Pease makes the point that initial reports about the pogroms were much exaggerated and the actual level of violence was lower than was thought at the time—or is often imagined. However, at the time, Polish Jews were convinced that hundreds or thousands of Jews had been slaughtered by Polish antisemites and this belief—however false—influenced their attitudes. N. Pease, “‘This Troublesome Question’: The United States and the ‘Polish Pogroms’ of 1918–1919” in M. Biskupski, ed., *Ideology, Politics and Diplomacy in East Central Europe* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), pp. 58–79.

78 Even in the late twentieth century, memory of the Wilno pogrom remained divided: see Stefan Bergman, “W sprawie pogromu w Wilnie w kwietniu 1919 roku,” *Odra* 32:2–3 (1992), pp. 126–127.

79 Česlovas Laurinavičius, “Aus der Geschichte des provisorischen litauischen Komitees von Wilna (April bis Juni 1919)” *Nord-Ost Archiv* 2:2 (1992), pp. 361–376.

80 Joanna Gierowska-Kałuża, *Zarząd cywilny ziem wschodnich (19 lutego 1919 – 9 września 1920)* (Warsaw: Wyd. Neriton IH PAN, 2003).

81 Andrzej Pukszo, “Kultura polska Wilna w okresie Zarządu Cywilnego Ziem Wschodnich w latach 1919–1920,” *Zapiski Historyczne* 68:4 (2003), pp. 69–88.

82 Adam Wrzosek, *Wskrzeszenie Uniwersytetu Wileńskiego w r. 1919* (Wilno: Zawadzki, 1919). For the full text of this decree, see Józef Piłsudski, “Dekret Naczelnego Wodza Wojsk Polskich o otwarciu U. S. B. w Wilnie” in Feliksiak–1992, III, pp. 57–58. This volume contains several articles connected with USB and with other schools in Wilno.

an evening ball hosted by Piłsudski. The leader pronounced a long speech for the occasion, and at the signing of the act officially opening the university the title “Uniwersytet Stefana Batorego” (USB) was used for the first time. As the first rector later recalled, even the Jewish population of the city regarded the opening of the university with interest and sympathy.⁸³ Despite their small numbers, Lithuanians also established schools and periodicals in the city despite Polish censorship and general malevolence but they were unsuccessful in their desire to create the first Lithuanian university in the city.⁸⁴

When the Red Army marched on Warsaw in summer 1920 the Lithuanian government saw its chance to take advantage of Polish weakness and restore Lithuanian power over the nation’s declared capital.⁸⁵ The Red Army entered the city on July 14, 1920 and handed it over to Lithuanian control on August 26, immediately after the Polish defeat of Soviet armies at the so-called “Miracle on the Vistula.” With the Soviet defeat, Lithuania probably had no chance to retain its grasp over the predominantly Polish city, but it took the “revolt” of a friend and fellow officer of Piłsudski’s, Lucjan Żeligowski, to bring Vilnius back under Polish control where it would stay until autumn 1939. The extent to which Piłsudski knew of (or even ordered) Żeligowski’s attack on the city seems disputed but once the latter’s troops had taken the city from the Lithuanians on October 9, 1920, Piłsudski did not disavow or criticize his friend’s actions.⁸⁶ Resistance was minimal and the city fell into Polish hands without serious fighting.⁸⁷

Since ostensibly Żeligowski’s actions were a “revolt,” it would have been unseemly to attempt an immediate incorporation of the territory to Poland. Instead, the peculiar entity of “Middle Lithuania” was created while a plebiscite of the population was prepared (about which more be-

83 M. Siedlecki, “Wspomnienia z pierwszych dwóch lat organizacji Uniwersytetu Wileńskiego” in *Księga pamiątkowa ku uczczeniu 350 rocznicy założenia Uniw. Wileńskiego II* (Wilno: Uniwersytet Stefana Bartorego, 1929), pp. 60–80.

84 Vygintas B. Pšibilskis, *Iš Lietuvos XX a. kultūros istorijos* (Vilnius: “Arlila,” 1997), pp. 37–64.

85 On the development of the Lithuanian army in these years, see Vytautas Lesčius, “Lietuvos kariuomenė 1918–1920 metais,” in *Vilniaus miesto istorijos skaitiniai*, pp. 506–517.

86 Some years later Piłsudski was reported to have remarked that he “chose” Żeligowski to re-take Wilno (Grzegorz Łukomski, *Wojna domowa. Z dziejów konfliktu polsko-litewskiego 1918–1920* [Warsaw: Adiutor, 1997], p. 36). On Żeligowski’s “revolt,” see Zenon Krajewski, “‘Bunt’ generała Żeligowskiego i zajęcie Wilna,” *Wojskowy przegląd historyczny* 46:1 (1996), pp. 56–71. In general on this interesting figure, see Dariusz Fabisz, *Generał Lucjan Żeligowski (1865–1947). Działalność wojskowa i polityczna* (Warsaw: DiG, 2007).

87 On these battles, see Andrzej Żak, *Wilno 1919–1920* (Warsaw: Bellona, 1993); Bolesław Waligóra, *Zajęcie Wilna przez Gen. Żeligowskiego* (Warsaw: Wojskowe biuro historyczne, 1930); and Piotr Lossowski, *Stosunki polsko-litewskie w latach 1918–1920* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1966), pp. 319–367. Anger against Żeligowski and the general apathy of the western powers is reflected in the contemporary articles collected in Mich. Birżiszka [Mykolas Biržiška], *Na posterunku wileńskim*, vol. 4 (Wilno: “Głos Litwy,” 1922), pp. 59–94 [articles from October to December 1920].

low).⁸⁸ There was little doubt that the end result of the plebiscite would be favorable to the Poles—which is the main reason that Lithuanians vociferously opposed it. And, as foreseen by all, in early 1922 “Middle Lithuania” ceased to exist except as an eastern region of the Polish republic. The “liberation” of October 1920 (from a Polish point of view) or “illegal occupation” (from a Lithuanian) would quickly petrify into two opposing myths. For patriotic Poles, Żeligowski was a hero; a downtown thoroughfare in Wilno bore his name during the interwar years. For Lithuanians, on the other hand, the October attack was an illegal and cynical power grab on the part of the Poles and the beginning of a two decades’ long occupation of the true capital of Lithuania.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the years of the first World War in Vilnius witnessed the increase and sharpening of local nationalisms. When Russian power disappeared early in the conflict, Russian pretensions toward the city disappeared. Under the German occupation, both Poles and Lithuanians steadily maneuvered to assure their own grasp over the city after the war. Meanwhile most of the Jewish population attempted to stay outside the fray, knowing well that in the contest between Poles and Lithuanians siding with either side would only bring the intense enmity of the other. Unfortunately, the dogmatic assumptions of both Poles and Lithuanians and their unwillingness to compromise would mean that while the Poles gained initial dominion over Vilnius, the resentment felt among Lithuanians would make this victory hollow indeed. As for the Lithuanians, their desire to gain Vilnius at any price made them willing to become Stalin’s accomplices in 1939, a short-lived victory that would lead directly to Lithuania’s incorporation into the USSR.

In Vilnius as elsewhere in Europe, World War I sharpened national aspirations and conflicts. The war also had catastrophic effects on the city’s economy and population. The optimistic, growing city of early 1914 had transmogrified into a considerable smaller, hungrier, and more isolated city by 1922. The Poles “won” the contest for the city but their victory was a hollow one indeed, bringing in its wake a total breakdown in relations with Lithuania. The city also became much more homogenous in the period 1914–1920 with the departure of almost all Russians and a significant reduction of the Jewish population. The Polish triumph in 1920 helped pave the way for another patriotic victory: the transfer of the city from Poland to Lithuania with the help of the Red Army in autumn 1939.

88 On “Middle Lithuania”, see Zenon Krajewski, *Geneza i dzieje wewnętrzne Litwy Środkowej* (Lublin: Ośrodek Studiów Polonijnych i Społecznych PZKS, 1996); Beata Kolarz, *Ustrój Litwy Środkowej w latach 1920–1922* (Gdańsk: Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2004).

89 For a good example of the Lithuanian point of view, see Mykolas Biržiška, *Spalių 9 diena (1920–1927)* (Kaunas: Vilniui vaduoti sąjunga, 1927); for pro-Polish rhetoric, see “Niema Litwy bez Polski, niema Polski bez Litwy” in *Zorza wileńska na rok 1920. Kalendarz* (Wilno: Księgarnia Jurkiewicza i Szalkiewiczza, 1920), pp. 17–31.