

Vilnius in World War I, 1914–1920

by Theodore R. Weeks

World War I transformed Europe and one may argue that its greatest impact was precisely on Eastern Europe. The Habsburg, Romanov, and Hohenzollern Empires collapsed and would-be nation-states emerged to the rejoicing of patriots from Tallinn to Tiranë. Probably no single region experienced such radical upheaval as the territory inhabited by Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, and Belarussians (to name only the most prominent ethnic groups) that in 1914 had been ruled by the Romanovs and after 1920 would be divided between the newly-formed Lithuanian and Polish republics. The “capital” of this region, Vilnius, forms the focus of this paper.

Traditionally World War I’s chronological limits are clear: from the declarations of war in early August 1914 to the cease fire of November 11, 1918. In Eastern Europe generally and in Vilnius in particular, this chronology – particularly its end date – does not make sense. Nothing of great significance changed in Vilnius in November 1918. The real changes occurred earlier, in 1917 with the two revolutions in neighboring Russia, or later, with the Soviet invasion and battles between Poles, Lithuanians, and the Red Army for the city which only ended in 1920. Our story will thus begin some years before the war’s outbreak with a portrait of the late imperial provincial town known in Russia as Vil’na¹ and end with the establishment of Polish rule over the city in 1920.

Vilnius before 1914

Before 1914 Vilnius was a provincial city, capital of the so-called “Northwestern provinces” where Belarussian and Lithuanian peasants dominated the countryside, Jews were prominent in towns, and Polish landholding was strong. Since the crushing of the 1863 Polish Insurrection, the Russian government had adopted strict measures to reduce Polish influence in the city but even 50 years later one was more likely to hear Polish spoken in the Vilnius than Russian (though

¹ Throughout this paper I will use the present-day name of the city, “Vilnius,” despite the anachronism, for simplicity’s sake.

native speakers of Yiddish almost certainly outnumbered those of Polish).² The Russian authorities had attempted to make their mark on Vilnius through the building of monuments, orthodox Churches, and entire new streets and districts. The three most prominent Russian monuments were those to Mikhail Murav'ev (1898), Pushkin (1899), and Catherine the Great (1904).³ The stern "hangman" (to use the Polish epithet) who presided over the crushing of the 1863 rebellion, Murav'ev stood atop a large granite base gazing sternly in the direction of the university which had been closed after the previously Polish insurrection in 1831.⁴ The Pushkin monument was smaller, but no less strategically located at the foot of Gediminas Hill. Finally, the grandiose monument to Catherine the Great – a figure not beloved by Poles – stood near the front of the Catholic Cathedral.⁵ All three monuments were located in close proximity; one could walk the triangle Catherine-Pushkin-Murav'ev-Catherine easily in half an hour. Taken together, they served as concrete visual reminders of Russian political dominance over the city.

Demographically and culturally, however, the position of Russians in Vilnius was much less strong. According to the only scientific census of the Russian Empire, carried out in 1897, no one ethnic group dominated in Vilnius. In any case, the data gathered in this census did not include the category "nationality" or "ethnicity" but we may draw conclusions by extrapolating from figures for "native tongue" and "religion." By religion the city's population broke down into 24% Orthodox Christians, 36% Catholics, and 40% Jews (with assorted Muslims, Karaites, Lutherans, and even two Mennonites). By native tongue, Yiddish enjoyed a strong plurality with 40% of all inhabitants, followed by Polish (31%), Russian (20%), Belarussian (4%), and Lithuanian (2%).⁶ While we must use these figures with

² For background on russification in this region, see Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914*. DeKalb 1996, esp. pp. 44-109.

³ *Vil'na v karmane* [Vilna in your Pocket]. Vil'na 1912, pp. 34-38.

⁴ On this monument, its construction and use as a symbol of Russian domination, see Theodore R. Weeks, *Monuments and Memory: Immortalizing Count M.N. Muraviev in Vilna, 1898*, in: *Nationalities Papers* 27 (December 1999), No. 4, pp. 551-564.

⁵ A.A. Vinogradov, *Pamiatnik Imperatritse Ekaterine II v Vil'ne* [The Monument to Empress Catherine II in Vilna]. Vil'na [1903]; *Otkrytie pamiatnika Imperatritse Ekaterine II v Vil'ne* [The Inauguration of the Monument to Empress Catherine II in Vilna], in: *Niva*, No. 39, 25 September 1904, pp. 778 ff.; *Pomnik Katarzyny II w Wilnie*, in: *Kraj* 23 (17/30 September 1904), No. 38, pp. 18 f.

⁶ *Pervaia vseobschaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii. tom 4: Vilenskaia guberniia* [First General Census of the Russian Empire, vol. 4: Vilna province]. St. Petersburg 1899,

caution – there were almost certainly Lithuanians who were included as native speakers of “Polish” and the figures for Russians are very likely inflated – the general picture is clear: no one religious or linguistic grouping predominating, but Jews and Poles together made up over two thirds of the town’s total population.

Economically, the city had been growing steadily from the early 1860s with the completion of railroads linking it first to Kaunas and Prussia, then to St. Petersburg and Warsaw. The town’s economy was based more on small workshops and artisan work than on large industrial establishments, but by the early 20th century Vilnius could boast several tobacco, paper, and chocolate factories and a total industrial working class perhaps nearly ten thousand individuals.⁷ A very large number of these workers (who often were not easily distinguished from “artisans”) were Jews which explains in part the predominance of Jews among socialists in official reports of the time. The single strongest socialist party in Vilnius, by all accounts, was the Jewish Bund, founded there in 1897.⁸ Perhaps the most famous Vilnius worker of the early 20th century was the Bund sympathizer Hirsh Lekert who attempted to assassinate the repressive governor general Viktor von Wahl in 1902 and was himself executed shortly thereafter.⁹

In 1905/06 Vilnius was rocked by revolution. In the city socialist agitation (the Jewish Bund, Polish PPS, and Lithuanian Social-

tetrad’ 3, tables XIII and XIV. The total population of the city in 1897 was 154,532. For “Lithuanian” I added together “litovskii” and “zhudskii” entries; I have also rounded the figures.

⁷ Because tsarist statistics are far from reliable on social class, attempts to fix the number of industrial workers inevitably involve a good deal of guesswork. In the most comprehensive city history to date, published in Lithuania during the Soviet period, a total of 8,000 industrial workers is estimated in Vilnius in 1900 (p. 300); J. Jurginis, V. Merkys, A. Tautavičius, *Vilniaus miesto istorija nuo seniausių laikų iki Spalio revoliucijos* [Vilnius City History from Oldest Times to the October Revolution]. Vilnius 1968, pp. 275-284, 300-311.

⁸ On Vilnius and the Bund, see Henri Minczeles, *Vilna, Wilno, Vilnius: La Jérusalem de Lituanie*. Paris 1993, pp. 84-93; *Materialy k istorii evreiskogo rabochego dvizheniia* [Materials on the History of the Jewish Workers’ Movement]. St. Petersburg 1906, esp. pp. 27, 36 ff.; and the essays collected in: *Wilno: a zamelbukh gevidnet der shtot vilne* [Wilno: A Collective Work Dedicated to the City Vilne], ed. by Efin Yeshurin. New York 1935, esp. part 2 “Arbayter, sotsialistishe un revolutsionere bavegung in Vilne” (pp. 74-263); and for a quick overview Gottfried Schramm, *Wilna und die Entstehung eines ostjüdischen Sozialismus 1870-1900*, in: *Deutsche Juden und die Moderne*, ed. by Shulamit Volkov. Munich 1994, pp. 129-140.

⁹ Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II*. Detroit 1999, pp. 132-142; *Der heroischer akt fun Hirsh Lekert*, in: G. Aronson (et al.), *Geshikhte fun Bund*. New York 1960, Vol. I, pp. 231-241. Lekert fired two shots at von Wahl (wounding him slightly) on May 6, 1902 and was hung on May 28.

Democratic Party were all active in the city) mixed with nationalist demands.¹⁰ In the course of the revolution the first legal periodicals in Lithuanian, Polish, and Yiddish were published in the city, shopkeepers were allowed to put up signs in front of their establishments in Polish (or other non-Russian languages), and clashes between police and demonstrators left dozens dead, creating some of the first socialist martyrs in Vilnius's history. The single most important event of 1905 for the Lithuanian national movement was the "Great Seim" held in Vilna late in that year.¹¹ The gathering had been inspired and organized in great part by the energetic and cantankerous Dr. Jonas Basanavičius, one of the fathers of Lithuanian nationalism.¹² Coming together in early December, the several-day affair brought together dozens of Lithuanian intellectuals who subsequently published their demands, including Lithuanian schools and the use of that language in "supplementary services" (prayers, hymns, homilies) in Catholic churches.¹³ But far more important than any declarations or demands was the simple fact that a large group of Lithuanian patriots had gathered in Vilnius, tacitly laying claim on the city as their past and future capital.

After the crushing of the revolution throughout the empire and in Vilnius, a sullen calm settled over the city. Still, nothing would be quite the same. Despite renewed censorship, Yiddish, Lithuanian, and Polish newspapers and journals continued to be published. Economic activity picked up and the city's population grew, making Vilnius in 1910 the empire's fourteenth largest city with a total population of 192,746.¹⁴ Thus on the eve of World War I Vilnius was a fairly prosperous provincial center, peopled mainly by Poles and Jews but also claimed by Russians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians, with a population of around 200,000 souls.

¹⁰ Theodore R. Weeks, *The 1905 Revolution in Vilnius*, in: *Rewolucja 1905–1907 w Królestwie Polskim i w Rosji* [The Revolution of 1905–1907 in the Kingdom of Poland and Russia], ed. by Marek Przeniosła and Stanisław Wiech. Kielce, 2005, pp. 213–236; Juozas Jurginis, *1905 metų revoliucijos įvykiai* [Events of the 1905 Revolution]. Vilnius 1958; and, particularly for cultural history, Andrzej Romanowski, *Młoda Polska Wileńska* [Young Poland in Wilno]. Cracow 1999.

¹¹ Egidijus Motieka, *Didysis Vilniaus seimas* [The Great Seimas of Vilnius]. Vilnius 1996.

¹² Basanavičius's importance for Lithuanians is reflected in his image on the present-day fifty litas bill.

¹³ Motieka, *Didysis Vilniaus seimas* (see footnote 11); Juozas Dainauskas, *Prelude to Independence: the Great Conference of Vilnius, 1905*, in: *Lituanus* 11 (1965), No. 4, pp. 47–60; and the great man's own account, Jonas Basanavičius, *Iš Didžiojo Vilniaus Seimo istorijos* [From the History of the Great Seimas in Vilnius]. Vilnius 1925.

¹⁴ *The City in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. by Michael F. Hamm. Bloomington 1986, p. 3.

The First Year: Vilnius in Russian Hands to September 1915

The outbreak of World War I caught Vilnius – like other cities throughout Europe – by surprise. Located on the main railroad connecting St. Petersburg to Warsaw and hardly 150 miles from the Prussian border, Vilnius was from the start on the front lines. As is well known, the war on the Eastern Front began with Russian successes in East Prussia which were quickly reversed by the German victory at Tannenberg in late August. Driven out of East Prussia, the Russian armies would never again threaten German soil in the conflict.¹⁵ After Tannenberg, the Germans concentrated the bulk of their forces on the western front, hoping for a massive breakthrough that would end the war, giving the Russians a short respite. But the following summer the German army was on the move again, occupying Warsaw and Kaunas (Kovno) in August. Thus 13 months after war's begin, German troops were threatening Vilnius.

The outbreak of war was received with mixed feelings among the inhabitants of Vilnius. On the one hand, it was clear that the war would bring shortages, bloodshed, and suffering. On the other, Polish patriots hoped that the European shake-up would bring them more national rights, possibly even independence. At the beginning of the war, both Poles and 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, support might easily be switched to the other side.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 authorities.¹⁸ A sympathetic (though not

¹⁵ The best single source on World War I in the east remains Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917*. New York 1975.

¹⁶ Wiktor Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe during World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. Boulder 1984, pp. 100-111.

¹⁷ Stanisław Cywiński, *Kartki z pamiętnika (1914–1920)* [Pages from a Diary (1914–1920)]. Wilno 1931, pp. 10 ff.

¹⁸ 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 1999, pp. 16-23 and passim. In general on the tragic position of East-European Jews during World War I, see Frank Schuster, *Zwischen*

particularly judeophilic) 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 ...”¹⁹

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic about the historiography of World War I and Vilnius is the almost total lack of attention paid to the 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).²⁰ Even published memoirs, such as that of the future Lithuanian foreign minister Petras Klimas, also tend to start in late 1914 or even in summer 1915.²¹ Polish journalist Czesław Jankowski’s diary notes the Polish support of the Russian war effort initially, notes battles over 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.²² 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. Evacuations of banks, government offices, and even the monuments to Empress Catherine the Great and Russian administrator Count M.N. Murav’ev were set in motion.²³

August 1915 to Spring 1917: German Occupation

In August 1915 it was clear that the Russians’ days in Vilnius were numbered. On 15 August an 11 pm curfew was announced that was to

allen Fronten: Osteuropäische Juden während des Ersten Weltkrieges (1914–1919). Köln 2004.

¹⁹ Pofny memoriał Michała Römera z sierpnia 1915 [The August 1915 Secret Memorandum of Michał Römer], ed. and publ. by Wiktor Sukiennicki under the title “Wilno na schyłku rządów carskich,” in: *Zeszyty Historyczne* (1970), p. 119.

²⁰ See, for example, Pranas Čepėnas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija* [Modern History of Lithuania]. Vilnius 1992, Vol. II, p. 25 ff.

²¹ Petras Klimas, *Dienoraštis 1915–1919* [Diary 1915–1919]. Chicago 1988.

²² Czesław Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień. Warszawa 1914–1915 Wilno* [Day By Day. Warsaw 1914–1915 Wilno]. Wilno 1923, pp. 20–68.

²³ *Lietuva Didžiąjame Kare* [Lithuania in the Great War], ed. by Petra Ruseckas. Wilno 1939, p. 12; Cywiński, *Kartki z pamiętnika* (see footnote 17), p. 19 (entry for 12–15 August): “Zdjęto w Wilnie pomniki Katarzyny ir Puszkina. Murawjew stoi jeszcze. Ach, żeby Moskali stąd wyszli I nigdy już nie wrócili!” [The Pushkin and Catherine Monuments have been taken away. Murav’ev is still standing. Oh, may these Muscovites leave here and never come back!]

begin on 18 August. After this curfew all streetlights would be turned out, all windows had to be covered with black paper (to black 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 show up at his local police station to be organized into work battalions to dig defense trenches around the city.²⁴ Perhaps in an unconscious admission that they could not themselves keep order, in that month the Russians allowed a volunteer city police force or 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 keep public order.²⁵ By early September, the city was full of rumors of impending deportation, aerial bombing, and worse. 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 in general 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.²⁶

By chance, the Russians evacuated Vilnius on the eve of the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. Hirsz Abramowicz described that last day in this way: "Almost no one had a thought of attending Kol Nidrei services. People were afraid to appear in the streets ... Everyone was so fed up with the persecution, libelous attacks, and high inflation that nearly all of Vilna wished to be rid of the Russians ... After midnight on ... 17 September everything was closed tight. ... The night passed almost without ...

²⁴ "Wilnas Leidenzeit im Krieg", in: *Das Litauen-Buch: eine Auslese aus der Zeitung der 10. Armee. [Wilna] 1918*, pp. 116 f. 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*. New York 1919, Vol. I, pp. 197-202.

²⁵ Abramowicz, *Profiles* (see footnote 9), pp. 177 f.

²⁶ Pelikšas Bugailiškis's diary, in: *Klimas, Dienoraštis* (see footnote 21), pp. 18-25.

incident, except for the fear generated by the terrible explosions when bridges and other military targets were demolished.”²⁷

On Saturday, 18 September, German troops began to stream into the city across the damaged but still intact Green Bridge. Czesław Jankowski noted in his diary, “[a]fter a month’s siege, the Germans forced the Russians to withdraw to the east and took Vilnius – without a shot.” Jankowski also remarked on the apparent lack of major damage to any structures in the city and 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.²⁸

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 here, giving the impression that the city and its surroundings was 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!”²⁹ Abramowicz notes tartly that despite the generous words (for Poles, anyway) in Pfeil’s proclamation, “This Prussian ‘freedom’ endured for barely an hour,” after which this proclamation was taken down and replaced by far stricter ones.³⁰

Abramowicz’s “hour” may be a figure of speech, but the tenor of German proclamations did change quickly, and for the worse. On 21 September residents of Vilnius were informed that any messenger pigeons (*Brieftauben*) had to be killed within two days and admonished 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.³¹ Further

²⁷ Abramowicz, Profiles (see footnote 9), p. 178.

²⁸ Jankowski, Z dnia na dzień (see footnote 22), pp. 235 ff.

²⁹ Graf Pfeil announcement “An die Einwohnerschaft von Wilno!” (German version), in: Stefan Glaser, Okupacja niemiecka na Litwie w latach 1915–1918. Stosunki prawne [The German Occupation in Lithuania 1915–1918. Legal Relations]. Lwów 1929, pp. 159 f.

³⁰ Abramowicz, Profiles (see footnote 9), pp. 180 f.

³¹ Lietuvos Mokslo Akademijos Biblioteka, Ranraščių 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

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.³² In short, it was clear that life under German occupation was to be more orderly, but possibly no less trying, than the previous year under Russian rule.

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. 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.”³³

The Polish attitude toward the Germans was not, at least initially, so negative as Ludendorff indicated in his memoirs.³⁴ Fundamentally, however, Polish and German interests did not coincide. The Poles, for the most part, wished to incorporate the Vilnius region into a newly independent Poland while the German occupying authorities were more concerned about immediate considerations: waging a war, feeding and supplying soldiers, and maintaining public order. A report by one 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.³⁵ Von Beckerath may have been trying to put

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.)

³² Ibidem, ll. 10-25.

³³ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story* (see footnote 24), Vol. I, pp. 221 f.

³⁴ An excellent account of Polish Wilno in the first months of the German occupation is Andrzej Pukszt, *Wilno pod koniec roku 1915 – na początku 1916. Polskie czy niepolskie?* [Wilno at the End of 1915/early 1916. Polish or Not?], in: *Przegląd Wschodni* 8 (2002), No. 1, pp. 39-56.

³⁵ *Litwa podczas wojny. Zbiór dokumentów* [Lithuania During the War. Document Collection], ed. by L.A. [Ludwig Abramowicz]. Warsaw 1918, pp. 7-12.

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 (“bez najmniejszej ceremonji”) 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.³⁶ Complaints of this sort would only increase in the subsequent years of German occupation.

Even Jankowski who as a sympathizer with the National Democrats could hardly be suspected of pro-Jewish sentiments, noted that “At the present time [29 September 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 on the sabbath, the commander rejected their petition, remarking that he hadn’t had a Sunday off for a year: “This is war, gentlemen!”³⁷ The Germans were not so much antisemitic as simply inflexible 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 (for 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 increasingly 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, “[t]he 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.³⁸

³⁶ Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień* (see footnote 22), pp. 277-283.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 279 f.

³⁸ Abramowicz, *Profiles* (see footnote 9), pp. 186-202. Another, excellent source on Jewish life in Vilnius during World War I is Sh. An-shki, ed., *Pinkas far der geschikhthe fun vilne in di yorn fun milhome un okupatsie* [Collective Work on the History of Vilne in the Years of War and Occupation], ed. by Sh. An-shki. Vilne 1922.

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. Then, as we have seen in the von Backerath memorandum, the Germans appeared not to 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 German census of Vilnius argued that since their arrival in the city, the Germans had “further encouraged aggressive Polish policies.”³⁹ A year later, in summer 1917, one of the foremost Lithuanian leaders, 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 German attempts to “germanize” Vilnius by putting up German language signs in the city.⁴⁰ In short, at least as early as 1916 the Lithuanians were just as dissatisfied with the German occupation as their Polish and Jewish neighbors were.

In great part the dissatisfaction stemmed from the terrible economic situation of the period. As we have seen, the disruptions of trade caused by war, combined with the German army’s enormous requirements for foodstuffs 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.⁴¹ It was decreed that local 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).⁴² A new “Ostrubel” was also introduced in an effort to prop

³⁹ Lietuvių atstovų pareiškimas Vilniaus miesto vokiečių valdžiai dėl gyventojų surašymo [Statement of the Lithuanian Representatives to the German Authorities of Vilnius about the Census] (dated 19 March 1916), in: Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais 1915–1918. Lietuvos nepriklausomos valstybės genėzė [German Occupation in Lithuania During the First World War 1915–1918. The Genesis of the Independent Lithuanian State], ed. by Edmundas Gimžauskas. Vilnius 2006, pp. 64 f.

⁴⁰ Dr. J. Basanavičius, Iš lietuvių gyvenimo 1915–1917 m. po vokiečių jungu [From Lithuanian Life under the German Yoke, 1915–1917]. Vilnius 1919.

⁴¹ LMAB, F23-23, ll. 62 ff.

⁴² LMAB, F23-23, ll. 16, 153. In general on the currency policies of the period, see Borys Paszkiewicz, “Ostrubel” i “Ostmarka.” O pieniądzu okupacji niemieckiej na Litwie [„Ost-

up money supply, but locals with anything to sell (usually illegally as the Germans had forbidden or strictly regulated nearly all trade) were increasingly unwilling to accept the German script. 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 bordering on despair on the part of landowners and peasants.⁴³ These extremely restrictive policies had both economic and political outcomes, both very negative. Economically the German attempt to 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 initial at least potentially favorable attitudes toward the Germans on the part of (at least) Lithuanians and Jews, and to a lesser extent Poles, had been almost totally extinguished.

In cultural policy, the Germans early on adopted a seemingly liberal line. A decree of December 1915 stated explicitly that “[t]he 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.”⁴⁴ Pukszo points out that by the end of 1915 there were four Polish Gymnasias (high schools), eight “partial” Gymnasias (with only a four-year course), and thirty elementary schools operating in Vilnius. These Polish schools together enrolled over 5,000 pupils.⁴⁵ On a practical level Jewish schools continued to operate 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 with indifferent results.⁴⁶ There was no restriction on Lithuanian-language schools in Vilnius and a “People’s University” with lectures in Lithua-

rubel“ and „Ostmarka“ About German Occupation Money in Lithuania], in: *Biuletyn Numizmatyczny* 7 (1982), pp. 130-134.

⁴³ On the economic policy of the Germans, see Gerd Linde, *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im ersten Weltkrieg*. Wiesbaden 1965, pp. 52-68; and Glaser, *Okupacja niemiecka* (see footnote 29), pp. 131-142 (“Rekwizycje i kontrybucje”).

⁴⁴ LMAB, F23-23, ll. 120-124; in general on the legal situation of schools under German occupation, see Glaser, *Okupacja niemiecka* (see footnote 29), pp. 143-148 (“Szkolnictwo”).

⁴⁵ Pukszo, *Wilno pod koniec roku 1915* (see footnote 34), pp. 50 ff.

⁴⁶ Abramowicz, *Profiles* (see footnote 9), p. 203.

nian was set up in the city.⁴⁷ The Germans undercut, however, any Lithuanian gratitude by later forbidding the “People’s University” and their unsubtle efforts to force schools to serve the German cause (both in the sense of immediate politics and as germanizing centers) further antagonized members of all nationalities.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹

From Bad to Worse: The Year 1917

By spring 1917 the population of Vilnius was exhausted and hungry, unhappy with the German occupation and longing for peace. The revolutions of that year 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 by year’s end knocking Russia out of the war. 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 forbidding of private citizens from fishing, trading in foodstuffs of any kind, and owning bicycles (which were confiscated by the Germans). In 1917 belts were further tightened with the introduction of new taxes on salt, new confiscations of horses and crops, and the German authorities decision as of 24 July 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 (sparsely) in the 130 public soup kitchens set up by citizens’ committees in the city.⁵⁰ Help from international charities and assistance from relatives in North America were further restricted after the American entry into the war in April 1917.

⁴⁷ Klimas, Dienoraštis (see footnote 21), pp. 79, 88.

⁴⁸ The order forbidding any kind of university course in Vilnius was issued on 19 February 1916. The document is given in Lithuanian translation in: Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai [Sources for the History of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic]. Vilnius 1965, p. 558.

⁴⁹ Vejas Liulevicius, War Land on the Eastern Front. Cambridge 2000, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Lietuva Didžiajame Kare (see footnote 23), pp. 16-23.

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.⁵¹ 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).”⁵² 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 schools) and steadily increasing prices for every kind of food.⁵³ 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 moans 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.⁵⁴

And yet cultural and political life, of a sort, continued during this dismal year. As we have seen, Liūdas Gira continued, despite badly heated classrooms, to teach classes of Lithuanian children. Several newspapers in German (“Wilnaer Zeitung” and “Zeitung der X. Armee”), Lithuanian (“Dabartis” and from autumn 1917 “Darbo Balsas”), Polish (“Dziennik Wileński”), Belarussian (“Homan”), and Yiddish (“Letste naves”) continued to appear and even increased circulation numbers.⁵⁵ On 5 November 1916 the Central Powers had announced the formation of an independent Polish state without, however, allowing Poles to actually take control of administration in any region. Furthermore, the startling events in Petrograd encouraged both Polish and Lithuanian movements to press for more concessions. A meeting in September 1917 in Vilnius set up the Lithuanian *Taryba*,

⁵¹ Cemach Szabad, Ruch naturalny ludności żydowskiej w Wilnie w ciągu ostatnich lat 18-tu (1911–1928) [Jewish Population Dynamics in Wilno in the Past Eighteen Years (1911–1928)], in: Księga pamiątkowa I Krajowego Zjazdu Lekarskiego “TOZ-u” [Memorial Book of the 1st National Convention of the Medical Association TOZ]. Warsaw 1929, pp. 83 ff.

⁵² Referat o ogólnem położeniu miasta [Report on the General Situation of the City] (spring 1917), in: Litwa za rządów ks. Isenburga [Lithuania under the Rule of Prince Isenburg]. Cracow 1919, pp. 42–54.

⁵³ Liūdas Gira, Vilniaus gyvenimas po Vokiečiais, 1917 m. [Vilnius Life under the Germans], in: Mūsų senovė 2 (1922), No. 3, pp. 410–422.

⁵⁴ Haikl Lunsky, Me-haghetto havilnai: tipusim ve-tslalim [From the Vilna Ghetto: Characters and Shadows]. Vilna 1921, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Marija Urbšienė, Vokiečių karo meto spauda ir Lietuva [German War Press and Lithuania]. Kaunas 1939, pp. 41 ff.

or council, a kind of proto-government;⁵⁶ there was even a call (to be sure, from abroad) in November 1917 for Lithuanian independence.

The increasing visibility of the Lithuanian movement was disturbing enough for local Poles to feel the need to address various petitions to German authorities and politicians defending their position in Vilnius and insisting on the city's Polish history and identity.⁵⁷ A memorandum drawn up by Władysław Zawadzki of the Vilnius Polish committee (Komitet Polski w Wilnie) in early November 1917 saw 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 what he called "Lietuwi" (because local Poles sometimes – like poet Adam Mickiewicz – could and did refer to themselves as "Litwini" without being ethnically Lithuanian) as "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 so-formed 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 of Poland.⁵⁸ Unfortunately for future Polish-Lithuanian relations, Lithuanian activists insisted on Vilnius as the capital of a future Lithuanian state.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Alfred Erich Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania*. New York 1959, p. 25.

⁵⁷ Andrzej Pukszt, *Postawy wileńskich Polaków pod niemiecką okupacją w latach 1915–1918* [Attitudes of Wilno Poles under German Occupation in the Years 1915–1918], in: Tadeusz Bujnicki and Krzysztof Stępnik, *Ostatni obywatele Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego* [The Last Citizens of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania]. Lublin 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* [The Declaration of Polish Political Movements and Organizations on the Lithuanian Question] (19–22 May 1917), in: *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje* (see footnote 39), document No. 19, pp. 126 ff.

⁵⁸ *Memoriał o sprawie litewskiej złożony przez Władysława Zawadzkiego w Warszawie w listopadzie 1917* [Władysław Zawadzki's Warsaw Memorandum on the Lithuanian Question, November 1917], ed. by Wiktor Sukiennicki, in: *Zeszyty Historyczne* 30 (1974), pp. 77–85.

⁵⁹ See, for example, the discussion in W. Gaigalat, *Litauen. Das besetzte Gebiet, sein Volk und dessen geistige Strömungen*. Frankfurt 1917, *passim* and especially the pages on Lithuanians and Poles, pp. 120–130.

Interlude: the German “Mindscape of the East”

Up to now we have concentrated nearly exclusively on the impact of the war and German policy on the inhabitants of Vilnius – Polish, Jewish, and Lithuanian. But what about the Germans themselves? In a fascinating chapter in his book on *Ober Ost*, Vejas Liulevicius attempts to trace what he calls the “Mindscape of the East” that the Germans created during this period.⁶⁰ The Germans produced a remarkably large body of published texts on the eastern territories they occupied, even before 1918. Liulevicius sees several factors predominating in their discourse of the “new eastern lands,” including vastness/emptiness, filth, disorder, menace, *Unordnung*, and interesting but primitive peoples. According to his interpretation of these texts, the Germans saw their role in “straightening out” (both metaphorically and literally) these lands, cleaning them up, and bringing them *Kultur*.⁶¹

Looking more narrowly at contemporary German writings focusing on Vilnius, we find precisely the same tropes and “cultural tasks.” Take, for example, an impressionistic guidebook published first in serial form (in “Wilnaer Zeitung”) then as a booklet (and already in its second edition by 1916), written by the soldier Paul Monty. The very first words of the guidebook emphasize the exotic, crooked, and disorderly nature of the city: “Kraus und wirr ziehen Strassen und Gassen durcheinander, vergeblich sucht das Auge die ordnenden Linien, die den Sinn des ganzen städtischen Organismus irgendwie logisch und sinnvoll darstellen.”⁶² The alien use of space is emphasized when the author comments on the strange placement of the railway station, essentially cut off from the city (the Old Town, that is), without even a proper road connecting the two. As for the city’s squares and places, these are also peculiar: “Cathedral Square” is not a “square” at all, but a park, and “Lukischplatz” is rather sniffingly dismissed as “eigentlich nur Material zu einem Platz, mit einer echt russischen Raumvergeudung ohne jede Raumgestaltung hingelegt, ohne Beziehung auf die umliegenden Gebäude, mehr ein unbebautes Stück

⁶⁰ While Liulevicius does not cite his work, his insights and the entire idea of “mental landscapes,” bringing together space, time, and memory, have been stimulatingly investigated by the German historian Karl Schlögel. See, for example, the collection of *feuilletons* collected as Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*. München 2003.

⁶¹ Liulevicius, *War Land* (see footnote 49), pp. 151-175.

⁶² Paul Monty, *Wanderstunden in Wilna*. 3rd ed., Wilna 1918, p. 9.

als ein lebendiger Teil der Stadt.”⁶³ Once again clearly reflected is the author’s sense of unease with disorderly space lacking proper limits, connections, and form.

Monty took particular interest in describing the Jewish population of Vilnius. Starting with the main thoroughfare of the Jewish part of town, “German” Street (Nemetskaia, Vokiečių), the guidebook describes the many signs “in the most impossible German offering the broadest possible array of items for sale.” The “impossible German” almost certainly reflected attempts by the local Jews (who would in any case have made up the majority of retail traders in Vilnius) to fashion their native Yiddish into “proper” German. Similarly, in front of the railway station travelers are accosted by individuals with Yiddish accents (“schennes Zimmer?”) offering meals and lodging.⁶⁴

The Jewish part of town (“Ghetto”) is described in some detail. “As on an island in the sea the people of Israel live on their own streets, just like long ago, in the middle of the large city Vilna.” Tradition and piety predominate in this “city within a city.” A description of the crowded, narrow, and not particularly hygienic conditions in this quarter merits quotation: “A dark cloud appears to hover over these roofs, no matter what the weather. Walking in these gloomy streets arouses claustrophobia in a western person [i.e., a German]. All sense rebel against the stroller’s impressions. The eye sees misery, the ear hears dissonant sounds, and the nose – oh the nose! – the nose has very good reason to feel personally insulted.” Endless numbers of tiny stores line the streets, offering everything possible for sale. Everywhere one looks there are hawkers and children under foot. Only on shabbes do the stores close and the hubbub on the street dies down. But finding the Great Synagogue is no easy matter as “it hides itself” amid a warren of little streets and tiny courtyards, each harboring another small prayer house. Here, within a few steps all the necessities of Jewish life are available: places to buy and sell, places to pray, a bathhouse, and a large library (the famous Straszun library).⁶⁵ Despite the jocular style, we again see the menace of disorder, filth “insulting the nose,” the confusion of countless twisting alleys and the impossibility of gaining a clear image of the whole. The Jewish part of Vilnius is only the most disorderly, exotic, and alien quarter; the

⁶³ Ibidem, pp. 12-15.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, pp. 19, 30.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, pp. 59, 61-67.

entire city's charm for the German soldier-tourist lies in its exoticism and vaguely dangerous confusion.

The boundary line between order and chaos is set down clearly in the guidebook: an imaginary line dividing the railroad station from the rest of the town. Order reigns in the station: "Der Bahnhof gehört nicht der Stadt, er dient dem grossen Herrscher."⁶⁶ But as soon as one ventures out from the station, the foreign world of Jewish hucksters, crooked streets, mud, and disorder begins. A remarkable feature of Monty's guidebook is its almost total lack of human figures, aside from a few Jewish merchants. The Catholic churches of the city are described but without any reference to their (mainly) Polish congregations or to the Lithuanian peasants who came to the city to work as servants and laborers. To be sure, the guidebook genre encourages the privileging of permanent objects (churches, statues, squares, monuments) over humanity, but reading Monty's guidebook one would literally not know what languages the inhabitants of this city spoke. Perhaps acknowledging the culture of Vilnius's inhabitants would run counter to the "exotic" tone of the guidebook.⁶⁷

Other German publications, perhaps aimed at a broader audience of Germans who would never see the city itself, did devote more time to local languages and culture. In his travelogue entitled "Neu-Ost", Paul Listowsky gave a quick description of Polish cities and culture from Częstochowa to Grodno and while he referred to Vilnius as "Lithuania's capital" he failed to make clear whether he understood "Lithuania" in an ethnic or geographic sense (in any case he did not go into specific ethnic Lithuanian claims on the city).⁶⁸ A more scholarly work on the geography of Poland and Lithuania published in the war's final year argued that since the German occupation in 1915, "Stadt und Land [sind] von einer mit größtem Erfolg arbeitenden deutschen Verwaltung in sorgsame Pflege genommen. (...) Die Stadt ist damit in die jüngste Phase ihrer kulturellen Entwicklung eingetreten, welche die früheren Perioden des litauischen, dann des polnischen und schließlich des russischen Einflusses abgelöst

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 29.

⁶⁷ A shorter and rather less poetic guidebook to the city for German soldiers concentrated more on practical advice, giving two walking tours with the admonition "Die Heimat kann dir Wilna nicht ersetzen; trachte jedoch, es kennen zu lernen, halt die Augen offen, so wirst du dich heimischer fühlen." Ich weiß Bescheid. Kleiner Soldatenführer durch Wilna. Wilna 1918.

⁶⁸ Paul Listowsky, Neu-Ost. Unser Zukunftsgrenzgebiet um Ostpreussens Ostrand. Fahrten durch Polen und Litauen unter deutscher Kriegsverwaltung. Königsberg 1917.

hat.”⁶⁹ One could hardly state more explicitly the German self-image as *Kulturträger* to a benighted land.

At the same time, certain publications indicate a fondness and respect for the local culture that the Germans found in Vilnius and its region. It is rather remarkable that at a time of war and faced with all sorts of material shortages the Germans could publish, for example, a guidebook to an exhibition on “Antiquities and Art” in the region of Vilnius-Minsk.⁷⁰ Even more impressive is a well-produced volume of artistic photographs of the city, ranging from a general view of the city shrouded in snow to images of cities in the Jewish part of town to photographs of Orthodox and Catholic churches. Even here, however, the editor could not restrain himself from remarking on the “Schmutz” and “üble Gerüche” that might otherwise go unnoticed by the viewers of the photographs.⁷¹ The most sophisticated and longest of the Vilnius guides of this genre, Professor Paul Weber’s “Wilna. Eine vergessene Kunststätte”, complains that the Russians treated the city “stiefmütterlich” and notes, typically, that “Das deutsche Auge vermißt Sauberkeit und Ordnung,” but at the same time writes in an exalted and enthusiastic vein about the city’s cultural and architectural beauty.⁷² In short, not only did the German occupation have a significant impact on Vilnius, but Vilnius and its region also exerted its influence on the Germans who came in contact with it.⁷³

1918: German Victory, German Defeat

The year 1918 began with German victory on the Eastern Front and ended with the crushing (though later denied) defeat of Germany by

⁶⁹ Max Friedrichsen, *Landschaften und Städte Polens und Litauens. Beiträge zu einer regionalen Geographie*. Berlin 1918, p. 32.

⁷⁰ Albert Ippel, *Wilna-Minsk. Altertümer und Kunstgewerbe. Führer durch die Ausstellung der 10. Armee*. Wilna 1918.

⁷¹ *Wilna im Bilde. 20 Kunstblätter nach Lichtbildern*, ed. by Bruno Steiguer. Wilna 1918.

⁷² Paul Weber, *Wilna. Eine vergessene Kunststätte*. Wilna 1917, p. 10 and passim.

⁷³ A unique example of this impact is Arnold Zweig, *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*. Berlin 1920. Zweig takes the various tropes used by Germans describing *Oberost* – dirt, disorder, lack of culture – and applies them to Eastern European Jews, but with a twist: in Zweig’s idiosyncratic Zionist treatment, the *Ostjude* becomes a kind of “noble savage” that in nearly every regard is favorably compared to the assimilated German Jew. This fascinating work (together with the drawings of Hermann Struck that adorned the original German edition) has recently been published in English translation as *The Face of East European Jewry*. Berkeley 2004.

the western powers. 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 11 November 1918 was thus something of an anti-climax in Vilnius and neighboring regions.⁷⁴

As we have seen, Polish independence had been declared (though not translated into reality) by the Central Powers in 1916 and in autumn 1917 the Lithuanian Taryba had come into being.⁷⁵ With the Bolshevik revolution in Petrograd (November 1917, new style), it appeared that the Germans had free reign in the east, including Vilnius. On 13 January 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!"⁷⁶ Lithuanians, naturally, saw matters differently. On 16 February representatives of the Taryba in Vilnius, headed by Basanavičius, issued a statement declaring the "restoration" of an "independent Lithuanian state, resting on democratic foundations, with its capital in Vilnius."⁷⁷ Despite the Lithuanians' proclamation, however, the actual borders of a future Lithuania remained unclear. The Germans cautiously supported the Lithuanian national movement, allowing a German prince, Duke [Herzog] Wilhelm von Urach of Württemberg, to be elected as the future Lithuanian king on July 11. The collapse of impe-

⁷⁴ The "bands of German freebooters" dubbed the *Freikorps* were not, however, particularly active in Vilnius; they were more important for the independence struggles further north, in Latvia and Estonia. See Liulevicius, *War Land* (see footnote 49), pp. 227-246: "Freikorps madness."

⁷⁵ For the most important decisions of this conference, see Lietuvių Vilniaus konferencijos 1917 m. rugsėjo 18–22 d. posėdžių protokolo ištrauka [An Extract from the Protocols of the Lithuanian Vilnius Conference of September 18–22], in: *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje* (see footnote 39), pp. 159 ff. 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 1993.

⁷⁶ Cywiński, *Kartki z pamiętnika* (see footnote 17), p. 84.

⁷⁷ Lietuvos Taryba skelbia aktą dėl Lietuvos valstybės atkūrimo 1918 02 16 [The Lithuanian Taryba (Council) Announces the Re-establishment of the Lithuanian State, 16 February 1918], in: *Vilniaus miesto istorijos dokumentai* [Documents of Vilnius City History], Vilnius 2003, ed. by Eugenijus Manelis and Romualdas Samavičius, p. 342. See also Jonas Basanavičius, *Dėl vasario 16 dieną paskelbtos Lietuvos nepriklausomybės* [About Lithuanian Independence, announced on 16 February], in: *Vilniaus miesto istorijos skaitiniai* [Readings in Vilnius City History], ed. by Eugenijus Manelis and Romualdas Samavičius, Vilnius 2001, pp. 478-488.

rial Germany in November 1918 prevented him from accepting the Lithuanian crowd as King Mindaugas II.⁷⁸

The city's economic misery continued unabated as the political situation seemed to spiral 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: in principle 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 Germans 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 1918.⁷⁹

The Red Army marched into Vilnius to fill the power vacuum left by the retreating Germans. Already on 8 December 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.⁸⁰ 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 a closer alignment 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 on to form the "Provisional Revolutionary Workers' and Poor Peasants' Government of Lithuania" on 8 December 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).⁸¹

⁷⁸ On the exceedingly complicated diplomatic wrangling over Wilhelm von Urach's election as Lithuanian king, see the documents collected in *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje* (see footnote 39), pp. 340-404.

⁷⁹ Senn, *Emergence* (see footnote 56), pp. 61-68; Liulevicius, *War Land* (see footnote 49), pp. 214-219.

⁸⁰ Alfred Erich Senn, *Die bolschewistische Politik in Litauen 1917-1919*, in: *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 5 (1957), p. 93.

⁸¹ B. Vaitkevičius and Z. Vasiliauskas, *Lithuania in 1918-1919. First Soviets*. Vilnius 1979, pp. 38 ff., 56-60.

Chaotic Postscript: 1919–1920

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.⁸² In the first days of 1919 both Lithuanians and Poles (political leaders, that is), 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 5 January 1919. Abramowicz described life under the Bolsheviks in 1919 as “unbearably hard” with almost nothing to eat and anyone capable of doing so abandoning the city for friends and relatives on 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.⁸³ Bolshevik rule in Vilnius lasted barely three months; the city was taken by Polish armies led by Józef Piłsudski on 19 April 1919.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ The bitter memory of the April 1919 pogrom by Polish soldiers made Vilnius Jews fear for their future under a Polish government and *ipso facto* made them more sympathetic to the Lithuanians.⁸⁶ The Polish authorities denied any specific violence targeting Jews but argued that Jews had collaborated with the Soviet occupiers.

⁸² Algirdas Grigaravičius, Vilnius: 1918 metų gruodžio 20–24 dienos [Vilnius, 20–24 December 1918], in: Vilniaus miesto istorijos skaitinai (see footnote 77), pp. 496–505.

⁸³ April 1919, in: Abramowicz, Profiles (see footnote 9), pp. 209–218.

⁸⁴ Bolesław Waligóra, Walka o Wilno. Okupacja Litwy i Białorusi w 1918–1919 roku przez Rosję Sowiecką [The Occupation of Lithuanian and Belarus by Soviet Russia in 1918–1919]. Wilno 1938. On the taking of the city by the Polish troops, see Tadeusz Piskor, Wyprawa wileńska [The Wilno Expedition]. Warszawa 1919.

⁸⁵ On the Vilnius pogrom of 19–22 April 1919, see Schuster, Zwischen allen Fronten (see footnote 18), pp. 445–448; Frank Golczewski, Polnisch-jüdische Beziehungen 1881–1922: Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Antisemitismus in Osteuropa. Wiesbaden 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, in: Polin 14 (2001), pp. 138–149.

⁸⁶ 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, in: YIVO Annual 20 (1991), pp. 61–91.

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.⁸⁷ The Poles set up a “Civilian Administration of the Eastern Lands” in February 1919 that was to exist until September 1920 and under whose auspices Vilnius fell.⁸⁸ In the next year Polish culture made a comeback in the city, with theaters, periodicals, and schools opening in the city.⁸⁹

But the war was not yet over for Vilnius. 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. The Red Army entered the city on 14 July 1920 and handed it over to Lithuanian control on 26 August, 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 (ostensible) “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 Żeligowski’s plans seems disputed but once the latter’s troops had taken the city from the Lithuanians on 9 October 1920, Piłsudski was more than happy to see the city of his youth come (officially, in 1922 after a plebiscite) back to Poland.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Česlovas Laurinavičius, *Aus der Geschichte des provisorischen litauischen Komitees von Wilna (April bis Juni 1919)*, in: *Nordost-Archiv II* (1992), No. 2, pp. 361-376.

⁸⁸ Joanna Gierowska-Kałuża, *Zarząd cywilny ziem wschodnich (19 lutego 1919–9 września 1920)* [The Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands (19 February 1919–9 September 1920)]. Warszawa 2003.

⁸⁹ Andrzej Pukszo, *Kultura polska Wilna w okresie Zarządu Cywilnego Ziem Wschodnich w latach 1919–1920* [Polish Culture in Wilno during the period of the Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands, 1919–1920], in: *Zapiski Historyczne* 68 (2003), No. 4, pp. 69-88.

⁹⁰ On these battles, see Andrzej Żak, *Wilno 1919–1920*. Warsaw 1993; Bolesław Waligóra, *Zajęcie Wilna przez Gen. Żeligowskiego* [The Taking of Wilno by General Żeligowski]. Warszawa 1930; and Piotr Łossowski, *Stosunki polsko-litewskie w latach 1918–1920* [Polish-Lithuanian Relations 1918–1920]. Warszawa 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* [At my Post in Vilnius]. Vol. 4, Wilno 1922, pp. 59-94 [articles from October to December 1920].

Conclusion

The period of World War I, which lasted in practical terms over six years, was a disastrous one for Vilnius. The first year of the war, still under Russian rule, saw major disruption of everyday life and the city economy. Under German occupation, the circumstances of most residents were from bad to worse to catastrophic. By 1918 the city's population was barely half its pre-war figure and those remaining in Vilnius were hungry and cold. While November 1918 may have brought some respite in western Europe, here the degree of chaos actually increased. In the years 1919 to 1920 Vilnius was fought over by the Poles, Lithuanians, and Bolsheviks, with the local population suffering throughout. The inability of Poles and Lithuanians to find a compromise solution on the city's status meant that even after its final seizure by the Poles in autumn 1920, Vilnius remained a major bone of contention between the two states, essentially preventing any kind of diplomatic or cultural contact. As for the Jews, they suffered perhaps more than any other national group in this period. Their main livelihood as merchants and shopkeepers was severely damaged by the war, their safety threatened by marauding soldiers, and their future in a would-be national Polish state unsure. While Vilnius would recover significantly in population and prosperity in the following nearly twenty years of peace under Polish rule, in a sense the old multinational Vilnius of 1914 had been dealt a severe blow by World War I. Unfortunately, worse was yet to come.