

THEODORE R. WEEKS

Reading Vilna in the First World War

<https://doi.org/10.51554/Coll.21.48.09>

Annotation: The outbreak of war in August 1914 marked a new era in the history of Vilna for all of the city's inhabitants, but perhaps for the Jews most of all. The world war accelerated the processes of political and economic modernisation, to the detriment of local Jews. These processes were not, however, immediately evident to local residents, though the more far-seeing among them feared for the worst. After all, when had Jews gained from military action? In this short paper, I will give an overview of the impact of the First World War on Vilna, and highlight two specific, very different, sources: Paul Monty's *Wanderstunden in Vilna*, a guidebook for German soldiers, and Hirsz Abramowicz's *Profiles of a Lost World*, a memoir published later (in Yiddish) by a long-time Vilna resident.

Keywords: Vilna, Vilnius, First World War, tourism, ethnic relations, guidebooks.

Vilna was spared direct military action for more than a year after the declarations of war in early August 1914. While economic strains were immediately felt, the war itself, in the sense of military action, did not reach the city for a year. By August 1915, it was clear that the Russians' days in Vilnius were numbered. On 15 August, an 11pm curfew was announced that was to begin on 18 August. After this curfew, all street lights 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 18 to 50 years of age still resident in the city were required to report at local police stations to be organised into work battalions to dig defence trenches around the city.¹ Perhaps in an unconscious

1 '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, p. 116–117. This account ends with the German entry into the city; unfortunately Vilnius' *Leiden* were at that point far

admission that they could not themselves keep order, in that month the Russians allowed a volunteer city police force or militia to be organised.

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.² By early September, the city was full of rumours 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 15 September, one eyewitness wrote: ‘Vilnius is already becoming cut off from the world.’ On 18 September, the retreating Russians attempted to blow up the bridges over the River Neris, but in their haste only succeeded in damaging them. The same day, the Germans entered the city.³

The first months of German occupation

On Saturday 18 September, German troops began to stream into the city, across the damaged but still intact Green Bridge. The Polish journalist 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 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.⁴

from being over. On the military operations from the German point of view, see Erich von Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919, Vol. 1, p. 197–202.

- 2 Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life Before World War II*, translated by Eva Zeitlin Dobkin, edited by Dina Abramowicz and Jeffrey Shandler, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999, p. 177–178.
- 3 Pelikšas Bugailiškis’ diary in Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, p. 18–25.
- 4 Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień*, p. 235–237.

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 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!’⁵ 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 the proclamation was taken down and replaced by far stricter ones.⁶

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: ‘It is forbidden for women to sell themselves to German soldiers,’ causing local wags to wonder whether this was a suggestion that Vilnius’ female population offer themselves for free.⁷ Further 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.⁸ 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

5 Graf Pfeil’s 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, p. 159–160.

6 Abramowicz, *Profiles*, p. 180–181.

7 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).

8 *Ibid.*, ll. p. 10–25.

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 materialise, 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.’⁹

The Polish attitude toward the Germans was not, at least initially, so negative as Ludendorff indicated in his memoirs.¹⁰ Still, in a profound sense, Polish and German interests did not coincide. The Poles mainly wished to incorporate the Vilna region into an independent Poland, while the German occupying authorities had more immediate needs on their minds: waging a war, feeding and supplying soldiers, and maintaining public order. 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.¹¹ 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 (*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.¹² Complaints of this sort would only increase in the subsequent years of German occupation.

9 Ludendorff, *My Own Story*, Vol. I, p. 221–222.

10 An excellent account of Polish Wilno in the first months of the German occupation is Andrzej Pukszo, ‘Wilno pod koniec roku 1915 – na początku 1916. Polskie czy niepolskie?’ *Przegląd Wschodni*, 8, Vol. 1, 2002, p. 39–56.

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

12 Jankowski, *Z dnia na dzień*, p. 277–283.

Even Jankowski, who as a sympathiser with the National Democrats could hardly be suspected of pro-Jewish sentiments, noted: ‘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!”’¹³ The Germans were not so much anti-semitic 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 traditions). 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 antagonising the local Jews. But, as Hirsz Abramowicz noted in his memoirs of that period: ‘The German occupation during the First World War 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.¹⁴

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 to 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 German census of Vilnius argued that since their arrival in the city, the Germans had ‘further encouraged aggressive Polish policies’.¹⁵

13 Ibid., p. 279–280.

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

15 ‘Lietuvių atstovų pareiškimas Vilniaus miesto vokiečių valdžiai dėl gyventojų surašymo’ (dated 19 March 1916) in Edmundas Gimžauskas, ed., *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais 1915–1918. Lietuvos nepriklausomos valstybės genezė*, Vilnius: LII, 2006, p. 64–65.

A year later, in the summer of 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 attempts to ‘germanise’ Vilnius by putting up German-language signs in the city.¹⁶ In short, at least as early as 1916, the Lithuanians were just as dissatisfied with the German occupation as their Polish and Jewish neighbours 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). It was decreed that local merchants were obliged to accept both German and Russian currencies (at the exchange rate, favourable to the Germans, of first 1.5 marks to a ruble, later put up to two marks to the ruble).¹⁷ 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) 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.¹⁸ These highly 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 incentive 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 favourable attitudes toward the Germans on the part of (at least) Lithuanians and Jews, and to a lesser extent Poles, had been almost totally extinguished.

16 Dr J. Basanavičius, *Iš lietuvių gyvenimo 1915–1917 m. po vokiečių jungu*, Vilnius: Švyturio, 1919.

17 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’, *Biuletyn Numizmatyczny*, Vol. 7 (1982), p. 130–134.

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

In cultural policy, the Germans early on adopted a seemingly 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.’¹⁹ 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 30 elementary schools operating in Vilnius. These Polish schools together enrolled over 5,000 pupils.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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 propagandising local populations and as germanising centres) further antagonised members of all nationalities.²³ 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.’²⁴

19 LMAB, F23-23, ll. 120–124; in general on the legal situation of schools under German occupation, see Glaser, *Okupacja niemiecka*, p. 143–148 (‘Szkolnictwo’).

20 Pukszo, ‘Wilno pod koniec roku 1915’, p. 50–52.

21 Abramowicz, *Profiles*, p. 203.

22 Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, p. 79, 88.

23 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*, Vilnius: Mintis, 1965, p. 558.

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

War fatigue and German *Kulturarbeit*, 1916–1917

By the end of 1915 at latest, few inhabitants of Vilnius could have any illusions about the nature of the German occupation. The primary consideration for the German occupiers was serving the war effort. They were on the whole uninterested in restricting language use (except for outlawing the teaching of Russian), but they also did not expend resources for this purpose. Like good Prussians, these administrators expected local residents to pay taxes, surrender a good deal of their produce to feed German soldiers, and to 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. At the same time, the Germans did sponsor a surprising number of cultural events, publications, concerts, and the like. We will consider these under the rubric of *Kulturarbeit*.

In 1916, the population of Vilnius was exhausted and hungry, unhappy with the German occupation, and longing for peace. Conditions would only deteriorate 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 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 labour 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 beginning, 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.²⁵ Help from international charities and assistance from relatives in North America were further restricted after the American entry into the war in April 1917.

²⁵ Ruseckas (ed.), *Lietuva Didžiąjame Kare*, p. 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 prewar period, while births plummeted to less than one third of the 1911–1913 figures.²⁶ 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 the spring of 1917 argued that the combined effect of requisitions, forced labour, and increased taxes was ‘simply the annihilation of the country (*zagłada kraju*)’.²⁷ The diary of the Lithuanian writer Liūdas Gira 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 kind of food.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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 Lithuanian to children. Several newspapers in German (*Wilnaer Zeitung* and *Zeitung der X. Armee*), Lithuanian (*Dabartis*, and from the autumn of 1917 *Darbo Balsas*), Polish (*Dziennik Wileński*), Belarusian (*Homan*), and Yiddish (*Letste naves*) continued to appear, and even increased circulation numbers.³⁰

German occupiers too were captivated by the city. In a fascinating chapter of his book on Oberost, Vejas Liulevicius attempts to trace what he calls the ‘Mindscape of the East’ that the Germans created during this period. 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/

26 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, p. 83–85.

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

28 Liudas Gira, ‘Vilniaus gyvenimas po Vokiečiais, 1917 m.’, *Mūsų senovė*, Vol. 2, No 3, 1922, p. 410–422.

29 Haikl Lunsky, *Me-haghetto havilnai: tipusim ve-tslalim*, Vilna: Agudat ha-sofrim veba-zhurnalistim ha’ivriyim veVilna, 1921, p. 7.

30 Marija Urbšienė, *Vokiečių karo meto spauda ir Lietuva*, Kaunas: Spaudos fondas, 1939, p. 41–43.

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*.³¹

Looking more narrowly at contemporary German writings focusing on Vilna, we find precisely the same tropes and ‘cultural tasks’. Paul Monty’s popular guidebook for soldiers, published first in serial form (in *Wilnaer Zeitung*), then as a booklet (and already in its second edition by 1916), reflects this situation. ‘Paul Monty’ was the pseudonym of Paul Fechter, a writer and editor who had published the volume *Expressionismus*, on the art movement, just before the war. He came to Vilna in the autumn of 1915. The Canadian-Lithuanian historian and cultural critic Laimonas Briedis points out that the title of Monty’s guidebook, *Wanderstunden*, obviously echoes *Wanderjahre*, both in the sense of Goethe’s famous novel, more broadly referring to a young man’s ‘apprenticeship’ to some kind of trade, and, indeed, to the adult world in general. Whether or not one accepts Briedis’ interpretation of this guidebook as a document in the mode of Expressionism, one cannot deny that Paul Monty (Fechter) was an important and engaging writer, and was himself directly influenced by this artistic movement.³²

The very first words of the guidebook emphasise the exotic, crooked and disorderly nature of the city: ‘The streets and alleys are crooked and unplanned. The eye seeks in vain for a rational, logical sense of the urban organism.’³³ The alien use of space is emphasised 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 ‘in fact only raw material for a square [*Platz*], set out with a truly Russian waste of space without any clear organisation of that space, without any reference to the surrounding buildings, more a vacant lot than a living part of the city’.³⁴ Once again, clearly reflected is the author’s sense of unease with disorderly space, lacking proper limits, connections and form.

31 Liulevicius, *War Land*, p. 151–175.

32 Laimonas Briedis, ‘Įvadas’, in: Paul Monty [Paul Fechter], *Vilniaus kelrodis. 1918–ųjų miesto veidas*, Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2018, p. 5–47.

33 Paul Monty, *Wanderstunden in Wilna*, 3rd ed., Wilna: Verlag der Wilnaer Zeitung, 1918, p. 9.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 12–15.

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, travellers are accosted by individuals with Yiddish accents (*schennes Zimmer?*) offering meals and lodging.³⁵

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 senses 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 underfoot. 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 harbouring 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).³⁶

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

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19, 30.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 59, 61–67.

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: ‘The railway station does not belong to the city. It serves the occupying power.’³⁷ 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 labourers. 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’ inhabitants would run counter to the ‘exotic’ tone of the guidebook.³⁸

The year 1918 began with German victory on the Eastern Front, and ended with the crushing (though later denied) defeat of Germany by the Western powers. While traditionally the First World War ends with this year, in Vilnius and elsewhere east of the River Odra, war conditions continued for at least two more years, making 1918 not the 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 a non-event in Vilnius and neighbouring regions.

The city’s economic misery continued unabated, as the political situation seemed to spiral out of control. With the Kaiser’s abdication and the 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 (the Red Army) and west (Poland). The Germans remained in Vilnius for some weeks

37 Ibid., p. 29.

38 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: Verlag Zeitung der 10. Armee, 1918. <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/helios/digi/feldzeitungen.html>

longer, evacuating in mid-December, though the soldiers of the 10th Army elected their own council (Soviet/Rat) in November 1918.³⁹

The war did not really end for Vilna until 1921, and one could even argue that the period from late 1918 to 1920 exceeded even 1915 to 1918 in chaos, misery and economic dislocations. The city became a pawn between Soviet, Lithuanian and Polish power, with the Poles winning out in the short run (from October 1920). In 1939, Lithuania would ‘win back’ the city (from the hands of Stalin), then Vilna would become part of Soviet Lithuania (with the horrible hiatus of the Nazi occupation) from 1940 to 1990. And after 1990, the city, now properly termed ‘Vilnius’, became capital of the independent Republic of Lithuania. Unfortunately, after the Second World War, the city’s Jewish community was a mere shadow of the vibrant prewar Vilna. But that sad transition goes beyond the boundaries of this paper.

Conclusions

The years of the First World War were devastating for Vilnius. In a sense, the city would never recover, or, at least, it would recover as a different city. During the period 1914 to 1921, Vilnius experienced numerous changes of power: from Russian to German to a confused period of struggle between Lithuanians, Poles and Soviet forces. Still, while the city itself decayed from military occupation and lack of maintenance, and while the population went hungry, national movements within the city became better organised, anticipating the struggles for sovereignty that would explode once foreign occupiers had withdrawn. Looking at the city in early 1914 and again in 1922, one notices the reduction of the city’s population, and in particular its Jewish community (mainly because of emigration and the generally high death rate). However, that Jewish community remained strong enough to play a significant role in the interwar Polish city of Vilnius. That story, however, must wait for another occasion.

Received 2020 03 01

Accepted 2021 11 01

³⁹ Liulevicius, *War Land*, p. 214–219.

Vilnos skaitymas Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais

Santrauka

Pirmasis pasaulinis karas buvo labai reikšmingas Vilniui. Prieš karą buvęs Rusijos imperijos provincijos miestu, po 1920 m., nepaisant Lietuvos protestų, Vilnius buvo inkorporuotas į Lenkijos Respubliką. Straipsnyje apžvelgiami svarbiausi 1914–1918 m. įvykiai mieste, daugiausia remiantis dviem šaltiniais: daug vėliau jidiš kalba parašytais Vilniaus gyventojų žydo Hiršos Abramovičiaus atsiminimais (1999) ir per karą keliais leidimais išėjusiu vokiečių kareiviams skirtu Paulo Monty vadovu po Vilnių. Skirtingos šių šaltinių perspektyvos atskleidžia, kad kiekviena tautinė grupė miesto erdvę suvokė itin savitai.

Abramovičiaus atsiminimuose Vilnius iškyla kaip vieta, kur žydai, lenkai ir kitų tautybių atstovai gebėjo palyginti gerai sutarti ir kartu dirbuotis. Rašytojui žydai buvo ne tik neatskiriama vilniečių, bet ir pačios miesto tapatybės dalis. Tačiau net šis išsilavinęs, plačių pažiūrų memuaristas kandžiai pažymi, kad jo paties viltys ir lūkesčiai dėl tarptautinio bendradarbiavimo ne visada atspindi platesnį daugumos gyventojų, ypač lenkų, supratimą.

Monty kelionių gidą parašytas turint visiškai kitokią tikslą – juo siekta vokiečių kareiviams pristatyti „rytietišką“, „egzotišką“ miestą. Šiame unikaliam leidinyje orientališkas kalbėjimo būdas ir globėjiskasis požiūris į Vilnių dera su autoriui būdingu akivaizdžiu susidomėjimu ir žavėjimusi šiuo miestu.

Raktažodžiai: Vilna, Vilnius, Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, turizmas, etniniai santykiai, kelionių vadovai.