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## The Vilnius issue in international relations: the historiography of the problem

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THE VILNIUS ISSUE  
IN INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS:  
THE HISTORIOGRAPHY  
OF THE PROBLEM

*M. A. Mankevich*\*



*This article considers certain historiographical aspects of the Vilnius issue as an international problem. The author analyses the origins of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, the role of the struggle for Vilnius in the general context of the Polish-Lithuanian confrontation, and the origin and nature of Lithuanian nationalism. The article also examines historiographical perspectives on the seizure of Vilnius by the troops of the Polish general, L. Żeligowsky, and the international consequences of the violation of the Suwalki Agreement. The author pays special attention to the positions of western powers, the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors on March 15, 1923, and the mediation of the League of Nations in the territorial dispute between Lithuania and Poland. The article considers the existing historiographical concepts and evaluations of the role of the Soviet diplomacy in the Vilnius issue. The author identifies new trends in the contemporary historiography of the Vilnius problem.*

**Key words:** Lithuania, Poland, USSR, League of Nations, historiography, international relations, Vilnius issue, 1918—1939

The Vilnius issue as an international problem was not only the stumbling block in the bilateral Polish-Lithuanian relations of the interbellum, but also involved the leading European powers and the Soviet Union into the tangle of contradictions.

The Vilnius issue is an international problem that resulted from the conflict between Poland and Lithuania over the ancient city of Wilno and the contiguous territories. After the seizure of the city by the Polish troops on October 9, 1920, Lithuania and Poland were at war until 1927. Diplomatic relations between the countries were resumed only in 1938. Throughout the interbellum, the Vilnius issue was the

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key problem of Lithuanian foreign policy, which the ideologists of Lithuanian nationalism were especially sensitive to, whereas the Constitution of independent Lithuania proclaimed Vilnius the occupied capital of the state.

The dispute between Lithuania and Poland is compared by researchers to other conflicts of the kind. The American historian, A. E. Senn, draws an analogy with the Arab-Israeli and Indo-Pakistani conflicts, emphasising the specific feature of the Polish-Lithuanian confrontation: the disputed region included the capital of one of the rivalling countries [1, p. 235]. The Lithuanian author, V. Žalys, when stressing the significance of Vilnius for the interwar Lithuania, draws a parallel with Alsace and Lorraine for France, as well as Trieste for Italy. He emphasises that, however dear these territories were to Italian hearts, they had never been the cradles of either French or Italian statehood [2, p. 24].

Having become the central problem of Lithuanian-Polish relations, the Vilnius issue attracted the attention of contemporary scholars [3—9] even when the final resolution seemed to be a matter of a distant future. The Polish-Lithuanian conflict has been the focus of attention of international historians. Several works on the historiography of the problem have been published over the last ten years; however, they present either a cross-section of opinions of historians of a certain chronological period (a review of studies published after 1989) [10—12], or a general systematisation of the accumulated historical research [13].

This article makes an attempt to draw attention to certain problems of the historiography of the Vilnius issue as an international problem and abstract from the chronological and traditionally national principle of the analysis of historians' perspectives on the problem. The views of researchers are grouped according to the four key aspects of the topic: 1) the sources and causes of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, its features; 2) the meaning and international consequences of the action of the Polish general, L. Żeligowsky<sup>1</sup>; 3) the position of western powers and the cooperation of international institutions; 4) the position of the USSR on the Vilnius issue.

The main body of sources reflecting the vicissitudes of the diplomatic struggle for Vilnius was published as early as the interbellum. However, the same documents were differently interpreted by historians; interpretations were often affected by political beliefs and nationality. The modern (post-Soviet) period of historiography is characterised by a wide use of archive materials that were earlier inaccessible or overlooked by the previous generations of scholars. Unfortunately the works of modern Russian historians are at a considerable disadvantage in comparison to the publications of western counterparts in terms of the sources used.

According to certain historians, the local Vilnius conflict was just a part of the global Polish-Lithuanian confrontation dating back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before the restoration of independent Poland and Lithuania, the problem of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict was scrutinised in an article by M. Römeris [14]. The famous Lithuanian lawyer and public figure an-

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<sup>1</sup> I.e. the seizure of Vilnius by the Polish military on October 9, 1920.

analysed the gradual process of the Polonisation and Russification of the population residing in the territories of Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). The Lithuanian nobility was most affected by Polonisation. M. Römeris believes that it led to the Lithuanian national culture being preserved in the lowest peasant circles [14, p. 247]. The people, excluded from political life and involved in land cultivation, did not have close contacts with the educated layers and were hardly affected by the high-society culture, which, after the unification of Poland and Lithuania, and later the inclusion into the Russian Empire, was dominated by the Polish and Russian languages. The Lithuanian nobility, overpowered by Polish and Russian cultural influence, “merged” with it. Thus, the first leaders of the Lithuanian national movement, which emerged at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were of peasant origin.

This idea was developed — from a peculiar point of view — by the Soviet and Russian authors, R. Žepkaitė, R. Žiugžda, I. V. Mikhutina, Ya. Ya. Grishin [15—19]. R. Žepkaitė explained the hostility between town nations by class antagonism between Lithuanian serfs and land-owners, most of whom were of the Polish origin [16, p. 17]. The Russian historian Ya. Ya. Grishin agrees with I. V. Mikhutina supporting the idea that the Lithuanian nation predominantly developed as a nation of peasants, and such a differentiation in the national structure contributed to the Polish cultural influence having exerted at the expense of the Lithuanian national culture. Thus, the national movement proclaimed itself right from the start as anti-Polish [18, p. 16].

An opposite interpretation of anti-Polish sentiments of the Lithuanian national movement was given by the Polish expert, W. Wielhorski. He assumed that Polonisation was a result of a conscious decision of the Lithuanian population (not only the nobility, but also bourgeoisie, and peasantry) for a more progressive Polish culture [20, p. 254].

When speaking of the development of the Lithuanian national movement, it is important to emphasise that its initial target was only the enlightenment of Lithuanians. However, from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the achievement of political independence appeared on the agenda [21]. It was the time, when, according to M. Römeris, the global misunderstanding between the Polish and Lithuanians arose [14, p. 248]. The Lithuanian diplomat and lawyer, D. Zaunius, stresses that the efforts of the Lithuanian people to create an independent state were deemed by the nationals of restored Poland to be an insult, especially when Lithuania decided to unite around the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, to which the Polish had developed a certain liking [22, p. 31].

Another contentious issue is the problem of the national identity of the population of the disputed territories. Historians offer statistical data of censuses; however, they admit that one of the reasons behind the conflict was the different interpretation of the notion of nationality by the Polish and Lithuanians. The Polish author, P. Łossowski, writes that, according to the criteria applied by Polish politicians, a Polish national was a resident of the GDL who spoke Polish at home and “what is more important, felt that they are Polish, identified themselves as a Polish national”, whereas Lithuanian,

he continues, “maintained that nationality is determined by the origin, however ancient, and self-identification is of secondary importance. The Polish and Belarusian population of the disputed lands was considered Slavicised Lithuanians who must be returned to the bosom of “Lithuanity” [23, p. 14].

Another Polish specialist, K. Bukhowski, scrutinises the problem of Lithuanian national and historical identity. He draws attention to the attitude of Lithuanian national ideologists to the so called “polonised Lithuanians” — the Polish residing in the territories of the GDL [24, p. 9]. A “polonised Lithuanian” is a label which was actively used by the activists of the Lithuanian national movement. Lithuanian nationalists had a similar view on the Germanised population of the so called Lithuanian Minor, which was a part of Eastern Prussia [24, p. 11]. This interpretation of the notion of nationality, according to P. Łossowski, gave grounds for Lithuanian territorial claims [23, p. 15]. The author of a fundamental work entitled *The Struggle for Lithuanian Independence*, Antanas Rukša, calls those claims “a little bit divorced from reality” [25, p. 67].

Both authors, P. Łossowski and K. Buchowski, agree that the Lithuanian national revival and later the ideology of an independent Lithuania developed in the fear of assimilation [25, p. 14]. The national ideology was called to stop the processes of biological demise of “Lithuanity” [24, p. 9].

Lithuanian nationalism rested on the glory of the GDL with the capital in Vilnius<sup>2</sup> was, according to A. E. Senn, the heart of Vilnius issue. At the time, to abandon Vilnius meant to renounce the idea of independence [1, p. 235]. V. Žalys agrees with his transatlantic counterpart, “After the annexation of Vilnius, Poland was perceived in Lithuania as a major threat to the sovereignly and territorial unity of the country” [2, p. 24]. Thus, for years, the Vilnius issue was the central problem of not only foreign, but also internal policy of Lithuania<sup>3</sup>.

A different perspective on the reasons behind the Polish-Lithuanian conflict is presented in the works of some Soviet and Russian scholars — J. Matulaitis, I. Shubina, R. Žepkaitė, Ya. Grishin. They emphasise the “greed and aggression” of the restored Polish state [18, p. 11], which I. Shubin described quite emotionally, “in effect, the argument from the population, which was put forward by Poland, had the same effect as the motivation of a wolf that devoured an innocent lamb because it was hungry” [4, p. 27]. Ya. Grishin emphasises that Poland was highly interested in the Neman basin and the warm water port of Klaipėda, which would “have granted Poland free access to the Baltic Sea and created a convenient base for the seizure of the whole Baltic area” [18, p. 35—36]. The problem of Polonisation of Lithuanians was also paid attention to: J. Matulaitis focuses on the activities of Polish scholars of the interbellum who developed the idea of historical predetermination of Slavicisation of Lithuanians residing

<sup>2</sup> The syndrome of GDL heritage was also addressed by other Lithuanian historians. See [2, p. 17].

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the attitude of different Lithuanian political parties to the Vilnius issue see [26].

in the Wilno and Kowno provinces, as well as the Germanisation of Prussian Lithuanians [3, p. 8].

Historians agree that the climax, the “point of no return” of Polish-Lithuanian relations was the violation of the Suwałki Agreement<sup>4</sup> by Poland and the seizure of Vilnius by the troops of General L. Żeligowsky<sup>5</sup>. The fact that the general’s “riot” was supported by the authorities of the Second Polish Republic raises no doubts in the academic community. G. Rauch writes that it was obvious that Warsaw approved of this risky undertaking [27, p. 101]. On the basis of Polish archive materials; R. Žepkaitė comes to a conclusion that, alongside J. Piłsudski, the Polish Foreign Minister I. Paderewski also knew about the imminent “riot” [16, p. 22]. The Polish author Zb. K. Cesarz also maintains that the attack was planned and implemented at the command of the government of the Second Republic of Poland [28, p. 173]. He criticises the actions of the Polish leadership, first of all, because they damaged the international image of the country which since then was deemed by the international community to be an aggressor and a violator of international agreements [28, p. 174]. The conclusion of the Suwałki Agreement is considered by P. Łossowski a strategic mistake of the government of the Second Polish Republic whose leadership lacked the resolution to avoid signing the document [23, p. 225].

However, the seizure of Vilnius inflicted irreversible damage not only to Polish-Lithuanian bilateral relations. According to V. Žalys, it was that incident that buried any hope for consolidation in the region [2, p. 21]. The American researcher P. Čepėnas draws attention to the fact that the Vilnius issue deteriorated significantly the relations between the allies — England and France [29, p. 624].

The position of western powers on the Vilnius issue is differently evaluated by researchers. Some believe that the Western approach was, to a degree, a reflection of the general attitude towards Lithuania. The presence of a representative of an independent Lithuania at the Paris peace conference was a surprise for great powers because Lithuania had not been invited to the meeting<sup>6</sup>. In the fact that the West perceived Lithuania just as a Polish province, P. Čepėnas sees a result of Polish propaganda. In his research, he argues that, despite financial complications, representatives of the Lithuanian delegation published 15—20 items of informative materials about Lithuania in order to influence the European public opinion [29, p. 462—463].

Calling the Vilnius issue an effective example of the allies’ influence in Eastern Europe, A. E. Senn stresses that the reason of their failure lies, to a

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<sup>4</sup> The Suwałki Agreement between Lithuania and Poland was signed in the town of Suwałki on October 7, 1920 through the mediation of the League of Nations Control Commission. According to the provisions of the agreement, Vilnius and contiguous lands remained a part of Lithuania.

<sup>5</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> of October (the day of the Seizure of Vilnius by Polish troops) was recognised as a national day of mourning throughout the interbellum.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on the actions of the Lithuanians in Paris see: [30].

great degree, in the insufficient understanding of the features of the Eastern European nationalism. Thus, the “idealistic plans” for plebiscite, federation, and autonomy, were shattered into pieces; and by the end of 1922, the allies were ready to acknowledge the status quo [1, p. 26]. It was this period that marked the beginning of acknowledgement of Lithuanian sovereignty by western countries, when it became obvious that it was impossible to unite Poland and Lithuania into a federation<sup>7</sup>. On March 15, 1923, the Conference of Ambassadors of the Entente adopted a resolution, according to which Vilnius and the contiguous territories became a part the Republic of Poland.

This step taken by the West, which, according to A. Senn, was somewhat of an act of desperation [1, p. 26], was considered by the Soviet historians as an exertion of the will of imperial states [32, p. 84–85]. In the context of the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors, G. Rauch develops the idea about a peculiar compensation for Lithuania from the West in connection to the Klaipeda issue<sup>8</sup>.

Great powers hoped that, if the Lithuanian government was allowed to keep this region, it would easier put up with the loss of Vilnius [27, p. 105]. According to P. Miškinis, K. Počas, A. Rubtsov, R. Žiugžda, for the West Lithuania was an important link in the chain of states composing the “sanitary cordon” against the USSR [17; 34–36].

As to the European participation in the Vilnius issue, it is worth noting the historical research dedicated to the mediation of the League of Nations in the Polish-Lithuanian dispute [28; 37]. It was this international institution that became a platform for the Polish-Lithuanian confrontation throughout the 1920s.

In the Soviet rhetoric, the League of Nations was presented as a herald of the will of imperialistic states, which even “sanctioned the seizure of Wilno by imperialistic Poland” [3, p. 10]. However, the works of Zb. K. Cesarz and G. Vilkelis make an attempt to show the ambiguity of the actions of the international organization in the context of the Vilnius issue.

According to the data offered by Zb. K. Cesarz, as early as October 1920, Poland aspired to avoid the mediation of the League of Nations, especially the latter’s initiatives on holding a plebiscite in the Vilnius region [28, p. 186]. When analysing the events of the autumn of 1920, G. Vilkelis states that the League of Nations was not able to keep the Polish at bay and chose the path of growing compromises and concessions [37, p. 227]. The attempts of the League of Nations to ensure peace in the region failed,

<sup>7</sup> For more details on the international recognition of Lithuania see: [31].

<sup>8</sup> After World War I, Klaipeda (the Memel region) was detached from Germany and made a protectorate of the Entente States. At first, it was planned to transfer the city to the “Polish-Lithuanian Federation”. As a result of an armed provocation organised by the Committee for the Salvation of Lithuanian Minors in January 1923, Memel was seized by Lithuanian troops. After the initial protests of the Conference of Ambassadors of the Entente, allies made a decision to transfer the Memel region to Lithuania; this decision was approved by the Council of the League of Nations [33, p. 31–32].

since they were based on legitimising military aggression. At the same time, G. Vilkelis admits that in many cases the position of this international institution was determined not by the principles of peace protection, but mostly by the interests of great powers. Even if the League of Nations had decided, according to Article 16 of its Charter, to restore the situation between Lithuania and Poland which existed before the violation of the Suwałki Agreement, it is difficult to imagine who would have been able to enforce this decision [37, p. 228].

The Soviet Union was also involved in the search for solutions to the Vilnius issue. The Soviet and later Russian historiography has developed a tradition of idealising the actions of the USSR in the Vilnius issue. All researchers stress that the RSFSR played the key role in the return of Vilnius to Lithuania in summer 1920 [16, p. 21]. Later, the policy of the Soviet state rested on the principles contained in the Moscow Peace Treaty<sup>9</sup>. The Russian author concludes that “almost the whole interbellum was marked by the aspiration of the Soviet Union to establish normal, neighbourly relations with Lithuania” [18, p. 9]. Yu. Plotnikov focuses on the Soviet moral support for Lithuania [33, p. 17].

The major achievements of the USSR in the framework of the “idealistic” concept are as follows: the RSFSR condemned the actions of Poland and helped Lithuania prevent the plebiscite in the territory of the Vilnius region in autumn 1920<sup>10</sup>; it also condemned the resolution of the Conference of Ambassadors of the Entente of March 15, 1923. As the relations between Poland and Lithuania became more strained, the USSR helped keep peace in the region. Similarly, the Soviet policy is assessed by D. Zaunius, who stresses that Russia did not allow Poland pursue the policy of non-participation in any agreements and became a guarantor of Lithuanian sovereignty [22, p. 33].

A different perspective on the actions of the USSR within the Vilnius issue is taken by foreign authors. Without denying the above mentioned achievements of the Soviet diplomacy, this group of researchers focuses on the motives behind the Soviet policy. Special attention is paid to the assessment of the Moscow Peace Treaty. P. Łossowski calls Lithuanian cooperation with the RSFSR and the violation of neutrality in the Soviet-Polish war<sup>11</sup> a suicide policy for Lithuania, since in case of the victory of the Red

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<sup>9</sup> The Moscow Peace Treaty was signed by Lithuania and the RSFSR on July 12, 1920. The Soviet Russia recognised the sovereignty of Lithuania and acknowledged Lithuanian authority over the Vilnius region, as well as Grodno, Lida, and Ashmyany. Both parties undertook to prevent the deployment of the third countries' arms forces in their territory.

<sup>10</sup> The project plebiscite in the disputed territories was proposed to the conflicting parties by the League of Nations. Lithuania (as well as Poland) tried to prevent it. Firstly, the troops of General Żeligowsky were still deployed in the territory of the Vilnius region; secondly, the mere fact of a referendum on the state affiliation of their own capital was unacceptable for Lithuanians.

<sup>11</sup> The issue of the nature of Lithuanian neutrality in the Soviet-Polish war is contentious, see [38].



Army over Poland, Lithuania would have faced swift and complete Sovietisation [23, p. 226]. A. Kasparavičius emphasises the contradictions between the Moscow and Riga Peace Treaties [39, p. 130]. While in the former Russia acknowledged Lithuanian authority over the Vilnius region, the peace treaty with Poland defined it as the subject of dispute between Lithuania and Poland. Č. Laurinavičius also assesses the Moscow Peace Treaty negatively, stressing that as a result Lithuania was made a protectorate of the Soviet Russia [40, p. 37].

On the basis of archive materials, A. Kasparavičius comes to a conclusion that the conflict between Poland and Lithuania was to the Soviet benefit [39, p. 129]. The Polish-Lithuanian confrontation hampered the establishment of an Eastern Locarno — a political bloc of the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) — thus the Soviet diplomacy was highly interested not in solving the Lithuanian-Polish conflict, but rather in its existence [39, p. 136]. The Soviet Union was a pharmacist that dispensed the conflict depending on the circumstances [39, p. 133]. V. Žalys maintains that the true victors in the Polish-Lithuanian conflict were the Soviet Russia and Germany [2, p. 21]. The exclusion of Lithuania from the designed buffer made it impossible to surround the strategically important Eastern Prussia [2, p. 22]. Both German and Soviet diplomats hinted to Lithuanian politicians on more than one occasion that, if Lithuania had acceded the union of the Baltic states, it would have been unwise for it to expect any support in the struggle for Vilnius against Poland [41].

In conclusion, one can say that the interest of both Russian and international researchers in the Vilnius issue does not wane even today. Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, and American scholars put forward original concepts and approaches to different aspects of the Vilnius problem. Over the last year, historiography has abandoned emotional and one-sided judgments, as well as nationally biased assessment of the participation of the USSR and other European countries in solving the Vilnius issue.

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