Population Displacement in Lithuania in the Twentieth Century

Experiences, Identities and Legacies

Edited by

Tomas Balkelis
Violeta Davoliūtė

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Forging a "Moral Community": The Great War and Lithuanian Refugees in Russia

Tomas Balkelis

Introduction

By the end of the Great War, Russia's disastrous military performance, economic collapse and growing unrest on the "home front" brought the transformation of the empire into a number of *shatterzones* where various nationalist and revolutionary forces asserted themselves with unseen vigour. One of the critical sources of this internal collapse was the refugee crisis that shook the empire from the early days of war.

Recently a number of historians from various countries turned to the study of Russia's more than seven millions war refugees. They started raising questions about efforts of relief, their war experience, political loyalties, national and social identities, and the impact of revolution on post-war political developments.[1] Peter Gatrell offered a transnational perspective by suggesting that the newly built nation-states and national movements that emerged on the outskirts of empire relied on the support of refugees of various ethnicities, among other sources. A massive displacement of Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Jews and Armenians provided an opportunity for their political mobilization and "national regeneration."[2] In short, hundreds of thousands of refugees became nationalized (and revolutionized) by the end of the war.

1 Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron, eds., *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918–1924* (London: Anthem Press 2004); Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); А.Н. Курцев, "Беженцы первой мировой войны в России," *Вопросы истории* 8 (1999): 98–113; Любовь Н. Жванко, *Біженці Першої світової війни: український вимір, 1914 – 1918* (Харкіv нац. акад. міськ. госп-ва, 2012); Jan M. Piskorski, *Wygnancy: przesiedlenia i uchudzcy w dwudziestowiecznej Europie* (Warszawa: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawnniczy, 2010); Mariusz Korzeniowski, Marek Mądzik and Dariusz Tarasiuk, *Tułaczy los Uchodźcy polscy w imperium rosyjskim w latach pierwszej wojny światowej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu M. Curie-Sklodowskiej, 2007).

2 Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 170.

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The focus of this chapter is on the case of approximately 250,000 ethnic Lithuanian refugees. The war swept them from the Lithuanian provinces to Russia between 1915 and 1918. They were able to return to the newly constituted Lithuanian state from 1918 to 1922. In my earlier work I focused on the efforts of the Lithuanian government to claim the refugees in Russia by organizing their repatriation, but also by selecting those whose loyalty, ethnicity or expertise was needed, and rejecting those who did not have the right qualities.[3] This chapter aims to provide a more in-depth study of the war experience of refugees living in Russia. The key question is: how were the Lithuanian refugees formed into a national-minded community during their displacement? If we know that their loyalties to the empire had been altered by the relief activities, we need to explore how they worked on the grass-root level. For this purpose I studied the strategies of relief used by the Lithuanian elite, and refugee responses to them. Their day-to-day experiences while living in Russia are an important field of enquiry that may shed more light on the relationship between war displacement and the constitution of political and cultural identities. I also focused on the political and cultural activities of refugees that helped to strengthen their communal ties.

A proponent of cultural approaches to the study of nationalism, John Hutchinson in his *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (2005) suggests that cultural nationalists (comprising intellectuals, artists, journalists, etc.) serve as "moral innovators," who seek to culturally regenerate the nation in response to perceived threats by creating a cultural community. One of the strategies they use is "a switch to a sacrificial struggle when the nation seems threatened by internal crisis or when the state is faced with a systemic crisis, such as war or social revolution."[4] According to Hutchinson, for nationalists such crises are an opportunity for the prospective rebirth of the nation. They are able to produce new leaders "outside established structures" and to energize the demoralized populations "by offering positive alternative social pathways."[5] This approach is valuable because, contrary to most "constructivist" theories of nation-building, it allows for a high degree of bottom-up activism. Elites and the masses are thus conceived as being in an interactive, rather than wholly top-down, relationship.

3 Tomas Balkelis, "The Lithuanian Government and the Return of WWI Refugees to Lithuania, 1918–1924" in *Homelands: War, Population Displacement and Statehood in the East–west Borderlands, 1918–1924*, eds. Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (London: Anthem Press: 2004), 74–98.

4 John Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 69.

5 Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict*, 70.

I was especially intrigued by the *moral aspect* of making such a cultural community among the refugees. During the war, besides relief, one of the greatest concerns of the Lithuanian intelligentsia was the creation of a sacrificial rhetoric that would penetrate the hearts and minds of exiles. I was struck by the amount of effort that the revivalists spent describing the war displacement in *moralizing terms* – as a danger not only to the physical survival of refugees, but also to their souls. Thus my argument is that various Lithuanian relief officials who were involved in helping the refugees tried to claim them by creating, first of all, "a moral community" whose members should take responsibility for preserving and cherishing those moral and cultural features that made them ostensibly more Lithuanian and which were seen as endangered by their experience of war.

Developing a rhetoric of sacrifice and strengthening ties with the fatherland were just some of the strategies used to build community. Others included offering positive "social pathways" through relief, education (particularly among the youth), professional improvement and religious and cultural activities. This was a battlefield where the empire lost to the national activists, as the whole relief system gradually became associated with an idea of building a new nation-state.

Such community building was far from straightforward; it had its own pitfalls and alternatives. Although the relief officials often tried to describe the refugees as a demoralized crowd in need of help (and indeed they needed help), the refugees were not only helpless victims but also active agents. After the February revolution of 1917 they became involved in various forms of politics. The Bolshevik revolution offered an alternative vision of community that also needs to be taken into account, as well as other voices of dissent that made the success of nationalist revivalists far from certain.

The onset of war in August 1914 sent a wave of bewilderment across the empire. In Lithuania, as in many other parts of Russia, the initial shock (*Rygos garsas* warned, "Lithuania will feel the heaviest burden of the war") was soon followed by an explosion of enthusiasm and support for the Tsarist government.[6] "Our primary duties are those which the state is asking from us today," wrote the nationalist *Viltis*. This zeal culminated in the well-known "Amber Declaration" drawn by the leaders of the national movement on 4 August 1914. The document affirmed that "the common task of Lithuanian and Slav warriors is to combat…the all-devouring Germanism."[7] No wonder that the early political expectations of the Lithuanian patriotic elite (autonomy and unification of Lithuanian Minor) were based on the hope that Russia would win the war.

6 "Lietuva ir karas," *Rygos garsas* 60 (30 July 1914), 1.

7 Antoine Viscont, *La Lituanie et la guerre* (Genève: Atar, 1917), 176.

The calls for unity with the empire were also replicated within the ranks of the elites: the nationalist newspaper *Vairas* called for the unanimity of all political streams of Lithuanians in August 1914.[8] This desire was clearly expressed in the emergence of the Lithuanian War Relief Association (LWRA) in Vilnius in November 1914 that joined two major political wings: nationalists and socialists. This institution, generously funded by the all-Russian Tatiana Committee, played a critical role not only in refugee relief, but also in the creation of a new "moral community" among them.[9] An early attempt to create a political centre of all major political streams in the form of the Committee of Representatives (Atstovų komitetas) in Vilnius in January 1915 was unsuccessful because of bickering between the left and right.[10]

The second year of war brought the wind of change in the rhetoric of Lithuanians. As the German army swept across the country taking Kaunas in August and Vilnius in September 1915, thousands of refugees started pouring into the Russian interior. By mid-summer Vilnius with a pre-war population of 200,000 was flooded by approximately 100,000 refugees.[11] The LWRA found itself overwhelmed as a bigger part of it (led by Martynas Yčas) left for Russia, leaving a smaller group (led by Antanas Smetona) in the occupied city. "Poverty and misfortune are waiting for your work," Yčas urged the mobilization of Lithuanian elites, "our nation never asked so much from its representatives as today."[12] The LWRA also appealed to students asking them to accept the challenge of helping the growing number of refugees.[13]

The German occupation not only created a new centre of political and cultural activities for the Lithuanian elite in Russia, as the majority found themselves displaced, but also produced the first serious cracks in their feelings of loyalty toward Russia. By late 1915, the Lithuanians were far from speaking in a single voice about the future of Lithuania. There were still many of those who believed that Russia could be among the winners of the war. However, the

8 *Vairas* 14 (30 August 1914), 2.

9 The key significance of LWRA is openly expressed in memoirs of its leaders. Martynas Yčas, "Rusijos lietuvių pastangos," in *Pirmasis nepriklausomos Lietuvos dešimtmetis* (Kaunas: Šviesa, 1990), 24; Petras Leonas, "Mano pergyvenimai, 1914–1919," in *Mūsų senovė* (Kaunas: 1939), 620–631.

10 Petras Leonavičius, *Petras Leonas – Lietuvos sąžinė, 1864–1938* (Kaunas: Technologija, 2012),188–193.

11 The large number of these refugees was Jews. See, *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1916), 64. P. Bugailiškis spoke about more than 100,000 refugees in the Vilna area at the end of August 1915 (Lietuvos mokslų akademijos bibliotekos Rankraščių skyrius (LMAB), F. 87, B. 163, l. 27).

12 *Viltis* 231 (10 October 1914), 1.

13 *Lietuvių balsas* 6 (27 September 1915), 1.

newly born Lithuanian press in Russia (by September the LWRA had its weekly *Lietuvių balsas*, by December socialists published *Naujoji Lietuva*) became a new venue where the post-war fate of the country was discussed from late 1915.[14]

The major concern for the patriots was still the issue of national unity. One of the editorials of *Lietuvių balsas* ran: "What can we expect from the war?… In the course of war we have to form a single thought, a single Lithuanian orientation. Our orientation is based on the issues of the nation. And the primary one among them is national unity."[15] Besides relief, for the leadership of the LWRA its major aims were "to strengthen the link between refugees and Lithuanian culture; to uphold among the refugees an intense desire to return to the homeland; to prepare ways for their future repatriation; and to use the time of war for the upbringing of as many cultural workers…as possible among the dispersed crowds of Lithuanian refugees."[16] The leaders of the LWRA saw their organization as "responsible for all spheres of human life, including religious."[17] However, despite their different political views, they were concerned mostly with one particular group of refugees – ethnic Lithuanians.

The emergence of the first refugee newspaper in Russia struck a new chord both among the elite and ordinary exiles, as hundreds of letters were sent to the editors of *Lietuvių balsas*. Matters of relief became a key concern as it quickly built its readership up to 17,000, surpassing its political competitors.[18] Lithuanian refugees who were stuck in Tambov or Kharkov finally had an opportunity to learn about the fate of their co-nationals in Moscow, Ryazan, the Caucasus or even Vladivostok. Now they could trace down their lost relatives through the ad pages of *Lietuvių balsas*: "I want to correspond with my male and female co-nationals [tautiečiais ir tautietėmis], especially from Raseiniai county of the Kaunas province. I am Boleslovas Ivanauskas, son of Adolf, from the town of Skaudvilė. St. Petersburg."[19] Ads like this one became a lifeline for thousands caught in the cauldron of war as people sought not only their close relatives, but also their co-nationals (sic!).

Finding, counting and "gathering" dispersed Lithuanians became the priority for community-building. For this purpose, in mid-1915 the LWRA established

14 *Lietuvių balsas* 9 (8 October 1915), 1; *Lietuvių balsas* 13 (25 October 1915), 2.

15 *Lietuvių balsas* 19 (15 November 1915), 1.

16 "The Resolution of the Stockholm Conference," in Martynas Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 3 (Kaunas: Spindulys, 1991), 96–97.

17 Mykolas Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai* (Vilnius: Vilniaus universitetas, 2006), 225.

18 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 3, 126.

19 *Lietuvių balsas* 3 (10 January 1916), 4.

a Refugee Information Bureau in St. Petersburg that had the task of helping the refugees to find their relatives. Two other major concerns were to enumerate the Lithuanian refugees for relief purposes and for their future repatriation to Lithuania. "It is imperative there should not be a single Lithuanian who is left uncounted," *Lietuvių balsas* wrote.[20] A head of the LWRA branch in Tallinn, future minister of independent Lithuania and priest Mykolas Krupavičius recalled that the counting involved walking from one house to another in search of Lithuanian speakers. In one house in Tallinn he stumbled into a brothel where he was met by five half-naked Lithuanian women. Having learned that he was a priest, they quickly changed their attire. Krupavičius described this incident in his memoir: "this is how all Lithuanians were registered; not a single one could be left unaccounted for."[21]

As a result of the hasty evacuation, refugees ended up dispersed all over the empire, some of them settling as far as Siberia and the Caucasus. LWRA representatives travelled to these remote places to find them, count them, establish local branches and appoint officials to dispense relief. By the end of war, it had a network of about 250 agencies all over the empire, paid salaries to several hundreds of its workers and ran a massive budget of half a million roubles a month in 1916. One of the early counts of refugees produced a figure of 101,089 in October 1916 (far below the actual number of the displaced).[22] Of those more than 60,000 received relief from the LWRA.[23] Those who would refuse to register with the LWRA could not expect any relief. Once registered, people could not easily change their residence without travel permits issued by the LWRA or local Tsarist authorities. Overall, the initiative was quite successful; the majority were registered.

The LWRA worked hard to prevent their dispersal as far as Siberia, ringing alarm bells that those who ended up there would lose their social and cultural

20 *Lietuvių balsas* 12 (18 October 1915), 1.

21 Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 227.

22 "Сведения об Отделах и Уполномоченных Центрального Комитета Литовского Общества о количестве беженцев-литовцев, об образованных для них Отделами и Уполномоченными учреждениях, об отпущенных и израсходованных суммах: сведения о числе беженцев составлены на 1-е октября 1916," *Известия Центрального Комитета* 1, 1917 (Петроград: Центральный Комитет Литовского Общества, 1917).

23 The figure of 101,089 was far too low because it did not include about 15,000 refugees in Moscow. The figure for St. Petersburg was given 6,600 and did not reflect the fact that about 20,000 refugees settled in the city. In his memoir Yčas claims that by mid-1916 the committee took care of more than 200,000 Lithuanian refugees and exiles. See Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 120.

ties with the others.[24] Thus staying apart in the midst of strangers was presented as a mortal danger:

> Our Lithuanian people escaped mostly from small towns and farmsteads. Having ended up in big cities among total strangers who have different traditions and habits, Lithuanians are not able to resist their influence. … A duty of the relief institutions and the entire intelligentsia is to defend people against negative influences.[25]

When the local authorities of Nizhny Novgorod tried to distribute the refugees in the countryside, LWRA's officials asked to stop it arguing that those Lithuanians who were removed from larger ethnic communities in towns "may lose their religion and language."[26] Thus keeping the refugees within the reach of the LWRA was seen as a first step in saving the face of the community.

The LWRA saw mixing with Polish refugees as a serious threat to the spiritual survival of Lithuanian refugees in Russia.[27] Those who preferred to speak in Polish (many were from the Polish-speaking Vilnius province) were reprimanded or dismissed from relief work.[28] The refugee press reproached those Lithuanians who sided with the Poles or registered with the Polish relief agencies. For example, in Romny (Ukraine) LWRA officials complained that "relations with the Poles here are bad: the Poles don't want to recognize the Lithuanians as a separate nation…they are forcing them to speak Polish, hindering the establishment of our relief branches…and denouncing Lithuanians to the government as pro-German."[29] They also noted that local Russian officials often failed to distinguish between Lithuanians and Poles since they were all Catholics. Thus the pre-war Polish-Lithuanian conflict simmered unabated among the refugees even in Russia. The refugee press also shamed those Lithuanians who having found good jobs assimilated into Russian culture. Nevertheless, relations with Russians were not seen as dangerous and corrupting as with Poles.

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24 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 127.

25 *Lietuvių balsas* 9 (31 January 1916), 1.

26 "Lietuvių draugijos įgaliotinio J. Savickio pranešimas," in Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 128.

27 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 129.

28 This is what happened in the Odessa branch of LWRA. See Julius Būtėnas, *Mykolas Šleževičius* (Chicago: Terra, 1954), 55–56.

29 "Romny Lietuvių komiteto ataskaita, 1 December 1915," Lietuvos valstybės istorijos archyvas (LVIA), F. 1232, A. 1, B. 2, l. 5–7.

The existence of parallel relief networks among Polish, Jewish and Latvian refugees also facilitated the creation of communal ties among Lithuanians.[30] Forms of patriotic work were easily copied from other ethnic groups since the LWRA was often in contact with other large relief agencies such as the Polish CKO (Centralny Komitet Obywatelski) and the Jewish EKOPO (Еврейский комитет помощи пострадавшим от войны и погромов).[31] In many cases the Lithuanians were helped by Russian, Latvian and Polish agencies as it happened, for instance, in Penza and Tula.[32] Yet the overall tendency was the "nationalization" of the whole relief system. Parallel processes of community building also took place among other non-Russian refugee groups.

The LWRA also saw as one of its aims the "safeguarding dispersed crowds of Lithuanians from moral degradation."[33] Its officials travelled to remote communities of refugees painting pictures of "an ugly and degrading moral gangrene that eats up the soul of the nation."[34] One of them wrote from Vitebsk: "our Lithuanian girls are going out with soldiers in teahouses and barracks. They are losing their morality."[35] Preserving the chastity of women became a part of building the moral community of refugees. At night armed with guns Lithuanian men guarded student hostels of Lithuanian girls against foreign marauders, while at daytime they escorted them to schools in Voronezh.[36] The "safeguarding" was broadly understood as a normative action against immoral practices among the refugees such as drinking, apathy, poor hygiene, bad manners, criminal activities, sexual laxity and others.[37]

One of the key strategies of keeping up the spirits of the refugees was the preservation of their religious life in exile. Having found themselves in remote places of the empire, Lithuanians initially could not continue their Catholic religious practices: there were very few priests among them. The Central Committee of the LWRA was flooded with requests to send priests and prayer books to remote communities. "The refugees from Mariupol and Alexandrovsk are asking to send them at least one priest," "the refugees are pleading to send

30 Aija Priedite, "Latvian Refugees and the Latvian Nation State during and after World War I," in *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia 1918–1924*, eds. Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 35–52.

31 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 114–117.

32 "Lietuvių draugijos įgaliotinio J. Savickio pranešimas," in Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 136.

33 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 3, 94.

34 *Lietuvių balsas* 23 (3 December 1915), 1.

35 *Lietuvių balsas* 21 (26 November 1915), 2.

36 Būtėnas, *Mykolas Šleževičius*, 258.

37 *Lietuvių balsas* 73 (25 September 1916), 3; *Lietuvių balsas* 3 (8 January 1917), 2.

them a priest at least once a month," LWRA officials routinely reported to their superiors.[38] In September 1917 the LWRA and Polish CKO came together to discuss the shortage of Catholic priests. It turned out that among all Catholic priests who worked among refugees in Russia there were only 25 paid by the LWRA. The Polish CKO had 107 priests and 132 chaplains.[39] The LWRA insisted that there should be at least one priest for every 5,000 Lithuanian refugees.[40] It tried to help them by recruiting fresh graduates from Catholic seminaries. However, the shortage remained a constant problem throughout their stay in Russia. Meanwhile, the LWRA printed and distributed prayer books which were in high demand. Religious life continued with high intensity helping the Lithuanians to self-identify amongst the local Orthodox population and chart the boundaries of their "moral community."

Most of the cultural and social activities of the refugees were also run by LWRA officials. Writers, actors, singers and musicians joined their efforts in organizing various social gatherings. These cultural activities were not simply created in exile but revived from the pre-war period. The refugees could hear popular lectures on farming and cooperation and entertain themselves with songs and dancing. Folk singing, dancing and improvised theatrical plays were the most popular features of these gatherings. They turned out to be key community events where people could socialize and meet new partners. A LWRA official claimed: "it was a great idea: …in this way we have managed to keep our people from the street and away from strangers."[41] Thus during Christmas in Smolensk the LWRA organized separate soirees for adults and children that included "declamations, songs and games."[42] Reviews of such cultural activities became a permanent feature in the back pages of *Lietuvių balsas* where its organizers and participants were praised or critiqued.

Another key strategy of building "the moral community" was the creation of a vast network of various educational institutions for Lithuanian refugees. By 1917 the LWRA succeeded establishing more than 250 schools in cities such as Voronezh, Tambov, Yaroslavl, Yekaterinoslav, Rostov-on-Don, Moscow, St. Petersburg and others. It also ran a network of teachers' colleges, vocational courses, student hostels, orphanages and public canteens. The most notable of the schools were two gymnasiums for girls and boys that Yčas founded with the support of the Ministry of Education and the Tatyana Committee in Voronezh

38 "Letter of priest J. Avižienis to the LWRA, 11 August 1917," LMAB, F. 70, B. 24, l. 7–9.

39 LMAB, F. 70, B. 24, l. 13.

40 LMAB, F. 70, B. 24, l. 7.

41 Būtėnas, *Mykolas Šleževičius*, 49.

42 *Lietuvių balsas* 25 (13 December 1915), 2.

in 1915. His initiative helped to transform the city into a hotbed of cultural and social life for Lithuanians. The LWRA soon took notice and moved its headquarters from St. Petersburg to Voronezh.

Lithuanian language and religious education became the cornerstones of the curriculum of the two gymnasiums. The LWRA carefully handpicked the teaching staff by inviting a number of veteran patriots such as linguists J. Jablonskis and J. Balčikonis, writers P. Mašiotas and S. Kymantaitė-Čiurlionienė. Among its teachers there were also five Catholic priests who made sure that religion was always included in the school's curriculum.[43] The city had ten hostels that housed almost 1,000 students in early 1916.[44] Some of them had so-called "black books" that kept track of the day-to-day misconduct of students. Those who refused to follow the rules had to leave.[45] Yčas praised the teaching staff in his memoir: "many would have lost their moral face without their protection and moral support."[46]

Keeping the track also meant controlling the language that refugees spoke. Pre-war efforts of linguistic purification were eagerly renewed in Russia. Lithuanian patriots were urged to avoid using Russian and Polish "barbarisms" in their manner of speaking. *Lietuvių balsas* wrote: "this defect of Lithuanians of not knowing their language and not taking care of it is hurting the entire case of Lithuania."[47] Meanwhile, the young people were called to record carefully Lithuanian folk songs and fairy tales among the refugees.[48] Thus, paradoxically the cultivation of ethnic folk traditions continued even in wartime exile.

The early effort of building a unified political community in Lithuania with the creation of the LWRA was also replicated in Russia. In February 1916 the LWRA held its first all-Russian congress that was attended by its 104 regional representatives, including left-wing politicians.[49] They discussed various issues such as their relief efforts in Lithuania, preparations for future repatriation and relations with the relief agencies of other ethnic groups. In April 1916 a group of Lithuanians from various political parties came together with the purpose of developing a common Lithuanian policy.[50] By November they

43 Yčas, *Pirmasis nepriklausomybės dešimtmetis*, 27.

44 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 158.

45 LVIA, F. 1232, A. 1, B. 23, l. 16.

46 Yčas, *Atsiminimai*, vol. 2, 161–162.

47 *Lietuvių balsas* 24 (6 December 1915), 1.

48 *Lietuvių balsas* 73 (23 September 1916), 2.

49 Leonavičius, *Petras Leonas*, 218–221.

50 "Laikinosios organizacijos komisijos lietuvių tautos mezliavos tikslui ir organizacijai nustatyti protokolai, December 1916 – February 1917," LMAB, F. 237, B. 68, l. 36.

developed the idea of collecting the Charity for the Lithuanian Nation (Lietuvių tautos mezliava). Pre-war political tensions resurfaced as the Catholic wing opposed the project with a request that the charity should not contain any political aims.[51] However, this short-lived manifestation of unity provided momentum for the creation of the Council of the Lithuanian Nation (Lietuvių tautos taryba) on 24 February 1917 in St. Petersburg. The Council brought together all major political groups (including the Catholics who managed to form their own party) and adopted a declaration claiming that Lithuania was a separate ethnic, cultural and political entity that should have its own government and should belong to a single administrative body.[52] Although these demands were not made public at the time, they set the political tone for the Lithuanian community in Russia and abroad when they gained a new life during the Russian revolution.

The February revolution of 1917 became a turning point for the Lithuanian movement in Russia. First, it released all political tensions among different political groups of refugees who at the onset of war had to set aside their differences and cooperate. Secondly, now the Lithuanian elite could appeal to the community of refugees without any major restrictions.[53] The LWRA and right-wing parties that supported its policies (Catholic Union, Christian Democrats and National Liberals) now suddenly faced stiff opposition not only from the leftists (Socialist Democrats, Socialists Populists and Santara), but also from the restless masses who started calling for the "democratization" of the whole relief system. This call was echoed in two all-Russian congresses of refugees (the first took place in early September 1917; the second in late November).[54] In early 1917 the Central Committee of LWRA was flooded with reports from ordinary refugees pointing to corruption and misuse of public relief funds by local representatives. Thus in Tambov people asked to remove their local representative and an accountant. Refugees from Alexandrovsk wrote: "there is no justice in our relief branch, no accounting."[55] In Tambov some of them denounced the LWRA officials to the government for "making illegal speeches about the war and Lithuanian writers…"[56] The leadership of the LWRA tried to cope with

51 Ibid.

52 Pranas Čepėnas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija*, vol. 2 (Chicago: K. Griniaus fondas, 1976), 61.

53 Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 181.

54 Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 187; "Draugai tremtiniai," LMAB, F. 70, B. 138, l. 2.

55 "The protocols of the Central Committee of LWRA, 16 January – March 1917," in Государственный архив Российской Федерации (GARF), Fond. 3934, Opis.1, Delo.1, l. 1–2.

56 LVIA, F. 1232, A. 1, B. 4, l. 3.

bottom-up activism by sending their inspectors to provincial communities, dismissing those that had lost the sympathy of refugees and imposing financial accountability.

Political tensions came to a boil in the so-called Lithuanian congress in St. Petersburg on 27 May – 3 June 1917. For the first time during the war all major political parties came together to raise openly the political demands of Lithuanians. Although its 336 participants were either nominated or elected by various refugee communities in Russia, the congress became an exercise in divisive politics. Most of its time was spent bickering between "regressives" and "progressives" on the composition of its presidium. On the last day, the congress, 140 votes against 128, managed to adopt a resolution calling for "a permanently neutral and independent Lithuanian state."[57] In protest, all three leftist parties walked out singing the *Marseillaise*. The next day they adopted their own resolution calling for Lithuania's right to self-determination within Russia's federative framework.[58]

The congress showed that the refugee community that was cobbled together by the relief efforts of the LWRA did not speak with a single voice and did not share a single political vision. There were at least three competing views for the future of Lithuania. The rightist parties thought that Germany would be the winner of the war and any political arrangement would have to consider its interests in the region. The moderate leftists staked their hopes on the liberal reform of democratic Russia that would hopefully grant autonomy or independence to its non-Russian nationalities.[59] The smallest group were those who abhorred the war and sympathized with the Bolsheviks, who believed that revolution was the ultimate answer that would solve all issues of national self-determination. For the left radicals the idea of independence was just a camouflage used by their class enemies to sidestep social issues.

After the February revolution the everyday life of refugees turned into a battlefield among all these political streams that started actively seeking their loyalty and support. A Lithuanian woman teacher wrote in a letter to her friend describing the changing mood among refugees in Moscow: "Last year the Central Committee [of the LWRA] behaved more humanly; they did not meddle into our private lives so deeply. They would send money and that would be it! Now it is different. The religious prudes are scaring children with their

57 For the text of the resolution, see *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, vol. 22 (Boston: Lietuvių enciklopedijos leidykla 1960), 372–373.

58 Ibid., vol. 22, 373.

59 Vincas Bartuška, *Lietuvos nepriklausomybės kryžiaus keliais* (Klaipėda: Rytas, 1937), 294–295; Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 264–265.

stories about hell…; the patriots are forcing into their heads ideas about "the language of their homeland" and "love of the fatherland"; the populists (liaudininkai) are telling them fairy tales from the lives of shepherds about pigs… It is so obvious that everyone is trying to pull the crowd in their own direction."[60]

The Lithuanian youth in Russia, in particular, became a target of political agitation. Both nationalists and leftists saw the young refugees as the vanguard of their new political orders. Their minds became a battlefield where the contours of "the moral community" of refugees became shaped with a previously unseen energy. The nationalist-minded LWRA tried to recruit young people into various youth organizations (such as *ateitininkai* and *aušrininkai*) that became involved in patriotic work. For *ateitininkai*, who tried to bring together young Lithuanian Catholics, their self-declared goal was "to march to the people."[61] This meant the organization of various professional societies, agrarian cooperatives and, especially, agitation among the youth. *Ateitininkai* saw as their immediate tasks "to prepare themselves as leaders of Lithuanian society and to safeguard Lithuanians in Russia from Russian influence in general, from atheism; and, in particular, from Marxism."[62] This youth organization played an especially active role in building "the moral community" of Lithuanians in Russia. After repatriation many of them volunteered for the Lithuanian armed forces in the wars of independence in 1918–1920.[63]

The left side of the political spectrum was occupied by so-called *aušrininkai*, a political youth organization established in 1910 and revived in 1917 that united progressive-minded students (pažangioji moksleivija). In Russia among their leaders there were prominent members of the LWRA such as Stasys Šilingas and Petras Klimas. This group was smaller than the *ateitininkai* and soon split between those who supported the cause of independent Lithuania and those who became openly pro-Bolshevik.[64] If in early 1917 the two camps of young Lithuanians engaged in quick-tempered debates and disputes, by the end of the year they started forming their own armed militias. In early 1918 pro-Bolshevik Lithuanians established the most powerful element among the ranks of the Soviet militia in Voronezh, and proceeded to arrest their right-wing competitors. In January several close LWRA accomplices were sentenced to death by a revolutionary committee and only narrowly escaped execution.[65]

60 "A letter of A. Didžiulytė to V. Požela," LMAB, F. 237, B. 15, l. 1–3.

61 "Protocols of ateitininkai, June 1917," in Lietuvos nacionalinės Mažvydo bibliotekos rankraščių skyrius (LNMB), F. 106–108, l.46.

62 Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 240.

63 Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 263.

64 Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 265.

65 Būtėnas, *Mykolas Šleževičius*, 270; Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 270–274.

The Bolsheviks offered an alternative community-building model for the Lithuanians and war refugees of other nationalities. The Bolshevik impact on their mentalities remains poorly studied.[66] In one respect, this model was more inclusive than the one offered by nationalists and liberal-minded leftists: the Bolsheviks did not see ethnicity as a defining feature of this new community. One of the aims of the Lithuanian Commissariat (LC), established in Moscow on 8 December 1917, was to conduct communist agitation among all refugees from Lithuania, including Poles and Jews.[67] The LC was created by the Soviet government to deal with Lithuanian affairs along with similar national commissariats that worked among other groups of refugees. The Bolshevik leadership did not reject outright the idea of Lithuanian statehood. However, it argued for a new Soviet Lithuanian state that would "expel not only the Russian government, but also our own capitalists."[68]

From December 1917, the Bolsheviks, in effect, started taking over the entire system of refugee relief created by the tsarist state. The Second All-Russian Congress of Refugees that took place in Saint Petersburg in late November 1917 openly announced the take-over as their priority. As mentioned, the congress urged the "democratization" of relief work. From the Bolshevik perspective, this meant dismantling the old relief agencies and establishing their own refugee Soviets.[69] By 20 December 1917 the LWRA lost most its properties and assets to the so-called Lithuanian Liquidation Commission, the Bolshevik agency created to take apart the LWRA.[70]

The transfer of the property of the LWRA to the Bolsheviks was a messy process that hardly earned them credits among rank-and-file refugees. By December 1917 the Central Committee of the LWRA reported that the entire relief network was on the verge of collapse because it had no funds. The Soviet government did not provide any financial support and forbade selling its property which was needed to feed the starving refugees.[71] Refugees from Kazan wrote to the Liquidation Commission begging for funds "because they were not getting any relief payments for three months and were in a critical

66 The only study based on archival materials remains a book by Jonas Aničas and Sigita Noreikienė, *Lietuvos reikalų komisariato veikla 1917–1918 metais* (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės literatūros leidykla, 1959).

67 Aničas, Noreikienė, *Lietuvos reikalų komisariato veikla*, 31.

68 This is an excerpt from a report written in 1917 by Vladas Požela, one of the leaders of Lithuanian radical leftists. LMAB, F. 237, B. 49, l. 8.

69 "Draugai tremtiniai," LMAB, F. 70, B. 138, l. 2.

70 "Protocol of the meeting of the LWRA, 18 December 1917," LMAB, F. 70, B. 141, l. 1.

71 "Report of the LWRA, 20 December 1917," LMAB, F. 237, B. 70, l. 1.

condition."[72] The liquidation process still continued in July as the properties of the provincial branches of the LWRA were taken over by local Soviet authorities.[73]

Since the Bolshevik take-over and repatriation took place simultaneously, most refugees were able to evade the Bolshevik grip by returning to Lithuania. The repatriation started after the signing of the treaty of Brest Litovsk in March 1918 and continued until 1922.[74] In many cases entire educational institutions were repatriated with all of their staffs and students. The most notorious return was that of more than 740 pupils, 200 teachers and 270 school staff from Voronezh to Vilnius in June 1918. The permission to board the trains was granted only after the list of repatriates was screened by local Lithuanian Bolshevik commissars. According to the priest Julius Jasienskis, who was responsible for the return, "by the spring everyone jumped up in their preparations to return to the homeland. There were no disputes on this decision."[75]

Despite the screening efforts, on the whole, the Bolsheviks did not hinder the repatriation of refugees. However, they actively engaged in propaganda among the returnees urging them to support the Soviet case in Lithuania. For instance, they organized a massive demonstration among refugees in Voronezh on the topic "The Russian Revolution and Work in Lithuania."[76] The Petrograd section of the LC distributed more than 15,000 different communist newspapers and leaflets among the refugees on the Soviet-Lithuanian border.[77] In the summer of 1918 the Communists held 23 demonstrations among refugees in the area of St. Petersburg.[78]

On 8 December 1918 the Lithuanian communists in Russia announced the creation of the Soviet Republic of Lithuania. Along with the Soviet republics of Latvia and Estonia, these political projects were inspired and fully controlled by Moscow. The nucleus of this new political entity was made up of the Lithuanian war refugees who worked in the LC (V. Kapsukas-Mickevičius, Z. Angarietis, S. Matulaitis and others). No wonder the Lithuanian Bolsheviks in Russia saw as their priority preparations for political work in Lithuania. They registered party

72 "Letter of V. Dumbris to V. Požela, 28 December 1917," LMAB, F. 237, B. 16, l. 2.

73 "Correspondence of V. Požela," in LMAB, F. 237, B. 98, l. 2.

74 On the process of repatriation, see Balkelis, "The Lithuanian Government and the Return of WWI Refugees to Lithuania."

75 "Pranešimas buvusiojo Centro Komiteto Voroneže įgaliotinio kun. J. Jasienskio, 1 July 1918," LMAB F. 70, B. 141, l. 304–305.

76 Aničas, Noreikienė, *Lietuvos reikalų komisariato veikla*, 32.

77 Ibid., 36.

78 *Tiesa* 53 (6 December 1918).

members willing to work in Lithuania.[79] After the invasion of the Red Army into Eastern Lithuania in December 1918, many refugees streamed into the country joining the Bolshevik troops in Vilnius. Red partisan units, often led by the former members of the LC, sprang up all over Lithuania in places such as Kuršėnai, Šiauliai, Panevėžys, Ukmergė, Rokiškis and elsewhere.[80]

Thus the revolution produced a split within the refugee community between the majority that was sympathetic to the nationalist-minded LWRA and the minority that supported the Bolsheviks. There is an open question whether this conflict helped the emergence of "the moral community" or hindered it. The animosity between the Bolsheviks and nationalists (and nationally minded socialists) that flared within the refugee community in Russia was soon transferred to the battlefields of Lithuania. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks offered a political alternative for those war refugees who believed that their lives could be transformed by the communist ideals of social equality and justice. Of about 250,000 ethnic Lithuanians displaced by war into Russia, the majority came back to Lithuania. However, there were nearly 35,000 who did not return.[81] According to one estimate, in total, approximately 4,000 Lithuanians served in the Red Army between 1919 and 1920.[82] These numbers speak to the presence of multiple political and ethnic identities among the refugees.

Conclusions

By the end of the Great War there was hardly a single cultural community among the Lithuanian refugees that spoke the same political language. The years spent in displacement took a heavy toll on them as many were affected by assimilation and found a new home elsewhere. In 1922 while observing a Lithuanian refugee train coming home, a contemporary noted:

> Among the refugees conversation is conducted in all languages, or to be more precise, in a mixture of all languages. … Having lived for so long in foreign lands, our countrymen intermarried with the Ukrainians; the

79 Aničas, Noreikienė, *Lietuvos reikalų komisariato veikla*, 77.

80 Aničas, Noreikienė, *Lietuvos reikalų komisariato veikla*, 79.

81 LVIA, F. 377, A. 5, B. 212, 213; Rapolas Skipitis, *Nepriklausomą Lietuvą statant* (Chicago: Terra, 1961), 265.

82 Aldona Gaigalaitė, "Советско литовские войнские формирования в 1917–1920 г.," *LTSR Mokslų Akademijos darbai*, Serija A, vol. 1 (12) (Vilnius, 1962), 140.

> majority are bringing their wives from Ukraine to Lithuania…[and they] don't understand a word of Lithuanian. An entire Lithuanian family speaks to itself in Russian…[83]

Some writings of the refugees also convey their confusion and inability to orient themselves in the rapidly shifting political situation after their repatriation to Lithuania. For many, the new power symbols of the Lithuanian state represented an unfamiliar and challenging political reality.[84]

However, this should not obscure the fact that the majority of refugees wholeheartedly supported the independent nation-state. "Nobody wanted to stay in Russia," wrote a young Lithuanian woman doctor in Minsk in 1918.[85] The desire to return to the homeland was widespread, and it was kept alive by the LWRA, the refugee press and most political parties of Lithuanians. Having returned from Russia with their staffs and students, numerous refugee educational institutions and associations continued their work in Lithuania. The personal connections that were made in Russia helped people to integrate into the social and economic life of the country. A dozen former relief officials became government ministers (Yčas, Petras Leonas, Leonas Bistras, Rapolas Skipitis, Stasys Šilingas, Mykolas Krupavičius and others), prime ministers (Mykolas Šleževičius and Antanas Tumėnas) or even president (Kazys Grinius). The experience they gained while working in the relief administration in Russia was channelled into the state-building project of an independent Lithuania. The core of the Lithuanian army initially was made of Lithuanian WWI veterans of the Tsarist army who actively fought Russians, Poles and Germans to secure Lithuania's independence in 1918–1920. Many demobilized war veterans returned within the stream of refugees and formed defence groups that successfully fought the Bolsheviks, Poles and Germans all over Lithuania.[86]

One of leaders of the LWRA and of the Lithuanian Christian Democrats Krupavičius noted that in Russia many Lithuanian refugees "matured as true democrats." The revolution made them more aware of the interests of society as a whole and of various political alternatives that they had never knew before. He noted that in Russia "they became the enemies of all kinds of

83 Mikų Dėdė, "Lietuvos tremtiniai iš Ukrainos," *Lietuvos žinios* 140 (24 August 1922), 2.

84 Jonas Jakelaitis, *Jeigu kas nors skaitys: atsiminimai* (Kaunas: Spindulys, 1991), 229–230.

85 Veronika Janulaitytė-Alseikienė, "Kūno pacientai ir dvasios draugai," *Šiaurės Atėnai* 43 (2001), 9.

86 Tomas Balkelis, "Demobilisierung, Remobilisierung: Paramilitärische Verbände in Litauen 1918–1920," *OstEuropa* 64 (Jahrgang /Heft 2–4/Februar–April, 2014): 197–221.

dictatorship."[87] And indeed, for many refugees democratic politics became preferable to any form of autocracy. The majority of the Lithuanian population that remained in the occupied country did not have the same exposure to democratic politics as those Lithuanians who ended up in Russia. When the Lithuanian Council (Taryba) desperately searched for autocratic rulers for the emerging Lithuanian state, Lithuanian political leaders in Russia hardly admired such efforts. The massive repatriation of refugees was a significant source of support for a democracy in Lithuania.

Living in exile, Lithuanians were drawn together by the energizing efforts of the Lithuanian cultural elite. By nationalizing the relief system created by the Tsarist state, the elite turned it into a social safety network through which a new sense of community was reared among the refugees. Pre-war cultural practices of nationalist agitation based on the cultivation of the Lithuanian press, language, various schools, youth organizations, folk traditions, religious life and moral behaviour helped to instil a sense of national awareness and patriotic pride among the refugees. After the Russian revolution of February 1917 this community was gradually turned from a cultural into a political one.

The foundation of "the moral community" that was built in exile survived the war. By 1918 the right-wing intelligentsia and rank-and-file refugees shared a degree of national solidarity and patriotic pride unseen before the war. The political elite of independent Lithuania was able to mobilize its local population for the cause of independence, because parts of it had already been mobilized through their experience as refugees. It was this collective experience of displacement that helped to legitimize the formation of a new "moral community" among them, which was rapidly turned into a new national and social order.

An attempt by the Bolshevik regime to instil their own statehood in Lithuania was a failure because of their military defeat by the Lithuanian, Polish and German troops and the lack of support among the local peasantry. However, another reason for their downfall was their inability to attract a more significant political backing among war refugees.

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87 Krupavičius, *Atsiminimai*, 262.

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