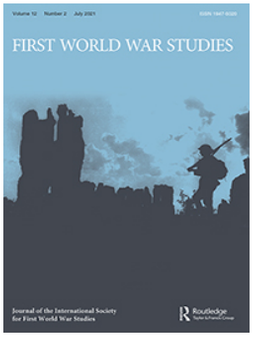

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ARTICLE

Humanitarian crisis in German occupied Vilnius, 1916-1917

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ABSTRACT

Based on newly published witness accounts, the article gives an insight into the civilian experiences of the humanitarian crisis that took place in the Ober Ost in 1916–1917. Vilnius, a city of 140,000, became an epicentre of famine and an epidemic of typhus that resulted in the death of several thousand civilians between November 1916 and October 1917. The article explores causes and dynamics of the crisis, survival strategies of local population and the emergence of a vast network of local relief agencies among Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and Belarusians. The author argues that the humanitarian disaster in Vilnius was part of the broader home front crisis of Central Powers. The food shortages that hit Germany and Austria-Hungary from mid-1916 led to the tightening of the exploitative occupation policy in the Ober Ost. Increasing requisitions, including confiscations of full harvests, food rationing, restrictions on free trade and population movement produced the famine that German authorities were able to control only with great difficulties. The humanitarian crisis destroyed the political credibility of the occupation regime in the eyes of the city's population which had to rely for help mostly from their own relief agencies. It was during this crisis that numerous relief societies that have emerged among Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and Belarusians grew and extended their influence among city's residents. Eventually they also helped to set the stage for nationalist and revolutionary political agendas of the city's ethnic groups. These relief structures became early vehicles for their political aspirations and provided an early organizational setup for their post-WWI political programmes.

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Introduction

On 12 May 1917 Germany's Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg received a telegram from Vilnius signed by representatives of local Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian and Belarusian relief agencies:

> Vilnius is in the grip of horrifying famine. The death rate is 98 people out of 1000. The food ration of population is cut to 200 grams of bread. No other food provisions are provided. The representatives of all people have asked for help from the City Governor, offered solutions, yet there were no results. People are chased on the streets and sent to forced labour . . . Please support us and help us immediately.[1]

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It is not known whether the telegram produced an official response. On 29 July 1917 Kaiser Wilhelm II himself visited Vilnius, though not for humanitarian, but military purposes. In the city of 140,000, the humanitarian crisis continued from November 1916 until the early fall of 1917. According to one estimate, between 1 November 1916 and 1 May 1917 more than 4,260 people died from famine and epidemic.[2] Between January and September 1917, more than 2,600 had typhus, 170 of them died.[3] Yet at the time the Germany's government had more significant concerns than the crisis in Vilnius. From mid-1916 food shortages hit the cities across Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1917 the stalemate on the Western Front seriously challenged Germany's chances of victory in the Great War.

The humanitarian crisis in Vilnius deserves a study of its own not only because it was closely tied to the broader home front crisis of Central Powers. It was also a portent of the total collapse of state power and social and political upheaval that would take place in the East European borderland after the Great War. In 1918, in the East, Germany's defeat opened a road for dozens of various nationalist and revolutionary political projects that tried to mobilize populations for their ideological agendas and create new state structures and identities.[4]

My first intention here is to trace a course, dynamics, causes and consequences of the humanitarian crisis in Vilnius with the purpose of placing it in the broader context of Germany's stalling military effort. The food shortages in Germany and Austria-Hungary had a direct impact on the famine in Vilnius. At the same time, I will argue that the humanitarian disaster helped to generate a variety of organized local responses that eventually led to political fragmentation and mobilization of Vilnius' population alongside ethnic lines. Thus, the crisis in Vilnius helped to set the stage for the postwar contest for the city among various political groups.

The famine and epidemic in Vilnius had never been a focus of a separate study, though references to them abound in several academic works.[5] For political reasons the Ober Ost administration never fully recognized the humanitarian crisis as such, denied its negative impact and tightly controlled the news of it. Its surviving statistical data on it is scant and fragmentary. However, recent years saw publication of several diaries of witnesses who had lived in the city during the famine and epidemic.[6] Alongside other witness descriptions and fragments of local press accounts that the German regime had allowed to be published, they served as key sources for this article.[7] They shed new light on everyday experiences of living through hunger and epidemic in wartime Vilnius. The ego documents are especially valuable because they tell us not only about everyday hardships of living through the famine and epidemic, but also about the efforts of people and organizations of dealing with them. Exploring those first-hand accounts allows us to understand the impact of Ober Ost policies, the public mood of city's residents, their survival strategies and emotional and social responses in the face of the humanitarian crisis.

The food shortages in Central Powers and the famine in Vilnius

Food shortages hit Germany's cities as early as in the spring of 1916. Food prices doubled compared to the pre-war levels and they remained high for the rest of the year. By the summer, first major hunger riots erupted in Hamburg. They involved

thousands of civilians fighting police, looting bakeries and shouting for bread. Famine hit Berlin as early as May 1916.[8] By October, about 1,500 public kitchens were operating across Germany, while food rationing was introduced as early as 1915. The shortages reached their climax in the winter of 1916–1917. They were infamously described as the 'Turnip Winter', as millions of Germans and Austrians were forced to adopt turnips as their main product due to the British naval blockade, poor harvest of 1916 and potato plague.[9] Among other key causes that produced the crisis were the drastic drop in food production due to the labour shortages and the lack of fertilizer.-[10] By the spring of 1917, in Vienna, a quarter of million people were queuing for food.[11]

The shortages soon spread to the occupied Eastern territories: the Ober Ost, the Imperial Government-General of Warsaw and the Austrian occupied Military Government-General, with its administrative centre in Lublin. All three, along with Romania, from the early days of occupation were key granaries for Germany and Austria-Hungary. In October 1915 the official daily ration of bread in Warsaw dropped to 160 grams, while in Germany it was 225.[12] In the second half of 1916 Warsaw was essentially blockaded from food supplies. No wonder riots broke out in the city plagued by hunger and epidemics. In 1916 strikes and hunger riots also spread to Białystok and other Polish cities.[13]

The famine in Vilnius started a few months later (in November 1916) than the food shortages in Germany's and Poland's cities and towns. And it was part of the broader humanitarian crisis in the Ober Ost that at the time included Courland, Lithuania, parts of western Belarus, and north-eastern Poland. In Vilnius, as we will see, it took the most drastic form because it was the largest city in the region flooded with high numbers of refugees. Like in Germany, by mid-December 1916, the German press in Lithuania started calling for replacing potatoes with turnips: 'At the time of war we must settle for lower quality food than earlier. The war is calling for great sacrifices in all spheres of life. If we bear this in mind, . . . it will be easier for us to prepare meals with turnips'.[14]

Causes

In Vilnius the famine began as a result of the German occupation policy in the East. The policy was built on the idea of winning the 'total war' by squeezing out all economic and human resources from the occupied areas such as the Ober Ost. The latter was a military administration established and controlled, not by the government in Berlin, but by the Army and its leaders Generals Paul Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. In essence, it was a military utopia *par excellence*: a colonial project whose key aim was to be an army's feeding ground and a source of cheap labour while imposing on the local population German *Kultur und Zivilisation*.[15] In principle, German officials treated the Ober Ost as 'a gigantic farming resort'.[16]

Overall, the Ober Ost pursued more ruthless economic policy than the Imperial Government-General of Warsaw, where central political supervision (as opposed to military) was much stronger. For example, the requisitions in the Imperial Government-General of Warsaw were partly compensated, while in the Ober Ost they were mostly taken and settled with bills that had little legal value.[17]

The feeding function of the Ober Ost was well reflected in the range of various repressive policies that the regime imposed on the local civilian population. They were able to produce spectacular results in the early phase of war. Throughout 1915–1917 the German Army drained the local economy as it requisitioned about 90,000 horses, 140,000 cattle, and 767,000 pigs.[18] Only in the first eight months of 1916 the military administration made a profit of more than seven million marks.[19] Materials removed from the Ober Ost were valued nearly five times more than those imported to it.[20] Meanwhile, the food shortages in Germany in 1916 led to ever-increasing requisitions in the Ober Ost.[21] Although the leaders of the German Army saw the Ober Ost as a granary, first of all, for the military, starting with 1916, the Army started shipping local food provisions to feed the German homeland. Thus, for example, a half of the barley harvest (3,160 tons) and two thirds of eggs (13,884 tons) were shipped from the Ober Ost to Germany.[22]

Among the most devastating policies that led to the famine were requisitions of full harvests of 1914, 1915 and 1916. The population was left only with resources for seeding and foodstuffs to feed themselves for six months. Thus, based on the German official data, in 1916–1917 the locals were left only with less than 40% of the wheat and 19% of the potatoes. In his writings Ludendorff later admitted that due to the requisitions, 'the condition of the town population was desperate'.[23] The regime was forced to introduce strict rationing, but the rations were inadequate. In July 1916 the daily ration for a person was reduced to 160 grams of grain and 500 grams of potatoes.[24] Alongside various goods requisitioned for the military purposes of the Reich (copper, animal skins, flax, fruit, rubber, bicycles, telephones, etc.), the massive requisitions of horses (there were five of them in 1915–1917) reduced their stock by 30% and also had a destructive impact on local farming.[25] The population received only symbolic compensations for requisitioned foodstuffs and cattle that were considerably below their market value. Often official receipts for the requisitioned goods turned out to be fake. Only about five percent of the requisitions were compensated. Overall, between August 1915 and July 1916, Germans exported from the Ober Ost goods for more than 15 million marks, while their local expenses were several times lower.[26] According to interwar Lithuanian economist Albinas Rimka, the requisitions made up staggering 56% of war damages to Lithuania.[27]

These drastic measures, alongside forced labour recruitment of more than 130,000 males and restrictions on the sales of land (introduced on 12 July 1916) and the population movement (civilians were allowed to travel without permits only in their estate districts), completely paralysed region's commerce and disrupted trading between cities, towns and their agricultural hinterlands. The regime banned any food imports from outside the Ober Ost, except Germany. In addition, Germans flooded civilians with various orders and decrees, intended to control every facet of their social and economic life: from a head poll tax imposed on all adult males, to various transit tolls and taxes on beer brewing, dog keeping, and cake making.[28] The population was taxed also indirectly through the imposition of state monopolies on cigarettes, liquor, beer, salt, sugar, saccharin and matches. The accumulative result of these measures was the decreasing harvests in the Ober Ost. Thus, in the winter of 1916–1917, the authorities became concerned with a disappointing harvest, falling short of exaggerated estimates put about by their experts.[29]

Based on the German census of 9 March 1916, the population of Vilnius consisted of 50% of Poles, 43% of Jews, 2.6% of Lithuanians, 1.5% of Russians, 1.4% of Belarusians and 0.7% of local Germans.[30] Initially, the German regime shared city's administration with the local Citizen Committee (established on 4 September 1915). Although Poles dominated it, delegates of Jews, Lithuanians and Belarusians also joined. However, in late January 1916, Germans closed it for its pro-Polish nationalist activities. In February 1916 the city's magistrate that initially included local representatives was turned only into an advisory institution to the German City Governor (*Stadthauptmann)*.[31] From then on Vilnius was firmly controlled by the German administration alone.

The elimination of self-government went hand-in-hand with an increase of restrictive measures on city's everyday life. In December 1916 the Governor requested the city to raise a million marks loan to be used for its upkeep. Since the residents failed to buy out the loan bonds, it was turned into a contribution, collected through increased taxes paid by city's well-to-do residents.[32] The Jews had to provide three fourths of this amount which led to their protest and the eventual arrest of their community leader Dr. Jakub Wygodzky.[33]

Since the German takeover in September 1915, most of city's factories were either evacuated to Russia or closed by Germans. As a result, from 1 December 1915 to April 1917 almost 8,000 people registered as unemployed. Since early 1916 they became a target for German forced labour recruiters. Soon the official unemployment was wiped out by the formation of forced labour battalions.[34] However, due to the shortage of workers, the authorities often organized chasing of males on the streets which led to numerous protests by local ethnic communities.

In May 1917 the Polish Committee sent a desperate memorandum to the German authorities calling for their immediate action against the famine. It plainly stated the main causes of the disaster that had befallen city's population: reduced daily food rations; ban on bringing food products from the countryside; black marketeering that spread due to price fixing which had inflated food prices, prohibition of free trade in foodstuffs, and the lack of support for local relief agencies.[35]

Famine

The early steps that set the background for the forthcoming humanitarian crisis were already made in the first few months of German occupation. On 1 December 1915 the Germans introduced bread cards (*Dauerkarte*) in Vilnius. Locals were allowed to get bread only in 67 state-controlled bakeries, while the prices of bread and flour were fixed. The daily bread ration for a person was set to 200 grams.[36] In late January 1916 there was already shortage of bread and flour in the city.[37] On 14 April, due to the shortages, the German authorities were forced to re-open supply of food from the countryside into Vilnius. However, by September 1916 the ban on food imports was reintroduced.

We can trace the course and dynamics of famine from the diaries of a few witnesses who took notes on city's life during the time. On 29 September 1916 Lithuanian journalist and writer Petras Klimas wrote in his diary: 'The life in the city got considerably worse. Still, no-one is allowed to bring any food into Vilnius . . . '.[38] In late October in his diary Polish engineer and social activist Alexander Szklennik noted that due to the shortage of

funds, with the approach of winter, city's ethnic relief societies 'were forced to reduce their activities by leaving on the street poor orphans, children and sick'.[39] A few days later he reported an incident:

> Since there is a big famine in the city, from the early morning people are queuing at those shops that have received some potatoes . . . Yesterday . . . in one of the queues a middle-class looking woman lost her mind and started ripping off her clothing; she was queuing from the early morning and was extremely poor.[40]

In mid-January 1917 the local press reported that, due to the shortage of flour, the German Governor shut down several bakeries and placed limitations on baking cookies, cakes and sweets.[41] By the end of January, Vilnius was hit with a wave of freezing weather as temperatures plummeted below minus 20 degrees of Celsius for several weeks. The authorities started distributing firewood to relief societies and put on bonfires for the freezing public all over the city.[42] On 30 January Szklennik wrote:

> Mortality has risen sharply recently, mainly due to food shortages and severe frosts. Up to 30 people die every day, mostly children and elderly. Christians are dying, Jews are dying. . . . Recently a representative of the Jewish Relief Committee reported that they are not able to burry all the dead.[43]

When the Committee asked the Governor for help, he replied that the mortality was also high in Germany and he was able to help only by sending two horses. On 7 February 1917, a city's hospital reported 74 dead in a single day, mostly Jews. The majority died from hunger and frost, though the city's authorities forbade to indicate those as official causes of death.[44] By mid-May the daily bread ration for a person was reduced to miserable 100 grams.[45] On 8 May Klimas jotted in his diary:

> People are starving to death and dying slowly. Walking down the street, one shivers from the view of pale and hungry lying on the ground all dirty. They cry and howl: children, women and old people from all sides, on every street, like in the heart of hell.[46]

In May 1917 the Polish Committee collected a data from Jewish, Lithuanian and Belarusian relief societies and reported to the German authorities that while the daily death rate in Vilnius in November and December 1916 was 13 and 25 people respectively, in January and February 1917 it rose to 20 and 24.[47] In his diary Lithuanian writer and activist Jonas Basanavičius wrote that, in March 1917, 850 people died from hunger, while in April more than 1,000 starved to death.[48]

The mortality among Vilnius's Jews was higher than among its Christian population.[49] This was caused by the severe restrictions placed on city's trade and the ban on imports from outside. Since a significant part of the Jews were small traders and artisans, while the social makeup of Christians was more diverse, the Jewish community suffered more. At the end of March 1917, the death rate among the Jews (there were 55,000 of them) reached almost 10% (97.5 dead per 1000).[50] The leadership of the Jewish community kept an extraordinary record of the dead and ill among the Jews for the years 1914–1918.[51] It indicates that the number of deaths among the Jews rose from 1,088 in 1913, to 3,649 in 1917.[52] The peak of deaths was reached in March (443 dead), April (375) and May (423) of 1917. The groups that suffered most from famine (listed as 'exhaustion') and epidemics were children and the elderly: 17% of all dead in 1917 were the elderly (61–70 years old)

and 15% were children (0–5 years old).[53] Prior to the war children's mortality rate in the city did not exceed two percent a year. Yet in April 1917 it reached more than eight percent.[54] The general mortality rate among the Vilnius Jews significantly dropped only in October 1917.[55]

In their memorandum of 21 May 1917 to the Head of the Administration of Ober Ost, Prince Isenburg-Birstein, representatives of city's relief agencies pointed out the disastrous situation in feeding Vilnius' population. Public canteens were able to produce only 35,000 daily rations of soup for 65,000 people (almost half of the city's residents!) Meanwhile, all others were entitled to receive only their daily 100 grams of bread (230 calories).[56] By 1916 more than a half of the Jewish population (32,000) were dependent on charity for mere subsistence.[57] The humanitarian situation of Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and Belarusians was barely better as each were forced to rely on their own relief agencies.[58]

Epidemic

In early July 1917, in his war diary, Polish historian Wladyslaw Wielhorski noted that 'Germans are reluctant to allow people out of the city, even though it is ravished by famine. Vilnius is taken over by spotted typhus. The mortality is very high due to hunger and disease'.[59] In mid-May Szklennik wrote that the situation became so serious that the poor were no longer able to afford any coffins for their dead closest:

> A horse carriage is riding around the city and picking up corpses, our workers are throwing them into the carriage, of course, without any coffins. . . . Then the corpses from all over the city are taken straight to the cemetery.[60]

The relatives were not allowed to escort them to prevent the spread of typhus.

In early May 1917 the German Governor, due to the outbreak of typhus, ordered to close down all city's schools (including Jewish *kheders*).[61] The closure continued for over six months and prompted the rumours that Germans were about to ship city's children to Germany. Yet typhus started in Vilnius much earlier: by mid-summer 1917 it simply reached its peak. The observers noted its first traces as early as February 1916.[62]

By the end of 1916 the city authorities decided to relief pressure on the dangerous humanitarian situation by allowing war refugees to return to their native towns and villages. The majority of 22,000 Jewish refugees were permitted to return to their homes, while many of 10,000 Christian refugees were also allowed to leave. However, the administration used their departure as a motive to further reduce the daily food ration and the number of feeding places for city's population. Three consecutive censuses that were carried during 1916 were partly held to control the amount of mouths to be fed in Vilnius.[63] In the summer of 1917 the Polish and Lithuanian relief societies also started to relocate Polish and Lithuanian children from their relief shelters in Vilnius to the countryside to reduce their exposure to famine and epidemic.[64] Those lucky residents like Basanavičius, who occasionally were allowed to leave the city for the country, felt greatly relieved.[65]

On 14 March 1916 German soldiers received an official warning of typhus and were ordered to limit their contacts with civilians in the city. The authorities treated the danger of epidemic much more seriously than that of famine: the army did not starve, while the

typhus could thin out its ranks. As the main causes of epidemic, they considered not the famine, but poor hygiene among the locals, lice infestations and the lack of delousing facilities.[66] If in 1917 Vilnius had only four delousing stations, by March 1918 their number increased to nine. The German regime also created a special anti-epidemic unit (*Seuchentruppe*) with 52 paramedics to deal with the epidemic. In early 1918 Vilnius had 48 doctors, six hospitals and two quarantines (with 800 places).[67] Based on one estimate, during 1915–1918, 138,000 local residents (almost the entire city population!) were forced to visit the delousing stations.[68]

Despite these efforts, typhus took a heavy toll among Vilnius residents. Between January and September 1917, more than 3,240 caught typhus. During the peak of epidemic in July and August 1917, of 1,334 infected 212 died (almost 16%).[69] The famine led not only to the epidemic of typhus, but also to other diseases, especially tuberculosis and dysentery. Throughout 1916–1917 the Jewish Committee recorded more than 700 cases of tuberculosis and 140 cases of dysentery among Jews in the city.[70] In his classical history of Vilnius' Jews, Israel Cohen wrote that at the time 'Vilna became a city of the dead, and those who still moved around felt that they were mere ghosts'.[71]

Responses

Responses of city's residents to the humanitarian crisis varied from desperate measures designed to circumvent the exploitative German policies and adoption of various survival strategies to organized political activities and open protests.

One of the major consequences of food shortages and price fixing became the emergence of the massive black market and contraband in foodstuffs. They were a spontaneous, yet often well-organized responses of civilians backed into a corner by the exploitative regime. When the poor were dying from hunger and disease, those still with means were able to afford food at exorbitant black-market prices. From pre-war levels they rose by several times as a result of shortage of provisions and price fixing, but also of the devaluation of Russian roubles.

On 15 January 1917 Szklennik wrote:

> Yesterday five miles from Vilnius . . . the police arrested about 30 persons. They looked poor, ragged, each with a bundle on their shoulders. They were food traffickers. Yet no prohibitions and fines are going to stop them, because hunger and poverty are stronger than Germans.[72]

Another witness reported that, on 10 January 1917, the authorities apprehended several train carriages of flour and meat, destined to Vilnius. They disclosed an entire organization of Jewish speculators.[73] He wrote, 'speculators use all means of trafficking foodstuffs: they take them with hospital patients, within carriages of farming equipment, etc. . . . They even use singing funeral processions to traffic food within coffins'.[74] By mid-1916 the city was flooded with fake bread cards, while those of the already dead and departed people became especially valued. This forced the regime to issue them only to passport holders.[75] On 8 January 1917 Catholic priest Pranas Bieliauskas wrote in his diary, 'all roads to Vilnius are full of guards. Only occasionally one can squeeze through them with products into the city. People who carry them for 12 miles are stopped and everything is

taken from them. Germans are cursed'.[76] Yet by August every day crowds of women and children were leaving the city without any permits for food foraging in the countryside. 'It is a spontaneous movement inspired by hunger, that is why no German cordons and laws can stop it', Szklennik concluded in his diary.[77]

Since 1915 Vilnius became a behind-a-frontline city where German military units regrouped and rested from the battle action on the Eastern Front. The presence of thousands of idle troops looking for peace of the civilian life and entertainment turned the city into a massive beer hall as local shops and restaurants were forced to open pubs (*Bierhalle*) and teahouses (*Teehaus*).[78] In mid-June 1917 Szklennik described 'the decline of morals' in Vilnius:

> The huge army, hundreds of thousands of healthy men in their prime . . . once they get into a big city to rest, are unable to control their sexual instincts. . . . they are good-looking, they have jobs, money and are in control here. Therefore, they are very popular among women: on the streets they can be seen mostly in the company of young Jewish girls because they can easily speak to each other. Yet it is a common knowledge that most often the Polish women are victims of these sexual relations, because they are less down-to-earth. Among other things, hunger and poverty are pushing them onto this road.[79]

The city's administration soon faced a major problem of containing the spread of venereal diseases among the troops. By some military estimates more than half of local prostitutes were infected.[80] The military tried to limit the contact of troops with the civilians, to register all prostitutes, to provide them with at least minimal medical care and to keep official brothels for troops.[81] Ober Ost's censors even tried to eliminate 'dirty literature' which might inflame soldiers.[82] Meanwhile, religious Christian and Jewish authorities attempted to prevent the spread of prostitution through their sermons in city's churches and synagogues.[83] Yet none of these responses were able to stop it as hunger, desperation and poverty forced hundreds of women into the streets. While describing the problem of prostitution and the spread of unwanted pregnancies, on 14 June 1917, Szklennik jotted in his diary: 'today a very good student from Grade 8, Miss T. from a poor family jumped into the Vilija river from the Žvėrynas bridge; her body is not found yet'.

The only institutions that provided effective help for population caught in the grip of the humanitarian crisis were relief agencies of the city's different ethnic groups. Since the Ober Ost regime did not care establishing its own relief agencies, the humanitarian field was taken by various relief societies run by local ethnic communities. Most of them emerged still under the Russian rule, but they expanded their structures, humanitarian activities, memberships and networks of support under the German occupation during 1915–1918.

The Lithuanian War Relief Association (LWRA, *Lietuvių draugija nukentėjusiems dėl karo šelpti*) emerged in Vilnius as early as on 4 December 1914. It brought together two major political wings of Lithuanians: nationalists-clericals and socialists. Leftists pulled out from the relief effort dominated by the conservatives (nationalists and clericals), and in July 1915 they formed their own Lithuanian Society for War Relief, Agronomic and Legal Aid (*Lietuvių draugija nukentėjusiems nuo karo gyventojams teisių ir agronomijos pagalbai teikti*). Both societies competed with each other for limited resources. By mid-September 1915, the LWRA in Vilnius was taking care of more than 2,600 refugees

(mostly Lithuanians) and ran a number of orphanages and hostels.[84] In 1916 in the Ober Ost its network expanded to 148 branches, while the Agronomic Society was much smaller.[85] In 1916, in Vilnius, the LWRA took care of more than 800 people, while the Agronomical Society of 140.[86] The LWRA financed itself through numerous charity events, donations from the Lithuanian diaspora in the US and its own city gardens that extended for 33 hectares.[87]

Parallel relief agencies were also established among Poles, Jews, and Belarusians. In April 1915 Belarusians were allowed to open their relief society in Vilnius that soon ran branches in Polotsk, Minsk, Disna, Druskininkai, and elsewhere.[88] From October 1914 in Vilnius there was already a Jewish Relief Committee with 24 members, though officially it was recognized only in April 1915 as the Jewish Society for the Aid of War Victims (*Evreiskoe obshestvo po okazaniu pomoshchi postradavshim ot voiny*).[89] In 1916 it was reformed into the Central Jewish Relief Committee that administered several Jewish relief agencies in Vilnius. By 1916 they provided relief to more than half of the Jewish population.[90] The largest ethnic community in the city, the Poles also ran a dozen of various relief agencies, coordinated by the Polish Committee, established in 1916. They provided relief to almost 30,000 local Poles, about a third of the whole Polish community in Vilnius.[91] These estimates suggest that more than half of Vilnius population heavily relied on the relief provided by these ethnic societies.

Initially, the humanitarian crisis induced these relief agencies to cooperate. Since the already-mentioned telegram of 12 May 1917 to the Germany's Chancellor did not produce a response, Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian and Belarusian relief societies continued working together trying to put more pressure on the regime. On 21 May they repeated their request for help to the authorities of Ober Ost, yet to no avail again.[92]

By early June the worsening famine and epidemic forced the hungry residents into the streets. On 7 June 1917, an angry crowd of about 1,000 (mostly women) gathered at the Lukiškės Square shouting 'Gib Brot!', and the city police had to disperse it by force.[93] Apparently, the bread riot made more impression on the authorities than the repeated requests of help from the relief societies. On 28 June 1917 Klimas noted that 'they [Germans] increased the bread ration again . . . '.[94]

Yet this humanitarian cooperation was short-lived as gradually these ethnic relief societies became hotbeds of nationalist agitation and adjuncts to various nationalist political parties. Thus, on 26 May 1917, all major Polish political streams (including nationalists, regionalists and socialists) issued a joint 'Political Declaration of the Polish Society in Lithuania' and declared their objective to join Lithuania to Poland.[95] Meanwhile, on 10 June 1916, the leadership of the Lithuanian War Relief Association (LWRA) affirmed the Chief of the German Army in the East that Lithuanians were never going to give up Vilnius and that their political aims were incompatible with those of Poles.[96] In April 1917 the German regime changed its policy vis-à-vis the Regency Kingdom of Poland, established in late 1916, and decided to create Courland and Lithuania as German-dominated satellites.[97] Eventually this led to the political deal with the Lithuanian leaders of the LWRA (A. Smetona, J. Basanavičius, A. Vileišis and others), the creation of the Lithuanian Council (Taryba) in September 1917 and the emergence of an independent Lithuania in February 1918. As many as eight members of the LWRA entered the *Taryba*. Thus, for political reasons, the LWRA refused to cooperate with Polish, Jewish, Belarusian and the left-wing Lithuanian Agricultural Society when they

all sent the joint telegram to the Reich Chancellor. 'Neither the Belarusian nation, nor its leaders are suitable partners for us [Lithuanians]', Klimas wrote in his diary in mid-1917 referring to their aim to declare Vilnius as the future capital of an independent Belarus.[98] In December 1917 Belarusians formed their own Vilnius Rada that aimed to establish an independent Belarusian state. Thus, by mid-1917 Vilnius became a battleground for these competing nationalist visions. And those visions played out in the organizational frameworks of the ethnic relief societies.

In his study of the Jewish community in Vilnius during the Great War, Andrew Koss argued that war transformed it by bringing forward 'a new generation of modernizing, nationalist intellectuals and activists' who replaced old social communal and largely religious structures. These new secular leaders (and most of them such as J. Wygodzky, S. Rosenbaum, C. Shabad and others worked closely with the Central Jewish Relief Committee) 'were nonetheless able to achieve de facto Jewish autonomy under German rule'. Yet this change also brought a fierce struggle between various Jewish political parties and ideologies, the main conflict running between the nationalist Zionists and socialists Bundists. Like other ethnic groups, Vilnius Jews also sought different forms of political autonomy.[99]

Meanwhile, the food shortages that hit Vilnius in 1917 turned the public canteens and hostels of these ethnic relief agencies not only into sites of critically needed humanitarian aid, but also into tools of social and political control. Feeding, schooling, and housing became instruments of power used to enforce the political agendas of those in charge of the relief and educational efforts. Andrea Griffante showed how these relief and educational associations essentially tried 'to create relations of dependence between themselves and the population groups they were trying to help' by building networks of socio-political and national loyalty among the population.[100] Despite the humanitarian crisis, the war years saw an explosion of nationalist agitation in the city as Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and Belarusians all started opening their primary schools, gymnasiums, cultural clubs, orphanages, shelters, hostels and newspapers. Lithuanian priest Pranas Bieliauskas, one of the most active members of LWRA, joyfully noted in his diary in 1915: though only seven children out of 46 could speak Lithuanian on their arrival to an LWRA hostel in Vilnius, within two months almost everyone had become fluent in it.[101]

Conclusions

On 12 August 1917, Szklennik noted in his diary: 'There is a good harvest of potatoes in the whole country. Farmers are ready to hide from Germans as many goods as possible: now they are drying up grain and digging it under the ground. And everyone does it, because people have learned the lesson'.[102] By the early fall of 1917, Vilnius saw a considerable decline in the death rate among its civilian population.[103] Yet the destruction brought by the German war policies on Lithuania's economy have been felt for a long time. During 1918–1920 the city would face hunger and epidemics several times again due to Bolshevik incursions into Lithuania and the continuous collapse of local commercial networks.[104]

In his classical study on the Ober Ost, Vejas Liulevicius claimed that, by the early 1917, the German regime faced intersecting crises of the military state, the subject populations, and the German Army.[105] This crisis and the humanitarian disaster

that struck Vilnius in 1916–1917 should be seen in the broader context of the food shortages and bread riots that started in Germany and Austria-Hungary several months earlier. The crisis of Germany's home front that occurred as a result of its stalling military effort also affected the fragile economy of the Ober Ost. Since the latter was created as essentially a granary and feeding ground for the German army, the food shortages in Germany also led to the increasing requisitions in the Ober Ost. By the end of 1916 the German policy of draining the Ober Ost of its resources produced famine in Vilnius as the city became isolated from its hinterland, cut off from any food imports and its local economy destroyed. The German regime was unable to deal with the famine effectively, and the severe winter of 1916–1917 turned Vilnius into a site of typhus epidemic. As a result, between November 1916 and September 1917 about 7,000 people (5% of city's population) died from hunger and disease.

In her important study on wartime Vienna, Maureen Healey argued that, the heterogenous population of Vienna, under the material stress of war, hunger and violence, experienced 'communal disintegration' and 'a falling apart'.[106] A similar process of social fragmentation took place also in wartime Vilnius whose multi-ethnic population became divided as a result of the ruthless economic policy of the German occupation regime.

The responses of city's residents varied from adopting desperate survival strategies, attempts to circumvent the oppressive restrictions by developing a black-market economy to open protests and the creation of their own relief networks. Most importantly, the crisis destroyed political credibility of the occupation regime in the eyes of the city's population. One of the leaders of the Lithuanian national movement Jonas Basanavičius wrote in July 1917, 'the mood of people has fallen to its lowest due to the German policy. Everyone, from the young to the old, are waiting for the time when they will be able to get rid of the German rule'.[107] Its oppressive policy and failure to deal with famine and epidemic forced them to look for political alternatives.

The numerous relief societies that have emerged among Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and Belarusians as a result of the exploitative German policy grew and extended their influence among the city's residents during the humanitarian crisis. Eventually they also helped to set the stage for nationalist and revolutionary political agendas of city's ethnic groups. The relief structures became early vehicles for their political aspirations and provided an early organizational setup for their political activities.

At the same time, the humanitarian crisis also set the background for ensuing fragmentation of nationalist politics and the entrenchment of ethnic fault lines among city's ethnic groups.[108] In this sense, it can be viewed as a precursor of the post-WWI conflict that would sweep the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderland in 1918–1920. After the collapse of the Ober Ost, Vilnius became a sought-after prize by its ethnic communities as the nationalist rivalry for the city soon was joined by the invading Red Army. Thus, the destruction of normalcy of the civilian life in the city during the crisis precipitated the postwar conflict as nationalist relief and party politics soon became replaced by the emergence of (para)military formations among local ethnic groups.

Notes

1. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 481–482; *Litwa za rządom ks. Isenburga*, 24.
2. Basanavičius, *Mano gyvenimo kronika ir nervų ligos istorija, 1852–1922 m*., 120. This overall estimate is also confirmed by the data provided by the Polish Committee for the period November 1916 – March 1917. The Committee also noted the higher estimate of the total of 8,280 victims for the period of October 1915 – May 1917. See, *Litwa za rządom ks. Isenburga*, 1–2.
3. *Verwaltungsbericht der Deutschen verwaltung Litauen*, 31 September 1917, cited in Urbšienė, 'Sveikatos priežiūra vokiečių okupuotoje Lietuvoje Didžiojo karo metu,' 93.
4. For some recent studies on this process in the region see Gerwarth and Horne, eds. *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence after the Great War, 1917–1923*; Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland*; Balkelis, *War, Revolution and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923*; Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992*.
5. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*; Cohen, *Vilna*; Koss, *World War I and the Remaking of Jewish Vilna, 1914–1918*; Urbšienė, 'Sveikatos priežiūra vokiečių okupuotoje Lietuvoje Didžiojo karo metu;' Jurginis, *Vilniaus miesto istorija: nuo seniausių laikų iki Spalio revoliucijos*; Čepėnas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija*, vol. 2; Griffante, *Children, Poverty and Nationalism in Lithuania, 1900–1940*; Laučkaitė, *Vilniaus dailė Didžiojo karo metais*; Gimžauskas, 'Institutions for the Administration of Vilnius at the Beginning of the German Occupation During the First World War.'
6. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*; Bieliauskas, *Vilniaus dienoraštis 1915–1919*.
7. The earlier published diaries and memoirs include those of Petras Klimas, Feliksas Bugailiškis, Wladyslaw Wielhorski, Czesław Jankowski, Michal Brensztein and Jonas Basanavičius. Beside official German newspapers *Zeitung der X. Armee* and *Wilnaer Zeitung*, in Vilnius there were some local newspapers, tightly controlled by military censorship: Belarusian *Homan* (from February 1916), Polish *Dziennik Wilenski* (from February 1916), Jewish *Letzte Najes* (from January 1916) and Lithuanian *Dabartis* (from September 1915).
8. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 207–208.
9. On the German food crisis see, Ritschl, A. 'The Pity of Peace: Germany's Economy at War, 1914–1918 and Beyond;' Balderston, T. 'Industrial Mobilization and War Economies.'
10. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 225–226.
11. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 209.
12. Kaufman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*, 56.
13. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 69.
14. Anon. *Dabartis* (16 December 1916): 4.
15. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*; Roshwald; Balkelis.
16. See note 13 above, 69.
17. Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe Poland and the Baltics, 1915–1929*, 159, 257.
18. Stražas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 29–30; Čepėnas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija*, vol 2, 91.
19. Čepėnas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija*, vol. 2, 92.
20. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 438.
21. See note 13 above, 75.
22. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 440–442; Stražas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 47.
23. Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe during World War One: from Foreign Domination to National Independence*, vol. 1, 158.
24. Urbšienė, *Vokiečių okupacijos ūkis Lietuvoje*, 95–98.
25. Urbšienė, *Vokiečių okupacijos ūkis Lietuvoje*, 100.
26. Urbšienė, *Vokiečių okupacijos ūkis Lietuvoje* 141.

27. Rimka, 'Lietuvos karo nuostoliai,' 318. The estimate did not include the Vilnius region.
28. Žiugžda, ed. *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai*, vol. 3, 53.
29. See note 13 above , 181.
30. Brensztejn, *Spisy ludności m. Wilna za okupacji niemieckiej od d. 1 listopada 1915 r*., 24.
31. Gimžauskas, 'Institutions for the Administration of Vilnius at the Beginning of the German Occupation During the First World War,'168.
32. Anon. *Dabartis* (30 December 1916): 4.
33. Cohen, *Vilna*, 367–368.
34. Jurginis, *Vilniaus miesto istorija: nuo seniausių laikų iki Spalio revoliucijos*, 378.
35. *Litwa za rządom ks. Isenburga*, 1–23.
36. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 47.
37. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 77.
38. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 127.
39. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 74.
40. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 84.
41. Anon. *Dabartis* (24 January 1917): 3.
42. Anon. *Dabartis* (14 February 191): 3.
43. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 293.
44. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 305–306.
45. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 157.
46. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 149.
47. *Litwa za rządom ks. Isenburga*, 2.
48. Basanavičius, *Mano gyvenimo kronika ir nervų ligos istorija, 1852–1922 m*., 120.
49. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 306; Cohen, *Vilna*, 363.
50. Cohen, *Vilna*, 369.
51. Reisen, ed. *Pinkos*.
52. Reisen, ed. *Pinkos*, 136.
53. Reisen, ed. *Pinkos*, 159–160.
54. Griffante, *Children, Poverty and Nationalism in Lithuania, 1900–1940*, 44.
55. Reisen, ed. *Pinkos*, 196.
56. *Litwa za rządom ks. Isenburga*, 27–28.
57. Cohen, *Vilna*, 363.
58. Often the recipients of relief preferred those agencies that gave better food rations ignoring their ethnic character.
59. Wielhorski, *Dienoraštis, 1915–1917*, 290.
60. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 487.
61. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 470.
62. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 83.
63. Cohen, *Vilna*, 362–363; Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe during World War One: from Foreign Domination to National Independence*, vol. 1, 160–161.
64. See note 54 above , 86.
65. Basanavičius, *Mano gyvenimo kronika*, 120, 122.
66. Urbšienė, 'Sveikatos priežiūra vokiečių okupuotoje Lietuvoje Didžiojo karo metu,' 87, 91, 93.
67. *Verwaltungsbericht der Deutschen verwaltung Litauen*, 31 March 1918. For the Germany's anti-typhus measures during the First World War and the connection with the Nazi gas chambers see Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890–1945.*
68. Urbšienė, 'Sveikatos priežiūra vokiečių okupuotoje Lietuvoje Didžiojo karo metu,' 93.
69. These estimates are based on the official data provided in *Verwaltungsbericht der Deutschen verwaltung Litauen* (31 September 1917). Cited in Urbšienė, 'Sveikatos priežiūra vokiečių okupuotoje Lietuvoje Didžiojo karo metu,' 92–93.
70. Reisen, ed. *Pinkos*, 174.
71. Cohen, *Vilna*, 368.
72. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 263.

73. Bugailiškis, 'Iš I-ojo pasaulinio karo užrašų: 1915–1918 m. vokiečių okupacijos kronika,' 41.
74. Ibid. 51.
75. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 129.
76. Bieliauskas, *Vilniaus dienoraštis 1915–1919*, 66.
77. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 598.
78. Laučkaitė, *Vilniaus dailė Didžiojo karo metais*, 57.
79. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 517.
80. See note 13 above , 80.
81. Ibid., 80.
82. Ibid., 133.
83. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 517.
84. See note 54 above , 46.
85. Griffante, 'Making the Nation,' 26.
86. *1917 metams Lietuvos kalendorius*, 30, 33.
87. 'Mūsų draugijos', *Lietuvos aidas* (6 September 1917): 4.
88. Laurinavičius, ed., *Lietuvos istorija*, vol. 10, part 1, 26.
89. Zlatina, *Problema evreiskogo bezhenstva v Rosii*, 90.
90. Cohen, *Vilna*, 363.
91. See note 78 above , 58.
92. *Litwa za rządów ks. Isenburga*, 25.
93. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 173; Bieliauskas, *Vilniaus dienoraštis 1915–1919*, 85.
94. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 176.
95. *Litwa za rządów ks. Isenburga*, 4–9.
96. 'Lietuvių atstovų memorialas, 10 June 1916', in Gimžauskas, ed. *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, 97–98.
97. 'Vokietijos Reichskanclerio ir vokiečių Vyriausiosios kariuomenės vadovybės pasitarimo Kroicnache protokolo fragmentas, 23 April 1917,' in Gimžauskas, ed. *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje*, 123.
98. Klimas, *Dienoraštis*, 157.
99. Koss, *World War I and the Remaking of Jewish Vilna, 1914–1918*, III–IV.
100. Griffante, 'Making the Nation,' 21.
101. See note 76 above , 10.
102. Szklennik, *Dienoraštis 1915–1918*, vol. 2, 598.
103. Reisen, ed. *Pinkos*, 196.
104. For the consequences of the economic collapse in the region see, Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe Poland and the Baltics, 1915–1929*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
105. See note 13 above , 195.
106. Healey, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, 3–4.
107. Basanavičius, *Iš lietuvių gyvenimo 1915–1917 metais po vokiečių jungu*, 19.
108. Weeks, *Vilnius Between Nations, 1795–2000*, 108–111.

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