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ARTICLE

The Logic of Violence in the Polish-Lithuanian Conflict, 1920–1923

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Abstract
The article is devoted to violence that took place in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland after the Great War. Using the theoretical insights of Stathis Kalyvas (2006), the author explores violent actors, types, and the dynamics of violence in the conflict over the neutral zone between Poland and Lithuania between 1920 and 1923. The focus is on the experiences of civilians and the social impact of violence on the formation of their national identities. The author suggests that violent ways of nation making forced the local populace to adopt national identities to ensure their security, but the process of forced nationalization was limited and may have resulted in the emergence of indifference among certain groups of the population.

Keywords: ethnic conflict; nationalism; paramilitarism; violence

Introduction

In her recent article in *Nationalities Papers*, Janine Holc (2018) drew attention to the process by which one local community or social group came to view itself as different from another in the contested and multiethnic Polish-Lithuanian borderland. She argued that this process "was not a freely chosen, unhindered path." Like in many other Central and Eastern European borderlands, identities such as Lithuanian or Polish were "either imposed by state authorities or carved out as acts of resistance against those authorities" (Holc 2018, 656). And although specialists of East-Central Europe are well aware of the scale and intensity of the violence that exploded in the region after the Great War (Gerwarth and Horne 2012; Prusin 2010; Holquist 2003; Böhler 2015), violence itself is rarely seen as a nation-making tool with regard to the creation of new identities (for a few exceptions see Hutchinson 2017; Fearon and Laitin 2000; Brubaker and Laitin 1998). The academic discourse on nation making is dominated by discussions on ethnicity, language, culture, religion, citizenship, shared historical memory, and political and economic modernization, but hardly on violence.

The capacity of intellectual elites and state authorities to create national identities is unquestionable. Yet in her article on national indifference, Tara Zahra (2010) noted that recently historians of regionalism, localism, and borderlands in East-Central Europe have rediscovered populations and individuals who were not so easily swallowed up by the forces of nationalization. Among many, she noted the Wasserpolen and Masures in Silesia, the Lemkos of the Carpathians, the Hultschiners of Moravian Silesia, Transylvania's Szeklers, Bohemia's Budweisers, and the Tutejszie in the borderland of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Zahra 2010, 96).

What is striking is that many of these "indifferent communities" emerged in the borderlands that in the first decades of the 20th century witnessed exceptionally high levels of violence: interstate wars, paramilitary struggles, and ethnic strife. Post-World War I Silesia and the Polish-Lithuanian

borderland were typical epicenters of such violence, where civilians became both victims and perpetrators of state-induced attempts to impose national identities.

Thus, here I problematize the relationship between violence and nation-making in the peripheral regions where states' capacity to impose a monopoly of violence was limited. I will focus on a typical case of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, but similar research may be extended to other disputed borderlands, such as Silesia, Galicia, Pomerania, the Klaipėda (Memel) region, and others where violent national projects encountered population groups that were not easily nationalized.

The Polish-Lithuanian conflict initially emerged as a cultural battle between the Polish and Lithuanian national movements in the late 19th century (Balkelis 2009). However, after World War I, it turned into an interstate war between the newly created nation-states over Vilnius. The war lasted until November 29, 1920, when both sides signed a truce under the mediation of the League of Nations (LN). The battle over Vilnius remained one of the most permanent fixtures of international politics of interwar East-Central Europe (on the Polish perspective, see Łossowski 1996; on the Lithuanian one, see Senn 1966). If the regular war between the two states ended with the truce in 1920, the irregular, or so-called dirty war, continued until 1923, when on February 3 the LN abolished the so-called neutral zone between Poland and Lithuania and on March 14 turned it into an administrative border. The LN created the neutral zone to prevent the continuation of direct contact between the Polish and Lithuanian troops with the hope that a final border agreement could be reached later (Łossowski 2002, 27). Thus, in November 1920, both sides agreed to pull their armies six kilometers back from the existing frontline. In this way a zone was created that did not belong to either side. Eventually, it also included the so-called demilitarized zone in the Suwalki area (north of Grodno) that followed the demarcation line established on December 8, 1919 (Łach and Melnik 2005, 194). The neutral zone was about 400 kilometers long, 12 kilometers wide, and 4,000 square kilometers, and it contained roughly 30,000 people of various ethnicities.

However, the area immediately became an epicenter of irregular conflict between Poles and Lithuanians with high levels of ethnic strife that involved local civilians. Numerous paramilitaries were mobilized locally and sent by the national governments of Poland and Lithuania. The dirty nature of this conflict was evident in the widespread use of terror by both sides, which included summary executions, mutilations, torture, kidnappings, population displacement, and hostage and ransom taking, as well as pillaging, requisitions, robberies, pogroms, and destruction of private property.

My aim here is to explore the logic of violence in the neutral zone by using the theoretical insights of Stathis Kalyvas from his well-known study *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006). One of the key suggestions made by Kalyvas was that "violence should be analytically decoupled from war, echoing the well-established distinction between *jus ad bellum* (lawful initiation of war) and *jus in bello* (lawful conduct of war)" (Kalyvas 2006, 20). Thus, violence itself may have its own logic and constitutive impact not only on the outcomes of conflicts but also on the behavior and identities of belligerents and civilian populations. Hence, I will focus on whether the violence can be seen as a nation-making tool used in disputed areas like the Polish-Lithuanian neutral zone. I will analyze its forms, dynamics and functions, its perpetrators, and responses of victims to understand the impact it had on the formation of national identities in the region.

My argument is that violence, effectively, became a nation-making instrument that forced the local people into two hostile networks of self-support (even those who did not have clearly cut national identities). Thus, the visible markers of identity turned the civilians into expected targets, and they were forced to coalesce around their respective groups because of security considerations. However, the escalation of violence from selective to indiscriminate compelled both national governments and the LN to contain it. This concern eventually became one of the key motives for the abolishment of the neutral zone.[1] In this case, as in other similar cases, violence may be considered as much a critical community building element as ethnicity, religion, and language, since national identities became the outcomes of violent power relations. However, there were some

limits to this violent nation-making in the region, since some groups of the population did not adopt clearly defined national identities.

Key sources for this article were Polish and Lithuanian accounts of atrocities, including memoirs of paramilitary fighters and local press reports, as well as archival documents of Polish and Lithuanian civilian and military institutions, the League of Nations, and various paramilitary organizations. Obviously, the conflict in the neutral zone drew the considerable attention of mostly Lithuanian and Polish historians, whose studies were highly useful while writing this article (Rezmer 2006, Łach 2010, Łossowski 2002; Łach and Melnik 2005; Rukša 1982; Lesčius 2004, 2007; Garšva and Grumadienė 1993; Gudaitis 2004). However, the majority of them focus on its diplomatic or military aspects, hardly on the experiences of civilians. Thus, my intention here is to explore the social impact of violence on the local population.

A Case of a Civil War?

The question of whether the conflict in the neutral zone may be considered a civil war is key for understanding the experiences of civilians and the nature of the violence that occurred. Like most other specialists, Kalyvas considers a civil war to be "an armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities" (2006, 5). Formally speaking, it was not a civil war because the neutral zone did not have a common authority, and it was not a recognized sovereign entity. The zone was rather a temporary solution to appease the interstate conflict. In essence, it was a no-man's-land where the central authorities of Poland and Lithuania had limited power (Łach 2010; Rezmer 2006).

However, the conflict had several key features that allow us to study it as a civil war. First of all, nonconventional warfare was common, like in many other civil wars. The absence of regular armies and central authorities created a power vacuum that was filled in by various paramilitary formations. Hence it was a paramilitary conflict fought by loosely organized groups of mostly local men. Secondly, the violence perpetrated by these formations was common to many civil wars: it was highly irregular, often indiscriminate and non-regulated by any rules of conventional wars. Unsurprisingly, the civilian population experienced the conflict as civil war due to its high levels of terror, requisitions, robberies, and physical displacement. Third, the neutral zone's residents were forced to accept a state border in the region, which historically had never been divided by any states. Fourth, as a result of the conflict, several ethnic groups that had been living in peace for many years were split into two hostile communities (Poles versus Lithuanians), while others (Jews, Belarusians, and those who did not have clearly defined national identities) were forced to choose their sides. Finally, the zone displayed fragmented sovereignty common to civil wars. It was fragmented because two political actors exercised limited sovereignty over the same part of the territory.

Ethnic and Social Profiles of the Region: Preexisting Cleavages

Before the Great War most of the territory that would constitute the neutral zone belonged to the Vilna and Suvalki provinces of the Russian empire. Between 1915 and 1918 the region was part of the Ober Ost, a military administration controlled by the German army. Whereas from the 1860s onward the Russian authorities pursued the policy of Russification toward the non-Russian population of the borderland, the Germans tried to divide it into separate national groups without allowing any of them to dominate (Staliūnas 2007; Matthaus 1998; Liulevicius 2000).

Since the late early modern period, the region was highly multiethnic. Most of the neutral zone was situated in the former Trakai (Трокский), Vilnius (Виленский), and Švenčionys (Швенчанский) districts of the Vilna province. According to the Russian census of 1897, there were 1.1, 2.1, and 4.6 percent Lithuanians in each of them respectively. Poles formed 31.4, 33.6, and 20.6 percent; Belarusians formed 8.1, 3.9, and 5.8 percent; and Jews formed 25.4, 44, and 52.3

percent (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 92–94). By 1914 the majority of the Slavic speakers lived in a salient around the city of Vilnius that in the northeast and southwest was surrounded by the lands inhabited mostly by Lithuanians. In addition, there were quite a few places where all four ethnic groups lived in ethnically mixed areas (Rozwadowski 1930).

The social profile of the region had more clear-cut divisions than the ethnic one. In the Vilna province, like in the rest of the Lithuanian provinces, the majority of the population (75 percent) were peasants (Первая всеобщая перепись 1904, 5). Of those peasants, about 8 percent were landless, while three quarters of the peasant farmers were smallholders (Tyla 1968, 39). Despite tsarist repressions that followed the Polish uprisings (1831 and 1863), in 1905 the Polish speaking nobility constituted less than 10 percent of population but owned 33 percent of land in the Vilna province (Gudavičius 2004, 241).

Due to its diverse ethnic structure, sharp social divisions, and relatively backward economic conditions, the population of the Vilnius region displayed a complex palimpsest of ethnic identities. Here nationalization was slower than in the Kovno province, but it accelerated during the period of wars between 1914 and 1921. Yet, as many observers have noted, the region was notable for a large group of residents who did not have clearly articulated national identities or possessed only a vague notion of their nationality. Often it was almost impossible to distinguish between a Pole and a Lithuanian in the borderland because both were Catholic. A considerable part of the peasant population called themselves Tutejszie (*tuteišiai* in Lithuanian, meaning locals) and spoke *po prostu* (simple language) (Staliūnas 2015; Merkys 2006; Garšva and Grumadienė 1993).

Kalyvas claims that "local cleavages may be preexisting as opposed to war-induced. In the first case, the war activates existing fault lines, while in the second one, it creates new ones" (2006, 374). To what extent could the preexisting social and ethnic cleavages have contributed to the explosion of violence in the neutral zone in 1920–1923? In the area there is some evidence that the prewar Polish-Lithuanian conflict had ethnic and social dimensions. Thus, starting from the late 1880s there were numerous cases of collective violence (mostly physical fist fights) between Polish and Lithuanian peasants over the use of their respective languages during religious services in Catholic churches in the Suvalki and Vilna provinces. Those conflicts occurred in places such as Lazdijai, Veisiejai, Simnas, Liudvinavas, Eišiškės, Butrimonys, and elsewhere (Staliūnas 2015, 242–245). Yet due to their episodic nature and cultural origins, they can hardly be compared to the wave of violence that swept the borderland later. The ethnic and social tensions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries helped to define the contours of the two competing nationalist projects. However, it was the Great War, the collapse of all forms of state governance, revolution, and postwar conflicts that produced new cleavages which may explain the high levels of ethnic and social strife that occurred in the neutral zone.

Agents of Violence

When in November 1920 Poland and Lithuania agreed to remove their regular troops and create the neutral zone, local paramilitary militias filled in the power vacuum. Lithuanians joined the Šauliai (Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga [Lithuanian Riflemen Union]), while Poles created their own Milicja Ludowa Pasa Neutralniego (People's Militia of the Neutral Zone; PMNZ). In essence, the zone was divided into two sectors: the PMNZ controlled the eastern part, while the Lithuanian militiamen controlled the western part (Lesčius 2007, 192; Łach and Melnik 2005, 194). Both sides labelled each other partisans, trying to ascribe irregular and illegitimate status to their opponent. Despite their claims that they were local, both paramilitary formations were closely related to the state structures and policies of Poland and Lithuania.

The Šauliai were formed by several mid-ranking Lithuanian state clerks as a volunteer organization in Kaunas in the summer of 1919 amid the Bolshevik assault on Lithuania. Their ranks increased to several thousand during Lithuania's wars of independence (1918–1920). They were used mostly as an auxiliary force to ensure home front security, to sabotage enemy activities, and to

gather military intelligence. In the course of the Polish-Lithuanian War, the Šauliai subsumed most of local armed Lithuanian self-defense bands. In the zone, the Šauliai were divided into three districts (northern, central and southern), each containing 4–5 armed groups formed from local men (Vareikis 2004, 118). Although their activities were coordinated by their headquarters in Kaunas, local units often acted without their authorization (Vareikis 2004, 117). In total, there were several thousand militants, about 1,000 in the area of Švenčionys alone (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 192).

On the other side, the Polish militia was established in the fall of 1920. The majority of its members belonged to Związek Bezpieczeństwa Kraju (National Security Union; ZBK) based in Vilnius and were paid by the central authorities of Middle Lithuania (Rezmer 2006, 31).[2] Its commander was appointed directly by the head of the Polish police in Vilnius. The League of Nations authorized the Polish militia to ensure security in the neutral zone under the condition that it had to be made up only of local men (Łach and Melnik 2005, 194). The Polish militia had its regional divisions in Širvintos, Giedraičiai, and Janiškiai (Śleszyński 2004, 104), while its five armed groups were located in Avižonys, Trakai, Rūdiškės, Švenčionys, and the area of Suwalki.[3] Its largest units were stationed in the districts of Širvintos and Giedraičiai, and they included about 2000 members. In total, there were about 6000 Polish militiamen in the zone.[4]

Both Polish and Lithuanian paramilitaries were supplied by the regular armies and police forces of Lithuania and Poland. Both had small weapons as well as machine guns, grenades, and occasionally mine throwers. Nevertheless, they were primarily political rather than military institutions. Although they were formed to engage mostly in so-called protective violence, they often meted out predatory and abusive violence. They used their power to fight personal and communal conflicts, and their reputation for atrocity, as I will demonstrate, was well established.

Another key feature of both paramilitary groups was that they were often staffed and led by Lithuanian and Polish veterans of the Great War and independence wars. Thus, perhaps the strongest Polish militia units from Avižonys and Varviškės were led by the Great War veteran officers Michal Wirball (nicknamed Sarton) and J. Pilewski (Chmura), both feared for their toughness and ferociousness (Lučinskas 2013, 281; Łach and Melnik 2005, 195). On the Lithuanian side, one of the most belligerent bands formed in Perloja (near Varėna) when a group of Lithuanian Great War veterans led by the former Russian army NCO Jonas Česnulevičius decided to establish their self-defense band (Česnulevičiūtė 1998, 17). Often these commanders acted as independent warlords and ignored the orders of their superiors in Kaunas and Vilnius. Although the majority of the paramilitaries were locally recruited volunteers, their ranks also included some demobilized soldiers from Poland and Lithuania.[5] In addition to the Polish and Lithuanian militias, some armed gangs aimed simply to pillage. Apprehended by the militiamen, they often claimed to belong either to the Šauliai or the PMNZ.

Outline of Conflict

The epicenters of the most vicious violence were in the northeast (Širvintos, Giedraičiai, and Avižonys) and the southeast (Liudvinavas, Perloja, Varviškės, Liškiava, and Valkininkai). Interestingly, those were the places where the numbers of Tutejszie were relatively low, and Lithuanians resided in proximity to the Poles. The earliest assault by the rival militias occurred on January 7, 1921, when the Šauliai attacked the Polish controlled town of Linkmenys, killing two and capturing five Polish fighters (Vareikis 2004, 117). The assault produced several Polish counter-attacks in the Širvintos area between January and March of 1921 (Lesčius 2007, 190). This early wave of fighting subsided in mid-April, when the Chief of Headquarters of the Lithuanian army, fearing the escalation that may have involved the regular Polish troops, issued an order to the Šauliai to stop all their offensive operations.[6]

The second, more intense, wave of violence started after the Polish elections to the Diet of Middle Lithuania on January 8, 1922.[7] The late winter and spring saw closures of Lithuanian schools and

newspapers, arrests, requisitions, forced mobilizations into the Polish army, beatings, cases of torture, and revenge assaults on Polish officials by Lithuanians (Biržiška 1992, 154–155). This violence reached its peak in late August 1922, when well-armed and organized and supplied by their regular troops, Polish and Lithuanian militias started clashing in a series of open battles in the area of Širvintos and Giedraičiai. These clashes and the general disorder that they had produced escalated through the fall and reached the peak in January-February 1923. As mentioned, finally, on February 3, 1923, the League of Nations decided to abolish the neutral zone and impose an administrative border between the two states. Poland was to receive the strategically important railway line Grodno-Vilnius, while Lithuania was allocated the area of Širvintos and Giedraičiai. The Lithuanian government protested to the League of Nations, refused to acknowledge the border, and considered it only as a temporary demarcation line (Łossowski 2002, 37).

Hence the closure of the zone turned out to be far from an amicable affair. Eventually, having warned Kaunas in advance, the combined forces of the Polish militia led an attack on February 15, 1923. A specially formed group under Colonel Stanisław Pasławski, composed of four battalions of the State Police Force, ten Border Guard battalions, and formations of the National Security Union, pushed out the Lithuanian irregulars from the part of the zone designated for Poland. The operation lasted for several days and resulted in the loss of 70 Polish fighters and a similar number of Lithuanian fighters (Rezmer 2006, 52). Open clashes, finally, subsided in May 1923, when both sides replaced the militias with their regular troops. The closure eventually ended the violence in the area, but, as we know, it did not resolve the Polish-Lithuanian conflict that smoldered during the whole interwar period and beyond it.

Irregular Violence

This general account of violence barely conveys its scale, intensity, and social impact on the borderland population because, like many other similar accounts, it focuses on organized violence. However, what made this conflict exceptional was the high amount of spontaneous and irregular violence performed by local militiamen and civilians. It included extortions, robberies, pogroms, personal acts of revenge, burnings of properties, intimidations, beatings, expulsions, hostage taking, torture, and executions.

To paraphrase Kalyvas (2006, 377), in civil wars violence may grow from dynamics within the community. This violence was not necessarily externally imposed upon unsuspecting civilians in the neutral zone. Its detailed descriptions suggest that the local population actively engaged in the production of violence. Its irregular nature had a deep destabilizing impact on local communities and prompted them to accept certain models of behavior that helped the Polish and Lithuanian governments to claim the residents of the zone to be under their protection. Thus, the Polish and Lithuanian authorities used the excessive violence as the key justification to incorporate the area into their states (discussed below).

Perhaps the most widespread but the least damaging to the survival of civilians type of violence was requisitions, pillaging, and robberies. Due to the absence of any state authorities in the zone, the militias routinely expropriated farmers of their goods, especially food stocks and farm animals. In the village of Skardžiai (near Giedraičiai) Polish militiamen only briefly interrupted pillaging after an arrival of the Control Commission of the League of Nations.[8] A Lithuanian villager from Alksnėnai (near Punsk) complained to the Commission that "the Polish militiamen, while being drunk, shot my five pigs. My wife and children got terrified."[9] A Lithuanian observer reported that "in Kernavė people kept complaining about the behavior of both Polish and Lithuanian fighters. They said that Lithuanians took horses from two Jews."[10] In many cases the Šauliai fed themselves from the local population, often irrespective of their ethnicity and loyalty. A Lithuanian army officer described their pillaging as a growing source of tension between the Lithuanian army and the paramilitaries: "Behind the frontline the Šauliai take from the local people food and horses. They demoralize soldiers. They are paid 20 *auksinai* [German marks] per day but are telling them, 'You,

fools, are always guarding your position and we [. . .] wherever we stay, we may kill a goose or a calf, and we are not accountable for it.' "[11] Overall, both paramilitary groups practiced robberies all over the zone. Moreover, they created opportunities for individual robbers who prayed on the helpless population.

Poor provisioning of militias was one of the causes for pillaging and requisitioning. However, they were also part of the premeditated tactics used against the local people. These included attacks against state symbols and institutions (militia barracks, schools, post offices, etc.) and burnings of properties often accompanied by threats of expulsion. Thus, on September 30, 1922, in Antalksniai (near Švenčionys), Polish militiamen ripped to pieces a historical symbol of ancient Lithuania, the Knight (*Vytis*), in a Lithuanian school (Biržiška 1992, 193). In Kučiūnai (near Lazdijai) the militiamen forced Lithuanian farmers to sing Poland's national anthem and beat them when they were not able to do it (*Laisvė*, December 17, 1922). The closures of Lithuanian language newspapers and arrests of Lithuanian teachers became routine (*Lietuvos rytai*, May 19, 1923). Meanwhile, Lithuanians robbed the Polish regional office in Ceikiniai (near Švenčionys) and destroyed its telephone line (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 194). In late November 1922 the Lithuanian partisans threatened to burn the Polish-speaking village of Magūnai (near Giedraičiai) and attempted to set on fire a local Polish school (*Gazeta Wilenska*, November 24, 1922). The Lithuanian attack on the village of Varviškės (near Varėna) in the spring of 1923 resulted in the burning of the entire village and the displacement of its Polish-speaking population (Lučinskas 2013, 292). It is quite obvious that such attacks were of political nature and often intended to clean up the zone from ethnic foes.

In February 1923 the abolition of the neutral zone and its division into the Polish and Lithuanian parts produced considerable population displacement within the region. Thus, the Polish press in Vilnius reported the movement of Polish civilians with their properties to the Polish-controlled areas from the district of Giedraičiai, which fell into the hands of Lithuanians (*Kresy*, March 4, 1923). On the other side of the zone, in May 1922 the Lithuanian press noted that "some frightful Lithuanians from the neutral zone, faced with their never-ending misery, are preparing to move into the interior of Lithuania. They are searching to buy available farmsteads" (*Lietuva*, May 5, 1922).

Alongside the heavily politicized ethnic conflict, social hatred was another cause of violence in the zone. On March 29, 1922, the Lithuanian government started a radical land reform with the aim of eliminating the power of Polish landowners in the countryside. The official anti-Polish, antilandlord propaganda also reverberated in the neutral zone, where there was a considerable increase in the number of attacks by Lithuanians against the estates of Polish landlords. For example, in the fall of 1921, the Lithuanians attacked a Polish estate in Rakečiai (Šiaudinis 1997, 102). Several similar attacks happened in the district of Dūkštas in 1923 and 1924 (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 196–197). The assaults were directed against landlords and their family members, and they usually ended up robbing and burning their estates.

Terror

In the zone the most vicious form of violence was terror (here understood as violent acts intended to create fear among civilians). A high number of terror cases is somewhat surprising, bearing in mind that during the violent period of 1918–1920 in Lithuania terror was used only moderately and on a much lower scale than in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Ukraine, or Poland (Laurinavičius 2015; Balkelis 2018).

In the neutral zone intentional and direct physical violence against civilians took several forms, including previously mentioned arson and forced displacement as well as kidnappings, hostage taking, arrests, beatings, torture, and mutilation. Kalyvas defines terror as "anomic or nihilistic, expressive violence" (2006, 24) directed against persons exclusively based on who they are. In the neutral zone terror was used instrumentally as coercive measure to generate compliance among the

population and force it into respective political camps. It seems that inability of both sides to fully control the neutral zone only increased the amount of brutality against the civilians.

The earliest notable eruptions of terror may be linked to the repressive measures taken by the Polish militia against the Lithuanians who refused to vote in the January 1922 elections to the Diet of Middle Lithuania. For example, in Tračiūnai (near Švenčionys) the militia severely beat a Lithuanian family for not voting (Biržiška 1992, 154.). Similar beatings, alongside arrests, occurred in Moliai, Piliūnai, Mikalčiūnai, Marcinkonys, Musteika, and other places during the spring and summer of 1922 (Biržiška 1992, 168, 180, 184). They were also accompanied by requisitions and forced recruitment into the Polish army. Moreover, women and the elderly became legitimate targets of assaults: in Kriokšlys (near Valkininkai) the militiamen beat a pregnant Lithuanian woman and a 78 year old man (Biržiška 1992, 180).[12] Soon terror became reciprocal as Lithuanians started assaulting and killing Polish militiamen, as happened, for example, in Marcinkonys (near Druskininkai) on July 15, 1922 (Biržiška 1992, 180). Gradually the reciprocal attacks became more organized and involved larger units of militias. For example, on December 2, 1922, Lithuanian partisans assaulted an outpost of Polish militiamen in Olany (near Širvintos): they took them into captivity, undressed them, beat them, tied them to horse carriages, and led them away (*Gazeta Wilenska*, December 10, 1922).

Gradually the beatings became accompanied by torture cases and even mutilation. Of course, press descriptions or collective complaints over such cases committed by both sides should not be taken at face value. Often the belligerents exaggerated them by adding graphic details to emphasize unjustified brutality of the enemy and their own victimhood. Nevertheless, high numbers of such cases clearly show that torture and mutilation became widespread in the zone. In January 1923 *Dziennik Wilenski* reported that Lithuanian fighters were torturing Polish landlords by burning their feet and beating them with clubs (*Dziennik Wilenski*, January 12, 1923). Meanwhile, in August 1922, in Musteika (near Druskininkai) the Polish militants tortured two Lithuanian men by piercing their bodies with stitching awls (Biržiška 1992, 184). On January 10, 1921, the Lithuanian authorities in Alytus received a collective complaint from local villagers describing how the Polish militia had assaulted them: "Our citizen, Motiejus L., was taken from his house, beaten until he bled; his whole left cheek was ripped out, and they poked his eye out [. . .]. They were beating all, including women and children [. . .]. Children were interrogated about where goods were hidden by twisting their fingers. [. . .] Vladas S. was beaten for half an hour, a gun was forced into his mouth, and he was told, 'You better should not be Lithuanians, for when we come for the second time, [. . .] we will burn everything' " (*Lietuva*, January 12, 1921).

There were cases of Lithuanian fighters being cut into pieces with swords and their corpses mutilated.[13] On April 5, 1922, in Old Druskininkai Polish militiamen set on fire a Lithuanian man (Biržiška 1992, 184). A gruesome murder took place on April 30, 1923, in Aleksandriškiai (near Giedraičiai), where the militiamen slaughtered a 19-year-old Lithuanian woman. Before the execution, they mutilated her by cutting off her nose and ears (Biržiška 1992, 220). Surprisingly, there were very few rape cases, which perhaps means that victims refused to report them.[14] The most vicious terror was directed against enemy fighters, their family members (including females), and those civilians that collaborated with an enemy.

During the late summer of 1922, the initial wave of violence turned into open battles between well-armed militia units near Širvintos and Giedraičiai. Both sides treated each other's prisoners of war with savagery as their summary executions became a norm. For example, on June 12, 1922, the Polish militiamen captured a Lithuanian partisan during a battle in Širvintos. The captive was undressed naked and shot publicly on the street to strike fear among the locals.[15] In early January, in the village of Sumai Lithuanian militants executed a Polish militiaman and his male relative.[16] Such executions of paramilitaries and their family members became common and reciprocal.

In the neutral zone the logic of violence took a new twist when gradually executions escalated due to the hostage exchanges between Poland and Lithuania. Initially, the hostages were handed to the official authorities, but after exchange they were able to return and denounce those who had arrested them. As a result, both sides started executing the hostages for the reason of their own

safety. In his memoir a former Lithuanian militiaman noted that since 1921 the Lithuanians had started killing Polish captives, instead of turning them into the hands of Lithuanian authorities, because, after the exchanges of hostages, the Polish fighters were able to denounce their captors (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 195). This also led to suicide cases, like what happened to the Polish militia leader Michal Wirball, who blew himself up with a grenade to avoid being captured by Lithuanians (*Kresy*, March 4, 1923).

Another notable feature of terror was its reciprocal nature. Assaults on villages and militia outposts were often followed by revenge attacks. On February 27, 1922, the Polish militia of Varviškės attacked a Lithuanian village of Dluga and killed 30 people. This attack was provoked by earlier attacks by Lithuanian riflemen on Polish-speaking Varviškės (*Kresy*, March 18, 1923). Similar logic of violence repeated elsewhere including Linkmenys, Avižonys, Liškiava, and Širvintos. In one case, near Širvintos, a Polish revenge attack over a killed Polish militiaman took place using a cover of a religious ceremony, when Polish fighters tried to mingle among the relatives of the deceased person (Daunys 1923, 55).[17] In the neutral zone the conflict also provided a cover to settle personal scores between neighbors. On July 7, 1922, a Lithuanian forester was assaulted by two men. He reported that those were his "personal enemies whom he gained at his work."[18]

Violence against Others

The general disorder, absence of state authority, and dominance of paramilitary militias were also responsible for the violence against ethnic groups that were caught between the Polish and Lithuanian sides. The period of 1920–1923 witnessed many cases of arbitrary violence against Jews, which took place in the neutral zone and its vicinity. Those cases ranged from assaults, robberies, and killings of individuals to pogroms against Jewish communities.[19] On August 6, 1922, during a Polish militia attack on Giedraičiai, "the militiamen robbed stores [. . .]. Several Jews were severely beaten for refusing to tell where the local militia were."[20] On March 4, 1923, Polish militiamen murdered three Jews and robbed others in the village of Galiniai (near Seinai) (Biržiška 1992, 214). Some pogroms occurred outside the neutral zone, for example, in Radun (near Lyda). On July 8, 1922, a unit of Polish cavalry entered the town and forced all Jews into the center claiming they were searching for deserters. Their houses were robbed, and several young men were taken away. The Polish press attributed the attack to Lithuanians (*Kurjer Poranny*, July 16, 1922). The majority of attacks on Jews were carried out by the Polish side and were often justified by their refusal to participate in the local election in January 1922. The assaults prompted a collective complaint of the Jewish community of Širvintos to the Commission of the LN that visited the town (its visit is discussed further).[21]

On November 11, 1920, Lithuania signed an agreement with Vatslau Lastousky, the head of the government of Peoples' Republic of Belarus, by which Belarusians promised their support in the forthcoming plebiscite in the Vilnius region in exchange for Lithuania's financial help and a promise of national autonomy for Belarusians in Lithuania. The agreement lapsed because the LN revoked the plebiscite on March 3, 1921 (on the Lithuanian-Belarusian alliance see Laurinavičius 2013, 310). Nevertheless, the Lithuanian government provisioned and coordinated armed Belarusian partisan groups in the areas of Vilnius, Druskininkai, Grodno, and Lyda. On May 23, 1922, in Bialystok four Belarusian partisans were executed, and six received life sentences for their armed anti-Polish activities. Some Belarusians joined the Lithuanian Šauliai and suffered casualties. Yet Lithuanian officials complained that their political loyalty to the cause of an independent Lithuania remained doubtful and that many joined the partisans mostly for material benefit (Vareikis 2004, 119–120).

Role of Governments

As mentioned, the Polish and Lithuanian governments were heavily involved in the conflict in the zone and saw the militias as their proxies. However, the truce of November 29, 1920, and the

pressure of the League of Nations to stop the quarrel forced both governments to limit their direct involvement. Supplying the militias and organizing propaganda campaigns among the local population were their preferred policies as well as conducting international public campaigns (often based on collective complaints of zone's residents) aimed to discredit the other side.

Some Lithuanian militiamen operated their military bases in independent Lithuania, for example, in Salakas and Tauragnai (near Utena), where the Lithuanian army regularly resupplied them (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 192; Šiaudinis 1997, 100). Moreover, in Širvintos the Lithuanian partisan garrison was secretly reinforced by regular troops (Lesčius 2007, 193). Before entering the zone, they were dressed up as civilians and received fake personal documents. The Polish side used the same strategy: in the contested district of Širvintos and Giedraičiai local units of militiamen were reinforced by at least 300 former war veterans from Silesia in June 1922.[22] Polish soldier E. Korzenewski, taken into captivity in January 1923, reported that his 350 men unit was part of the regular Polish army. But before it was transferred to the zone, soldiers' documents were taken away, and they were ordered to call themselves Polish partisans.[23]

However, neither government was happy with the violent acts committed by their partisan proxies. They tried to limit their activities because they induced general disorder in the zone and could also reignite an open war between the states. As mentioned, the Lithuanian army tried to forbid the Šauliai from conducting their offensive operations in the vicinity of the zone. Lithuanian officers were often suspicious of Šauliai's military value, lack of discipline, and depressing impact on the population (Vareikis 2004, 116). The Chief of General Headquarters of the Lithuanian army Maksim Katche wrote about the Lithuanian militia in Širvintos as "partly demoralized and indulged in drinking."[24] In the meantime, the Polish authorities in Vilnius occasionally tried to investigate the most extreme crimes committed by their militias and bring them to justice.[25] Both states also refused to use their regular troops in the battles that ensued during the liquidation of the neutral zone in mid-February 1923.

On September 19, 1922, the Control Commission of the League of Nations, led by Spanish diplomat Pedro Saura, arrived to the neutral zone with the aim of marking out an administrative border between Poland and Lithuania (Łossowski 2002, 33). The Western diplomats visited several places including Širvintos and Giedraičiai, the hottest venues of military clashes. For both governments the visit became an occasion to claim the zone by staging public campaigns aimed to vilify the other side and present their conationals as victims of the enemy's violence. In Širvintos the envoys were met by delegations of local Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews. When Lithuanians and Jews complained about the attacks of Poles, the Poles asked the protection of the League of Nations against the assaults of Lithuanians and demanded the inclusion of the area into Poland.[26] In Avižonys a crowd of 200 Poles, mobilized by the local warlord Wirball, repeated the demands. Polish women "accused Lithuanians of not allowing them to visit their churches, beating them, and terrorizing." To impress Saura, the locals brought over the corpse of a Polish militiaman killed by Lithuanians and asked the envoy to join them for a burial prayer.[27] Meanwhile, in Giedraičiai, local Lithuanians complained to Saura that the Polish militiamen "rob and kill us."[28] The Lithuanian and Polish authorities encouraged the participation of local civilians in these public campaigns. In his report to the League of Nations, Saura noted the unbearable conditions of the people and "their fear caused by the anarchy in the zone."[29]

The involvement of Polish and Lithuanian authorities in the conflict in the neutral zone can also be read in the light of Kalyvas' insight about the linkage between elite (center) and ground (periphery) politics in civil wars. He calls this linkage "alliance," which entails "a process of convergence of interests via a transaction between supralocal and local actors, whereby the former supply the latter with external muscle, thus allowing them to win decisive advantage over local rivals; in exchange, supralocal actors are able to tap into local networks and generate mobilization" (Kalyvas 2006, 383). Thus, it is quite clear that the civil war in the zone was simultaneously decentralized and linked to the wider conflict between Poland and Lithuania, but it was also used to mobilize the civilian population for the respective national projects.

Responses of Civilians

The responses of civilians to the violence in the zone varied, but, as a rule, followed several patterns that did not leave them many choices. Fear and threats to their survival were responsible for the physical displacement of some. Robberies and especially terror also produced a wave of their collective complaints to the national governments of Poland and Lithuania as well as to the League of Nations. As mentioned, the national governments greatly encouraged such complaints and often exaggerated the scale of committed atrocities to discredit each other internationally, gain the status of victim and sympathy of the League of Nations, and convince the LN to join the neutral zone to their respective state. At the same time, many of these complaints describe authentic crimes committed against the civilians by militias and convey their desperation and calls for help. As mentioned, Saura's commission registered several such complaints, but there were many more, both collective and individual. For example, in early 1923 some delegations of villagers from the Liubavas area (near Lazdijai) addressed the regional Polish authorities in Bialystok asking to join their villages to Poland (*Kresy*, March 18, 1923). On the other side, in their memorandum to the League of Nations, 40 civilians from the districts of Grodno and Vilna protested that "the districts of Trakai, Marcinkonys, Lipica, Szuny, Krakšliai, Kabeliai, Darželiai, Margionys, Kapieniškės, and others [had] been completely devastated by Polish soldiers and police."[30] The complaints fostered communal links among villagers, while violence forced them into social networks of self-support, which national governments claimed to be under their protection.

The reactions to violence also included individuals' willingness to collaborate with its perpetrators. Thus, in late 1922 the local Lithuanian authorities discovered that in Širvintos local people started secretly paying taxes to the Polish authorities (Vareikis 2004, 125). In March 1923 the Lithuanian military made a report: "Recently the local people in the zone, for example, in Avižonys and elsewhere, are asking the Polish partisans with tears in their eyes to avoid stayovers in their places, because they are afraid that Lithuanians may burn their properties."[31] Yet, overall, the conflict in the zone saw relatively modest rates of collaboration. The Polish and Lithuanian authorities had to rely on their military intelligence to gather information about their opponents.[32] Bearing in mind Kalyvas' insight that "gaining control over an area brings collaboration" (2006, 119), perhaps this lack of collaboration may be explained by the fact that eventually neither side was able to establish full control over the zone. In other words, collaboration was too dangerous due to potential revenge attacks by the other side.

Nevertheless, violence greatly contributed to the mobilization of zone's population, forcing them to choose their political sides and form militias of self-defense. Perhaps the most radical case of such self-mobilization occurred in Perloja and Varviškė (both near Varėna), where Lithuanian and Polish villagers created their semi-independent 'republics' and self-governments that often ignored policies of central governments.[33]

During its short but eventful life, the self-labeled Perloja Republic (Perlojos respublika) of local Lithuanians regulated local trade, guarded its forest resources, paid salaries to its employees, provided support to the poor, and passed various community laws (e.g., a law on observing all Catholic feast days). The community also dispensed justice by setting up a local court not only for the town but also for a dozen neighboring villages (Česnulevičiūtė 1998). Meanwhile, throughout 1920–1923, Varviškės became the base for a band of 300–400 heavily armed Polish paramilitaries that established their own Self-Government of Varviškės (Samorząd Warwiszki). For three years the band controlled a 30-square-kilometer-wide area around Varviškės. It terrorized the local population by conducting night assaults on nearby ethnic Lithuanian villages and forcing them to pay a ransom (*davina*). In early 1923 Samorząd Warwiszki even issued its own postal marks and official stamp that carried a symbol of the Polish state. This political entity ended its existence only when, on March 23, 1923, a 300-strong battalion of the Lithuanian army, together with the local Šauliai, attacked Varviškės and burned the entire village (Lučinskas 2013). In short, the violence in the neutral zone was a key in producing these local communities of armed men.

Conclusions

After the forced closure of the zone on May 15, 1923, the local Šauliai groups were disbanded. They had to return their arms, while the Lithuanian government paid them social allowances and tried to integrate them into civilian life by providing them with limited jobs and land allotments. However, as some recent research shows, their demobilization was an uneasy and long-term process. There were some who refused to return their weapons and even preferred to switch sides by joining the Poles (Jokubauskas et al. 2015, 77). The Polish militia was also demobilized and followed a similar path. In his memoir, former Lithuanian partisan Valentas Šiaudinis (from Paringė in the neutral zone, the district of Švenčionys) wrote that most of his battle comrades settled in independent Lithuania, started working the land, or enrolled in the border police. As for the main reason why the Lithuanians lost in the neutral zone, he suggested "the lack of support from the Lithuanian government" (Šiaudinis 1997, 105).

The conflict over the Polish-Lithuanian neutral zone is indicative of how modern nation-states, such as Poland and Lithuania, attempted to nationalize those people who found themselves on the margins of their national projects. In the zone, violence was an essential nation-making tool that forced people to take sides and adopt national identities, primarily for their security and survival. The region became an epicenter of selective and indiscriminate violence that was both communal and state induced. Although Poland and Lithuania provisioned rival paramilitary proxies, they were formed largely from local civilians, often veterans of the Great War and independence wars. Their willingness to act violently was encouraged by the absence of any kind of state authority and the competing claims of nation-states, as well as by the vicious logic of reciprocal violence that progressed from threats, pillaging, and requisitions, to terror (burnings, beatings, torture, executions, mutilations of the enemy's fighters and their family members, or even assaults on village communities). It is unsurprising that those population groups that did not fit into the Polish and Lithuanian national projects (the Tutejszie, Belarusians, and especially Jews) found themselves in the midst of a cauldron, as both sides tested their loyalty.

Zahra pointed out that across Eastern Europe "competition between popular nationalist movements on the ground actually encouraged national indifference." And this indifference may be explained not as a reflection of political ignorance or premodern relic but as "a response to modern mass politics" (2010, 100). Indeed, even today the Tutejzsie remain a distinct community in Lithuania, and they often refuse to be labelled as either Poles, Belarusians, or Lithuanians (Garšva and Grumadienė 1993, 357; Zverko 2009). The Polish census of 1931 recorded 707,000 persons who identified themselves as Tutejszie (Piotrowski 1998, 294). Lithuania never recognized the Tutejszie as a separate ethnic or linguistic group. Yet in the Lithuanian census of 2011, about 33,000 people refused to indicate their national identity; of those 17,178 were from the Vilnius region (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas 2013, 7, 11). The survival of the Tutejszie certainly testifies to the limits of a nation-state's ability to nationalize indifferent populations. But it remains to be seen to what extent this indifference is part of their premodern identities or a political response to the violent efforts of nation making that took place in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland. Perhaps this question may be answered more thoroughly by using more anthropological and sociological approaches to the understanding of contemporary identities.

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Notes

1 Other motives included Poland's pressure to the LN and Lithuania to secure the railway line Grodno-Vilnius, which the neutral zone divided into Polish and Lithuanian sectors, and the Lithuanian takeover of the Klaipėda (Memel) region on January 15, 1923. The latter event prompted Poland to request the LN to abolish the zone. See Łach (2010, 104).

2 Along with the militia, there was also the smaller Korpus Politiczny Zandarmerii (Political Department of Police), which was also controlled by the ZBK. See Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (LCVA), f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 27.
3 LŠS žinių koncentracijos vadovo pažyma, August 26, 1922, LCVA, f. 383, op. 7, d. 341, 36–37.
4 Kontražvalgybos dalies viršininkui, August 2, 1922, LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 27.
5 Thus, the Lithuanian military intelligence claimed that Wirball's band included only seven locals, while the majority were recruited in Poland. See LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 36.
6 Gen. štabo viršininko raštas LŠS CV pirmininkui, April 15, 1921, LCVA, f. 929, op. 2, d. 321, 14.
7 The election took place in the Vilnius region, but it was boycotted by the majority of its Lithuanian and Jewish populations. Eventually, on February 20, 1922, the elected Diet unanimously voted to incorporate the Vilnius region into Poland.
8 Report of Lt. V. Biliūnas to the Government Representative at the League of Nations, February 27, 1921, LCVA, f. 648, op. 1, d. 95, 55.
9 Complain to the Control Commission, October 29, 1921, LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 4.
10 Report of Lt. V. Biliūnas to the Government Representative at the League of Nations, February 27, 1921, LCVA, f. 648, op. 1. d. 95, 58.
11 2-ojo pėstininkų pulko vado pranešimas, December 6, 1920, quoted in Vareikis (2004, 116).
12 See also the case of beating several women in Piliūnai (near Radun) (Biržiška 1992, 184).
13 On March 19, 1923, in Paliepiai (near Alytus) the Polish militia slaughtered the local Lithuanian Šauliai, mutilated their bodies with swords by cutting off legs and fingers. The case was widely covered by the press in Lithuania and produced an official protest by the local population. See "Alytaus miesto ir apkrities piliečių demonstracijos rezoliucija," *Karys*, April 19, 1923, 197.
14 On May 18, 1930, Polish militiamen attacked a social gathering of local Lithuanians in the village of Dmitrauka (near Varėna). They beat them, shot one of them and raped several women. The incident produced mass protests in Lithuania and forced the Lithuanian government to issue a complaint to the League of Nations. See Kviklys (1964, 418).
15 LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 18.
16 LCVA, f. 656, op. 3, d. 79, 214.
17 Another account of the incident claims that a Lithuanian priest refused a permission to burry a local Polish militiaman in Širvintos. Nevertheless, the funeral procession that included about 100 armed Polish fighters tried to enter the town, but it was violently dispersed by armed Lithuanians. See LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 69.
18 LCVA, f. 383, op. 7, d. 341, 17.
19 The individual assaults are reported in LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 66, and *Rytų Lietuva*, September 7, 1922, 2.
20 LCVA, f. 383, op. 7, d. 341, 19.
21 Pobyt Delegacji Ligi Narodowei w Pasie Neutralnym, September 1922, LCVA, f. 15, op. 2, d. 78, 1.
22 A report of the Lithuanian military intelligence, June 30, 1922, LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 2.
23 LCVA, f. 656, op. 3, d. 79, 204.
24 Generalinio štabo viršininko raštas Užsienio reikalų ministerijai, June 20, 1922, LCVA, f. 929, op. 3, d. 359, 63.
25 See the case of murder and robbery of a Jewish merchant from Warsaw by a Polish militiaman in Giedraičiai in September 1922. LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4058, 66.
26 Pobyt Delegacji Ligi Narodowei w Pasie Neutralnym, September 1922, LCVA, f. 15, op. 2, d. 78, 3.
27 Pobyt Delegacji Ligi Narodowei w Pasie Neutralnym, September 1922, LCVA, f. 15, op. 2, d. 78, 3–4.
28 Pobyt Delegacji Ligi Narodowei w Pasie Neutralnym, September 1922, LCVA, f. 15, op. 2, d. 78, 4.
29 Pobyt Delegacji Ligi Narodowei w Pasie Neutralnym, September 1922, LCVA, f. 15, op. 2, d. 78, 1.
30 LCVA, f. 656, op. 3, d. 79, 47.
31 Santrauka 1923 m. vasario-kovo mėn. žvalgybos skyriaus viršininkui, LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4090, 3.

32 See the data on Catholic priests who worked with the Polish militia provided by the Lithuanian military intelligence. LCVA, f. 378, op. 2, d. 4048, 2.
33 Both terms were used by the members of these self-defence bands (Česnulevičiūtė 1998; Lučinskas 2013).

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