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The Case of Vilnius. The Case of Klaipėda. Excerpts from Polish/Lithuanian Relations

> Famous Vilnian Czesław Miłosz once wrote in his «Dialogue about Vilnius»: «neither is it Poland, nor Lithuania; neither the countryside, nor the capital». The lawyer Tadeusz Wróblewski, when asked by Count von Pfeil in September 1915 as the Germans were entering the city, stated as follows: «The intelligentsia and bourgeoisie are Poles, while the masses are heterogeneous, representing various tribes and faiths <...> Actually, we do not know ourselves (what country this is. — *J. G.-K.*), as it all depends on where we stand: Christianity and culture as a whole were introduced here by Poles, who funded the schools and the university; but recently, the country has entirely been Russian on the outside and Polish life was being suppressed with most effort»[1].

The Lithuanians had declared their ambition of having the city exclusively to themselves as early as 1905, in their memorial handed to Sergius Witte. As a result of the evacuation ordered by the Russians in the summer of 1915, a large part of the attendants of the fourteen Orthodox churches in Vilnius had left[2]. The departure of almost the entire Russian community, previously amounting to 20 % of the popula-

[1] Lithuanian State Historical Archives in Vilnius (LVIA). Fond 1135. Descr. 4. Unit 30, Aleksander Szklennik, note dated September 5, 1915.

[2] The churches of: Sts Cosmas and Damian, St Mary Magdalene, St Michael, St Nicholas, St Paraskeva, Sts Peter and Paul, Theotokos, Holy Trinity, Holy Ghost, Sts Constantine and Michael, Our Lady of the Sign and the Annunciation. Juliusz Kłos («Wilno» przewodnik krajoznawczy [Vilnius: tourist guide]. Oddział Wileńskiego Towarzystwa Krajoznawczego, Drukarnia Zawadzkiego. Vilnius, 1923) lists the Orthodox Churches of St Andrew, St George, and the Uniate of the latter: Polish Wilno: chief monuments of Polish national architecture in Wilno, once the second capital of Poland / With an introd. and comm. by Juliusz Kłos. Vilnius, 1921.

tion of the city, resulted in Vilnius being dominated by two national groups, Poles and Jews, while even Belarusians (3% of the population) were almost two times more numerous than Lithuanians[3].

The question of the affiliation of Vilnius and its region with Poland during the Interwar years (1918–1939) was settled by the Vilnius Sejm. Its establishment, its sessions, and the circumstances of the adoption of the resolution incorporating the Vilnius region into Poland (20 February 1922), as well as the history of Central Lithuania, constitute the subject of a study by Wrocław-based historian Aleksander Srebrakowski[4]. However, it should be made clear that the events recounted therein depict the ultimate failure of the numerous attempts made by Józef Piłsudski to implement the main **(I)**, and then the backup **(II)** variant of his federalist programme. The Polish political press of the period hailed the decision of the Vilnius Sejm as Poland's victory, but with the benefit of hindsight, we now know that this «victory» was in fact a very problematic one. The Chief of State knew this as well. Speaking later as a private citizen, Józef Piłsudski distanced himself as explicitly as he could from the political line adopted in practice in 1921. I quote: «First of all, that name. I have nothing to do with it. It was not me who chose the name "Central Lithuania"»[5].

The history of Piłsudski's eastern policy between 11 November 1918 and the Treaty of Riga can be divided into two very distinct stages.

Stage I. The original variant of the federalist programme was to be implemented during the activity of the Civilian Board of the Eastern Territories (1919–1920)[6] in the eastern parts of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. One primary task of the Civilian Board was to carry out a secret, universal and direct election without distinction of sex, announced in the Proclamation to the Inhabitants of the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (formulated by Piłsudski in April 1919 following the liberation of Vilnius from the hands of the Bolsheviks by the Polish Army)[7].

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[3] *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* 1) O sytuacji politycznej i społecznej w Wilnie lat I wojny światowej [On the political and social situation in Vilnius at the times of World War I] The impact of the advent of a new occupier on the multinational urban community. The case of Vilnius at the times of World War I. Lecture delivered on 8 November 2015 during the International Scientific Conference in Hrodna (Projekt «Grodnenskiy sotsium») (in press); 2) Belarusians of Vilnius at a turning point in 1915 in the light of the notes of Vilnius chronicler Aleksander Szklennik, delivered on 19 June 2015 during the International Scientific Conference in Ciechanowiec (War and people. Social aspects of World War I) (in press).

[4] *Srebrakowski A.* Sejm Wileński 1922 roku. Idea i jej realizacja [The Vilnius Sejm of 1922. The idea and the execution] // Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis N 1363 Historia XCIX. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1995.

[5] *Piłsudski J.* Sprawa wileńska. Wykład drugi [The Vilnius issue. 2nd lecture] Pisma zbiorowe Wydanie prac dotychczas drukiem ogłoszonych. Vol. VI. Warsaw, 1937. P. 127.

[6] See: *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* Zarząd Cywilny Ziem Wschodnich (19 lutego 1919 — 9 września 1920) [The Civilian Board of the Eastern Territories (19 February 1919 — 9 September 1920)]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IH PAN & Neriton, 2003. (further *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* ZCZW).

[7] *Piłsudski J.* Pisma zbiorowe [Collected Works] Wydanie prac dotychczas drukiem ogłoszonych. Vol. V. Warsaw, 1937. P. 75–76.

This self-determination was supposed to settle the internal, ethnic and religious issues of the people living in the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The «Vilnius Proclamation» stated as follows: «Your country has not known freedom for more than a hundred years, since it has been oppressed by the force of Russian, German and Bolshevik enemies, who did not consult the people, but rather imposed on them a foreign model of conduct, suppressed their will and often destroyed their lives. <...> I want to give you the possibility of developing interior, national, and religious matters just as you wish, without any force or pressure from Poland»[8].

As we know, not all residents of North-Eastern Territories favoured a federation with Poland and, what should be stressed, this observation does not apply solely to Poles, but also to other residents, and above all, to political leaders representing all the other nationalities inhabiting these lands in the years 1919–1920 on the political scene.

According to Piłsudski's plan, the Polish-Lithuanian federation programme was to be implemented, among others, by his emissary on the eve of the Vilna offensive, i.e. Michał Römer, an ex-member of the Polish Legions widely regarded as a representative of the krajowcy movement. He was supposed to convince the Lithuanian side to cooperate with Poland, as well as to find agreement with the Belarusians in Kaunas[9].

In my personal opinion, Römer may have not been the most suitable choice for the role of negotiator on behalf of the Polish Chief of State. While Vilnius was under the control of Litbel, in his personal journal, Römer expressed fear not of Bolshevism, but of... Polish imperialism. Even at the time of his departure to Kaunas, he considered Piłsudski's policy «beautiful and noble, but sterile and unrealistic given the actual circumstances»[10]. The outright negative attitude of the emissary towards his own mission remained in blatant contradiction with his own remarks expressed during his trip to Kaunas in March 1919. «Out of my many impressions from this journey, I would like to write down a particular one that struck me very positively <...> everywhere <...> we could see <...> only local people. They speak <...> a Polish-Belarusian dialect (a simple one); all the people "from here" think and feel using its categories. This divests the Polish intervention of the traits of an invasion or occupation, <...> giving a sense of trust and reliance on the people, which conveys a feeling of familiarity»[11]. A meticulous study of Römer's writings from the years 1918–1920 leads me to believe that he had rejected Polishness as early as in 1918. The rejection of Polishness was, however, not synonymous with a conscious adoption of Lithuanianness (in its political sense). He eventually opted for the lat-

[8] *Piłsudski J.* Pisma zbiorowe. P. 75–76.

[9] On the grounds of the Lithuanian-Belarusian arrangements of November 1918, the Belarusians enjoyed the status of a national minority with its own minister and six seats in the Taryba.

[10] The Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius (LMAB). Fond 168. Descr. ... Michał Römer's journal («M. Römer...»). Note from 24 April 1919.

[11] M. Römer... Note from 28 April 1919.

ter around April–May 1919 (at the latest), and not in autumn 1920, as it is often assumed in historiography[12].

The so-called «Kaunas uprising», i.e. the attempted coup aimed at overthrowing the existing Lithuanian government, unfavourable towards Poland, and establishing a new one with a pro-Polish attitude — de facto supported, if not inspired by the Polish Military Organisation of the Kaunas region — was widely considered a huge embarrassment for Poland. The failure of this operation was determinative of the effectiveness of Polish political activity in Lithuania and White Ruthenia[13].

The heated intra-Polish debate regarding the self-determination of the inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania announced in the Vilnius Proclamation was cut short by the Entente's decision, transmitted to the Polish government by A. Millerand on 6 March 1920, in the form of a note stating the «impossibility of performing a plebiscite»[14]. After less than 11 months since the Proclamation to the Inhabitants of the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Entente had effectively prevented Piłsudski from fulfilling the promise made to the inhabitants of these lands in April 1919. This fact has undoubtedly accelerated his decision regarding a joint operation with Petlura (April 1920), and created a more favourable environment for cooperation with the group representing the so-called Third Russia; the leading representatives of this group, such as Tchaikovsky and Savinkov, had indeed sought cooperation with the Polish Chief of State since as early as January 1920[15].

In the circumstances that occurred after 6 March 1920, the «Polish» opponents of the federalist needed little effort to deprive Piłsudski of an already useless instrument (the Civilian Board), which, in the original version of the federalist concept, was to serve in a long-term rivalry with Russia. Piłsudski consistently considered Russia the greatest threat to the independence of Poland and his beloved Lithuania. By order of the Supreme Commander dated 29 May 1920, the position of Commissioner General of ZCZW was subordinated to the Council of Ministers in Warsaw, effective from 1 June 1920, while the authority of the President of the Supreme Audit Office was extended over the territories subject to ZCZW. The military events of summer 1920 have only increased the scale of destruction.

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[12] I justify my theory in more detail in my article submitted to the Eastern Review (*Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* Michał Römer wobec «kwestii białoruskiej» [Michał Römer and the «Belarusian issue»]. Na podstawie zapisów w Dzienniku Michała Römera poczynionych pomiędzy proklamacją niepodległości BRL a notą Milleranda z 6 marca 1920 roku), also translated into Belarusian.

[13] More on the Kaunas issue in: *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* ZCZW. P. 274–297, study by the same author of important notes by Walery Sławek in «Zeszyt Sławka» (Dokument XIII) *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* «Depozyty» Walerego Sławka przechowywane w Moskwie («Biuro Detaszowane Oddziału II Naczelnego Dowodztwa 1919») // Studies into the History of Russia and Central-Eastern Europe. XLVII. P. 242–272.

[14] Note published in: *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* ZCZW. P. 92, ref. 117.

[15] See: *Gierowska-Kałłaur J.* Bardzo krótki zarys zagadnienia białorosyjskiego [Brief outline of the White Russian matters]. (In press at Wydawnictwo IH PAN).

Stage II. Prime Minister Wincenty Witos defined Poland's stance on the Polish-Lithuanian relations quite tersely in his speech before the Legislative Sejm in summer 1920: «It must be noted with regret that, in spite of our sincerest efforts towards harmonious coexistence with Lithuania, with which we have been bound by historical ties and have shared suffering in captivity, we have not been able to reach compromise with the Lithuanian government. At a moment most critical for us, the Lithuanians joined up with the Bolsheviks, took military action against us and seized a part of the country that was clearly granted to the Polish State. When our army launched a pursuit after the defeated Soviet troops, the Lithuanians broke their neutrality, letting the Bolshevik soldiers, as well as weapons and ammunition from Prussia pass through their territory, and then, by seizing our territory, they caused a military conflict between Poland and Lithuania. Wishing to avoid war, we have made peace arrangements with the Lithuanians. However, not only did the Lithuanians not leave our territory, but by cooperating further with the Bolshevik army, in spite of all denials, they have obstructed our military operations against the latter»[16]. By force of the Lithuanian-Bolshevik Treaty of 12 July 1920, the Bolsheviks handed over Vilnius to the Lithuanians. In 1923, Piłsudski stated in Vilnius: «Military defeats occurred alongside political ones. <...> The decision conceding Vilnius to Lithuania had even been made behind our backs. I had to deal with these decisions in our subsequent strategies. I had to deal with them as a fait accompli. A fait accompli. I decided to work around this fait accompli. Create a new fait accompli, a new state of affairs. I have prepared General Żeligowski's expedition in its entirety»[17].

Piłsudski attempted to implement the backup scenario of the federalist programme in the first weeks of the existence of Central Lithuania (1920–1922). This was the objective of the efforts of both Lucjan Żeligowski and Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz, as well as the Ukrainian initiatives planned already in autumn 1920[18].

Between 30 September and 8 October 1920, Polish-Lithuanian talks were taking place in Suwałki (at the initiative of the Lithuanian side)[19]. This coincided with a series of Polish military successes (battle of Neman[20]). In his instructions handed to the Polish delegation, Piłsudski recommended avoiding the subject of Vilnius and its region and emphasising that the residents of this area were not inquired about

[16] Shorthand report from the Legislative Sejm, session 167 on 24 September 1920, margin 15.

[17] *Piłsudski J.* Pisma zbiorowe. Vol. VI. Warsaw, 1937. P. 126. See: Odczyt Marszałka Piłsudskiego wygłoszony 24 sierpnia 1923 r. w Wilnie [Proclamation by Marshal Piłsudski on 24 August 1923] / Comp. by J. Gierowska-Kałłaur. Przegląd Wschodni. Vol. V. Issue 4 (20). P. 767–791.

[18] *Bruski J.* J. Petlurowcy. Centrum Państwowe Ukraińskiej Republiki Ludowej na wychodźstwie (1919–1924). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2000. P. 294–318.

[19] See: *Radziwonowicz T.* Polsko-litewskie rokowania w Suwałkach (30 września — 8 października 1920 r.) // Suvalku sutartis faktai ir interpretacijos — Umowa suwalska fakty i interpretacje / Ed. by Ceslovas Laurinavicius and Jan Jerzy Milewski. Versus Aureus, 2011. P. 228–257.

[20] Bitwa niemeńska 29 VIII — 18 X 1920: dokumenty operacyjne [The battle of Neman: operational documents]. Part 1 (29 VIII — 19 IX) and part 2 (20 IX — 18 X) / Ed. and prep. for publ. by Marek Tarczyński; Andrzej Bartnik [et al.]. Warsaw: Rytm, 1998–1998.

their affiliation, while the Lithuanian Government failed to make even the slightest gesture of reconciliation towards the Polish population living there. The agreement concluded in Suwałki laid down a demarcation line «which did not determine in any way the territorial rights of either contracting party». The agreement was to enter into force on October 10, at noon. Lucjan Żeligowski seized the city from Lithuanians before the agreement (not the treaty!) came into effect; however, his objective was not to incorporate Vilnius into Poland, but rather to prolong the possibility of Poland renewing its federation with Lithuania. Piłsudski wished to pursue the political line of the Civilian Board of the Eastern Territories. In his plans, the new Lithuania was composed of 3 cantons. The Vilnius canton would constitute the central part of this remodelled Lithuania, hence the name «Central Lithuania». The success of this «new edition of the old concept» depended not only on Lithuanian Poles, but also on the politicians of the Belarusian People's Republic residing in Kaunas and Lithuanian ones...

In his first order as Supreme Commander of the Central Lithuanian Army, General Żeligowski announced the convening of the Legislative Sejm in Vilnius, the only authority authorised to decide the fate of these territories. On 12 October 1920, almost immediately after the seizure of Vilnius, he issued several essential decrees, which defined the main authorities of Central Lithuania and determined its territory; the emblem of the country comprised the historical symbols of Lithuania and Poland, i.e. the Pogoń and White Eagle both on the same shield. The second decree presented the composition of the governing body of Central Lithuania, namely the Provisional Governing Committee (PGC). The provisional constitution published by the PGC proclaimed the future parliament in Vilnius. A manifesto addressed to the population was issued, diplomatic notes were sent to Warsaw, Kaunas and the governments of the Allied powers, and the recruitment of volunteers for the Central Lithuanian Army was announced. On 1 November 1920, Żeligowski issued a decree regarding the elections to the Vilnius Sejm, and, on December 11, another one introducing an agricultural reform. However, attempts of obstruction from the Lithuanian side were also anticipated. Colonel Leon Bobicki, Director of the Department of National Defence of the PGC[21] even envisioned that, in the case the Polish-Lithuanian federation could not be implemented, the idea of the total independence of Lithuania would have to be supported. On the other hand, Teofil Szopa and Mieczysław Engel, Vilnius activists from the Association of Borderland Guard, both leaning towards nationalist policies[22], advocated for the necessity of incorporating Vilnius and

[21] Decree N2 of Supreme Commander of the Central Lithuanian Army. Official Journal of the PGC. P. 2. N 1 dated 17 November 1920. Provisional Governing Committee.

[22] More on the Borderland Guard (Association of the Borderland Guard since September 1920) and its key activists in: Raporty Straży Kresowej 1919–1920 [Reports of the Borderland Guard]. Ziem północno-wschodnich opisanie / Ed. and comp. by J. Gierowska-Kałłaur. Warsaw–Pułtusk, 2011. P. 1173; Straż Kresowa a Zarząd Cywilny Ziem Wschodnich. Współdziałanie czy rywalizacja? [The Borderland Guard and the Civilian Board of the Eastern Territories. Cooperation or rivalry?] Warsaw Instytut Historii PAN & Wydawnictwo Neriton, 1999. P. 129.

Lithuania as a whole into Poland. The plans of the Association of Borderland Guard leaders enjoyed moral support from the Polish government in Warsaw, which exerted strong, constant pressure on General Żeligowski, wanting Lithuania to subject to «*general Polish interests*».

The intervention of the Council of the League of Nations on 20 October 1920 already recommended a plebiscite as the method of settling the conflict between Central Lithuania and Lithuania proper[23]. Negotiations began on 13 December 1920 in Warsaw. As established by Piotr Łossowski, leading Polish expert on Polish-Lithuanian relations[24], the Lithuanian delegation, headed by Christian Democratic activist Jonas Staugaitis, was instructed to seek solutions aiming to... prevent the plebiscite from happening at all costs. Very important as well is that the delegation submitted its offer to the government in Warsaw, and not the PGC in Vilnius. On 20 December 1920, J. Staugaitis handed a declaration in which Lithuania urged the Polish government to abandon the idea of the plebiscite and recognise the border demarcated by the Lithuanian-Soviet Treaty of 12 July 1920. Vilnius would then become the capital of Lithuania.

Poland however advocated for the resumption of the union or the formation of a federation, which in turn was unacceptable for the Lithuanian side. After much pressure from the League of Nations, the Lithuanian government, cornered, explicitly refused to participate in the plebiscite[25].

The period of self-governance, which gave the PGC an asset in the planned talks and direct agreements with Lithuania proper with the aim of replacing its government with a new, joint representation of both political centres, lasted essentially until December 1920.

Despite the many actions aimed at improving the economic situation of the population of Central Lithuania, the PGC was losing popularity. It did not come unnoticed by the Polish public opinion either that the Lithuanians were not at all interested in real cooperation, neither with Central Lithuania, nor the Polish Republic. Witold Abramowicz, President of the PGC, was increasingly perceived by Poles as a theorist detached from reality.

The situation became critical by the end of December 1920, when a Delegate of the Polish Government arrived to Vilnius. On 1 February 1921, General Żeligowski

[23] *Wambaugh S.* Plebiscites since the World War. With collection of official documents. Vol. 2. Washington, 1933. Doc. 93. P. 269–270 in: *Łossowski P.* Stosunki polsko-litewskie 1921–1939. Warsaw: Instytut Historii PAN & Mazowiecka Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczno-Pedagogiczna w Łowiczu, 1997. P. 9.

[24] *Łossowski P.* Konflikt polsko-litewski 1918–1920 [The Polish-Lithuanian conflict. 1918–1920] Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1996. P. 252.

[25] Their note, dated 13 February 1921, addressed to the Council of the League of Nations, stated clearly that «regarding Vilnius, which is the capital of Lithuania, the Lithuanian government considers it necessary and fair that the city be incorporated into Lithuania without resorting to a plebiscite».

postponed the elections to the Vilnius Sejm[26]. When these were suspended, it became clear that the political initiative regarding the fate of Central Lithuania depended in no way on Vilnius and the PGC, but on the Polish Government alone. The situation in Poland was not idle. Wishing to comply with the principles of democracy, Żeligowski did not want to govern in opposition to the opinion of the majority of the society. He became an enforcer of the will of the government in Warsaw. The PGC in its new composition abandoned the political line followed so far, subordinating their actions to the decisions of the Polish government. Negotiations were conducted with Aleksander Meysztowicz, in order to persuade him to take over the functions of General Żeligowski and lead to «the organisation of elections and the incorporation» of the Vilnius region to Poland. Obviously, this course of action enjoyed the support of the majority of Vilnius Poles, who developed a growing aversion towards anything that could separate them from Poland proper. The elections to the Vilnius Sejm took place on 8 January 1922. The harsh defeat experienced by Polish federalists was easily predictable even several months prior.

The case of Klaipėda

The condemnation of Żeligowski's Mutiny and the indignation demonstrated (to this day) by Lithuanian politicians did not keep the latter from employing the exact same scenario — in different socio-political circumstances — in the resolution of the Klaipėda issue[27].

The Klaipėda Region constituted a fragment of the so-called Lithuania Minor, situated on the right bank of the river Pregel, i.e. the north-eastern part of East Prussia. As a result of an increase in German settlement in Lithuania Minor, the Lithuanian language was forced out of schools and social life. Lithuania Minor played a significant role in the history of the Lithuania's national revival nonetheless. The newspaper «*Auszra*» was printed there since 1883, and so did Jonas Basanavičius, father of Lithuania's national revival, with his articles. Having been part of Prussia for many years, and given the dominance of Evangelicalism in this area, the local Lithuanians differed considerably from their counterparts in Lithuania proper. However, they were not Germans. They considered themselves a part of the surrounding German environment, were loyal to the Prussian state and obedient to the dictates of the Protestant religion.

Germany's defeat in 1918 caused a stir among Lithuanian activists from Lithuania Minor. On 16 November 1918 they established the Prussian Lithuanian National

[26] These events are discussed in the study: *Fabisz D.* Generał Lucjan Żeligowski 1865–1947. Działalność wojskowa i polityczna [General Lucjan Żeligowski 1865–1947. Military and political activity] Warsaw, 2007. P. 374.

[27] *Łossowski P.* Kłajpeda kontra Memel: problem Kłajpedy w latach 1918–1939–1945 [Klaipėda versus Memel: the Klaipėda issue in the years 1918–1939–1945] Wydawnictwo Instytutu Historii PAN & Neriton, 2007. P. 231 (further *Łossowski P.* Kłajpeda kontra Memel). The author relied on sources and literature, *inter alia*, in Lithuanian.

Council, which, after two weeks of debates (30 November 1918), proclaimed in Tilsit an act demanding unification of Lithuania Minor with Lithuania proper; as one might expect, it was received very badly by the German side[28].

The Lithuanians from Kaunas did issue, to the attention of Georges Clemenceau, memoranda addressed to the Peace Conference justifying, given Germany's defeat, the Lithuanian claims to the whole area of Lithuania Minor; however, due to the low status of their delegation (no official mandate for the conference), these proposals were not even discussed by the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers. All the more so that the demarcation of the German border in the North East was of great interest for a delegation with a much stronger position: the Polish one. The Polish side wanted to obtain a solution to the Polish-Lithuanian issues in the North-East, including the future, strongly anticipated relationship between the two countries. It was also hoped that the lands surrounding the mouth of the Neman river would end up within the Polish borders as a separate, possibly autonomous area.

The proposal presented on March 12 by the Commission for Polish Affairs of the Peace Conference included the demarcation of an ethnic boundary between Lithuanians and Prussians and became the foundation of the draft peace treaty, then handed to the German representatives in May. This project shattered Lithuanians' hopes of acquiring the entire, or at least a major part of Lithuania Minor, while failing to specify the fate and the status of the detached territory. Both Lithuanians and Germans claimed the Klaipėda Region for themselves. The Lithuanian interests in this rivalry were defended by Polish Prime Minister Ignacy Paderewski, who kept hoping for a future state union with Lithuania[29].

As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany lost a territory of 2860 km^2 on the right bank of the Neman river. According to the census from 30 September 1920, the area had a population of 150 746, out of which 71 thousand spoke German, while 67 thousand spoke Lithuanian. 132 thousand declared Evangelicalism, and only 5383 were Catholic. (There were as little as 1350 Jews.) All parties concerned sought to turn the outcome of this transition period in their favour.

Especially the Germans, who employed a strategy faits accomplis, treating the Klaipėda Country as part of their Reich. A provisional parliament was even appointed in summer 1919, which then selected an executive committee, charged with the preparation of a constitution for the Republic of Klaipėda. These efforts were foiled only by an intervention of the Allies, inspired by the Lithuanians.

By force of a decision made on 9 January 1920 in Paris, the Klaipėda Country was placed under Allied supervision. French General Dominique Odry was appointed chief administrator, with the title of High Commissioner[30]. Klaipėda retained nonetheless the existing German laws, German administrative, judiciary and educational systems, and previous German officials as well. All of these, including the German mayor,

[28] *Łossowski P.* Kłajpeda kontra Memel. P. 13.

[29] Ibid. P. 19.

[30] Ibid. P. 22–24.

Artur Altenberg, were appointed to the board by General Odry. The latter was soon succeeded by prefect Gabriel Petisné[31], but the once appointed officials remained in their positions. Gabriel Petisné was perfectly aware of the aims of the German policy, which consisted in preventing the assimilation of the local Germans with the hope of reclaiming Klaipėda in the future. It was with strong reluctance that he approached the project presented to him in mid-1921 by representatives of the local economic spheres, aiming to transform Klaipėda Country into a «Free State». Petisné feared an avalanche of events that would deprive him of actual control over the situation.

The question of Klaipėda was of a key and vital importance, both economic and military, for Lithuania. The representatives of the residents had already pronounced their participation in the shaping of an independent Lithuania by means of a resolution passe on Christmas Eve 1919. In response to this decision, the Lithuanian State Council (Taryba) dispatched their emissaries, who, immediately upon arrival in Klaipėda... realised that the differences between Lithuania Minor and Lithuania proper would exclude the incorporation of Klaipėda into Lithuania.

The proclamation issued on 2 March 1920 by Lithuanian Prime Minister Ernestas Galvanauskas, which called to participate in the elections to the Legislative Sejm, contained the Lithuanian stance on the Klaipėda Region: «Through their representatives, the people of this country expressed their willingness to merge with the rest of Lithuania and form a single state organism». The achievement of this objective has become the chief task of Lithuania's parliament and government. 21 March 1920 saw the adoption of a resolution co-opting the representatives of Klaipėda into the Lithuanian Taryba. It was also announced that the Klaipėda Region constitutes a single whole with Lithuania and should be incorporated therein, yet to be governed by special rules and retain self-governance. On 11 November 1921, the Lithuanian Legislative Sejm passed a resolution on the annexation of the Klaipėda Region by the Lithuanian state as an autonomous entity. The fact that Lithuania had not been recognised *de iure* and the conflict with Poland were not conducive to a rapid settlement of the Klaipėda issue at international level.

For the Polish authorities, Klaipėda was of secondary political importance, far behind Gdańsk. However, the Klaipėda issue was perceived by the Polish Foreign Ministry as an instrument of pressure on Lithuania in their effort to resolve the Lithuanian-Polish dispute. Of course, it was not in Poland's interest for Klaipėda to return to East Prussia. The port could be of key economic importance for Poland in the future, but only providing the normalisation of the relations with Lithuania. The vision of a future Polish-Lithuanian union, followed by the annexation of Klaipėda by Lithuania, also prevailed in French sources of that period. Further international initiatives towards Poland and Lithuania reaching consensus were consistently blocked on the grounds of the latter's position in this matter.

[31] The Polish diplomacy saw him as a supporter of the reconstruction of «white» Russia, properly aware, at the same time, of the danger posed by Germany, and inclining to the idea of a union between Lithuania and Poland, to which Klaipėda Region would be bound.

The difficulties of the postwar period and growing conflict with Germany regarding its non-compliance with the resolutions of the peace treaty relating to reparations were conducive to further reductions of personnel at the French garrison in Klaipėda. After three years, the number of soldiers stationed there had shrunk to 200. This was accompanied by movements of Lithuanians troops along the border, while Lithuania provoked an artificial boost in prices of food exported to Klaipėda, etc. The French acted in consultation with the Polish side, which leaned towards turning Klaipėda into a free territory under the protectorate of the League of Nations. In November 1922, economic activists from Klaipėda were invited to Paris to comment on the future of the country.

In spite of the Lithuanian Sejm adopting one year earlier the resolution on the incorporation of the Klaipėda Region, the opinions of the guests were not uniform; some preferred a merger with Lithuania as an autonomous entity, while others advocated independence under the protectorate of one of the members of the Entente[32]. A committee, headed by French diplomat Jules Laroche, was appointed to prepare a draft resolution; however, the result also failed to obtain the approval of the Lithuanians. According to the draft, the Klaipėda Region was to be declared a «free state» and administered for 10–15 years by a French commissioner. The board of the port was to comprise representatives of the Klaipėda Region, Lithuania and Poland. The final arrangements were to be made in early 1923. (On 15 March 1923, the post-war borders in Europe were ultimately approved by a decision of the Council of Ambassadors.) Laroche's proposal was seen by the Lithuanian side as a personal defeat and a threat of losing Klaipėda.

The Lithuanian government decided to take a different course of action. According to the findings of P. Łossowski, the representative of Lithuania in Klaipėda, Jonas Žilius, already urged the Lithuanian government to seize Klaipėda by force in early 1922. The shaping of the public opinion in Klaipėda began; the purchase of newspaper publishing houses allowed a vigorous promotion of pro-merger sentiments among the residents of the city.

In mid-July 1922, the Lithuanian government was still considering three variants of action regarding Klaipėda.

The first possibility was to hand over the case to the League of Nations while simultaneously intensifying the economic blockade of Klaipėda.

The second variant was to seize the city by force, as suggested by Žilius, within a period of action reduced to 24 hours.

The last option was to organise an uprising in Klaipėda against the German directorate and French administrators. The latter was eventually chosen, and to play the role of «insurgents» were chosen regular soldiers dressed in civilian clothes, as well as riflemen from paramilitary organisations. This staged operation was intended to pose as a stand-alone insurgency of the local population. However, significant

[32] *Łossowski P.* Kłajpeda kontra Memel. P. 36.

support from local Lithuanians was not really expected. According to the reliable account by Erdmonas Simonaitis, strong enthusiast of Klaipėda's merger with Lithuania, Lithuanian member of the Directorate[33], and future leader of the Liberation Committee in Klaipėda, the Lithuanians from Klaipėda Region had become pragmatists focusing on their own personal material gain. Apparently, they clung to the belief that, sooner or later, they would return to the Reich. In fact, they would show little concern over who was governing them at the moment: the French, Poles or proper Lithuanians.

The preparations for the «coup» were carried out in a systematic manner. Prime Minister Galvanauskas received in November 1922 an assurance from Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin, who was passing through Kaunas at the time, that Soviet Russia would not only abstain from obstructing the implementation of the Lithuanian plan, but what is more, it would not remain idle in the event of a military response from Poland[34]. In turn, Berlin considered a Lithuanian Klaipėda isolated from Poland a more desirable solution than the free city status similar to that of Gdańsk. From the German point of view, at the turn of 1922 and 1923, the Lithuanians were a guarantee of the inviolability of the German affairs until Klaipėda would return to the Reich[35].

On 22 December 1922, Lithuania was recognised *de iure* by the members of the Entente. By a happy coincidence for Lithuania, the governments of France and Belgium have decided on 11 January 1923 to begin the occupation of the Ruhr, which inevitably dragged their attention away from Klaipėda. At the same time, Poland watched the developments very closely, but with no intention to intervene whatsoever.

On 9 January 1923, the Lithuanian epicentre in the Klaipėda Region, Šilutė, saw the emergence of the Liberation Committee, which proclaimed the seizure of the entire power and entrusted Erdmonas Simonaitis with the formation of a new directorate. On January 10, the Lithuanian troops, in force of 584 soldiers dressed in civilian clothes and 455 šauliai, crossed the border in several places, meeting no opposition. They acted as «independent insurgents» and pretended that they were not standing up against the Entente, as their only objective was to overthrow the German directorate. The troops headed north towards Klaipėda, towards Šilutė in the central part of the region, and along the lower parts of the Neman River in the South. The local population showed no resistance, and just as Simonaitis had predicted, they also proved to be largely indifferent and passive.

On January 11, Raymond Poincaré, President of the Conference of Ambassadors, made direct allegations against the Lithuanian government, accusing it of inciting the revolt in Klaipėda and demanding the withdrawal of all Lithuanian citizens from this territory. The Lithuanian government immediately denied all

[33] This opinion appeared in the memoirs of Vincas Krėvė, Chairman of the Šauliai Union. See: *Krėvė V.* Bolševikų invazija ir liaudes vyriausybė. Vilnius: Atsiminimai, 1992. P. 96–98.

[34] *Łossowski P.* Kłajpeda kontra Memel. P. 41.

[35] Ibid. P. 39.

involvement. Commissioner Petisné refused to initiate negotiations with the insurgents. On 15 January 1923, Klaipėda saw a change in power, as the German administration resigned. A neutral zone was set around the barracks occupied by the French. The Lithuanian side created *faits accomplis* at a rapid pace. The Lithuanian Liberation Committee issued, on 19 January 1923, a declaration announcing that the Klaipėda Region was merging with Lithuania as an autonomous entity, independent in terms of organising its own economic and social life. Simonaitis, acting as head of the provisional authorities in Klaipėda, dispatched on the very same day a telegram to the Conference of Ambassadors informing of peace prevailing in Klaipėda. After five days, the Lithuanian Sejm «solemnly affirmed» the resolution of the Legislative Sejm of 11 November 1921. On January 26, a special committee for the situation in Klaipėda, appointed by the Council of Ambassadors and headed by French diplomat Georges Clinchant, arrived to the city. The committee refused to recognise the accomplished facts; on 12 February 1923, the Lithuanian authorities were handed a note explicitly accusing the Lithuanian government of instigating the events in Klaipėda and sending their troops there. Nevertheless, the Allies, engaged in their conflict with Germany, failed to show consistency in forcing the Lithuanians to withdraw their soldiers and dissolve the Liberation Committee of Lithuania Minor and Simonaitis' directorate[36].

Warsaw acknowledged the seizure of Klaipėda by Lithuania in the name of higher goals. Poland hoped for the eradication of «all unresolved issues in Eastern Europe», including, in particular, the recognition of the Polish eastern borders. (As we know, that issue was settled on 15 March 1923.) On February 16, the Council of Ambassadors decided that the Klaipėda Region will be handed over to Lithuania on condition of ensuring freedom of commercial transit and concluding a separate convention. The resolution of 16 February 1923 was accompanied by requests regarding the appointment of an autonomous government in Klaipėda and representatives of the local population, as well as the recognition of Lithuanian and German as official languages. Poland was to obtain a guarantee of the freedom of transit (floating) on the Neman river. The port of Klaipėda was to be administered by an international body with the participation of a Polish representative. Moreover, Poland was to obtain a free zone at the harbour.

On 19 February 1923, the Lithuanian army officially entered into Klaipėda Region, while the former commander of the insurgents, Jonas Budrys (Polovinskas), took over the position of High Commissioner. One of his first decisions was the expulsion of the Polish delegation. On 20 February 1923, the Polish delegate Marceli Szarota and his colleagues, who were already staying in Klaipėda for more than a year, were ordered to leave the country immediately. At the same time, the Lithuanians were opening the consulates of Germany and Latvia. This way, the Lithuanian side excluded all possibility of a thaw in the relations between the two countries

[36] *Łossowski P.* Kłajpeda kontra Memel. P. 49–50.

sharing centuries of joint tradition. Despite the many attempts made by the Polish side, the Lithuanians persisted in their obstinacy until the Polish ultimatum in March 1938. The authorities in Kaunas have thereby overlooked the hidden, yet real danger posed by Germany, consistently striving to rebuild its sphere of influence and power. The restoration of the German state of affairs in Klaipėda took place, as we know, on 21 March 1939.

In conclusion. The Lithuanian historical policy reveals, to this day, a remarkably high degree of flexibility in the assessment of the above two cases; Żeligowski's operation in Vilnius is treated disparagingly, while the Lithuanian military action in Klaipėda meets with praise. The obliviousness to historical sources, even if these were truly inaccessible to Polish scholars until recently, also had a negative impact on the canon of Polish historiography.

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