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The drawing of borders in occupied territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an instrument of implementation of German special policies

Zarys treści: Celem pracy jest przedstawienie niemieckich koncepcji politycznych realizowanych na okupowanych przez Rzeszę terenach dawnego Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w czasie I wojny światowej. Ich głównymi wykonawcami byli: szef Sztabu Generalnego Erich Ludendorff oraz Głównodowodzący Wschodu feldmarszałek Paula von Hindenburg. Kluczowym celem tej polityki specjalnej było maksymalne osłabienie samoorganizacyjnych możliwości Polaków.

Outline of content: The work aims to present German political concepts implemented in the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania occupied by the Reich during World War I. Their main contractors were Chief of the General Staff Erich Ludendorff and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg. The key objective of this special policy was the maximum weakening of Poles' self-organisational capabilities.

Słowa kluczowe: ziemie byłego Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego, Niemcy, Polacy, Litwini, I wojna światowa, Ober-Ost, granice, „polityka specjalna”

Keywords: Lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, First World War, Ober-Ost, borders, “special policy”

As we know, the successors of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania failed to form an international union in 1919–20, which would effectively halt possible expansionist attempts, either from the East or the West. The failure of the federalist policy proposed by Józef Piłsudski was due to the German “special policy” conducted in the territories of the Grand Duchy during the First World War.

Its leading concepts were formulated in 1915 by Friedrich Naumann in the well-known work titled *Mitteleuropa*.¹ In his opinion, Central Europe was destined

¹ F. Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin, 1915). For a general overview of this work, see: J. Pajewski, *Mitteleuropa, Studia z dziejów imperializmu niemieckiego w dobie pierwszej wojny światowej*

to become an economic and political entity subordinated to the German state. The Germans sought to control the situation in the entirety of the *Intermarium*.² On the other hand, the Polish population of all three partitions had been bound for 123 years by the hope that historical justice would one day be done and that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth would be resurrected. The implementation of the German plan in the East was therefore threatened by the explicit aspirations of the Polish nation as the dominant group in the lands newly occupied by the Germans in 1915; they also enjoyed an incomparably stronger position at the court of the Habsburgs rather than that of the Hohenzollerns'. The primary condition for the success of the German policies was the exclusion of any chances for the rebirth of the former Commonwealth in any form.³

It is difficult to tell nowadays whether the German analysts of that period were familiar with Józef Piłsudski's ideas published in 1895 in the periodical *Robotnik*. He postulated "slicing the Russian Empire along its ethnic seams". They undoubtedly used this patent in relation to some of the territories of the former Grand Duchy captured in 1915.

For the German policies in the occupied territories to succeed, the vast expanse of the former Commonwealth had to be dismembered as much as possible. The Germans adopted various stances towards the Polish population, depending on which part of the former Commonwealth they lived in.

- (I) Long before the outbreak of the First World War, Germany's principal nuisance in its eastern territories was the Polish population of the Prussian partition.
- (II) The Polish residents of the areas conquered in 1915 have been divided into two separate groups, strictly isolated and treated differently:
 - (II.1) Poles in the Kingdom of Poland
 - (II.2) Lithuanian Poles from the Ober-Ost area,⁴ which included but a fragment of the eastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (with Vilnius and Grodno).
- (III) In February 1918, during the break-off in the Brest talks, the Germans managed to move the German-Soviet frontline, placing the inhabitants of

(Poznań, 1959). See also: I. Goworowska-Puchala, *Mitteleuropa. Rdzeń Starego Kontynentu* (Toruń, 1997).

² J. Gierowska-Kałużur, 'Question of the access of restored Polish State to the Baltic Sea, in opposition to German interests', in: *Marea. Loc al memoriei și al desfășurărilor geostrategice*, ed. F. Angel, G.S. Manea, and M. Ömer (Târgoviște, 2014), pp. 225–38.

³ D. Szymczak, 'Sojusznicy i rywale, polityka i okupacja. Austro-Węgry i Rzesza Niemiecka w Królestwo Polskie w okresie I wojny światowej', in: *Pierwsza niemiecka okupacja. Królestwo Polskie i kresy wschodnie pod okupacją mocarstw centralnych 1914–1918*, ed. G. Kucharczyk (Warszawa, 2019), pp. 135–292.

⁴ The official name of the occupied region, *Ober-Ost*, was derived from the abbreviation of the German military title of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Commander-in-Chief of the East, Oberbefehlshaber Ost.

lands that had remained, until then, beyond German politics, under the latter's direct influence.

Poles from the Prussian partition fought on the Eastern and the Western Front in German uniforms. The territory of the former Congress Kingdom was unsuitable for applying the *divide et impera* tactic, as it was home to an organised Polish community, with some significant concentrations of Jewish population, but only in cities. On the other hand, the occupied territories of the Grand Duchy offered a wide range of possibilities.

Marian Świechowski's Vilnian files contain pre-war government statistics on Christian voters within the Grand Duchy (in the part occupied by Germans since 1915). According to him, 37.5 per cent of the population was Polish, 27.6 per cent of the inhabitants were Russians and Orthodox Belarusians, and 34.9 per cent were Lithuanians (or other groups).⁵

The German special policy (carried out by the Chief of the General Staff Erich Ludendorff and Commander of the Eastern Front Feldmarschall Paul von Hindenburg) was aimed at:

- (I) impeding, as much as possible, internal relations within the economically and culturally dominant Polish community of the former Grand Duchy,
- (II) causing an extreme economic crisis among the residents of Vilnius, thus forcing them to focus on survival,
- (III) creating or exacerbating existing tensions between Poles and Vilnian minorities, i.e. Lithuanians (3676 people) and Belarusians (2046). Vilnius was mainly inhabited by Poles (68,687) and Jews (59,112).⁶

The Jewish community was part of a large diaspora scattered worldwide. They did not have a homeland (or *Heimat*) during the First World War yet. The idea of creating a "Jerusalem of the North" in the former Grand Duchy was postulated occasionally in the press. This national and religious group could have threatened Germany's plans in the long term. The notes of Aleksander Szklennik,⁷ a Vilnian chronicler of the German occupation, reveal a picture that is surprisingly contradictory to the literature on Polish-Jewish relations in Vilnius in the years 1915–1918. Aside from divergent interests among small traders or service providers that would be inevitable in any part of Europe, it should be clearly emphasised that the Jewish leaders behaved in an extremely loyal and supportive manner towards Poles

⁵ Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Vrublevskių biblioteka in Vilnius (Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences; hereinafter: LMAVB), fond 168, fols 7–8, 'Komunikat prasowy nr 1'.

⁶ Data extracted from the German Census of Vilnius published in March 1916. A. Szklennik, 'Wspomnienia o wydarzeniach w Wilnie i w kraju'. *Dziennik*, part 1, ed. J. Gierowska-Kałuża, *Metamorfozy Społeczne Series*, 18 (Warszawa, 2018), p. 328.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 960.

throughout the German occupation of Vilnius.⁸ This attitude was understandable. In contrast to Lithuanians and Belarusians, these two national groups did not enjoy any protectionist treatment from the occupying authorities.

The activities of the narrow group of prominent Belarusian leaders were basically disregarded during German occupation. The occupied Vilnius and Grodno regions were home to but a small part of the “eight million-strong Belarusian electorate”. The vast majority remained beyond the frontline, under the influence of Russia in its consecutive forms: Tsarist, Democratic, and finally Bolshevik. Moreover, Belarusian farmworkers from the Ober-Ost area were much more receptive to signals from St. Petersburg, Moscow, or Minsk than those from a small group of activists from Vilnius.

In the past, Lithuanians benefited from the tsarist special policies in the Suwałki region. (In the second half of the nineteenth century, it was quite profitable to be Lithuanian there.)

Compared to Belarusians, they were more advanced in the development of their own consciously educated intelligentsia. During the Great Seimas of Vilnius in 1905, they officially claimed this Polish-Jewish city as their national capital. Despite the dynamic activity of Lithuanian émigrés in Russia, Europe and America, the Lithuanian community vastly differed in size from the larger ones. And unlike the latter, it had found itself entirely under German occupation.

Germany’s policies aimed at achieving their own political and economic domination in the occupied territories consisted of exploiting the political ambitions of the Lithuanian and Belarusian leaders. The claim made by Vejas G. Liulevicius (and several others) about the cultural mission of the German strategy in the East⁹ seeking the modernisation and enlightenment of these lands is acceptable under one significant condition: if we consider antagonising a multi-ethnic community which had so far been living on good neighbourly terms by means of treating one group unequally (or simply worse) and privileging the leaders of minority groups, namely Lithuanians and Belarusians.

Examples of this “modernisation” policy are abundant.¹⁰ For instance:

The scientific courses organized by Poles at the turn of 1915 and 1916 were terminated by the German authorities after a few weeks,¹¹ even though among the numerous speakers were representatives of the Lithuanian (Michał Birżyszka)¹²

⁸ For more, see J. Gierowska-Kałużur, ‘O relacjach polsko-żydowskich w Wilnie pod okupacją niemiecką (1915–1918) i bolszewicką (1919) słów kilka’, in: *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia jako obszar wielu kultur i polityk. Studia historyczne i politologiczne ofiarowane Profesorowi Nikolajowi Iwanowowi*, ed. A. Kwiatek, Z. Machelski (Opole, 2020), pp. 91–112.

⁹ V.G. Liulevicius, *Kriegsland im Osten: Eroberung, Kolonisierung und Militärherrschaft im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 2002), p. 72.

¹⁰ Aleksander Szklennik has provided numerous examples in his diary.

¹¹ See Szklennik, ‘Wspomnienia o wydarzeniach’, part 1, entries of 22 Dec. 1915, 15 Jan. 1916, 14 Feb. 1916, 21 Feb. 1916, 3 March 1916; M. Brensztejn, entry of 21 Feb. 1916.

¹² LMAVB, fond 79-838, Polish Education in Lithuania 1916 IV 3, fol. 4; Michał Birżyszka offered the lecture ‘On the history of Lithuania’.

and Jewish community (Dr Stefania Hertz)¹³, and the audience comprised people from all ethnic groups present in the city. Aleksander Szklennik, organiser of these courses and occasional speaker (he gave lectures on cooperation), noted in his diary: "I consider it a very positive sign that instead of engaging into politics, we have turned to scientific work and practical, commercial and economic sciences".¹⁴ The Germans shut the courses down using the nomination of Professor Adam Szelański from Lviv (privately a member of the National Democratic Party) for the role of administrative manager as a pretext. Given that the number of supporters of this party in 1915/1916 was estimated at 20 to 40 people (according to such sources as Michał Romer and Aleksander Szklennik) in a city of 200 thousand, no one could really predict that the German authorities would use this to accuse the organisers of... *Grosspolnische Agitation*.¹⁵

Since December 1915, the Germans have consistently supported all particular Lithuanian and Belarusian educational or cultural initiatives in Vilnius. The most glaring manifestation of this approach was the sponsorship provided since February 1916 to the Belarusian newspaper *Homan* freshly launched in Vilnius.¹⁶ The activity of Polish bookshops was being restricted in all possible ways, while at the same time three Lithuanian bookshops were allowed to open in the city...

The German authorities have wildly exploited the matter of the financial support provided to Vilnius by the Sienkiewicz Committee in Vevey. The first instalment of 50,000 roubles was distributed proportionally between the Polish, Belarusian and Lithuanian communities in accordance with the donors' instructions. A meticulous report was published in the press.¹⁷

The news spread quickly and it was clear that the chosen national groups were receiving the aid that had been addressed only to them. The second instalment from Vevey in the amount of 75,000 francs was therefore addressed exclusively to the Polish Relief Association for Victims of War. The German authorities announced that the Poles would receive only 15,000 francs from this sum, while the remaining 60,000 would be distributed by the Germans at their own discretion. At the same time, the Germans demanded that the president of the relief association sign the receipt for the entire sum, which he refused. The Lithuanian and Belarusian leaders

¹³ LMAVB, fond 79-838, Polish Education in Lithuania 1916 IV 3, fol. 4; Stefania Hertz offered the lecture 'What every woman should know'.

¹⁴ See Szklennik, 'Wspomnienia o wydarzeniach', part 1, entry of 15 Jan. 1916. The program was divided into three main sections: (i) philosophy and humanities, (ii) socio-legal issues, and (iii) mathematics and natural sciences.

¹⁵ Officially, because of the Hindenburg's ordinance of 28 June 1915 on political organisations.

¹⁶ See: J. Gierowska-Kallaur, 'Polacy z guberni północno-zachodnich (białoruskich) wobec idei odbudowy niepodległej Polski oraz białoruskich idei niepodległościowych', in: *Polacy na Białorusi od końca XIX do początku XXI wieku*, vol. 2, ed. T. Gawin (Warszawa, 2018), p. 81.

¹⁷ Signed by Fr Kazimierz Michałkiewicz and City Mayor Michał Węśławski.

vigorously expressed their support for the German authorities. This incident had a profound impact. Nothing causes division more than money.¹⁸

In the circumstances of the German occupation, the Lithuanian and Belarusian leaders quickly realised that allying with Poles would not be beneficial.¹⁹ Their separatist or anti-Polish actions, on the other hand, brought them considerable subsidies from the German occupying authorities. Already on 10 June 1916, the Lithuanian leaders submitted a memorandum to the German Supreme Command in the East, in which they attempted to prove that only Lithuanians were entitled to the political heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.²⁰

The Act of 5 November 1916 proclaimed in Warsaw contains the mention: “the future of the Lithuanian population is not a matter for this manifesto”.

In Vilnius the Act was nonetheless met with peculiar optimism. Szklennik noted on 31 December 1916: “It was said that Poland would be formed from the lands ‘retaken from Russia’, which means Poland would get Vilnius, as well as Kaunas and the Minsk region”. It is quite possible that the German authorities were responsible for encouraging this optimistic (and unjustified) interpretation of this Act by the Vilnians. Szklennik also noted: “While the letters from prisoners of war from Germany usually bore: *Russland*, *Wilna*, a month ago I saw the word ‘*Russland*’ crossed out and ‘*Polen*’ written instead”. However, in regard to the borders of the Polish state, the Act of 5 November 1916 literally states: “A more precise definition of the borders might be performed later”.²¹

The events described here were always accompanied by rumours and speculations. Undoubtedly, they were controlled and cleverly stimulated by the Germans.²²

¹⁸ See Szklennik, ‘*Wspomnienia o wydarzeniach*’, part 1, pp. 414–15.

¹⁹ Ivan Luckievich had even foreseen that situation and attempted to establish bilateral Belarusian-German relations in August 1915, even before the Germans have entered Vilnius. See: J. Gierowska-Kałużur, ‘Białorusini wileńscy w przełomowym momencie 1915 roku w świetle zapisów wileńskiego kronikarza Aleksandra Szklennika’, in: *Wojna i ludzie. Społeczne aspekty I wojny światowej*, ed. D. Michałuk (Ciechanowiec, 2015), pp. 153–70; ead., ‘Wpływ zmiany okupanta na miejską wielonarodowościową społeczność. Przypadek Wilna w latach I wojny światowej’, in: *Горад і яго жыгары : партрэт на фоне эпохі : X-XX стст.: зборнік навуковых артыкулаў*, ed. А.Ф. Смалянчук (Minsk, 2016), pp. 145–61.

²⁰ P. Klimas, *Der Werdegang des Litauischen Staates von 1915 bis zum Bildung der provisorischen Regierung in November 1918* (Berlin, 1919), pp. 23–25.

²¹ K. Kumaniecki, *Odbudowa państwowości polskiej. Najważniejsze dokumenty 1912 – styczeń 1924* (Warszawa–Kraków, 1924), p. 48.

²² On **10 January 1917**: “A prominent businessman from Warsaw (Mr. Jeziorański), a rare occurrence in the city of Vilnius isolated from the Polish Kingdom, assured its residents that Warsaw could not imagine Poland without Lithuania, especially now that the Germans have declared that the Suwałki Region would belong to Prussia”; **11 February 1917**: copies of the Council of State’s proclamation of 15 January 1917 have been sent via official routes from Warsaw to Vilnius in great numbers to be spread across the country. For this reason, as Szklennik wrote, “speculations and machinations have become commonplace”; **14 February 1917**: “Nothing can be heard about the establishment of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: neither a confirmation, nor a denial”; **14 March 1917**: German newspapers in Vilnius have reported extensively about the

The German measures were not accidental and constituted a specific plan of anti-Polish policies in the conquered territories. The German “special policy” consisted in slicing the multiconfessional and multinational, yet SINGLE society of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania “along its ethnic seams”.

The objectives were:

- (I) to perpetuate as much as possible the dispersion and weakening of the Polish community of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Vilnian Poles were not allowed to travel to Kaunas or Grodno, not to mention travelling beyond Ober-Ost borders, without permission. Obviously, these permits were not granted to Poles.)
- (II) to reduce the number of areas – from six to three – of German military administration with structures allowing for the construction of quasi-national Latvian, Lithuanian and Belarusian satellite states with Polish minorities in each of them.

What did the delineation of the quasi-national administrative districts of the Ober-Ost look like?

Hans Zemke states that, before March 1916, the Ober-Ost area was divided into six administrative/military districts (*Militärverwaltungsbezirk*).²³ The districts were: Courland, Lithuania, Vilnius, Grodno, Suwałki, Białystok.²⁴ On 1 May 1916 the administrative regions of Vilnius and Suwałki inhabited mainly by Poles and Lithuanians were merged. The new entity was named the Vilnius-Suwałki Administrative District (*Verwaltung Wilna-Suwalki*) with its seat in Vilnius.²⁵

recent promise that Belgium would be divided into two autonomous parts: one with Flemish population, and the other with Walloon population, under the executive leadership of the governor of Belgium. In Vilnius, isolated from the rest of the former Commonwealth, fevered speculations circulated: “The Białystok, Sokółka, and Biała districts will probably join the Kingdom [of Poland], while Polesia may be used to create the state of Belarus”; **16 April 1917**: “Among the ‘newest’ of news now in circulation, there is a dominant rumour that the Grodno Gov[ernorate] with the city of Vilnius and part of the Vilnius Gov[ernorate] is to be detached from the Ober-Ost area and the newly-created Lithuania, and that this entire territory will be merged with Poland”, Szklennik, ‘Wspomnienia o wydarzeniach’, part 1, pp. 835, 916, 921; id., ‘Wspomnienia o wydarzeniach w Wilnie i w kraju’. *Dziennik*, part 2, ed. J. Gierowska-Kałuża, *Metamorfozy Społeczne* Series, vol. 18 (Warszawa, 2018), p. 12, 89.

²³ H. Zemke, *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost und das Schulwesen im Verwaltungsbereich Litauen während des Weltkrieges/ Schriften der Kriegsgeschichtlichen Abteilung im Historischen Seminar der Friedrich – Wilhelms – Universität Berlin* (Berlin, 1936), p. 7.

²⁴ The Lithuania military district included one city with the status of a separate county (*Stadtkreis*) and 19 counties (*Landkreis*); Vilnius, respectively – one city and five counties; Suwałki – seven counties; Grodno – one city and four counties; Białystok – one city and seven counties; Courland – two cities with the status of a separate county and eight counties.

²⁵ *Befehls- und Verordnungsblatt des Oberbefehlshabers Ost*, no. 21, pos. 162, Betr. Verwaltung Suwalki, 25 Apr. 1916.

On 1 November 1916 the districts of Grodno and Białystok, inhabited mainly by Poles and Belarusians, were merged into the Białystok–Grodno Administrative District, with its seat in Białystok.²⁶

The establishment of the Białystok-Grodno District met with protests from the local Poles. They argued that in the times of the Commonwealth, the Białystok, Biała and Sokółka counties – later organised as the Białystok Oblast, then incorporated by the Russian government into the Grodno Governorate in 1843 – were located almost entirely within the Podlaskie Voivodeship and as such, in legal and political terms, they belonged to the Polish Crown. The Polish Committee of the Białystok Oblast convened a rally advocating the inclusion of this land in the Polish State. A number of resolutions were adopted, based on which the Polish Committee requested that the Białystok, Biała and Sokółka counties be reintegrated into the Polish State, regardless of the relations between the lands of the former Polish Crown and of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania after the war. The resolution remained ineffective. The Białystok, Biała, and Sokółka counties thus became a bargaining chip in the German diplomatic game against the representatives of the Regency Council in Berlin in the autumn of 1918.²⁷

After November 1916, several alterations were introduced in terms of the affiliation of different counties, for instance. On 1 February 1917, the Lithuania District (*Verwaltung Litauen*) was rearranged internally.²⁸ The “Lithuanian” communes of Baisogala, Jurbarkas, Jonava and Jūžintai were abolished and incorporated into the neighbouring counties of the Lithuania District. The Kaunas County (with a large Polish community) grew almost three times due to the incorporation of the Jonava County.

On 14 March 1917, an announcement was published regarding the merger, as of 15 March 1917, of the Lithuania Proper²⁹ and Vilnius-Suwalki³⁰ Administrative Districts, which, as Aleksander Szklennik dramatically put it, “left Vilnius to the Lithuanians”.³¹

²⁶ Befehls- und Verordnungsblatt des Oberbefehlshabers Ost, no. 63, pos. 405. Zusammenlegung der Verwaltungen Bekanntmachung Grodno und Białystok, 11 Oct. 1916.

²⁷ See: LMAVB, fond 168-13, fol. 162, ‘Rezolucja odbytych wieców Komitetu Polskiego Obwodu Białostockiego w sprawie przyłączenia tego obwodu do Państwa Polskiego. Białystok 8 listopada 1916 Podpisano: Komitet Polski’; *ibid.*, fol. 163, ‘Adres ludności obwodu Białostockiego do Tymczasowej Rady Stanu Białystok dnia 29 stycznia 1917’.

²⁸ After *Wiln[aer] Zeitung* of 14 Feb. 1917.

²⁹ *Verwaltung Litauen*.

³⁰ *Verwaltung Wilna-Suwalki*. The administration covered an area of 63,275 sq. km divided into 32 *Kreise*. The ranking officer in both administrations, Oberstleutnant *à la suite* Prince [Franz Joseph Fürst] von Isenburg und Büdingen, was appointed the head of this administration.

³¹ The Suwałki military district ceased to exist on 1 May 1916 and, together with the Vilnius district, it became a part of the Vilnius-Suwalki district (*Verwaltung Wilna-Suwalki*), with its seat in Vilnius. Retired reserve Major Count Yorck von Wartenburg was appointed head of the merged district. On 16 March 1917, the Wilna-Suwalki district was merged with the Lithuania district.

It is worth noting that this happened six months before the occupying authorities allowed the convening of the “Lithuanian Congress”, and also six months before the issue of the September Acts of the new Supreme Commander of the Eastern Front, Leopold of Bavaria, which formally sealed the fate of the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.³² Based on these acts, the German authorities formed the National Council of Courland, composed mostly of representatives of the Baltic German community, and an autonomous entity approximating the former Courland Governorate was established. September 1917 also saw the creation of the Lithuanian National Council and a “self-governing Lithuania” out of the *Militaerverwaltung Litauen* Administrative District.

As a result, shortly after the outbreak of the February Revolution, the Ober-Ost area was already divided into three administrative units.

The Courland District (19,139 sq. km) was theoretically dominated by Latvians; Baltic Germans also lived there, while larger concentrations of Poles could basically be found only in Latgale.

The Lithuania District (63,275 km²) was tailored in such a way as to neutralise, as much as possible, the dominance of Poles in Vilnius and its immediate vicinity.

The Białystok-Grodno district (26,394 km²) was inhabited by Poles and Belarusians.

In all these districts, Poles and Jews alike were minorities. The Poles from the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania have been divided not only by the front lines but also by the deliberate efforts of the Germans.

In summary

- (i) Some remained in the East beyond the frontline and then, following the Brest Treaty, beyond the division line.³³
- (ii) Some lived in a territory *dedicated* to Lithuanians.
- (iii) Some lived in a territory *dedicated* to Belarusians.
- (iv) Some lived in a territory *dedicated* to Latvians.

On 20 March 1917, the seat of the Lithuania district was moved from Kaunas to Vilnius; Zemke, *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost*, pp. 8–9.

³² See ‘Z Dokumentów Chwili LXVIII’, *Ojczyzna i Postęp*, no. 74 (17 Nov. 1917), printed as a manuscript, fols 8–15. Marian Świechowski, after: *Wiadomości Polskie*, no. 151, ‘The September Acts of Leopold of Bavaria’. The September acts of the commander-in-chief of the German army in the East, Prince Leopold of Bavaria, are the first attempt at determining the fate of the lands of the former Commonwealth not covered by the Act of 5 November, which once constituted, as part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, an equal and legitimate part of a single state organism with Poland.

³³ See LMAVB, fond 9-3462, fols 1–7, M. Świechowski, ‘Rozbiór Ziemi W.Ks. Litewskiego na mocy Traktatów Brzeskich w r. 1918. Tablice statystyczne z mapką’.

This division, however, did not, by any means, entail the intention of the German authorities to establish the independent and sovereign states of Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia.

From the point of view of the German occupying authorities, the objective of the Lithuanian Congress in September 1917 was to “use the method of *faits accomplis*” to take Vilnius back from Polish hands and to turn the Poles and Lithuanians against each other utterly. This, of course, does not exclude the presumption that the participants of the Lithuanian Congress were guided purely by their national objectives.

However, the first proclamation of Lithuanian independence (11 December 1917) served, in fact, only the interests of the German authorities rather than those of the Lithuanian patriots. Only the second proclamation (16 February 1918), cleverly imposed by the Lithuanians on the Germans during the negotiations in Brest, was a step towards implementing Lithuanian national goals.³⁴

Throughout 1915–1918, the efforts of Belarusian politicians were mainly beneficial to Germany, as they consistently compromised the honest intentions of the Polish side. The Belarusian conferences (at least eight were held during the talks in Brest), which were regularly supported by the occupying authorities, brought the results expected by the Germans. The Belarusians addressed the authorities in Berlin with a “requested” petition demanding the disarmament of Dowbor-Muśnicki’s Polish Corps stationing in what they called “Belarusian” territory.³⁵ Despite the significant contribution of the Belarusian leaders to the implementation of the German policies, the Memorandum of the Government of the Belarusian National Republic of 5 April 1918 to the Chancellor of Germany, requesting the recognition of their independence, was rejected. The charter of 25 March 1918 was drawn up too late. The Germans could not breach the conditions agreed upon with the Russians in Brest.

The Poles, however, reacted on time. On 21 December 1917, the representatives of the United Polish Political Parties in Lithuania³⁶ addressed the Secretary of State Richard von Kühlmann with a statement perfectly in line with the “announced peace programme of Germany and Russia, granting the people of the occupied areas the right to decide their fate”.³⁷ They objected to the division of the occupied territory of Lithuania and advised Kühlmann that “the only solution to the Lithuanian

³⁴ P. Łossowski, *Litwa, Historia Państw Świata w XX Wieku Series* (Warszawa, 2001), pp. 64–65. However, it should be clearly stated that this was merely “the appropriate declaration of independence”, while the actual success of Lithuanian politicians was made possible only by the defeat of Germany in the First World War.

³⁵ Gierowska-Kałużur, ‘Polacy z guberni północno-zachodnich (białoruskich)’, pp. 77–98.

³⁶ Namely: Count Marian Broel-Plater, Konrad Niedziałkowski, Witold Abramowicz, Tadeusz Dembowski, Ludwik Chomiński, Kazimierz Świątecki, and Witold Węśławski.

³⁷ LMAVB, fond 168, fols 5^r–5^v, ‘Do Jego Ekscelencji Kanclerza Rzeszy HR. Hertlinga 2 stycznia 1918’ (copy).

issue would be to merge the entire occupied territory into a single federal state with Poland while retaining the autonomy of its components”. These postulates fundamentally contradicted the consistently anti-Polish line of the German policies, so the German authorities ignored them.

Soon afterwards, the accredited representative of American Lithuanians and the Lithuanian progressive circles in Switzerland, Juzoas Gabrys, declared to the correspondent of the newspaper *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*: “The aspirations of the Lithuanians are simple: they demand an absolutely independent Lithuanian state. It must include the Vilnius Governorate and Vilnius, as the capital of the country, the Kaunas, Grodno, and Suwałki Governorates, the Nowogródek county and part of the Minsk Governorate”.³⁸ According to Gabrys, the so-called other ethnic groups of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania should be granted minority rights only in the cultural field.

And so, owing to their resourcefulness, the Lithuanians, alongside Germans and Ukrainians, also became beneficiaries of the Brest Treaty. Since May 1916, Lithuanian policymakers have been pursuing a strategy focused solely on their national success and have cleverly exploited their moment in the Brest talks.

On the losing side, aside from Belarusians, were the Jews, whom no one really took into consideration, treating them instead as *the livestock* of the conquered territories. The biggest losers, however, were the Poles. It was not just about the painful loss of the Chełm region and fragments of Podlasie but also about the division line crossing the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which ultimately tore the Polish community apart.³⁹

Conclusion

The German military command in the East prioritised not so much the “liberation of the local population from the yoke of the Russian Empire” – as German⁴⁰, Lithuanian,⁴¹ and Belarusian⁴² historians widely proclaim – but rather the suppression of any chance for the restitution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, especially in a modern, twentieth-century form. The declaration of the establishment of the Lithuanian state (16 February 1918) was a German “accident at work”, while the Belarusian lands – following the failure of the proclamation of the

³⁸ Ibid., fond 168, fols 7–8, ‘Komunikat prasowy nr 1’.

³⁹ See Marian Świechowski’s map (presented below) in his *Żywioł polski na ziemiach litewskich ze szczególnem uwzględnieniem obszarów okupowanych przez mocarstwa centralne: stosunki ludnościowe i własność ziemiska* (s.l., 1917).

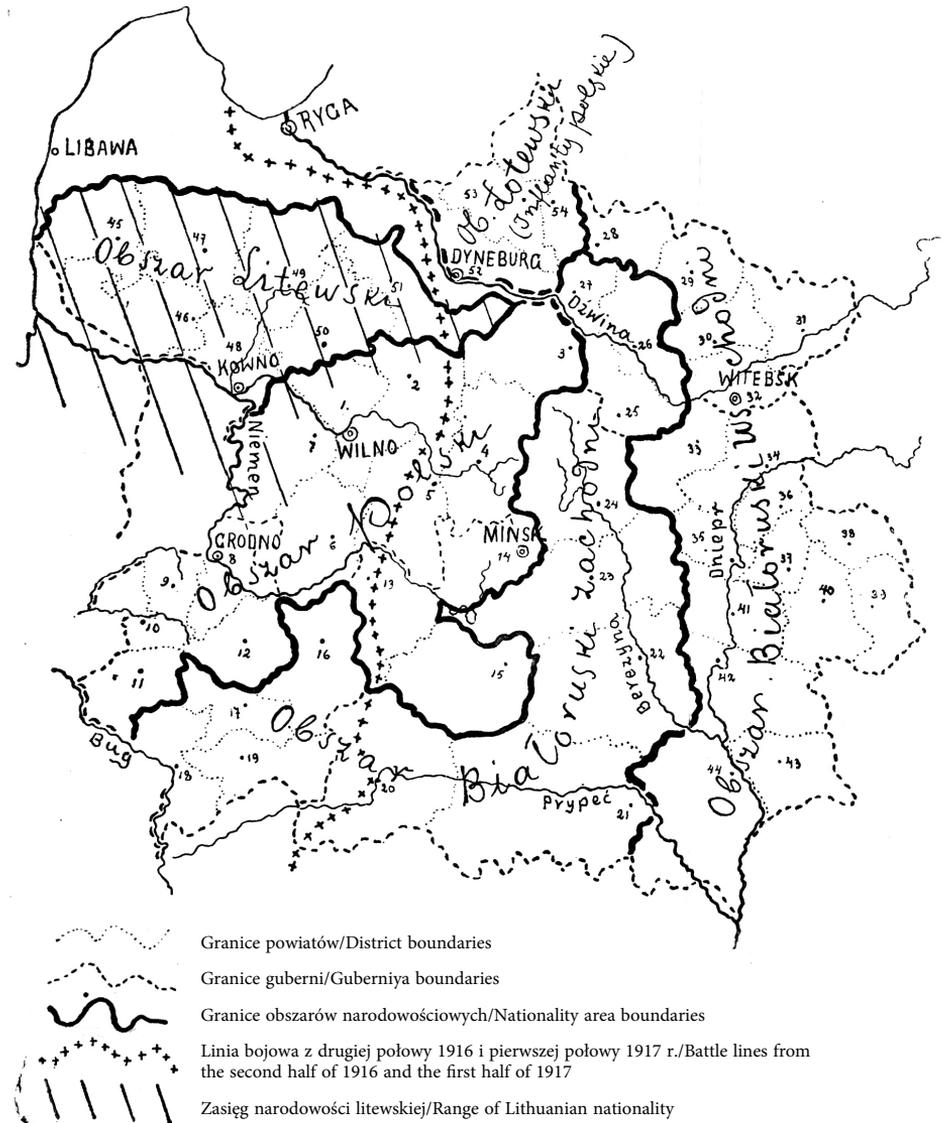
⁴⁰ Fritz Fischer being an exception.

⁴¹ For instance: Liulevicius, *Kriegsland im Osten*, p. 72.

⁴² See, e.g., V. Volkava, ‘Ziemia białoruskie pod niemiecką okupacją w okresie I wojny światowej’, in: *Pierwsza niemiecka okupacja*, pp. 669–846.

Mapka obszarów narodowościowych na terytorium W.Ks. Litewskiego (bez gub. suwalskiej)/Map of nationality areas in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (without Suwałki Guberniya)

Opracował na podstawie rządowej statystyki drobnych wyborców włościańskich M. Świechowski/Compiled on the basis of government statistics of minor peasant voters by M. Świechowski



Source: M. Świechowski, *Żywiot polski na ziemiach litewskich ze szczególnem uwzględnieniem obszarów okupowanych przez mocarstwa centralne: stosunki ludnościowe i własność ziemiska (s.l., 1917).*

		%% w stos. do ogółu chrześcijan/ Percentage to total number of Christians		
	km. kw	Grupa Polska: Polacy i tzw. Białorus. katol./ Polish Group: Poles and so-called 'Belorussian Catholics'	Gr. prawosławna: Rosjanie, Białor. praw. i Rusini/ Orthodox group: Russians, Byelorussians and Ruthenians	„Inni” (prócz żydów) przeważnie Litwini lub Łotysze/ 'Others' (except Jews) mostly Lithuanians or Latvians
Obszar polski/Polish area	77.369	57.7	30.8	11.5
Obszar białoruski zachodni/Western Belarusian area	93.572	27.4	69.4	3.2
Obszar litewski/ Lithuanian area	40.260	7.6*	10.3	82.1
Obszar łotewski/ Latvian area	13.727	10.6*	45.9	43.5
Zachodnia część terytorium W.Ks.L. razem (bez gub. suwalskiej)/Whole western part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania territory (excluding Suwałki guberniya)	224.928	35.2	40.2	24.6
Obszar białoruski wschodni/Eastern Belarusian area	79.428	14.2	81.0	4.8
Całe terytorium W.Ks. Litewskiego (bez gub. suwalskiej)/The whole western part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania territory (excluding Suwałki Gub.)	304.356	29.6	51.2	19.2

Obszar okupowany przez mocarstwa centralne (bez gub. suwalskiej). Dane statystyczne wzięte w granicach całych jednostek administracyjnych niepokrywających się ściśle z linią rowów strzeleckich (zob. tekst lub tablicę II)/Area occupied by the Central Powers (without Suwałki Gub.). Statistics taken within the boundaries of entire administrative units not strictly coinciding with the line of the shooting trenches (see text or Table II)

Część wyłącznie polska terenu okupowanego/The exclusively Polish part of the occupied area	52.173	59.6	24.8	15.6
Część polska łącznie z białoruską/Polish part together with Byelorussian one	73.639	52.1	36.1	11.8
Całość terenu okupowa- nego/The entire occupied territory	113.899	37.5	27.6	34.9

*) Na obszarach litewskim i łotewskim liczby procentowe dla ludności polskiej są znacznie wyższe./In Lithuanian and Latvian areas, the percentages for Polish population are much higher.

quasi-Belarusian state – were treated by Berlin solely as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Bolsheviks.

Conflicts of interest grew between the successors of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. However, it was only a month after the German capitulation that the members of the Jewish elders joined the Lithuanian Taryba. The circumstances of the Bolsheviks' entry into Vilnius caused further antagonism between the Poles and the Jews.⁴³

The citizens of Vilnius were sceptical of the federalist concept regardless of their nationality. Despite their defeat, the Germans managed to achieve their intermediate political goal. Poland would not become the leader of a new Central European Union. Due to the ultimate failure of the federalist policy sealed by the signing of the Peace of Riga, no powerful multinational union would emerge in the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to effectively put a halt to any later expansionist attempts, either from the East or from the West.

Abstract

The aim of German occupation policy in the former territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania occupied during World War I was to achieve total political and economic dominance by exploiting the political ambitions of Lithuanian and Belarusian leaders. From December 1915, the Germans consistently supported all educational and cultural initiatives of Lithuania and Belarus in Vilnius.

The announcement of the first Lithuanian proclamation of independence (December 11) was part of the long-term goals of German policy. The Lithuanians skillfully forced the second proclamation (16 February 1918) on the Germans during the debates in Brest, which was the implementation of exclusively Lithuanian national goals.

On the other hand, Belarusian politicians throughout 1915–18 did work that benefited the Germans. Consistently supported by the occupation authorities, the Belarusian Conferences (at least eight during the meetings in Brest) brought the Germans the expected result. The Belarusians sent an “ordered” petition to the authorities in Berlin demanding the disarmament of the Polish Dowbor-Muśnicki Corps stationed in “Belarus”. Despite the significant contribution of Belarusian leaders to the implementation of German policy, the Memorandum of the BPR government of 5 April 1918 to the German Chancellor with a request for recognition of independence was rejected.

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⁴³ J. Gierowska-Kałaaur, ‘The turn of 1918 and 1919 in Lithuania in the light of unknown documents’, *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 54, no. 4 (Special Issue) (2019), 31–63.

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