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A DIRTY WAR: THE ARMED POLISH-LITHUANIAN CONFLICT AND ITS IMPACT ON NATION-MAKING IN LITHUANIA, 1919–23

Abstract

This article discusses the armed Polish-Lithuanian conflict during 1919–23. It flared in May 1919 when the first open clash between Lithuanian and Polish troops took place. It gradually escalated into an undeclared war and lasted until late November 1920 when, in Kaunas, both sides agreed to stop fighting along the neutral zone established by the League of Nations. However, there was no final peace agreement signed, only a truce, and low-scale paramilitary violence continued unabated in the neutral zone until as late as May 1923. The author argues that the conflict involved various paramilitary formations which terrorised the civilians in the disputed borderland. For the Lithuanian government, the war against Poland provided an opportunity for total mobilization of the Lithuanian society. The fact that, during the entire interwar period, the conflict remained open-ended, ensured that the paramilitary structures and military laws that emerged during it would remain in place for much longer.

Keywords: Polish-Lithuanian War, Soviet-Polish War, violence, paramilitarism, ethnic conflict, nation-making

I INTRODUCTION

This article is based on my recently published monograph *War, Revolution and Nation Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2018). It traces the history of the armed Polish-Lithuanian conflict and explores its impact on nation-making in interwar Lithuania. Although the conflict has already been studied from a variety of military and diplomatic perspectives,¹

¹ For a few classical accounts of the conflict, see Alfred Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania* (New York, 1959); Piotr Łossowski, *Konflikt polsko-litewski, 1918–1920* (Warszawa, 1996); Krzysztof Buchowski, *Litwomani i polonizatorzy: mity,*

in my view, the social impact of violence that it had produced remains poorly understood. My aim here is to discuss the impact of violence on the formation of the Lithuanian state and society, with the focus on the involvement of civilians in the conflict.

Due to the focus on Lithuania, I used mostly Lithuanian sources, which in my view are still little known in Poland and the West. However, I also relied, although episodically, on Polish sources to present the perspective of Polish authorities and, more importantly, the living experiences of Polish-speaking civilians in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland.

Piłsudski's takeover of Vilnius in April 1919 helped Poles, Germans, and Lithuanians to defeat the Red Army, but from then on Poland and Lithuania came into direct contact in the historically multi-ethnic region that was disputed by several sides. The Lithuanian government saw large parts of the borderland as its own 'ethnic' territories, while Poland claimed them as its north-eastern region. The contest for Vilnius (Wilno) stood at the center of this clash: between early 1919 and late 1920, the city switched hands between Poles, Bolsheviks, and Lithuanians seven times. The collapse of state power, absence of any meaningful frontiers, and weak national consciousness among the local population turned the borderland into a likely venue for another war. Civilians in the region became the targets of intense campaigns of nationalization that went along with the fighting.

The Polish-Lithuanian war flared in May 1919 when the first open clash took place between Lithuanian and Polish troops near Vievis (central Lithuania).² It gradually escalated and lasted until 29 November 1920, when, in Kaunas, both sides agreed to stop fighting along the demarcation line established with the mediation of the League of Nations.³ Yet there was no final peace agreement signed, only a truce, and low-scale paramilitary violence continued unabated in the neutral zone along the demarcation line until as late as May 1923.⁴

wzajemne postrzeganie i stereotypy w stosunkach polsko-litewskich w pierwszej połowie XX wieku (Białystok, 2006); Vytautas Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė nepriklausomybės kovose, 1918–1920* (Vilnius, 2004).

² Edmundas Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai: nuo Pirmojo pasaulinio karo pabaigos iki L. Želigovskio įvykdyto Vilniaus užėmimo* (Vilnius, 2012), 60.

³ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 403.

⁴ Vytautas Jokubauskas et al., *Valia priešintis: paramilitaizmas ir Lietuvos karinio saugumo problemas* (Klaipėda, 2015), 77.

The Polish-Lithuanian conflict was a dirty war for two key reasons. First, officially no war was ever declared. However, more importantly, alongside their national armies, both sides used a variety of paramilitary troops that terrorised civilians. In fact, the civilians became heavily involved as violent actors. Although it was an inter-state war, in the remote towns and villages of the borderland, there was also a lot of ‘intimate violence’ as neighbours of different ethnicities took up arms against each other. Stathis Kalyvas has pointed out how “intimate violence is often related to interpersonal and local disputes” and “the search for national enemies becomes inseparable from the search for personal enemies”.⁵ In the borderland, this ‘intimate violence’ signalled not only the politicization of individual life but also a process of “pervasive privatization of politics” as neighbours settled personal scores based on social and ethnic hatreds.⁶

Finally, from the spring of 1920, the Polish-Lithuanian conflict also became part of the Polish-Soviet War. The opportunities provided by the latter were too attractive for Lithuanians, Poles, and Bolsheviks to refuse their claims to the region. Despite its officially declared neutrality, in July–August 1920 Lithuania used the temporary retreat of the Polish troops to reclaim Vilnius (from the hands of the Bolsheviks) and parts of the Suwałki region. Meanwhile, with a sudden change of its military fortunes in August 1920, Poland launched an assault of its armies both against the retreating Red Army and the Lithuanian troops that stood in their way. Unfortunately for the Lithuanians, this war ended with their loss of Vilnius and the Suwałki region.

Nevertheless, my argument is that the narrative of military events is unable to convey the full significance of the social and political processes that took place as a result of the conflict in Lithuania. The most significant of them was that the war served as the key ‘mobilising moment’ for the Lithuanian state and society. Paradoxically, it strengthened their new identity and helped to forge a social contract between the population and the government. The ‘Polish-Lithuanian struggles’ (*lietuvių-lenkų kovos*), as local contemporaries called them at the time, quickly entered the canon of national myth-making and

⁵ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, 2006), 345, 362.

⁶ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 363. By ‘privatization of politics’ Kalyvas means the practice of denunciations whereby people denounce their enemies to political authorities not for their political crimes, but to settle personal scores.

overshadowed earlier fights against the Bolsheviks and the German-Russian troops of Bermond-Avalov. In contrast to the two previous conflicts, the Lithuanian state already had relatively well-developed military institutions (the army, *šauliai*, and local military commandants) that could be used against its external and internal enemies. Yet, the open-ended finale of the Polish-Lithuanian War also ensured that some of the military structures and mobilization strategies that had been used during the war remained in place for decades after the actual violence had ended. In short, the war greatly deepened the nationalization and militarization of Lithuanian society.

II

FROM TENSE COEXISTENCE TO FIRST CLASHES

Initially there were no hostilities between the Lithuanian and Polish troops that faced each other after the Red Army was pushed from Ukmergė (east Lithuania) on 3 May 1919. Despite lukewarm diplomatic relations between the two states, both armies occasionally even cooperated. For example, on 11 May 1919, they jointly operated against the Bolsheviks in nearby Giedraičiai.⁷ On 20–21 May, delegates from both troops tried to negotiate a demarcation line between them, albeit unsuccessfully.⁸ Nonetheless, at least initially, they did not see each other as enemies.

There were cases where Lithuanian and Polish military garrisons and local authorities became established in the same town.⁹ Thus, in early May 1919, in the mostly Polish-speaking town of Širvintos, Lithuanians opened their commandant office (*komendatūra*) and a postal service alongside a Polish garrison. If the townspeople supported the Poles, volunteers from neighbouring villages flocked to the Lithuanian side. By late May the Lithuanian garrison already had thirty of them.¹⁰ In his memoir, one of the volunteers described how the peaceful coexistence between both troops escalated into a violent clash:

⁷ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 279.

⁸ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 40, 179–80.

⁹ Gintaras Lučinskas, 'Varviškės "respublika" (1920–1923)', *Terra Jatwezenorum*, 5 (2013), 280.

¹⁰ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 279.

Until September we lived with Poles quite passably – like a dog with a cat; later the tensions grew, because a Polish commandant captain Dvozak turned the locals against us, so that they would expel us from Širvintos.¹¹

The tensions quickly led to a build-up of troops on both sides. In September, after a Sunday mass, the Polish-speaking crowd demanded that the Lithuanian soldiers leave the town. After a brief deliberation, the Lithuanian commandant decided to evacuate; the decision was cheered by the crowd. Nevertheless, on 19 September 1919, the Polish troops attacked Lithuanians nearby Širvintos, taking thirty of them captive.¹² The long-term ethnic tensions provided the context for the military clash. Yet, in the end, it was provoked by the inability of both sides to decide which of them should control the monopoly on violence in the vicinity.

However, in 1919 the Polish-Lithuanian military conflict most intensely raged not over Vilnius, but the Suwałki area, an ethnically mixed region inhabited by Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews. Here Lithuanians lived in significant numbers in and around the towns of Puńsk and Sejny, while the Poles dominated in the region around the towns of Giby, Krasnopol, Suwałki and Augustów.¹³ This did not prevent both sides from claiming the whole area as their own ‘ethnic’ lands. From mid-1918 Lithuanians controlled Sejny and, on 1 June 1919, they were able to establish their garrison in the town of Suwałki too.

Until mid-1919 the only stabilising force in the Suwałki region remained the German troops. They openly favoured the Lithuanian side. However, under pressure from Poland and the Entente, they were forced to evacuate in mid-August. Their departure immediately led to a military crisis in the whole area: soon Lithuanians and Poles started clashing with each other. Sejny became a prize sought-after by both sides. Hoping to salvage the fragile position and to help mobilise the local Lithuanian population, on 20 August 1919 Prime Minister Mykolas Sleževičius himself visited the town. He addressed a patriotic

¹¹ Viršilos Antano Užpalio prisiminimai, in Petras Ruseckas (ed.), *Savanorių žygiai: nepriklausomybės karų atsiminimai*, I (Kaunas, 1937), 262–6.

¹² Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 280.

¹³ Edward Maliszewski, *Mapa narodowościowa ziem polskich* (Warszawa, 1919); Piotr Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie* (Warszawa, 1997), 55.

crowd urging “not to give up to the Poles”.¹⁴ Similar demonstrations of support took place in Kaunas and elsewhere. Nevertheless, on 23 August 1919, the Polish Military Organisation (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, POW) took the town. Two days later they were dislodged by a counter-attack from the Lithuanians. However, under pressure from the regular Polish troops that came to the aid of the Polish paramilitaries, the Lithuanians had to abandon it the same day. Another Lithuanian attempt to retake Sejny on 28 August was unsuccessful.

In the battle for the region, both sides actively employed their paramilitary formations. Quite often both used these locally-recruited troops to reinforce their ‘ethnic’ claims. On the Polish side, it was the local branch of the POW that started an armed insurrection against the Lithuanian government with the purpose of wresting control of the Suwałki from it. By late May 1919, the Suwałki POW already had 1,600 volunteers.¹⁵ A 300-strong unit of the POW participated in the initial assault on Sejny. Meanwhile, the Lithuanians mobilised about 200 of their ‘partisans’ in the areas of Sejny and Lazdijai.¹⁶ There were also some desertions since political loyalties were quite fluid in this multi-ethnic area. Thus, in the middle of the battle for Sejny, a Lithuanian officer, Bardauskas, switched sides, which led to his entire company being taken into the Polish captivity.¹⁷

The escalation of the conflict forced the Entente to draw a demarcation line between the warring sides. However, if the first line (of 18 June 1919) was rejected by Poland because it awarded most of the disputed Suwałki area (including Sejny) to Lithuania, the second one (the Foch line of 26 July 1919) was not acceptable to the Lithuanians because it left Sejny and most of the Suwałki region under Polish control.¹⁸ There was also public confusion over the precise demarcation of the Foch line: initially, the Lithuanians assumed that Sejny was left on their side.¹⁹ The fighting in the Suwałki region temporarily

¹⁴ *Lietuva* (24 Aug. 1919), 1.

¹⁵ Grzegorz Łukomski, *Wojna domowa. Z dziejów konfliktu polsko-litewskiego. 1918–1920* (Warszawa, 1997), 22.

¹⁶ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 275.

¹⁷ Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (hereinafter: LCVA), Reliacija apie mūšį Seinuose, 22–23 Aug. 1919, F. 929, A. 3, B. 19, l. 69–72.

¹⁸ Česlovas Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija: nepriklausomybė, 1918–1940*, x, Part 1 (Vilnius, 2013), 188.

¹⁹ *Lietuva* (15 Aug. 1919), 1.

subsided only after the arrival and direct intervention of the British military representative in Lithuania, R. Barrington Ward, in early September. With his mediation, on 6 September 1919, both sides agreed to consider the Foch line as their demarcation frontier and pull back their troops behind it.²⁰ Nevertheless, the Polish side kept the pressure on by allowing its paramilitaries to venture beyond the line. Thus on 12 October 1919 they attacked the town of Kapčiamiestis (south Lithuania), but were pushed back by a combined effort of Lithuanian troops and the *šauliai*.²¹

The Allies tried to deal with the volatile issue of the eastern borders of Poland by imposing a demarcation line on 8 December 1919. It stipulated that Poland could claim as its own only territories west of the line. To the chagrin of the Lithuanians, the whole Suwałki area was left on the Polish side, but Vilnius and Grodno ended up on their side. Piłsudski felt offended by the Allies' attempt to tame his ambition of creating a federal Poland that would include parts of Lithuania and Belarus. He even asked them not to publicise their decision for a while because "it could have a negative impact on the self-esteem of the Polish nation".²² Meanwhile, the Lithuanian government remained unaware of the line of 8 December for several weeks and continued upholding its plans about recovering not only Sejny, but also the towns of Suwałki and Augustów. Both sides claimed they were defending their 'ethnic borders' while trying to occupy even those areas where Poles and Lithuanians did not constitute majorities.

In early December 1919, the head of the Political Division of the Polish Army on the Lithuanian-Belarusian front, Marian Zyndram-Kościałkowski, produced a detailed report to his superiors on the political situation in independent Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderland taken by Polish troops.²³ He noted "the decreasing sympathy of the population towards Poland in the lands of Lithuania and Belarus". Among the key reasons were "the mistreatment of the local population by the Polish troops, police and private persons (especially by landlords)" and "the growing agitation against the

²⁰ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 277.

²¹ Konstantinas Žukas, *Žvilgsnis į praeitį: žmogaus ir kario atsiminimai: medžiaga istorikams* (Vilnius, 1992), 233.

²² Laurinavičius *et al.* (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 235.

²³ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 98, 330–7.

Polish statehood". He described the condition of Poles in independent Lithuania as follows:

The Lithuanian government ... treats the Polish population with disdain. The Poles live in a depressed mood due to the very strict censorship, ban on opening new schools ... their bread is taken away and those who speak in Polish are constantly monitored and suspected. Church representatives are impinging on their religious life; the state press is urging to dismantle the Polish estates; requisitions on a massive scale without any compensations are taking place.²⁴

Yet, the behaviour of the Polish side did not escape his criticism either. He noted that the Polish troops and administration "treat Lithuania and Belarus like conquered countries" and engage in "unjustified requisitions" and "assaults and robberies: especially the troops of General L[ucjan] Żeligowski (the 10th Division) and the regiments of Lida and Łódź, based on the Lithuanian demarcation line".²⁵ "The Polish police ... rarely contain ideologically trustworthy people" and its "corruption, black marketeering, and brutal behaviour with the locals" are rampant.²⁶ Kościółkowski claimed that "the national consciousness of the Belarusian population is practically non-existent; they do not understand the idea of Belarusian statehood".²⁷ Nevertheless, he concluded that this doesn't help the Polish government either because "it does not satisfy their basic needs". His conclusion was that "Poland does not have a firm and consistent policy on the future of Lithuania and Belarus".²⁸

The Lithuanian authorities treated the Polish population in the parts of the Suwałki region under their control and in Lithuania equally poorly.²⁹ There were numerous arrests and repressions against the Poles conducted by Lithuanian and German troops. They peaked with the announcement of the terms of the Versailles Treaty in late June 1919. Polish paramilitaries tried to prevent the German evacuation of the region, which involved the dismantling of local factories and railways

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 333.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 336.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 337.

²⁹ Krzysztof Buchowski, *Polacy w niepodległym państwie litewskim, 1918–1940* (Białystok, 1999).

and seizures of raw materials.³⁰ Overall, the Polish-Lithuanian military conflict much reinforced the pre-WWI ethnic tensions between the two groups. With the onset of fighting, more violent forms of conflict resolution became acceptable, and violence acquired its own logic.

III THE IMPACT OF THE POLISH-SOVIET WAR

The escalation of the Polish-Soviet War in April 1920 shattered the fragile truce on the Lithuanian-Polish front reached in late 1919. The Polish Army was able to stop the advance of the Red Army to the West in February 1919. From then on the Poles were slowly advancing, capturing Lida (17 April), Vilnius (19 April), and Minsk (8 August). The alliance of Piłsudski with the leader of the Ukrainian People's Republic, Symon Petliura, on 21 April 1920 shifted the balance of power in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland and allowed the Polish leader to prepare for his major assault against the Bolsheviks.

In early 1920 the government in Kaunas watched the build-up of Polish forces behind the Polish-Lithuanian demarcation line with great concern. Its military intelligence reported that in early February in Lithuania they reached almost 45,000 troops, eighteen tanks, and several armoured trains.³¹ The commander of the Lithuanian Army, General Pranas Liatukas, believed that the main target of a new Polish attack would be Kaunas. He feared that the Lithuanian troops, which at the time numbered about 27,000, were spread out along the whole demarcation line and would not be able to defend the provisional capital.³² Moreover, after the Kaunas garrison uprising in February 1920, the army was bleeding, and its morale was down.

However, the worries over the Polish advance into Lithuania were misplaced; its main thrust came against the Red Army. On 24 April 1920, Polish troops launched a major offensive against the Bolsheviks and captured Kiev a few days later. In mid-March, small but intense clashes occurred between Poles and Lithuanians over control of the Turmantas–Kalkūnai railway line (in north-eastern Lithuania). The Poles

³⁰ Łukomski, *Wojna domowa*, 22.

³¹ LCVA, Pr. Liatuko slapta direktyva no. 1 brigadų vadams, 7 Feb. 1920, F. 384, A. 3, B. 67, l. 28.

³² *Ibid.*, l. 28–9.

managed to push the Lithuanian troops about five kilometres from the railway. The fighting eventually prompted the Allies to issue a warning to Poland on 3 April 1920 to observe the agreed demarcation line.³³

From Poland's perspective, Lithuania's position in the Polish-Soviet War became critical with the emergence of the news that Moscow had started searching for a peace agreement with Lithuania and other Baltic states. The Estonians were the first to be approached by the Soviets with unofficial proposals of peace as early as late April 1919.³⁴ The Soviet offer to all three Baltic states came on 11 September 1919, but initially, they were quite lukewarm toward it.³⁵ There were justified fears that the Allies would cut their support for the Baltics because they still hoped that the Bolsheviks could be defeated by the White Russian armies, and therefore Russia should remain undivided. However, having expelled the Red Army from most of its territories, the Baltic states had little desire to participate in the anti-Bolshevik campaign. Moreover, in early 1920 Soviet Russia seemed to be the only great power willing to recognise their independence fully. Finally, a sudden shift in the Russian policy of the Allies also took place. On 13 December 1919, the Supreme Council of the Allies withdrew support for the White Russian armies.³⁶ For the Baltic governments, this decision opened a window of opportunity to end their own frontier wars with the Soviets.

On 14 September 1919 in Tallinn, and on 29 September – 1 October in Tartu, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians tried to coordinate their efforts in negotiating with the Soviets. Between 11 and 19 November, they gathered again to finalise their agreement in Tartu, but it stalled because of disagreements over the common terms of the negotiations. Most significantly, Lithuania was in open conflict with Poland over the Vilnius region, and none of its Baltic neighbours had any desire to meddle in that conflict.³⁷ In the end, the Latvians and Estonians decided to proceed on their own in their pursuit of separate treaties with the

³³ Antanas Rukša, *Kovos dėl Lietuvos nepriklausomybės, 1918–1920*, ii (Cleveland, 1981), 368.

³⁴ Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States: the Years of Independence, 1917–1940* (Berkeley, 1974), 70.

³⁵ G.K. Deev et al. (eds), *Dokumenty vneshney politiki SSSR*, ii (Moskva, 1958), 242, 244.

³⁶ Rauch, *The Baltic States*, 72.

³⁷ Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 230–2.

Bolshevik regime. Estonia was the first to sign one, on 2 February 1920, followed by Latvia on 11 August. Soviet Russia recognised their full independence, renounced all sovereign rights to their territories, cancelled Tsarist debts, and agreed to pay substantial amounts for the construction of their new states. All sides also agreed that they would not allow foreign armies and foreign political organizations to operate against each other in their territories.³⁸ For the Bolsheviks, the treaties provided badly needed breathing space in their desperate effort to survive in the cauldron of the Russian Civil War. The agreements also ensured that the Estonian and Latvian territories would not be used by their White enemies again. By signing their treaty with Latvia, the Bolsheviks also managed to forestall an attempt by Poland to build a broad anti-Bolshevik Estonian-Latvian-Polish-Finnish alliance in mid-March 1920.³⁹ By this time, none of Poland's potential allies were willing to continue their military conflicts with Soviet Russia.

The Lithuanian-Soviet treaty emerged in the same context as the treaties with Latvia and Estonia. However, it was signed only on 12 July 1920, during a critical stage of the Polish-Soviet War. Piłsudski's fortunes turned upside down when, in early July, the Red Army, having moved its strongest units from south Russia, counter-attacked and broke through the northern part of the Polish-Soviet front near the Berezina River. As the Polish troops pulled back to the West, opening a way for the Bolsheviks into Vilnius, the Lithuanian government found itself in a delicate, yet extremely volatile situation.

Now Poland sought to secure Lithuania's neutrality to avoid a dual conflict with both Soviet Russia and Lithuania, and to prevent the possible movement of Red troops across Lithuania's territory. To the surprise of the Lithuanian side, on 4 July 1920, the foreign minister of Poland, Eustachy Sapieha, acknowledged the Lithuanian state *de facto*, though without any references to Vilnius, and offered "to start a friendly relationship".⁴⁰ This offer was followed by invitation three days later from the Polish Army to form "a joint anti-Bolshevik front". It also contained an important note: "if due to the situation at the front, the Polish Army will have to abandon Vilnius, the leadership

³⁸ Toivo Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians* (Stanford, 2001), 297; Rauch, *The Baltic States*, 72, 74.

³⁹ Rauch, *The Baltic States*, 74.

⁴⁰ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 114, 371.

of the Lithuanian Army will be immediately informed, so that its army could take Vilnius".⁴¹

On the other hand, the Soviets pushed for finalising the peace treaty with Lithuania to put more pressure on Piłsudski and to lure Lithuania, if not as a military ally, then at least as a friendly neutral in the Polish-Soviet War.⁴² However, with the further advance of the Red Army, the appetite of the Bolsheviks grew: Vladimir Lenin in his note to Georgy Chicherin suggested "to occupy and to organise a revolution in Lithuania".⁴³ The Soviet leadership saw their second advance into the region as nothing less than another opportunity to establish control over it.

Meanwhile, the Lithuanian government hurriedly discussed its options in the Polish-Soviet conflict. The majority of its members felt enchanted by the possibility of retaking Vilnius. There were some, like Tomas Naruševičius, a delegate of the Lithuanian diplomatic mission to Moscow, who argued for a military alliance with the Soviets.⁴⁴ However, cooler heads, led by Augustinas Voldemaras, prevailed. They thought that Lithuania might lose the support of the Entente should it become an ally of the Soviets. Thus, on 18 June 1920, the Lithuanians rejected the Soviet offer of a military alliance.⁴⁵ However, they still kept considering various options with the Soviets that would have helped them to achieve their two principal aims: the Soviet recognition of Lithuania's independence and the inclusion of Vilnius into Lithuania.

In the meantime, the Polish government hurriedly sought support from the Allies. On 10 July 1920, in Spa, the Polish prime minister Władysław Grabski was forced to sign an agreement by which Poland would receive help, should it agree to give up Vilnius to the Lithuanians and to pull its troops back to the demarcation line of 8 December 1919.⁴⁶ By this policy, the Allies tried to mediate between Soviet Russia and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Dokumentas no. 115, 372.

⁴² Laurinavičius *et al.* (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 250.

⁴³ Lev Borisovich Kamenev (ed.), *Leninskij sbornik*, xxxviii (Moskva, 1944), 320.

⁴⁴ LCVA, T. Naruševičiaus telegramos į Kauną, 16–21 May 1920, F. 383, A. 7, B. 55, l. 188, 207–10.

⁴⁵ Laurinavičius *et al.* (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 254.

⁴⁶ The agreement stipulated that the issue of final borders between Poland and Lithuania would be decided by the Allies' Supreme Council. Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 117, 378. For the Spa agreement see *ibid.*, Dokumentas no. 118, 382–3.

Poland with the hope that both sides would agree to stop fighting along the line. Nevertheless, the Soviets rejected the offer; after all, the military momentum was on their side. They also hoped they could achieve more by direct negotiations with the Lithuanians and Poles.

The diplomatic events reached a frantic pace with the approach of the Red troops to Vilnius in early July. Finally, on 12 July 1920, Lithuania and Soviet Russia signed a peace treaty in Moscow by which the Bolsheviks recognised Lithuania's independence, cancelled old debts, and agreed to pay three million rubles.⁴⁷ Most significantly, Soviet Russia confirmed the eastern borders of the Lithuanian state, which included not only Vilnius, but also territories far beyond the line of 8 December 1919 including Grodno, Lida, and Braslau. The treaty was a Soviet-Lithuanian affront to Poland, which was obviously not consulted about the borders. Article 5 of the treaty announced Lithuania as a neutral country. However, an attachment to the treaty allowed the Red Army to use Lithuania's territory "for strategic military purposes" during the Polish-Soviet War.⁴⁸ The foreign minister of Lithuania, Juozas Purickis, later admitted that the attachment was forced upon the Lithuanian delegation in Moscow after a Soviet threat that the whole peace treaty may be suspended if the Lithuanians refused to accept the attachment.⁴⁹ It is thus no wonder that the treaty produced an adverse reaction from Great Britain.⁵⁰ At the same time, Poland refused to acknowledge the Soviet-Lithuanian agreement altogether, seeing it as nothing other than an anti-Polish conspiracy.⁵¹

The Lithuanian government thus could have received Vilnius from the hands of the Poles (following the Spa agreement of 10 July 1920); from the Bolsheviks (based on the peace treaty of 12 July); or by their own military efforts. It seems, at least initially, that the government favoured the third option.⁵² Thus on 12 July the head of the army, General Stasys Nastopka, ordered the Lithuanian troops to take Vilnius

⁴⁷ Juozas Žiugžda (ed.), *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai*, iv (Vilnius, 1961), 64–76.

⁴⁸ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 125a, 396–7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Dokumentas no. 125d, 401–2.

⁵⁰ Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 263.

⁵¹ Łukomski, *Wojna domowa*, 30; Łossowski, *Konflikt polsko-litewski 1918–1920*, 116.

⁵² Laurinavičius claims that their effort was only half-hearted. See Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 260.

'before the Bolsheviks'.⁵³ Recognising that the military situation was hopeless, Piłsudski came to the reluctant decision on 13 July to allow Lithuanians into Vilnius. On 14 July a Lithuanian armoured train moved from Kaunas in the direction of Vilnius but was attacked by the Polish troops near Vievis. Apparently, the Polish troops had not yet received an order to let the Lithuanians through.⁵⁴ After the four-hour battle, a Polish commander admitted it was a misunderstanding.⁵⁵ However, it stalled the Lithuanian expedition to capture Vilnius. In the meantime, on the evening of the same day, the Red cavalry corps of General Gai D. Gai swept through the streets of a barely-defended downtown Vilnius and occupied the city.

Having arrived in Vilnius on the afternoon of 15 July, the Lithuanian troops found it full of Bolsheviks and already decorated with red flags. The majority of Vilnius population, Poles and Jews, watched with curiosity how the recent enemies, Bolshevik and Lithuanian soldiers, marched next to each other on the streets. The Soviets did not resist the Lithuanians, but they openly plundered the apartments of 'the Polish bourgeoisie'. They also helped themselves to the stockpiles of military provisions left by the Polish Army. The train station soon filled up with echelons full of war bounty bound for Russia. To avoid possible tensions between the Lithuanian and Russian troops, the Lithuanian military command pulled its units from Vilnius and left only a tiny commandant office guarded by two infantry companies to keep at least a symbolic Lithuanian presence in the city.

In the meantime, the public mood in Kaunas was jubilant. On 16 July a huge crowd gathered in front of the city council to celebrate 'the recovery of the capital'. The *šauliai* and various public organizations, including Jewish and women societies, sent their representatives, while several prominent speakers greeted the crowd.⁵⁶ As people marched from the city centre to the British mission, an orchestra played Lithuanian and British anthems, and the crowd cheered the British delegates for the Spa conference that had acknowledged Vilnius as part of Lithuania.⁵⁷ The Christian Democrat newspaper *Laisvė* summed up

⁵³ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 124, 392.

⁵⁴ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 291.

⁵⁵ Vidmantas Jankauskas, *Kario kelias: generolas Kazimieras Ladiga nepriklausomybės kovose* (Vilnius, 2007), 223.

⁵⁶ *Lietuva* (18 July 1920), 1.

⁵⁷ Jonas Petraitis, *Mūsų žygiai*, ii (Kaunas, 1937), 37.

the public mood: “Kaunas is celebrating ... Soon all our towns and villages will be celebrating too. Vilnius is ours!”

The Polish withdrawal also provided the Lithuanian government with an opportunity to recapture those contested territories which Lithuania had lost to Poland in 1919. On 19 July 1920, the Lithuanian troops again advanced into the Suwałki region along the whole Polish-Lithuanian front and pushed away those Polish paramilitaries that attempted to control it after the retreat of regular Polish forces. On 19 July, the Lithuanians took Sejny, Puńsk, and Giby, followed by the town of Suwałki on 29 July and Augustów on 8 August.⁵⁸ They also tried to take Grodno but lost their race to the Red Army, which had already occupied it on 20 July. By early August, the Lithuanian Army interned about 3,600 Polish soldiers who, as a result of the Bolshevik offensive, either became stranded on Lithuanian territory or were taken into captivity.⁵⁹

In Grodno a Lithuanian soldier, Vladas Korčinskis, managed to escape from Polish captivity and described the departure of the Polish troops from the town:

The streets filled with endless strings of military carts and escaping carriages, all crammed together with cattle herds and droves of refugees. All of them mingled together with equally disorganised squads of the retreating army. The town was gradually flooded with hungry and ragged soldiers – those who were left behind or deserters. Shop owners hurriedly shut down metal shutters of their stores, because soldiers, when asked to pay, pointed their guns at them.⁶⁰

After the arrival of the Red Army, Korčinskis turned himself over to the Bolsheviks and was taken to a local Red commissar. On his way he and his Bolshevik guard were attacked by a column of barefooted men, the Soviet POWs returning from Polish captivity. They thought he was a Polish officer and wanted to take his boots. His guard had difficulty explaining to them that, in fact, he was a Lithuanian soldier and that now the Lithuanians and Bolsheviks were fighting together against the Poles. Finally, with a permit issued by the local commissar,

⁵⁸ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 298–9.

⁵⁹ LCVA, *Žinios apie lenkų karo belaisvius*, 10 Aug. 1920, F. 384, A. 2, B. 138, l. 4.

⁶⁰ Vladas Korčinskis, ‘Trys dienos su Gajaus raitāja kariuomene pietų Lietuvoje’, in *Karo archyvas*, 8 (1937), 307.

Korčinskis was able to make it to the Lithuanian troops stationed near Druskininkai.⁶¹

If the explosion of fighting shifted the state frontiers in one direction, a sudden change in military fortunes swung them the opposite way. The change came with the 'Miracle on the Vistula' which took place on 14–16 August 1920, when the revitalised Polish Army counter-attacked the overstretched Red troops near Warsaw. As the Polish troops broke through the Bolshevik front, the Red Army started pulling back from central Poland with the hope of establishing its line of defence along the Bug River and around Grodno. Meanwhile, the Red cavalry corps of Gai found themselves stranded as far as East Prussia from where they tried to return to Soviet Russia through Lithuania.⁶²

On 27 August 1920, a Polish military delegation arrived in Kaunas to present its demands to the Lithuanian government. They included the request to withdraw the Lithuanian units from the Suwałki region to the Foch line, to allow the Poles to use the Grodno–Lida and Grodno–Vilnius railway lines, and to ensure Lithuania's neutrality in the Polish-Bolshevik conflict.⁶³ The Lithuanian side replied that it was out of the question to allow Polish troops to move across its territory in their pursuit of the Bolsheviks. Since Poland refused to acknowledge the Lithuanian-Soviet treaty of 12 July that had assigned to Lithuania substantial lands claimed by Poland, the road to a new escalation of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict was open. On 28 August the advancing Polish troops quickly cleared the Lithuanian units from Augustów, and on 30 August they launched a broad frontal attack on their positions in the Suwałki region. On 31 August Suwałki, Sejny, and Giby were all retaken by the Polish Army.⁶⁴

After they arrived in Vilnius, the Bolsheviks largely ignored the presence of the Lithuanian commandant in the city and continued sending echelons full of military booty to Russia. They procrastinated about delivering on their promised transfer of the city to the Lithuanians: they complained to the Lithuanian government about the poor condition of local roads and asked for permission to use Lithuania's roads and railways. The Lithuanian side refused, but there came reports

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 307–37.

⁶² Kazys Ališauskas, 'Istorinės pastabos', *Karys*, 2 (1974), 55.

⁶³ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 150, 454–6.

⁶⁴ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 306.

that the Red Army was already using some of the roads near Varėna (south-eastern Lithuania).⁶⁵ Under pressure from the Lithuanians, on 6 August the Bolsheviks finally signed a military convention agreeing to finish the transfer of Vilnius by 1 September.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, on 15 July in Vilnius, the Bolsheviks established a local revolutionary committee staffed by the old-timers of the former LitBel (the Soviet Lithuanian-Belarusian Republic): Romuald Muklewicz, Vincas Kapsukas, Zigmantas Angarietis, and others. Bolshevik propaganda greatly intensified in the country, and the local Communist press started calling for an armed workers' insurrection in Lithuania.⁶⁷ In essence, Soviet Russia tried to follow the policy of 'internal Sovietization' that had been unsuccessfully applied in early 1919. On 28 July in Białystok, the Soviets also established a Polish revolutionary committee led by Julian Marchlewski and Feliks Dzierżyński. It seemed that, after all, the second Soviet attempt to export the revolution abroad might be more successful.

The government in Kaunas watched the situation in Vilnius and the rest of Lithuania after the return of the Red Army with increasing alarm. On 23 July 1920 the Lithuanian authorities reintroduced martial law across the whole country. In his speech to the Seimas, Minister of Defense Konstantinas Žukas explained that it was necessary to stop the Bolshevik propaganda, to prevent the illegal flow of foodstuffs from Kaunas to Vilnius, and to ensure a more efficient mobilization of men into the army.⁶⁸

The defeat of the Bolsheviks near Warsaw totally changed their attitude toward the Lithuanian government and the transfer of Vilnius to the Lithuanians. Pushed by the rapid Polish advance, the Bolsheviks hastily evacuated Vilnius on 27 August, even earlier than the agreed deadline of 1 September. The transfer of the city to the Lithuanians was a fast, but not quite amicable, affair. The Bolsheviks hurriedly dismantled and tried to evacuate the technical equipment

⁶⁵ LCVA, St. Nastopkos telefonograma no. 492 Vilniaus m. ir apskrities komendantui, 28 July 1920, F. 496, A. 2, B. 778, l. 6.

⁶⁶ LCVA, 1920 m. rugpjūčio 6 d. konvencija tarp Lietuvos ir Sovietų Rusijos, F. 929, A. 3, B. 10, l. 183–5.

⁶⁷ Romas Šarmaitis (ed.), *Lietuvos komunistų partijos istorijos apybraiža*, i (Vilnius, 1971), 484–6; Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 265; Žiugžda (ed.), *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai*, iii, 153.

⁶⁸ Žiugžda (ed.), *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai*, iv, 77.

of local factories. In Lentvaris (near Vilnius) they pillaged the local population.⁶⁹ In the meantime the Lithuanians, trying to put more pressure on the Red Army, derailed one of its evacuation trains.⁷⁰ However, military skirmishes were avoided. On the eve of their evacuation, the Bolsheviks in Vilnius arrested about 180 people, mostly prosperous traders; the majority were executed at night, and the others were taken by train to Soviet Russia.⁷¹ The first Lithuanian troops started arriving in the city on 25 August.⁷² On 29 August the head of the Lithuanian Army, Colonel Žukas, issued an official note thanking his troops for “the liberation of the capital of our forefathers”. The Lithuanian tricolour was raised on the top of Gediminas castle tower in Vilnius, while the press in Kaunas exploded with patriotic enthusiasm.⁷³

The importance of capturing Vilnius for both the Lithuanian government and the public mood in the country could not be overestimated. On 28 August the pro-government *Lietuva* wrote: “Today Vilnius must be the venue where, without any delay, new organizations must be created ... to educate and bring culture to the East of Lithuania”.⁷⁴ Lithuanization had become the preferred policy of the government in the newly regained city: some of the state offices were to be transferred from Kaunas. Meanwhile, there came a massive lay-off of Polish officials, about two-thirds of whom lost their jobs.⁷⁵

Piłsudski tried to negotiate with the Lithuanian government throughout the last days of August and early days of September 1920. He also put pressure on it through the League of Nations but to no avail. The Lithuanians steadfastly refused to give up the Suwałki region and move their troops back to the Foch line. At the same time, they kept insisting on their neutrality. On 2 September 1920, the Lithuanian Army attacked and ejected the Poles from Sejny, Giby, and Lipsk, but suffered heavy casualties near Augustów, which could not be taken.⁷⁶ Both sides continued clashing over Sejny on 10–13 September. From

⁶⁹ *Lietuva* (26 Aug. 1920), 2.

⁷⁰ Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 275.

⁷¹ *Laisvė* (29 Aug. 1920), 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷³ *Lietuva* (28 Aug. 1920), 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 284.

⁷⁶ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 312.

the perspective of the Polish government, Lithuania was not a neutral side because its forces protected the right flank of the Red Army based in Grodno and also occupied the territories which had been accorded to Poland by the Foch line, including Sejny and Puńsk.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, the Lithuanians argued they were defending their 'ethnic territories' accorded to them by their peace treaty with Soviet Russia.

The diplomatic and military stalemate forced Piłsudski to prepare a major offensive against the Lithuanians and Bolsheviks in late September. For the Battle of Nemunas (or Niemen, as it became known in Polish historiography), the Polish leader assembled a powerful force of the whole 2nd Polish Army that included seven infantry divisions and two cavalry brigades. This force was divided into two groups. The leading group was to attack the Lithuanians in the Suwałki region to dislodge them back to the Foch line and then turn south, cross the Nemunas and push the Red Army from Grodno. The second group was to provide a frontal attack against Grodno from the direction of Augustów. The Poles faced a considerably smaller Lithuanian force, which included seventeen infantry battalions, three cavalry squadrons, six artillery batteries, and two armed cars.⁷⁸

The Polish offensive started on the morning of 22 September 1920. The cavalry brigades quickly broke through the Lithuanian positions and captured the towns of Kapčiamiestis and Druskininkai. Having dislodged the Lithuanians to the north, the Polish troops turned their main thrust against the Bolsheviks in Grodno and took it on 27 September. The advance of the Polish Army now continued behind the Foch line: on 28 September they captured Lida and on 3 October removed the Lithuanian troops from a key railway station in Varėna. One Lithuanian battalion found itself detached from the main Lithuanian forces and ended up in the middle of the withdrawing Bolshevik troops in Lida. As the remnants of the Lithuanian troops reeled back, their losses grew to thirty-four killed, 103 wounded, and more than 2,000 soldiers captured during the Polish offensive.⁷⁹

The defeat of the Lithuanian Army in the Suwałki region came as a shock to both the Lithuanian government and the whole country.

⁷⁷ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 167, 489–97.

⁷⁸ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 323.

⁷⁹ 'Marijampolės grupės operacijos, 1919–1920', in *Karo archyvas*, no. 3 (1926), 256.

Even today Lithuanian historians view it as nothing less than ‘a catastrophe’.⁸⁰ Squabbles erupted within the military leadership over who was responsible for the failure, while Purickis accused it of disrupting the diplomatic efforts towards peace. A special commission was established to investigate the reasons for the collapse. On 1 October 1920 the head of the army, Kazimieras Ladyga, was forced to resign. On 25 September, MP Mykolas Sleževičius initiated an emergency session of parliament, as the situation had become critical. He called for the mobilization of the entire society: “we all have to take guns and march to the front: members of the parliament, soldiers, officials, farmers and workers”. His call was seconded by delegates of Jews, local Germans, and workers.⁸¹

The next day the pro-government *Lietuva* declared, “this war against the Polish imperialists is a holy war for us!” The government used military failure as another ‘mobilising moment’ for the whole nation. The country was swept along by an official patriotic campaign calling for the struggle against “Polish landlords who want to enslave us” and “take our land”. The social dimension of the conflict became critical as it merged with the ethnic hatred of the Poles. “Protect our population against the slaughter by the Polish Army, our women against desecration!”, ran an official address to the citizens. The government urged the population to “join *šauliai* units and to sacrifice to the army their savings, gold, jewellery, ... shirts for soldiers, gloves, warm clothing, and ... various foodstuffs”.⁸² On 27 September 1920, a special Committee for the Defense of Lithuania (*Lietuvos gynimo komitetas*) was created and led by Sleževičius.⁸³ On 1 October 1920, on behalf of the committee Mykolas Krupavičius urged local military commandants to closely watch Polish landlords in Lithuania, to arrest suspected persons, to limit their movement to their estates and to allow the *šauliai* and partisans to participate in ensuring security in various localities.⁸⁴

The diplomatic breakthrough came only in late September, when the League of Nations urged both sides to stop the fighting and stick

⁸⁰ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 340.

⁸¹ *Lietuva* (26 Sept. 1920), 2.

⁸² *Lietuva* (28 Sept. 1920), 1.

⁸³ Jokubauskas *et al.*, *Valia priešintis*, 66.

⁸⁴ LCVA, M. Krupavičiaus raštas Krašto apsaugos ministrui, 1 Oct. 1920, F 504, A. 1, B. 15, l. 56.

to the proposed Foch line. The fighting subsided on 7 October 1920 with the signing of an agreement in Suwałki.⁸⁵ It was a purely military agreement that established a new demarcation line. In the Suwałki region it followed the Foch line, then went along the Nemunas and Merkys Rivers and turned to Varėna, leaving it on the Polish side, and finished at Bastūnai (west Belarus). In essence, the Lithuanians had to give up the Suwałki region, including Sejny, Giby, and Puńsk. They also lost Varėna, a critical railway station on the line to Vilnius, but were left with a substantial territory around Vilnius.⁸⁶ The Lithuanian side realised the fragility of the agreement, noting that the Poles refused to extend the line beyond Bastūnai, which essentially meant that they could circumvent the whole demarcation line from the east in case there was an assault on Vilnius.⁸⁷ The city was not even mentioned in the agreement and neither side saw it as a final settlement of their borders.

It seems that Piłsudski needed the Suwałki agreement with the Lithuanians to calm down the Allies, but more importantly, to buy more time to reach a peace settlement with the Bolsheviks. On 5 October 1920, in Riga, the Soviet and Polish delegations reached a preliminary agreement on the division of the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian-Ukrainian borderland and on 12 October they signed an armistice.⁸⁸ The Soviets refused to annul their peace treaty of 12 July with Lithuania but agreed that Poland and Lithuania should settle their borders separately. The final Riga peace settlement between Poland and Soviet Russia was signed only on 18 March 1921. It divided the whole borderland into the Polish and Soviet sides, splitting the Belarusian and Ukrainian populations into two halves. The Riga treaty ensured that the demarcation line of 8 December 1919 was dead: the eastern border of Poland had been moved about 250 kilometres east of it.

⁸⁵ For a new perspective on the agreement, see the joint study of Polish and Lithuanian historians: Česlovas Laurinavičius (ed.), *Suvalkų sutartis: faktai ir interpretacijos / Umowa Suwalska: fakty i interpretacje* (Vilnius, 2012).

⁸⁶ For the text of the Suwałki agreement, see Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 470–2.

⁸⁷ The Poles' refusal was based on the argument that the territory beyond Bastūnai was still controlled by the Red Army. Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 243, 634.

⁸⁸ Andrei A. Gromyko and Boris N. Ponomarev (eds), *Soviet Foreign Policy: 1917–1980*, I (Moscow, 1981), 181.

IV
 ŻELIGOWSKI'S 'MUTINY'

Now the Lithuanians had to face the might of the Polish Army without any support from the Soviets. Before signing the Suwałki agreement with the Lithuanians on 7 October, Piłsudski already knew about the Polish-Soviet deal reached in Riga on 5 October. He started putting the final touches to his operation to retake Vilnius from the Lithuanians; now he was quite confident that the Red Army was not going to interfere in his operation.⁸⁹ Piłsudski's plan was quite straightforward, though it raised eyebrows among some of his supporters in the Polish Army. To circumvent the pressure of the Allies, who insisted that he should maintain peace with Lithuania, he decided to stage a 'mutiny' within his own army. It had to be carried out by the volunteers recruited from the Polish-Belarusian-Lithuanian borderland to demonstrate to the Allies and Lithuanians that the Polish claim to the city was based on the principle of self-determination. The troops were assigned a task of 'revolting' and taking Vilnius without any explicit orders from the head of the Polish forces. Piłsudski hoped that by capturing Vilnius, they would be able to establish a separate political entity in Lithuania that would serve as a springboard for his federal Intermarium (*Międzymorze*) project.⁹⁰

His search for a suitable 'mutineer' had actually started as early as mid-September 1920. After several candidates turned down the offer, Piłsudski chose General Lucjan Żeligowski, "the general whom I trusted completely ... and who, I knew, would not object to my and government's demands," as Piłsudski wrote later.⁹¹ Żeligowski was given an order to assemble his volunteers from the ranks of the 1st Polish-Belarusian Division stationed near Voronovo and Butrimonys. On 7 October 1920, in Eišiškės (south-eastern Lithuania), Żeligowski met its officers and, to their surprise, announced that "their current relations with the army's leadership will be cut". Therefore, they were given an option to join the operation voluntarily. The majority decided to join in, yet three of them objected. Captain Szalewicz said,

⁸⁹ Laurinavičius *et al.* (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 294.

⁹⁰ For a review of Piłsudski's federalism, see Piotr Wandycz, *Soviet-Polish Relations* (Cambridge, 1969), 99–100, 287–8.

⁹¹ Bolesław Waligóra, 'Kaip Gen. Żeligovskis užėmė Vilnių,' in *Mūsų žinynas*, xxi, 79 (1931), 327.

“he doesn’t want to join the mutiny, because it is a disloyal move against Poland”. Others, angered by their refusal, offered to have them shot, but Želigowski managed to calm them down.⁹² Overall, the idea of wresting Vilnius from the hands of the Lithuanians was highly motivating for his Polish-Lithuanian troops, who were assembled mostly from the borderland and saw the operation as nothing less than the liberation of their native lands.

On 6 October 1920, Želigowski’s force of about 14,000 started moving toward Vilnius along the unprotected Lida–Voronovo–Vilnius railway line. On the same day, it clashed with advanced Lithuanian units and brushed them aside. Although the Lithuanian Army leadership knew its position near Vilnius was extremely vulnerable, it did not have enough time and resources to prepare for the city’s defence. The Polish attack came as a great surprise. The leading Lithuanian force was stranded in the Suwałki region and near Varėna and was unable to reach Vilnius in time. On 8 October 1920, the Lithuanian government tried to salvage the situation by turning the control of the city to an Allied commission and started an evacuation of the city. Those few Lithuanian units that found themselves in the way of the Želigowski’s troops fiercely resisted near Rūdninkai and Jašiūnai, but were forced to withdraw. In the meantime, during their hasty departure from Vilnius, Lithuanian troops were attacked by Polish paramilitaries. One unit was decimated by massive desertion of its one hundred soldiers, while droves of Jewish refugees fled from the city fearing another pogrom.⁹³ Lithuanian representative Ignas Jonynas described the situation in the city on 9 October in his report to the government:

A Polish cavalryman showed up on a corner of Vilnius and Jurgis streets. ... The streets suddenly changed. Jews went hiding, they were replaced by Poles who surrounded the cavalryman and started shouting ‘Long live Poland!’ ... Once it became dark, screams were heard in various Jewish quarters. Robberies have started. Soldiers and partisans were robbing. People started coming with their complaints to the [Allied] missions. They were Jews. None of them was Christian.⁹⁴

⁹² *Ibid.*, 330–2.

⁹³ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 355.

⁹⁴ Žiugžda (ed.), *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai*, iv, 84–5.

Upon his arrival to Vilnius on 9 October 1920, Żeligowski was met by the French and British colonels Celestin Reboul and Richard Ward. They protested against his arbitrary takeover, ignorance of international law, and the breakup of the Suwałki agreement. He curtly dismissed them by ordering that they get out of the city within twelve hours before they were interned.⁹⁵ In short, the Allies and Lithuania were faced with a *fait accompli*: the Polish troops had taken Vilnius. On the same day, Żeligowski solemnly announced the creation of a new political entity: 'Central Lithuania' (*Litwa Środkowa*).⁹⁶ On 12 October he declared himself its leader. Paradoxically, the borders of 'Central Lithuania' were based on "the Polish-Lithuanian demarcation line of June 1920" and "the Lithuanian-Soviet peace treaty of 12 July 1920," the treaty that Poland had refused to recognise.⁹⁷

Żeligowski's takeover produced an avalanche of official protests from Lithuania toward Poland, the Entente, and the League of Nations, as well as from the Allies and the League of Nations toward Poland.⁹⁸ It also significantly contributed to the militarization of Lithuanian society, as the whole country was plunged into another massive self-mobilization campaign against Poland. Lithuanian historian Laurinavičius claims that "the march of Żeligowski gave to the national self-consciousness of Lithuanians an impulse such as no other event before and after it".⁹⁹ Anti-Polish protests swept across towns and villages in Lithuania, while civilians donated almost four million *auksinai* for the defence of the state in the first half of October alone.¹⁰⁰ A newspaper of the *šauliai* wrote:

The enemies of our nation today are not only those who serve in the Polish forces ..., but also everyone who is not contributing to the defence of Lithuania: be it with a weapon, property, work or a word.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹⁶ Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentas no. 254, 650–1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Dokumentas no. 268, 668.

⁹⁸ For more on these protests, see Gimžauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai*, Dokumentai nos. 258, 263, 267, 269, 655–69; Władysław Wielhorski, *Polska a Litwa. Stosunki wzajemne w biegu dziejów* (London, 1947), 351.

⁹⁹ Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 301.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 301. On 26 Feb. 1919, Lithuania officially introduced *auksinas* as its currency. Its exchange rate was set 1:1 with the German mark.

¹⁰¹ *Karys* (18 Oct. 1920), 2.

In the streets of Kaunas, schoolchildren sold a special newspaper prepared by a joint Lithuanian-Jewish press effort and raised 16,000 *auksinai* in a few days. The town of Jurbarkas (western Lithuania) declared its own war and raised a 180-strong unit of armed volunteers.¹⁰² There was also a massive surge in the number of volunteers into the army and the *šauliai*. On 20 October 1920 two new drafts were called, for young males and NCOs who had served in foreign armies.¹⁰³ Ten days later, the government issued a law that allowed the confiscation of landed estates from all persons serving in the Polish Army.¹⁰⁴ An anti-Polish spy mania gripped the country as the *šauliai*, and the police launched their campaign against suspected Polish agents.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, special volunteer ‘Iron Wolf’ cavalry units were created to match the Polish cavalry, which was seen as the most lethal war weapon of the Poles.¹⁰⁶ By the end of the year, the Lithuanian force expanded considerably and reached more than 44,000 men.¹⁰⁷ The diaspora groups increased their financial contributions to the Committee for the Defense of Lithuania, while there also came reports that a thousand German volunteers expressed their willingness to fight for Lithuania.¹⁰⁸

Żeligowski did not stop the movement of his troops in Vilnius, but tried to defeat the Lithuanian Army by capturing Kaunas.¹⁰⁹ After the war, he wrote: “Was it possible to take Kaunas? I think so ... However, for this we needed a program. And only the creation of Lithuania, incorporated to Poland, could be this program”.¹¹⁰ On 17 October 1920 his units attacked the Lithuanian positions near Širvintos and Giedraičiai. Mobile Polish cavalry squadrons swiftly broke through the front and wreaked havoc in the rear of the Lithuanian troops, capturing an entire headquarters of the 1st Lithuanian Infantry Division

¹⁰² *Lietuva* (15 Oct. 1920), 1.

¹⁰³ *Laikiniosios vyriausybės žinios* (22 Oct. 1920), 1.

¹⁰⁴ Pranas Čepėnas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija* (Vilnius, 1992), ii, 621.

¹⁰⁵ In November 1920, the *šauliai* established their Information Bureau (*Žinių koncentracijos biuras*) to gather intelligence from various parts of Lithuania. Jonas Matusas, *Lietuvos šaulių sąjungos istorija* (Vilnius, 1992), 58.

¹⁰⁶ LCVA, 1920 m. įsakymai Lietuvos kariuomenei, F 384, A. 1, B. 3, l. 297.

¹⁰⁷ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 436.

¹⁰⁸ Laurinavičius et al. (eds), *Lietuvos istorija*, x, Part 1, 303.

¹⁰⁹ Regina Žepkaitė, *Diplomatija imperializmo tarnyboje: Lietuvos ir Lenkijos santykiai 1919–1939 m.* (Vilnius, 1980), 128–33.

¹¹⁰ Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Akta Lucjana Żeligowskiego, vol. 21, 9.

with General Stasys Nastopka himself.¹¹¹ On 17 November the Poles launched their final offensive in the direction of Ukmergė, threatening to encircle Kaunas from the north-east. Nevertheless, the Lithuanian troops managed to regroup and counter-attacked near Širvintos, taking into captivity about 200 Polish soldiers.¹¹² The Polish offensive bogged down near Širvintos and Giedraičiai on 17–21 November, where the Lithuanians forced them into a retreat. The Polish cavalry units that penetrated deep into the rear were unable to control the localities they occupied since they were detached from the leading Polish forces and hunted down by the bands of the *šauliai*.

The fighting of the regular Lithuanian and Polish forces subsided only on 29 November 1920 when both sides signed a truce in Kaunas. Under the pressure of a special commission of the League of Nations, they agreed to accept the military status quo: a neutral zone that separated their controlled territories from each other and did not contain any regular armies.¹¹³ Żeligowski realised that he was not able to defeat the Lithuanian troops. Meanwhile, the Lithuanians feared that the regular Polish Army might join his troops. Unfortunately for the Lithuanians, Vilnius remained on the Polish side. In reality, the truce did not end the war, since the Vilnius question remained a thorn in Polish-Lithuanian relations throughout the whole interwar period and beyond.

V DIRTY WAR

Nor was there an end to the fighting. A different dirty war continued to rage between Polish and Lithuanian paramilitaries and civilian bands along the entire neutral zone.¹¹⁴ It was a more low scale and involved

¹¹¹ Lesčius, *Lietuvos kariuomenė*, 366–7.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 386.

¹¹³ For the text of the truce, see LCVA, 'Karo paliaubų protokolas', F. 384, A. 1, B. 212, l. 9.

¹¹⁴ For the Polish perspective on the conflict in the neutral zone, see Tomasz Gajownik, *Tajny front niewypowiedzianej wojny. Działalność polskiego wywiadu wojskowego na Litwie w latach 1921–1939* (Warszawa, 2010); Piotr Łossowski, 'Ostatni akt kształtowania granic Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej – podział pasa neutralnego pomiędzy Polską a Litwą w lutym 1923 r.', *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 37 (2002), 27–39; Waldemar Rezmer, 'Likwidacja pasa neutralnego pomiędzy

fewer belligerents, but it had a more brutal and intimate character as civilians turned against each other and village communities and sometimes even families were split apart. The neutral zone was about 400 kilometres long, 12 kilometres wide, was comprised of about 4,000 sq. kilometers and contained roughly 30,000 people of various ethnicities. On the Polish side, it was controlled by a special Peoples' Militia (*Milicja ludowa pasu neutralnego*),¹¹⁵ while the Lithuanians organised their own *šauliai* or partisan units. Paramilitary bands were staffed with local people from the countryside and towns and secretly supplied by the Polish and Lithuanian armies. Although the fighting took place in an ethnically mixed borderland, both sides claimed they were only defending themselves against each other. In reality, they were involved in ethnic cleansing since both sides terrorised the civilian populations living in or close to the neutral zone by trying to create fear among them and force their resettlement elsewhere.

For example, on 7 January 1921, the *šauliai* attacked the town of Linkmenys (eastern Lithuania) and shot two Polish militiamen and captured five. The incident produced criticism from the Ministry of Defense of Lithuania, which called it a reckless action that may have produced a Polish counter-attack.¹¹⁶ In the meantime, three days later the Lithuanian authorities in Alytus received a collective complaint from local villagers describing how their villages had been assaulted by the Polish militia:

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 ... They were beating everybody, 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 should better not be Lithuanians, for when we come for the second time, ... we will burn everything'.¹¹⁷

Polską a Litwą w lutym 1923 r.', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, xxxviii, 4 (2006), 31–52. For the Lithuanian perspective, see *Darbai ir dienos. Grumtynės dėl Vilniaus krašto 1919–1923 metais: lietuvių ir lenkų istorikų svarstymai* (Kaunas, 2004); Kazimieras Garšva and Laima Grumadienė (eds), *Lietuvos rytai* (Vilnius, 1993).

¹¹⁵ Wojciech Śleszyński, 'Abipus demarkacijos linijos', in *Darbai ir dienos. Grumtynės dėl Vilniaus krašto 1919–1923 metais: lietuvių ir lenkų istorikų svarstymai* (Kaunas, 2004), 101.

¹¹⁶ Jokubauskas *et al.*, *Valia priešintis*, 71.

¹¹⁷ *Lietuva* (12 Jan. 1921), 3.

Throughout 1921 to 1923, the fiercest paramilitary fighting and terror reigned in the areas of Širvintos-Giedraičiai (eastern Lithuania) and near the village of Varviškės (southern Lithuania). In early 1923 the *šauliai* assaulted Avižonys (near Širvintos), killing dozens of Polish militiamen and civilians. Three Polish paramilitaries were taken into captivity and executed by an order from a military court martial in Širvintos.¹¹⁸ The assault and executions provoked a similar attack by the Poles on several Lithuanian villages. The borderland terror thus had a reciprocal character, as violent acts provoked equally violent responses.

In the neutral zone, the logic of violence took a new twist when executions gradually escalated due to the hostage exchanges between Poland and Lithuania. Initially, the hostages were handed over to the official authorities, but after the hostage exchanges, they were able to return and denounce those who had arrested them. As a result, both sides started executing the hostages for reasons of their own safety. In his memoir, a former Lithuanian militiaman noted that from 1921 on, the Lithuanians started killing Polish captives, instead of turning them into the hands of the Lithuanian authorities, because, after the exchanges of hostages, the Polish fighters were able to denounce their captors.¹¹⁹

There were cases of Lithuanian fighters being cut into pieces with swords and their corpses mutilated. On 19 March 1923 in Paliepieiai (near Alytus), the Polish militia killed the local Lithuanian *šauliai* and 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.¹²⁰ A gruesome murder took place on 30 April 1923 in Aleksandriškiai (near Giedraičiai), where Polish militiamen slaughtered a nineteen-year-old Lithuanian woman. Before the execution, she was mutilated by cutting her nose and ears.¹²¹ Meanwhile, in January 1923, *Dziennik Wileński* reported that Lithuanian militants were torturing Polish landlords: burning their feet and beating them with clubs.¹²² In the neutral zone, assaults by

¹¹⁸ LCVA, KAM ministro raštas, 12 Dec. 1922, F. 929, A. 3, B. 360, l. 43–5.

¹¹⁹ Kazimieras Garšva and Laima Grumadienė (eds), *Lietuvos rytai* (Vilnius, 1993), 195.

¹²⁰ 'Alytaus miesto ir apkrities piliečių demonstracijos rezoliucija', in *Karys* (19 April 1923), 197.

¹²¹ Mykolas Biržiška, *Vilniaus golgota* (Vilnius, 1992), 220.

¹²² *Dziennik Wileński* (12 Jan. 1923).

Lithuanians on Polish estates became common as ethnic hatred merged with social tensions in the context of the radical land reform that took place in Lithuania.

In the middle of the Gudai forest, which extended across the borderland, a tiny Polish-speaking village of Varviškės, twenty-five kilometres north of Grodno, became a bloody battleground between two ethnic communities. Due to its propensity for ethnically-motivated low-scale ‘intimate violence’, the case of Varviškės is symptomatic of the dirty war. After the Polish-Lithuanian truce of 29 November 1920, the village with a population of about 400 found itself in the middle of the twelve-kilometer-wide neutral zone. On 5 March 1920, a head of the Sejny region reported to his Lithuanian superiors that people of nine villages nearby Varviškės “refuse to carry on their civil duties, provide information about draftees, pay taxes and requisitions (*pyliavos*)”. He also added, “they are armed and ignore all government orders”.¹²³

Throughout 1920–3, Varviškės became the base for a band of 300–400 heavily armed Polish paramilitaries, who established their own ‘self-government of Varviškės’ (*samorząd Warwiszki*). The band was organised by a few Polish Great War veterans and led by commandant J. Pilewski, nicknamed Chmura. For three years the band controlled a thirty-square-kilometre-wide area around Varviškės. It terrorised the local population by conducting night assaults on nearby ethnic Lithuanian villages and forcing them to pay a ransom (*davina*).¹²⁴ In early 1923 the *samorząd Warwiszki* even issued its own postage stamps and official stamps that carried a symbol of the Polish state. Since the Lithuanian government avoided open military operations in the neutral zone, the local Lithuanians, despite their numerous complaints to Kaunas, were mainly left alone to fend off the attacks of Varviškės paramilitaries. They organised their own self-defence militias and *šauliai* bands. Night raids, robberies, burnings of property, torture of civilians, the taking of captives, and gunpoint executions became commonplace on both sides as former neighbours turned into bitter enemies. Thus the Lithuanian village of Liškiava (south Lithuania) suffered five assaults during the period, while Varviškės was attacked continuously by the *šauliai*.¹²⁵

¹²³ Gintaras Lučinskas, ‘Varviškės “respublika” (1920–1923)’, 281.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

The explosion of vicious violence was one of the critical reasons that forced the League of Nations to interfere and abolish the zone on 3 February 1923. The Lithuanian government decided to liquidate the 'self-government of Varviškės' after the League of Nations turned the neutral zone into an administrative border between Poland and Lithuania. Varviškės was left on the Lithuanian side. On 23 March, a 300-strong battalion of the Lithuanian Army from Alytus, together with the local *šauliai*, attacked Varviškės and burned the entire village. Thirty Polish paramilitaries were killed, and others were forced to flee to Poland.¹²⁶

Yet the violence between Poles and Lithuanians subsided only in late April 1923, when the Polish and Lithuanian regular troops moved into the area, claiming the monopoly on violence from the paramilitaries. On 15 May the local *šauliai* units were disbanded. They had to return their arms, while the government paid them social allowances and tried to integrate them into civilian life by providing them with limited jobs and land allotments. However, as the most recent study showed, their demobilization was an uneasy and long-term process. Some refused to return their weapons and even preferred to switch sides by joining the Poles.¹²⁷

VI CONCLUSIONS

In his classic study on the emergence of modern Lithuania, Alfred Senn claimed that the Polish victory at the Vistula saved Lithuania from the Bolshevik occupation.¹²⁸ Indeed, in early July 1920, the advancing Red Army was more than capable of invading Lithuania and occupying Kaunas. However, the Bolsheviks did not pursue this option; presumably, because it could have provoked the Entente, Germany, and other Baltic states to reopen their anti-Bolshevik front in the Baltics. The leaders of Soviet Russia, however, hoped that Lithuania would fall back into its sphere of influence through the process of staging another 'revolution'. Their military defeat by the Poles destroyed the Bolshevik plans. In contrast, the Soviet-Lithuanian peace treaty of

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹²⁷ Jokubauskas *et al.*, *Valia priešintis*, 77.

¹²⁸ Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania*, 220.

12 July 1920 ensured that Lithuania remained neutralised, yet hardly neutral, during the Polish-Soviet War.

In the meantime, the return of the Polish armies in August 1920 came as another equally existential, if not more dangerous, threat to the Lithuanian state. The Battle of Nemunas in late September 1920 and Żeligowski's staged 'mutiny' in early October completely shifted the balance of power in the borderland in favour of Poland. The Polish leadership viewed the Lithuanian state as nothing other than an ally of the Bolsheviks. Having taken Vilnius in early October 1920, the troops of Żeligowski attacked the interior of Lithuania. The government in Kaunas was saved mostly by the total mobilization of Lithuanian society and the resilience of its national troops. The diplomatic pressure of the Allies on Poland was also crucial to ending the open fighting in late November 1920.

For Poland, the conflict was never of such an existential significance as it was for Lithuania. It is worth noting that in 1919–20 Polish governments did not consider the Polish-Lithuanian war as a clash between two equal parties. For a long time, Lithuania was not perceived as an independent state that had a full right to sovereign decisions regarding its territory and citizens. From the Polish perspective, Lithuania was seen as part of the historical, cultural and national heritage of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and thus – as was commonly believed – Polish heritage. This Polish interpretation of the Lithuanian question justified Poland's taking steps which the Lithuanians saw as aggression. The conflict helped to create the view of Lithuanians as irreconcilable enemies of Poland (although this perspective was more common among Poles in Lithuania than those living in Poland). The essence of this anti-Lithuanian vision was that the historical harmony that existed between Poles and Lithuanians for centuries was destroyed by the Lithuanian 'betrayal' of the common cause and a foreign conspiracy (either of German or Soviet origin).¹²⁹

The inconclusive nature of the Polish-Lithuanian military conflict meant that the end of the fighting between the regular armies did not bring peace to the region. A low-scale dirty war continued until as late as May 1923, as civilians on both sides became engaged in violent actions against each other. The paramilitary violence that

¹²⁹ Buchowski, *Litwomani i polonizatorzy*, 66–7.

swept the borderland epitomised the nature of the frontier war, as invisible frontiers in people's minds and identities were drawn alongside the physical frontiers between two states. Ethnicity became a key component in segregating the people into loyal and disloyal subjects of the new nation-states. 'Ethnic' claims on their identities and territories were used as ideological tools to enforce state control in the disputed region.

The conflict over the Polish-Lithuanian neutral zone is indicative of how modern nation-states, such as Poland and Lithuania, attempted to nationalise those people who found themselves on the margins of their national projects. In the neutral zone violence was an essential nation-making tool that forced people to take sides and adopt national identities, above all for reasons of their security and survival. The region became an epicentre of selective and indiscriminate violence that was both communal and state-induced. Although both Poland and Lithuania provisioned rival paramilitary groups, they were formed mostly from local civilians, often Great War and independence wars' veterans. Their willingness to act violently arose in part because of and was greatly aided by the absence of any kind of state authority and competing claims of nation-states, but also by the vicious logic of reciprocal violence that progressed from threats, pillaging and requisitions to terror (burnings, beatings, torture, executions and mutilations of enemy fighters, their family members, or even assaults on village communities).

If the Bolshevik invasion of 1918–19 helped orient the new Lithuanian elite to the West and erect the military and administrative structure of the new state, the war against Poland led to the total mobilization of the Lithuanian society. The fact that the conflict remained open-ended during the entire interwar period ensured that those paramilitary structures that emerged during it would remain in place for much longer.

In total, the Lithuanian Army and paramilitaries suffered about 1,440 military casualties during the 'freedom fights'. Of those, only 232 were incurred in the Polish-Lithuanian War.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, this war soon took central stage in the official commemorations in interwar Lithuania – such was its significance for the consolidation of the Lithuanian society. The loss of Vilnius to Poland and its return

¹³⁰ Ruseckas (ed.), *Savanorių žygiai*, i, 54–5.

to Lithuania remained a permanent fixation in Lithuanian politics throughout the entire interwar period.¹³¹

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¹³¹ For more on the central significance of Vilnius in Lithuanian politics and culture in the early 20th century, see the recent study by Dangiras Mačiulis and Darius Staliūnas, *Lithuanian Nationalism and the Vilnius Question, 1883–1940* (Marburg, 2015).