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**‘A mass which you could form into whatever you wanted’: refugees and state building in Lithuania and Courland, 1914-21**

**Introduction**

When refugees returned to Lithuania and Latvia at the end of the First World War, they returned to entirely different countries. Ravaged by destruction and deportations of a third of the population, the region was virtually unrecognisable. Moreover, what had once been provinces at the imperial periphery were now independent states, striving for international recognition and the consolidation of their borders. This rapid transformation over the course of the First World War is still a topic lacking research, with most imperial narratives ending in 1914 and national narratives picking up in 1918.

However, for the history of refugees this transformation is crucial. Deportations led to profound long-term changes in the social structure of the populations of Lithuania and Latvia. Lithuanian and Latvian peasants fled the advancing German Army. The Polish nobility in the German military occupation zone of *Ober Ost* was politically marginalised, the Baltic German nobility in Latvia deported. For the Jewish population in Lithuania, most of which was urban, the war brought the most significant changes, reducing their share in the population by a half<sup>1</sup> and irrevocably changing their social structure.<sup>2</sup> The situation was similar in the province of Courland, where ‘evacuations’ reduced the population from almost 800,000 to merely 250,000 during the war. After the most intensive phases of repatriation, statistics concluded that the size of the Jewish and German population of Latvia had still dropped by almost 50 per cent - in the case of Jews from 142,000 to below 80,000 and in the case of Baltic Germans from 120,000 to ca. 58,000.<sup>3</sup>

This indicates that the First World War and the repatriations, which already began during the war and lasted well into the 1920s, led to the disentanglement of the multi-ethnic populations of Lithuania and Latvia. Whereas such processes of ‘unmixing’ are commonly associated with expulsions and ‘population exchanges’ such as those in the Balkans and Turkey<sup>4</sup>, they seem to have taken place much more covertly in the Baltics. They remained hidden because they were woven into much broader crises such as the implosion of the Brest-Litovsk system and the Russian Civil War.

Looking at developments from the beginning of the First World War until the early 1920s, the main questions of this chapter thus regard the impact of ethnic belonging on the treatment of refugees and the changes ethnic policies took over the course of the war and the first years of independent statehood. The focus is put on Lithuania and Courland for two reasons. Firstly, both formed part of *Ober Ost*, meaning they shared many developments during the First World War. However, the refugee and repatriation question differed quite significantly between the two regions. Moreover, Courland and Lithuania shared a similar social structure in the sense that they had a nobility which was increasingly perceived as foreign (Polish in the case of Lithuania and Baltic German in the case of Courland) and a substantial Jewish population. The latter differentiated Courland from Livonia province, which was occupied at a later stage of the war. The southern part of *Ober Ost*, the Grodno-Białystok region (nowadays part of Poland and Belarus), will be referred to as well, as it shared many features of the refugee crisis in Lithuania and Courland.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Memorandum’, Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (= LCVA), f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 32, l. 23-30, here l. 26.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Monographie über die ökonomische Lage der litauischen Juden’, LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 32, l. 31-44 a.p., here l. 35; ‘Memorandum’, 12 November 1923, LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 32, l. 17-22, here p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Latvija’, *Trimitas*, 33 (1921), pp. 19-25.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 62-72

In general, research on refugees from the Baltics is still sparse – particularly with regards to transnational studies.<sup>5</sup> The most substantial research on the Latvian and Lithuanian cases is that of Aija Priedite<sup>6</sup> and Tomas Balkelis<sup>7</sup>, who focused mostly on the formation and consolidation of national communities and identities among refugees in inner Russia by examining national relief associations and refugee experience. Balkelis also focuses on the process of repatriation and emphasises refugees ‘had to be persuaded or forced to abandon their divergent and multiple identities’<sup>8</sup> in order to become citizens of the newly established independent nation state. This chapter will build on this research and put an additional focus on refugees who were not considered part of the new titular nations, thus highlighting the entangled history of ethnic groups between imperial and national policies: Imperial policies backed other groups than national policies, and some groups, such as Jews, were not backed at all. As Peter Gatrell puts it, imperial policies targeted entire communities that were perceived as disloyal, and post-war national policies ‘created even more favourable conditions for the persecution of minorities who did not meet the criteria for political membership.’<sup>9</sup> The implications this development had for the different ethnicities in Lithuania and Courland are at the core of this research.

### War-time evacuations from Lithuania and Courland, 1914-15

When the First World War broke out, the Tsarist government put front zones under direct control of the Russian generals, which had begun to ‘evacuate’ between 500,000 and one million people who were suspected of sympathizing with the enemy.<sup>10</sup> On 3 October 1914, all Germans (including Baltic Germans in Latvia and Estonia) were ordered to be deported. This order was extended to all Jews in January 1915.<sup>11</sup> Evicted persons had between three hours and one day to pack what they could carry and leave.<sup>12</sup>

With hardly any systematic support, some refugees found shelter in abandoned (mostly Jewish) houses; most, however, stayed in camps or in the open, exposed to disease and hunger.<sup>13</sup> Particularly during the first short-lived incursion of German troops into southern Lithuania in autumn 1914, there was no infrastructure in place for refugees, as can be seen in the case of Jews from Vilkaviškis, who set out to Mariampolė in October, where they got into the midst of a five-hour long gun battle. Spending the night in a forest, they headed towards Kaunas, but learnt that the Jews of Kaunas were currently being deported and no-one was allowed to enter the city. After spending a night on a farm near Birštonas, they

<sup>5</sup> Vital' Karnyalyuk, *Fakty historyka-demahrafičnyh zmen u skladze naseľnictva Belarusi u 1913-1918 gg.* (Minsk, 2001); Tatjana Bartele and Vitālijs Šalda, ‘Latviešu bēgļi Petrogradā (1915–1920)’, in *Latvijas arhīvi* 1 (2002), pp. 83-99; Vida Pukienė, ‘Voronežas. Lietuvių švietimo židinys Rusijoje Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais’, *Istorija. Mokslo darbai* 70 (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Aija Priedite, ‘Latvian Refugees and the Latvian Nation State during and after World War One’, in Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (eds.), *Homelands. War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918-1924* (London, 2004), pp. 35-52.

<sup>7</sup> Tomas Balkelis, ‘The Return of World War One Refugees to Lithuania’, in Gatrell/Baron, *Homelands*, pp. 74-97.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Gatrell, *Making*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Figures according to Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Sanborn, ‘The Genesis of Russian Warlordism. Violence and Governance during the First World War and the Civil War’, in *Contemporary European History*, 3 (2010), 3, pp. 195-213, here p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> *Lietuvos ūkininkas* (24 July 1915), pp. 189-190; J. Pikčilingis, ‘Pergyventos valandos’, *Karo archyvas*, 3 (1926), pp. 90-111, here pp. 94-95; Kauno apskrities archyvas (= KAA), f. I-50, ap. 2, b. 481, l. 1, 14-31.

<sup>13</sup> *Lietuvos ūkininkas* (15 July 1915), pp. 215 f.

headed further via Žiežmariai to Kaišiadorys, where they had to leave an elderly woman behind, eventually reaching Vilnius.<sup>14</sup>

'Evacuated' people mainly ended up as refugees in inner Russia, although many preferred to stay close to home, hoping for a possibility to return as soon as possible. Jewish community leader Shaul Lipschitz recounts that, right after the war broke out, Jews from Ventspils (Windau) were assigned five provinces for resettlement. The community decided to resettle to Orša in Mogilev province: „There was actually no reason whatsoever to choose Orsha other than it being the least distant point from Kurland.”<sup>15</sup>

Baltic Germans in Courland were prone to libels of Latvians, as the social antagonism between German landowners and Latvian peasants, which had been critical already before the war, sharpened further.<sup>16</sup> As evacuations assumed the character of deportations, families were regularly torn apart. The wife of a Baltic German estate owner just behind the frontline recalled that her husband was drafted into the army in the beginning of the war, while she stayed behind pregnant.<sup>17</sup> In December 1915, her father, who had two imperial German sons-in-law, was charged with treason and deported to Irkutsk. After the October Revolution, Red Army soldiers abducted her husband, who had just returned home, and her sister. She herself had to flee the estate shortly after.<sup>18</sup>

The local population perceived the massive deportations, which led to a significant long-term change in the regional demographics, as something unimaginable, as refugee trails of apocalyptic proportions moved through the countryside.<sup>19</sup> A peasant woman recounted that Jews 'ran like into Babylonian slavery',<sup>20</sup> while their property was seized by soldiers and townspeople. As Shaul Lipschitz recounts, Jewish evacuees did not conceive of themselves as 'refugees' as they had not fled by their own choice but had been expelled by force.<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of 1915, the German Army pushed the Eastern Front up to the river Daugava, where the front was stabilised for the following two years. While retreating through Courland and Kovno provinces, the Russian Army also evicted members of the Latvian and Lithuanian intelligentsia and skilled workers, leading to a massive depopulation of the cities.<sup>22</sup> The offensive uprooted further hundreds of thousands of people, who abandoned their homes out of fear of violence perpetrated by the advancing German army. At first these also tried to stay as close to home as possible, fleeing to relatives or simply into the closest forests, where they waited until it was safe to return home, not wanting to leave farmsteads and harvests behind to looters. In early 1915, in Kaišiadorys, between Kaunas and Vilnius, only landless peasants fled, while most landowners decided to stay.<sup>23</sup> Most people thus did not become parts of large refugee treks, but rather retreated only a few kilometres.<sup>24</sup> 15,000 peasants from the Suvalkija region fled to Vilnius, waiting for quick news that it was safe

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<sup>14</sup> 'Flüchtlinge', in *Libausche Zeitung* (6 October 1914).

<sup>15</sup> Shaul Lipschitz, *Jews of Kurland* (1971),

<http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/latvia1/lat276.html>, accessed on 17 November 2014.

<sup>16</sup> *Lebenserinnerungen Margarethe von Gersdorff (15.5.1889 - 9.7.1974) geschrieben von 1955-1969*, Dokumentensammlung Herder Institut (=DSHI), 140 Balt 617, pp. 20; Tovia U. Raun, 'Violence and Activism in the Baltic Provinces during the Revolution of 1905', *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* (2006), pp. 48-59, here p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Lebenserinnerungen Margarethe von Gersdorff*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22-24.

<sup>19</sup> Pikčilingis, 'Pergyventos valandos', p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> Ona Gudliauskaitė, 'Biržų apskritys. Nuo maro, bado, ugnies ir karo' [Biržai district. Of disease, hunger, fire and war], in Petras Ruzeckas (ed.), *Lietuva Didžiąjame kare* (Vilnius, 1939), p. 259-267.

<sup>21</sup> Lipschitz, *Jews of Kurland*.

<sup>22</sup> *Lietuvos ūkininkas* (3 July 1915), p. 162; Daina Bleiere, *History of Latvia. The 20th century* (Riga, 2006), pp. 76-77.

<sup>23</sup> 'Musų pabėgėliai', in *Lietuvos žinios* (18 February 1915).

<sup>24</sup> Nemakščia, Ras. apskr., in *Lietuvos žinios* (25 February 1915).

enough to return home.<sup>25</sup> When it turned out that the German Army would not be pushed out of Suvalkija soon, many peasants, anxious about what would happen to their land and cattle, tried to make their way through the Russian and German positions, but were usually arrested by Russian soldiers.<sup>26</sup>

The real refugee crisis happened further away from the front, where refugees and deportees oftentimes waited in numbers of thousands in a single locality to receive food and information about possibilities to return home, frequently without any information whether their home was still under Russian rule or already occupied by the German army. Wealthier people managed to stay in towns, closer to relief points, while poorer refugees had to stay in the countryside, often simply sleeping on fields or in forests. In many cases, locals were reluctant to help, as refugees, who were often without food for two or more days, were thought to carry contagious diseases.<sup>27</sup> A Baltic German reported that the road from Kūldiga to Jelgava was filled with exhausted refugees and livestock.<sup>28</sup> By summer, the numbers of both people on the move and people on the wait had multiplied. Around 150,000 refugees had passed through Oshmyany (Vilna province) by September 1915, and ca. 5,000 refugees were leaving Kovno and Courland provinces via Daugavpils every day. 15,000 to 20,000 people were living in the forest of Rudninkai, south of Vilnius, hoping to return home soon. 30,000 refugees were roaming the districts of Kuronis, Daršūniškis and Pakuonis, 16,000 Jeznas district, 3,000 Naujadvaris district, and 10,000 the districts of Eišiškės, Trakai and Valkininkai.<sup>29</sup>

Refugees were viewed with compassion, suspicion and curiosity at the same time. They brought news from the front when all other communication channels had broken down. In Riga, the Tatiana Committee urged refugees in May 1915 to report acts of violence against civilians perpetrated by the German Army, so that 'the barbarity and insidiousness of the enemy can be pinned down for future historical depictions'.<sup>30</sup> Peasants from Suvalkija were constantly squeezing newly arrived refugees for news on the degree of destruction in their home region and on epidemic diseases.<sup>31</sup> The inhabitants of Ilūkste in Courland province learned through refugees from Jelgava that the Germans were mining the outskirts of the town.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes refugees contributed to the spreading of sensationalist rumours, in turn causing other refugees to try to make it back to their farms, anxious about their property. Refugees reported the Germans were allegedly threatening all those abandoning their farms with confiscation of their land, which would then be handed over to German colonists.<sup>33</sup> As the German army made its way further into Lithuania and Courland in summer 1915, refugees from the region around Kaunas reported of alleged German plans to unite Prussian and Russian Lithuania as well as Latvia into a single kingdom.<sup>34</sup>

When Riga, the largest and by far economically most important city in the region, was evacuated in autumn 1915, including its industrial plants, 96,000 workers were forced to retreat with the army.<sup>35</sup> The Livonian industry was also evacuated in anticipation of a further

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<sup>25</sup> 'Musų pabėgėliai', in *Lietuvos žinios* (8 March 1915).

<sup>26</sup> 'Lietuvių neatsargumas' [Lithuanian carelessness], in *Šaltinis* 7-14 (1915).

<sup>27</sup> 'Musų pabėgėliai', in *Lietuvos žinios* (18 February 1915).

<sup>28</sup> 'Als deutscher Balte aus Sibirien nach Libau', in *Libausche Zeitung* (26 October 1915).

<sup>29</sup> 'Karo aukų globojimas' [Relief for war victims], *Lietuvos žinios* (18 September 1915).

<sup>30</sup> 'Rigaer Kriegschronik', in *Rigasche Zeitung* (25 May 1918).

<sup>31</sup> 'Vokiečiai Lietuvoje' [The Germans in Lithuania], in *Šaltinis* 17-18 (1915), pp. 123-125; 'Užkrečiamosios ligos ir kova su jomis' [Contagious diseases and how to fight them], in *Šaltinis*, 19-20 (1915), p. 130.

<sup>32</sup> 'Auf dem Südufer der Dūna', in *Libausche Zeitung*, (1 January 1916).

<sup>33</sup> 'Vokiečių nežmoniškumas' [The inhumanity of the Germans], in *Šaltinis*, 29 (1915).

<sup>34</sup> 'Dar apie teikiamąjį Lietuvai karalių' [More on giving Lithuania a King], in *Šaltinis* 30 (1915).

<sup>35</sup> Paul Bräunlich, *Kurländischer Frühling. Persönliche Eindrücke* (Berlin, 1917); Priedite, 'Latvian Refugees'. p. 37.

German advance. When the offensive came to a halt just before Riga, almost 35,000 refugees remained in the city and 120,000 in Livland.<sup>36</sup> By October 1915, Riga had become a huge hub, distributing tens of thousands of refugees to the adjacent provinces and inner Russia, as *Rigasche Zeitung* reported:

The majority is still in Riga and besiege the police offices to receive new passports, as they forgot their old ones at home or on the way, or because they want to obtain a second one for free, knowing that a 'real' passport is a well-paid commodity in Russia [...]. The rush for the municipal savings bank has become so immense that 145 persons [...] set up their sleeping place on the street after the gates closed, in order to be the first ones the next morning to be admitted.<sup>37</sup>

### Refugee policies in Ober Ost, 1915-18

As German soldiers advanced into the Lithuania and Courland, they encountered social and economic desolation. Roughly one third of the Lithuanian population had been forced into inner Russia, and even two thirds of the population of Courland province.<sup>38</sup> Three quarters of the population had left Kaunas upon the German advance.<sup>39</sup> Many of these were now arriving into Vilna, where at the same time 200,000 local residents were awaiting their imminent evacuation. Bands plundered or occupied abandoned houses.<sup>40</sup> As Vejas Liulevicius has pointed out, the German soldiers and the administrators of *Ober Ost* perceived the image of tens of thousands of displaced people, many ridden by illnesses, and the chaotic situation in the cities, as an inherent feature of region.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the administration acknowledged, that the region had been transformed by displacement, estimating that merely 2.9 million people inhabited the territory of *Ober Ost*, as opposed to 4.2 million before the war. The administration introduced a number of symptomatic measures aimed at reviving the economy that had suffered significantly from the 'evacuation' of skilled workers, farmhands, estate owners, etc. Local inhabitants of Kaunas were hired to guard real estate of deportees.<sup>42</sup> Special units of 'House guards' were established in Vilnius, who looked after houses during the night.<sup>43</sup> Neighbouring peasants were put in charge of cultivating abandoned small holdings. Large and profitable estates of the Baltic German gentry in Courland as well as of the Polish gentry in Lithuania German officers were given to German officers.<sup>44</sup>

It took more than half a year to resettle the majority of refugees within *Ober Ost* territory. In autumn 1915, 20,000 Jewish refugees from Courland and Kovno province were still in Vilna and an additional 10,000 from other localities.<sup>45</sup> A first order was issued on 13 October for refugees in Vilna to return home within twelve days, if their homes were intact.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>36</sup> 'Rigaer Kriegschronik', in *Rigasche Zeitung*, 4 October 1918.

<sup>37</sup> 'Rigaer Kriegschronik', in *Rigasche Zeitung*, 9 August 1918.

<sup>38</sup> Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States. The Years of Independence. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917–1940* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 25; Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *Kriegsland im Osten. Eroberung, Kolonialisierung und Militärherrschaft im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 2002), 19–20.

<sup>39</sup> Marius Pečiulis, 'Pirmojo pasaulinio karo veiksmai vakarų Lietuvoje - Vokietijos ir Rusijos pasienyje - 1915 m. pradžioje', in *Karo archyvas* 26 (2011), pp. 44–80; Theodore S. Weeks, 'Vilnius in World War I, 1914–1920', in Joachim Tauber (ed.), *Über den Weltkrieg hinaus. Kriegserfahrungen in Ostmitteleuropa, 1914–1921* (Lüneburg, 2009), pp. 34–57, here p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Lietuvos ūkininkas* (15 July 1915); *Lietuvos ūkininkas*, (24 June 1915).

<sup>41</sup> Liulevicius, *Kriegsland*, p. 89–90.

<sup>42</sup> Pikčilingis, 'Pergyventos valandos', p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> 'Bekanntmachung vom 29. November 1911', Martyno Mažvydo Biblioteka (= MMB), UDK 351.74.

<sup>44</sup> Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe*, p. 157.

<sup>45</sup> 'Lokales', in *Libausche Zeitung* (14 October 1915).

<sup>46</sup> 'Bekanntmachung vom 13. Oktober 1915', MMB, UDK 351.74.

However, in early 1916, there were still 7,000 refugees in the city.<sup>47</sup> The military administration relied heavily on national relief committees, which reflected the multi-ethnic composition of Vilnius, with a Polish Refugee Relief Committee working alongside a Jewish Relief Committee, a Lithuanian Society for War Relief and a Municipal Evacuation Commission.<sup>48</sup> By May, the number of refugees in Vilnius had finally shrunk to 1,500.<sup>49</sup>

The first wave of repatriations – mostly of Baltic Germans – from Russia to Courland occurred in autumn 1917 after German troops had finally managed to cross the Daugava and occupy Riga. In October, *Libausche Zeitung* reported that refugees used the chaos among the dissolving Russian Army to return home, where they were ultimately confronted with the improvised and opaque *Ober Ost* administration of abandoned properties and its misappropriation by “disloyal people, relatives, friends and former servants (...), even foreign usurpers”<sup>50</sup>, who had ruined the farms.

Systematic repatriation became possible with the signing of the peace treaty of Brest Litovsk, which envisaged the exchange of refugees and POWs and the establishment of (formally) independent states. The emerging Lithuanian national government immediately demanded that the German Military Administration revoked its notorious mobility restrictions, as they hampered trade, economic organization and repatriation. Repatriations were to be conducted via two trains weekly via Riga, Daugavpils and Minsk into *Ober Ost*.

The peculiar and rigorous movement policy, which was guided by the introduction of hermetically sealed inner borders within *Ober Ost* posed a significant obstacle for returnees. Aleksandras Stulginskis, head of the Lithuanian Repatriation Commission and future Lithuanian president, argued that repatriates were unaccustomed with German occupation policy and demanded that all requisitions and mobility restrictions should be removed.<sup>51</sup> In April 1918, the *Taryba* stated that it should be authorised to organise repatriation via local Lithuanian committees, unhindered by the *Ober Ost* authorities, stating that only refugees who were ‘from Lithuania’<sup>52</sup> should be repatriated, but left open whether it wanted this to be restricted to ethnic Lithuanians.

The Brest-Litovsk system finally nationalised the question of repatriation. Before March 1918, nationalisation with regards to the refugee question had been restricted to the work of national relief associations working with refugees in *Ober Ost* and inner Russia. Now, the connection of repatriation to the political revolution of pro forma independent statehood in the former borderlands turned it into a powerful tool for German imperialists as well as for national activists to nationalise territory and population. The German administration was reluctant to return estates close to the German border to their owners, whom the German military had taken hostage as reprisals for the ‘evacuation’ of Baltic Germans at the beginning of the war.<sup>53</sup>

Courland rapidly became an imperial project. The increasing conviction among conservatives that the region should be annexed to the German Empire<sup>54</sup> meant that the new border with

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<sup>47</sup> Most of these were academics and merchants. ‘Aus dem besetzten Gebiet’, in *Libausche Zeitung*, 7 February 1916.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Bekanntmachung vom 12. Januar 1916’, MMB, UDK 325.1 (474.5).

<sup>49</sup> ‘Aus dem besetzten Gebiet’, in *Libausche Zeitung*, 15 May 1916.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Aus dem besetzten Gebiet’, in *Libausche Zeitung*, 11 October 1917.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Taryba an Chef der Militärverwaltung Litauen’, 18 May 1918, LCVA, f. 1014, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 8.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Kommission der Taryba für Rückführung, geleitet von A. Stulginskis an die Militärverwaltung Litauen’, 15 April 1918, LCVA, f. 1014, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 6-7.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. ‘Tatbestand über die Angelegenheit des Grafen W. v. Polenta-Wolmer, Grossgrundbesitzer von Wiesajcie / Litauen’, 2 August 1918, Archiwum Akt Nowych (=AAN), 473, sygn. 21, pp. 181-183.

<sup>54</sup> Karl-Heinz Janßen, ‘Die baltische Okkupationspolitik des Deutschen Reiches’, in Jürgen von Hehn et al. (eds.), *Von den Baltischen Provinzen zu den Baltischen Staaten*.

Bolshevik Russia would need to be closed to returning refugees of ethnic Latvian origin. The Brest-Litovsk treaty included a clause that stated that only Latvians currently residing in Courland could gain citizenship, thus preventing a return of Latvian refugees and shifting the demography in favour of the Baltic Germans – a plan already discussed in early 1917.<sup>55</sup> The significance of these imperial plans for Latvia's national future reflected in partially sympathetic, partially derogative views of Lithuanian and Estonian nationalists on their unfortunate neighbours, whose national development had allegedly been cut short by the refugee crisis and German occupation policies. An Estonian national activists claimed in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that the devastations of the war had 'damaged Latvia and the Latvian people to such an extent, that the consequences cannot even be measured. The sticking point is whether the national-Latvian culture will have the possibility to develop any further at all [...]. The longer the war continues, the less evacuees and refugees will return [...], and Germany [...] will want to settle the conquered region with German colonists.'<sup>56</sup> In 1918, the Jewish-Latvian Social Democrat Alexander Lipschütz said the German Government was in the process of colonising Courland by forcibly keeping its Latvian inhabitants out. However, Lipschütz claimed, the return of Latvian refugees was the prerequisite for any plans of a future Latvian state in alliance with Germany in order to prevent the Baltics from turning into 'a new Balkan peninsula'<sup>57</sup>. After the sudden German defeat in November 1918, the Latvian Provisional National Council (*Latviešu Pagaidu Nacionālā Padome*) declared all annexation plans void and claimed it was the only legitimate authority to solve repatriation until all Latvian refugees had returned.<sup>58</sup>

### Repatriation policies of the new nation states after 1918

With German defeat in the West, the system of Brest-Litovsk collapsed, and the responsibility for repatriation finally fell into the hands of national activists. Repatriation remained complicated, as the eastern front, which had been peaceful since March 1918, became a zone of power vacuums that different emerging states aimed to fill. Over the course of 1919, the Red Army advanced deep into Latvia and Lithuania, opposed by national units as well as German Freikorps and White Guards, which obstructed the organized transport and support of returnees.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, these wars resulted in new refugee crises, as Russians fleeing the Bolsheviks poured into Latvia. On a smaller scale, the Lithuanian-Polish conflict over the Vilnius region also led to further refugee crises. Continuing warfare and food requisitions conducted by all competing factions - Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians and Poles – made it difficult to provide immediate care for returnees who owned no land they could reclaim. The emerging Lithuanian authorities demanded from the German administration that all food trade should be monopolised and kept within Ober Ost and that no inventory of estates of refugees must be sold.<sup>60</sup>

Returnees owning land outside the new battle zones could be repatriated rather quickly. However, those who lived in the warzone or whose property had been expropriated or squatted often had to spend months in temporary housing or quarantine camps, which were set up in 1919 and 1920. The worst conditions prevailed in the region stretching from

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*Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Republiken Estland und Lettland 1917-1918* (Marburg, 1971), pp. 217-254, p. 227

<sup>55</sup> 'Rückwanderungen', 31 March 1917, Bundesarchiv (= BA), R 704/50, pp. 12-15.

<sup>56</sup> 'Lettische Gegenwarts- und Zukunftsfragen', in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24 March 1916.

<sup>57</sup> 'Germany and the Baltic Provinces', press cutting, original in *Vorwärts*, 22 April 1918, Estonian National Archives (Rahvusarhiivi) (=ERA), 1583.1.174.

<sup>58</sup> 'Der Protest des Lettischen Nationalrats gegen die Annexion Kurlands', in Herder-Institut (ed.), *Dokumente und Materialien zur ostmitteleuropäischen Geschichte. Themenmodul "Lettland in der Zwischenkriegszeit"*, ed. by Janis Keruss. URL: <https://www.herder-institut.de/resolve/qid/1341.html> (accessed on 19.8.2014).

<sup>59</sup> 'Polnische Flüchtlinge in Libau', in *Libausche Zeitung* (26 July 1920).

<sup>60</sup> 'An Seine Exzellenz, den Herrn Chef der Zivilverwaltung für Litauen', 18 November 1918, LCVA, f. 392, ap. 1, t. 2, b. 76, l. 2.

central Latvia to Eastern Lithuania, which had formed the Russo-German frontline for more than two years. Most houses here had been destroyed, and repatriates had to live in dugouts, basements and trenches. Three years after German defeat, almost 2,000 repatriates were still living in former trenches in the former front city of Smarhon, now a battlefield of the Polish-Soviet War.<sup>61</sup> A similar situation prevailed in Ikšķile, where Latvian Riflemen had defended a small island in the river Daugava (later called *Nāves sala* – the 'Island of Death') for half a year. After visiting the area, a worker for the organization Save the Children recounted:

Nearly all the houses are completely destroyed, over an area covering several hundred miles, and the people are living in dug-outs, and temporary wooden huts, - one of these built by two boys of 14 and 16 years for their mother and sister. Close by, I saw two men piling together stones to make a house, one can hardly say build, and I congratulated them that they would have a roof over their heads for the winter, and they replied 'it is not for ourselves, but for our cows'. They showed me where they were living underground, like other families.<sup>62</sup>

Refugees belonging to minorities-in-the-making had most difficulties reclaiming land. Around 500 Russians who had bought land in a colony near Vilnius in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century returned to find the German occupation authorities had sold their land to various buyers. Unable to reclaim their plots, they had to live in sheds, and many were infected with typhus leading to at least a dozen deaths. Typhus also raged among refugees returning to Vilnius, which became a gathering point for returnees who could not move into their former homes, as a health commission appointed by the Polish parliament reported: Refugees 'absolutely do not know what to do with themselves, where to go, so for the time being they are staying at the *étape*, and when they are evicted almost with physical force, they probably suffer the same fate as the inhabitants of the trenches (...).'<sup>63</sup>

The ethnic conflict between Poles and Lithuanians in the Vilnius region led to a further complication of repatriation. At the same time, the increasing control and impermeability of the new borders perpetuated the status quo of displacement. Lithuanian refugees from Ukraine, who attempted to enter Lithuania from south, became stuck in Vilnius. The Polish administration blamed the Lithuanian authorities, who allegedly refused to grant these refugees passports, thus forcing the Polish authorities to provide the refugees with food.<sup>64</sup> Lithuanian officials in turn complained that the Polish authorities were using repatriation as a means for ethnic homogenisation, as they barred Lithuanians and Belarusians from returning to the Vilnius and Grodno regions and prevented any Jews from coming back at all.<sup>65</sup> Belarusian activists complained that the Polish Army, which was moving into eastern parts of *Ober Ost* left by the retreating Germans, was pushing returnees back eastwards into Bolshevik Russia, where civil war raged.<sup>66</sup> Belarusian refugees from the Białystok and Grodno regions, now part of the Polish Republic, found that their farms had been given to Polish soldiers.<sup>67</sup> According to Lithuanian nationalists, the Polish government was colonising Vilnius by sending Poles from Warsaw and other cities there under the guise of being refugees from the Vilnius region.<sup>68</sup>

In order to organise repatriation, but also to deal with the new waves of refugees from Bolshevik Russia, the emerging Lithuanian and Latvian states established refugee camps at

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<sup>61</sup> 'Sprawozdanie dla Sejmowej Komisji Zdrowia', 29 November 1921, AAN, 15, sygn. 90, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> 'Muriel Paget to Mr Golden', 4 July 1921, Cadbury Research Library, SCF, A401, EJ 73.

<sup>63</sup> 'Sprawozdanie dla Sejmowej Komisji Zdrowia', pp. 15-16.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Balkelis, 'Return', p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> 'Gudų memorandumas', *Karys* 40 (1921), p. 474.

<sup>67</sup> 'Žinios iš okupuotojo krašto', in *Trimitas*, 50 (1921), p. 36.

<sup>68</sup> 'Ruošiasi apsispręsti', in *Karys*, 25 November 1920, p. 444.

their borders. The Latvian government set up quarantine stations in Rēzekne and Daugavpils. As the Polish-Lithuanian border was closed, the Latvian and Lithuanian governments signed a treaty in 1921, which regulated that Lithuanian repatriates also had to pass through the Latvian stations before they reached Obeliai, the main quarantine station on Lithuanian territory.<sup>69</sup> Refugees from the Vilnius region, due to the same closed border, had to pass through the Polish-administered quarantine stations in Baranaviči and Smarhon.<sup>70</sup> These stations not only had the function to stop the spreading of epidemic diseases, but also to screen refugees for political tendencies and national belonging. The Latvian-Soviet and Lithuanian-Soviet peace treaties of 1920 stipulated only refugees who could prove that they had been registered in the territory of the new states before the First world War could become citizens.<sup>71</sup> In practice however, as Balkelis has shown for the Lithuanian case, refugees considered ethnically Lithuanian had significantly higher chances of being repatriated than other ethnicities. Only 27,2 per cent of all applicants were Lithuanians, but they formed 60 per cent of all those allowed to return. More Jews applied (29,8 per cent), but they accounted for only 11 per cent of all returnees.<sup>72</sup>

All in all, ca. 212,000 Latvian refugees returned between 1919 and August 1922,<sup>73</sup> while as many as 186,000 remained in Soviet Russia.<sup>74</sup> 245,000 Lithuanian refugees managed to return in 1918 and 1919 and another 345,000 until 1924, while around 185,000 could not or did not want to return at all. 85 per cent of all Lithuanians returned to the new republic, but only 70 per cent of all Poles, 50 per cent of all Jews, and less than 40 per cent of all Russians.<sup>75</sup> In the south of disintegrating *Ober Ost* (later part of the interwar Republic of Poland), the British Relief Mission to Poland estimated in 1919 that merely 20 per cent of the pre-war population was still there and a maximum of 50 per cent could be expected to return.<sup>76</sup>

The new governments made significant efforts to get those home that they considered part of the new titular nations. In June 1919, the Latvian Committee for Refugee Relief in Ekaterinodar complained that many of the 10,000 Latvian refugees in Southern Russia were drafted into the White Armies, although they should be considered Latvian citizens since de-facto recognition of Latvia by the western great powers. The Committee highlighted that these refugees were required to reinforce the Latvian Army instead.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, particularly wealthier Baltic Germans had difficulties entering the new Latvian state, often being charged high sums for transport from Rēzekne into inner Latvia. One returnee recounts that he and other Baltic Germans were issued only provisional residence

<sup>69</sup> 'Dogovor meždu Litvoy i Latviey o perevozke litovskih bežencev čerez teritoriju Latvii ot granicy Rossii do granicy Litvy (Riga, 22 iyulya 1921 g.)', in Pranas Dailidė (ed.), *Lietuvos sutartys su svetimomis valstybėmis, 1919-1929*, Vilnius 1930.

<sup>70</sup> 'Do Pana Ministra Zdrowia Publicznego i Naczelnego Nadzwyczajnego Komisarza w miejscu', 16 January 1922, AAN, 15, sygn. 90, p. 21; Emigracja, 1922, AAN, 15, sygn. 1654, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> 'Latvia and Russia. Treaty of Peace, done at Moscow, and completed and signed at Riga, August 11, 1920', *League of Nations Treaty Series* 67, p. 218.

[<http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/LNTSer/1920/63.html>]; Lithuania and Soviet Government of Russia. Peace Treaty and Protocol, signed at Moscow, July 12, 1920, *League of Nations Treaty Series* 94, p. 127 [<http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/LNTSer/1920/2.html>]

<sup>72</sup> Balkelis, *Return*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>73</sup> 'La situation en Lettonie, 10 February 1922', Cadbury Research Library (=CRF), SCF, A401, EJ 77.

<sup>74</sup> Priedite, *Latvian Refugees*, p. 49.

<sup>75</sup> Balkelis, *Return*, p. 92.

<sup>76</sup> Reports on the districts of Volkovysk, Pinsk, Slonim, Grodno, 3 May 1919, The National Archives (=TNA), FO 608/223/11, pp. 208-212.

<sup>77</sup> 'Comité letton de Secours aux Réfugiés en Ekatérinodar', 13 June 1919, TNA, FO 608/203/28, p. 539.

permits, which they had to change into passports for high fees: “we had not expected such a welcoming in our home country.”<sup>78</sup>

As Latvia and Lithuania initially did not allow non-Latvian and non-Lithuanian citizens to transit their territories, thousands of refugees from Bolshevik Russia were stranded at the Latvian quarantine stations. Konstantin Arabažin, a Russian nobleman from Poltava, was brought to Latvia by the disturbances of the Russian Civil War, and in January 1921 advocated a commitment of Russians to the new Latvian state: „It is time to carry on, to begin with constructive, honest work on the creation of a class of citizens and the preservation of Russian culture. We have all possibilities for that: We are no refugees; we, the Russians, are present here in all social layers.’ Ominously, however, he added that the future of Russians, who had never learned to organise as a national minority in a nationally fragmented order, seemed uncertain „We do not even know how many of us there are in Latvia, who we are, what we are, what we occupy ourselves with, in what condition of health the Russian population is, how big their power and knowledge for creative and productive work are – we don’t know anything about ourselves ...”<sup>79</sup>

In fact, the Russian community in Latvia at this point was almost 40 per cent smaller than it had been before the war<sup>80</sup>, while thousands of Russian refugees were waiting at the border, supplied by local relief groups and international associations such as Save the Children. By summer 1921, the situation in Daugavpils had become so hopeless that Russian refugees were beginning to return to famine-ridden Russia, „convinced that they are more likely to perish (...) if they remain”<sup>81</sup>, wrote Muriel Paget, director of Save the Children in the Baltics. The war, which had raged at the gates of the city, had turned Daugavpils into a wasteland, reducing its population from 250,000 before the war to 30,000 in 1922. Most houses had neither windows nor roofs, and flooding had exacerbated the hopeless housing conditions.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, refugees kept pouring in, many starved and in bad medical conditions.<sup>83</sup> For refugees without knowledge of Latvian, it was close to impossible to find work, and families with children often shared massively overpriced rooms without furniture.<sup>84</sup>

Due to the closed Lithuanian-Polish border and the rigid Latvian policies against Russian refugees in Rēzekne and Daugavpils, Lithuania never suffered the same refugee crisis as Latvia. Relatively few Russian refugees found their way into the repatriation camp established near Obeliai in December 1920, five months after the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty had provided for the exchange of refugees. Transit through the camp took up speed, after merely 2,114 repatriates registered in January 1921, to 7,360 in May 1921. 42,859 refugees were registered in Obeliai until August 1921. Lithuanians formed the largest group with 13,032, closely followed by Jews (12,081). Russians formed the third largest group (5,217). Less than 1,000 Poles were registered, as well as less than 500 Belarusians.

The Ministry of Defense complained that refugees had wildly different papers, with some arriving only with blank documents.<sup>85</sup> In May 1921, the Lithuanian Ministry for Interior Affairs ruled that refugees in Russia had to register in province or district centres with proper documents, which could be old passports, registration slips issued by the Russian imperial police or passports issued by Refugee Relief Committees in Russia. Alternatively, relatives who had stayed in Lithuania could attest to the identity of a repatriate. If all this did not apply,

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<sup>78</sup> „Unbillige Behandlung von Flüchtlingen aus Rußland”, in *Rigasche Rundschau*, 30 March 1921.

<sup>79</sup> Prof. K. I. Arabažin, ‘Nezavisimost’ Latvii i russkoe naselenie’, *Segodnya*, 31 January 1921

<sup>80</sup> ‘Latvija’, in *Trimitas*, 33 (1921), p. 22.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Muriel Paget to Mr Golden, 4 July 1921’, CRF, SCF, A401, EJ 73.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Latvia’, 21 April 1922, CRF, SCF, A401, EJ 70.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Monthly Report, Dvinsk Welfare Centre, 30 November 1921’, CRF, SCF, A401, EJ 72.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Paget Mission Latvia, Monthly Report, Dvinsk Welfare Centre’, 31 December 1921, CRF, SCF, A401, EJ 72.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

they would be regarded as citizens of Russia.<sup>86</sup> This excluded a large number of refugees from repatriation, if they did not have any family in Lithuania.

Refugees who could not provide proper documents or did not meet the criteria for Lithuanian citizenship were declared 'undesirable', unless they had professional skills classified as 'productive' by the Foreign Ministry. Already under German occupation, the Lithuanian Council (*Taryba*) had advocated to favour skilled workers over people who were 'not occupying themselves with any productive work'<sup>87</sup> with regards to repatriation. With 10 per cent, skilled workers did indeed form the largest group of people granted permits to stay in Lithuania, whereas farmhands and merchants accounted for only 2.5 per cent each. Particularly repatriates who had worked in the Tsarist administration as teachers, orthodox priests, writers, accountants, estate economists and estate supervisors were declared 'undesirable'.<sup>88</sup> This applied mostly to Russians, who hardly ever received permits for return. In late summer 1921, the situation of Russian refugees in the camps became so dire, that the Ministry of Interior Affairs considered granting them temporary residence permits.<sup>89</sup> Lithuanian newspapers reported of gangs of criminal Russians in the Obeliai camp.<sup>90</sup>

Jewish organisations who tried to help refugees get into Lithuania – mostly from Bolshevik Russia, but also from pogrom-ravaged Ukraine – were frequently alleged of bringing ever more 'unproductive elements' into the country. This was the case with international organisations such as the Comité executive de la Conférence Universelle Juive de Secours (Jewish World Relief Conference), which helped refugees from Ukraine and southern Russia to settle in neighbouring countries<sup>91</sup>, but mostly with the Lithuanian Ministry of Jewish Affairs, which from its establishment on was perceived by many as working not merely in favour of Jews, but also to the detriment of Lithuanians. The Ministry employed a special plenipotentiary, who was guaranteed the right to contact all Jewish repatriates at all refugee camps in order to provide social, religious and legal assistance.<sup>92</sup>

One employee of the Ministry was criminally prosecuted for trying to get as many Jewish refugees as possible (including those considered 'undesirable' by the Lithuanian government) from Latvia via Obeliai into Lithuania. The Lithuanian plenipotentiary in Rēzekne thus said the Jewish official had 'never learnt how a Lithuanian should love his fatherland; I cannot stand such people, who constantly blare about the honour of the fatherland and its wellbeing but harm it in all kinds of ways behind its back.'<sup>93</sup> Mirroring similar grievances in other parts of East Central Europe<sup>94</sup>, the Lithuanian government considered the food rations given by international organisations and the Ministry for Jewish Affairs specifically to Jewish refugees harmful, as this practice created conflicts between Jewish and Lithuanian refugees, the latter of which often suffered from severe food shortages.<sup>95</sup> In 1921 and 1922, the opposition frequently attacked the Lithuanian government

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<sup>86</sup> 'Vidaus Reikalų Ministerijai', 10 May 1921, LCVA, f. 377, ap. 5, b. 9, l. 43.

<sup>87</sup> 'Kommission der Taryba für Rückführung, geleitet von A. Stulginskis an die Militärverwaltung Litauen', 15 April 1918, LCVA, f. 1014, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 6-7.

<sup>88</sup> Pranas Baronas, 'Obelių karantinas 1919 metais', in *Istorija*, LVII (2003), pp. 45-50, here pp. 47-48.

<sup>89</sup> 'Užsienių Reikalų Min-jos Europos Centro Departamentui', 13 August 1921, LCVA, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 216, l. 7.

<sup>90</sup> 'Obeliai', *Darbininkas*, 12 January 1922.

<sup>91</sup> 'Conférence universelle juive de secours, Paris 1924; Comité executive de la Conférence Universelle Juive de Secours to the Cabinet of Ministers', 16 September 1921, LCVA, f. 377, ap. 5, b. 10, l. 1.

<sup>92</sup> 'Instrukcii o pravach i funkciyach polnomočennyh E. N. S. na Litve po delam reevakuacii bežencev', LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 49, l. 36-37.

<sup>93</sup> 'Prano Daugirdo pranešimas', 14 July 1921, LCVA, f. 377, ap. 5, b. 12, l. 87.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. e.g. with regards to by this time Polish Białystok: Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Białystok and its Diaspora* (Bloomington, 2010), p. 142.

<sup>95</sup> 'Makauskio byla', 6 August 1921, LCVA, f. 377, ap. 5, b. 12, l. 78-80; 'Šidlauskaitės pranešimas', 29 July 1921, LCVA, f. 377, ap. 5, b. 12, l. 81-83.

for letting too many Jews into the country.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, supply points organised by local Jewish organisations to feed refugees from the Vilnius region were often praised by the Lithuanian Army as reliable suppliers.<sup>97</sup>

Attempts to use repatriation for ethnic homogenisation mirrored strategies employed in South Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire (cf. the chapter of Uğur Ümit Üngör in this volume). Nationalization was designed as a measure to disentangle populations allegedly mixed together by imperial policies. The absence of large refugee waves at the borders of the new Lithuanian state enabled the government and its local administration to nationalize formerly multi-ethnic towns, as in the case of Tauragė, a town of formerly 14,000 inhabitants, which had been almost completely destroyed during the advance of the German Army. Ca. 1,500 refugees returning in the second half of 1918 had started building huts in the outskirts of the town. District chief Stanislovas Kuizinas recounted later:

From a national perspective, this was a mass which you could form into whatever you wanted. And before the war, this had been a real Babel, because real Lithuanians lived in the city, polonised Lithuanians, germanised Lithuanians, Russians, Jews, Germans, russophile Jews and germanised Jews and all those mixed peoples that we connect with trade and smuggling. The occupying power [...] had wanted to germanise a significant part of the population for good [...], the refugees returning from Russia, however, were influenced by the spirit of Russification and Bolshevisation. We had to work steadily and diligently to explain the idea of the declaration of independence, its meaning and its necessity and also its usefulness. Thus we toiled from the early morning until night-time; after all, we had to make Lithuanians of all this mass of people.<sup>98</sup>

However, the practice of distributing people to those parts of Lithuania where land was available was not always welcomed by the returnees, who included people of Lithuanian origin who had been deported already before the war and had made a successful, if modest living in Russia. In the early 1920s, a number of families of Lithuanians deported after the Polish Uprising of 1863 chose to leave Soviet Russia for Lithuania along with the crowds of returning refugees. After waiting for two years for a permit and having been promised the return of their family's land, which had been seized by the Tsarist authorities, they ended up with thousands of war refugees in the camp at Obeliai. Having liquidated their land in Russia, they were disappointed to learn that they were to be distributed to different districts with poor soil. In 1925, representatives of 100 families of returnees complained that their communities had been torn apart in the process of repatriation and they found it much more difficult to make a living than in Russia.<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, the refugee crisis did not restrict itself to the question of repatriation, but also included the question of how to deal with refugees already on the new national territories as a result of the First World War and continuing warfare in 1918 to 1921. Save the Children reported that in August 1921, of a total of 16,800 refugees currently on Latvian territory, 9,688 had no Latvian passport (most of them Russians), making them vulnerable and their future uncertain.<sup>100</sup> In Lithuania, 6,239 people were without citizenship in 1923<sup>101</sup>, but it is safe to assume that the figure was significantly higher in 1921.

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<sup>96</sup> Balkelis, 'Return', pp. 91 f.

<sup>97</sup> 'Žydų Reikalų Ministerija, spaudos skyriaus žinios', LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 45, l. 143.

<sup>98</sup> 'Pirmasis kariuomenės paradas Žemaičiuose', *Karys*, 8 (456), 16 February 1928, pp. 149-151, here p. 149.

<sup>99</sup> 'Prašymas. Nuog. tremt. 1863 metu grįžusių iš Rusijos 1922 met. Lapkričio mėn. iš 100 šeimynų, apsigivenusių: Kedainių, Rokiškio, Utenos, Biržų - Pasvalio, Šaulių, Šakių, Vilkaviškio ir Maryampolio apskrityse', 25 March 1925, LCVA, f. 392, ap. 1, t. 3, b. 2201, l. 384-385.

<sup>100</sup> Report Concerning Russian Refugees in Latvia, 18 August 1921, CRL, SCF, A401, EJ 77

<sup>101</sup> *Statistikos biuletenis*, 1 (1923), p. 14.

## **Conclusion**

The refugee crisis of the First World War and ensuing repatriation irrevocably changed the ethnic fabric of Latvia and Lithuania. The share of Jews and Russians in the population slumped significantly, as did the number of Baltic Germans in Courland and that of Poles in Lithuania. This was a result not only of the 'evacuations', but also of the politics of repatriation. The pronounced congruence of ethnicity and social function in imperial Russian society meant that all ethnic groups were affected to differing degrees by the refugee crisis. With Ober Ost, the German military occupation strongly differentiated between Lithuanians and Latvians, perceiving Courland to be an ideal territorial addition to the empire, thus preventing the repatriation of displaced Latvians. After the November Armistice, repatriation gained momentum, while at the same time new refugee crises emerged, with refugees of the Russian Civil War trying to pass through Latvia and Polish-Lithuanian (para-)military clashes displacing the population at the new border.

The refugee crisis and both imperial and national repatriation policies are crucial when looking at the transformation from an imperial to a national order beyond the political level. Lithuania and Latvia did not only have different borders and different governments after the war, but also different populations. Repatriation was not merely a reaction to expulsions, but a policy of its very own, with aims that went far beyond the return to the pre-1914 situation. In the case of Courland, the repatriation policy of Ober Ost turned the region into an imperial project, which aimed at transforming it into a German colony by barring Latvians from returning to their empty homeland. Post-war national repatriation policies aimed at resettling as many Latvians and Lithuanians as possible, while preventing refugees from other regions – particularly Russians fleeing the civil war – from coming in. At the same time, refugees originating from Lithuania and Latvia could be kept outside the borders if the group they were ascribed to was allegedly 'unproductive' or opposed to the empowerment of the titular nation. This means that the logic of how people became refugees (that is, because the Russian imperial authorities considered them disloyal) was fundamentally different from the logic according to which refugees were barred from repatriation because they were not part of the new titular nation. Repatriation thus could and did not want to 'right' the 'wrongs' of 1914-15 and contributed significantly to the fundamental political, social and economic changes the end of the war brought to the Baltics.