

Theodore R. Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations: 1795–2000*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015. 366 p. ISBN 978-0-87580-730-0

This book, according to the author, is about an exceptional city.¹ Although, as Theodore R. Weeks writes, there are many cities in Central and Eastern Europe where people of various cultures lived in the past and continue to do so, however none ‘figures so centrally in several different national mythologies as Vilnius’ (p. 2). It is not worth arguing against this thesis. The book’s introduction already explains that ‘For Poles, Jews and Lithuanians, Vilnius occupies a key position in national-cultural mythology’ (p. 1). And this book does indeed reveal the significance that the city had in the Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian and also Russian national discourses from 1795 until 2000. I think it is quite understandable why the author left Tatars and Karaites beyond his scope of attention for this volume, as they made up only a very meagre part of Vilnius’ population. However, the book might have benefited from greater attention to the role Vilnia played in Belarusian national mythology and that nation’s activities.

In the book, Weeks describes how different political regimes (Imperial Russia, the Second Polish Republic, the Soviet Union, and finally, the post-1990 Republic of Lithuania) tried to implement ‘a very specific type of national-symbolic politics’, though at the same time, in the book’s Introduction, he claims to devote great attention to ‘the city’s everyday negotiations of nationality and the relations between ethnic groups, with particular attention to economic, social, and national categories’ (p. 3). What immediately becomes apparent is that there are many interesting subjects

¹ Vilnius in Lithuanian, Vilne/Vilna in Yiddish and Hebrew, Vil’no and Vil’na in Russian, Wilno in Polish, and Vilnia in Belarusian. In this book, in the interests of clarity, the author uses the contemporary (i.e. Lithuanian) version of the city’s name (p. 10). When he reverts to a non-Lithuanian discourse, he uses the name appropriate to the particular discourse (language). However, this system is not applied consistently throughout the book. Firstly, in the Russian discourse until around 1863, Vil’no was more common, and only later Vil’na (for more detail, see D. Staliūnas, ‘Lenkija ar Rusija? Lietuva rusiškajame mentaliniame žemėlapyje’, *Lietuvos erdvinės sampratos ilgajame XIX šimtmetyje*, ed. D. Staliūnas (Vilnius, 2015), pp. 37–38). In addition, sometimes Weeks writes the Russian name for the city as Vil’na (pp. 10, 67, 71), but usually Vilna; in some cases, use of the Polish version is not completely clear: p. 93 ‘The Catholic bishop of Wilno’ or p. 238 ‘Here the Jews and Poles, who made up together the great majority of Wilno’s population ...’ (referring to the 19th century).

mentioned, even if they are not directly related to the book's topic, for example, the development of transport in the city. Weeks tells us that in 1907, the Vilnius city government discussed the possibility of an electric tram system, although in the end the existing horse-drawn trams remained, as well as 13 automobiles (1913) and around one thousand bicycles (p. 93). Later, he describes public transport in interwar Vilnius (p. 127), and the transport problems that unfolded at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries (p. 227).

The history of the city of Vilnius, as an arena for the interaction of various ethnic, national, confessional and cultural groups, is told in chronological order, i.e. each chapter of the book focuses on a different stage in history. Chapter 1, called 'Historical Background', which presents the context for the book's main subject, gives a brief summary of the city's history up to 1795, where, aside from already well-known facts, a number of important conclusions that appeared in David Frick's recent book about the interrelations of various confessional groups in Vilnius in the 17th century are given.²

The second and third chapters are devoted to the period where the author is at his strongest.³ Here, he not only analyses the Imperial government's actions in order to symbolically control the city, but also the cultural activities of various ethnic/confessional groups. He writes that until the mid-19th century, the fact that Vilnius belonged to the Russian Empire was not yet strongly felt. The situation changed after 1863, when the number of Russians in the city grew, and its cultural landscape started

² D. Frick, *Kith, Kin, and Neighbors: Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-Century Wilno* (Ithaca and London, 2013).

³ See his earlier books: T.R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914*, (DeKalb, 1996); T.R. Weeks, *From Assimilation to Antisemitism. The 'Jewish' Question in Poland, 1850–1914* (DeKalb, 2006). This is why it is somewhat odd to see quite a few inaccuracies in this chapter. When he lists the governorates of the Northwest Region (p. 71), the governorate of Vitebsk is 'skipped'; the naming of the uprising of 1830–1831 is very varied, and sometimes obviously inaccurate: for example, Weeks calls it the '1831 November uprising' (on p. 8 the uprising began in 1830, but not in November 1831); the author claims that it is called the November Uprising in Polish and Lithuanian historiography (p. 27), even though this specific terminology is not characteristic of Lithuanian historiography; on another occasion, it appears that he simply makes a mistake and mentions the November Uprising, instead of the January Uprising (the title used in Polish historiography for the 1863–1864 uprising): 'In particular after the period of the Great Reforms/November Uprising—that is, from the 1860s' (p. 238); p. 50 features a photograph of the Merchants' Club, built at the end of the tsarist period, that was allegedly taken in the early 20th century, even though traffic lights are clearly visible; therefore, it should read early 21st century, etc.

to change.⁴ Even though the largest ethnic group in the city were Jews, according to the author, Polish culture dominated in the city. Weeks also claims that although Poles and Jews were forced to cooperate and maintain some kind of contact in everyday life, it was most certainly not a ‘shared culture’ (p. 21). Essentially, the author sees three groups in the city: ‘Culturally and socially, Vilnius was at least three cities: one was Polish, one Jewish, and the other Russian’ (p. 36). The presence of Lithuanians in the city meanwhile only started to be felt more intensively after 1905.

What is somewhat strange is that in these chapters, the author does not discuss the changing conception of nationality at all. In effect, everything that was created in the Polish language in the first half of the 19th century is attributed to the Polish cultural (national, ethnic) domain in the book,⁵ even though we are well aware that in the late 18th century the concept of a political nation still prevailed (where the Lithuanian nation was essentially just the nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; by the first half of the 19th century, a concept of nation emerged that was based on a common history and territory; and only later did an ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic concept of nation become entrenched).⁶ Interestingly, we find information about a different concept of nationality in this book, when the author discusses Michał Baliński’s description of the city of Vilnius. There are no Poles in this Vilnius, because, as Weeks correctly notes, ‘As we have seen, Baliński probably considered himself “ethnically” different from Poles of central Poland and saw himself chiefly as a *Litwin*, which is not the same as how we in the twenty-first century (with our emphasis on language and ethnicity) would define a “Lithuanian”’ (p. 25). The author also unreservedly attributes Adam Honory Kirkor to Polish culture, even though there is sufficient research to indicate that this mid-19th century social activist considered himself a Lithuanian (understandably, not in the modern sense).⁷

⁴ Weeks believes that the erection of a monument in honour of Mikhail Murav’ev was a display of ‘some conciliatory gestures to the Poles’ (p. 69). My counter-argument: D. Staliūnas, ‘Lenkija ar Rusija?’, pp. 70–73.

⁵ Weeks uses the terms cultures, nationalities and ethnicities as synonyms in his book (p. 1).

⁶ Z. Medišauskienė, ‘Lietuvos vaizdiniai XIX a. pirmojoje pusėje’, *Lietuvos erdvinės sampratos...*, pp. 86–95.

⁷ S. Kirkor, *Przeszłość umiera dwa razy. Powieść prawdziwa* (Kraków, 1978); Z. Medišauskienė, ‘Adomas Honorijus Kirkoras: tarp Lietuvos, Lenkijos ir Baltarusijos’, *Lietuvių Atgimimo istorijos studijos*, t. 8 (Vilnius, 1996), pp. 168–193; A. Kulakauskas, ‘Šaka, atskilusi nuo tautos...’, *Lietuvos bajorijos ir LDK bajoriškosios kultūros vaidmuo lietuvių tautiniame atgimime*, *Sietynas*, 3 (1988), pp. 75–98; M. Долбиллов, Д. Сталюнас, *Обратная уния: из истории отношений между католицизмом и православием в Российской империи 1840–1873* (Vilnius, 2010), pp. 58–62.

The fourth chapter discusses the events of the First World War and afterwards (until 1922) in Vilnius, as well as the differences between the Imperial policies of Russia and Germany, the changing ethno-demographic situation, and the efforts of various nationalist movements to increase their influence in the city; much attention is given to the Lithuanian and Polish rhetoric that was used in the debate over Vilnius.⁸

Chapter 5 features a discussion about how Vilnius was seen as a Polish city in the interwar years. A great deal of attention is given to Stephen Bathory University (the former name of Vilnius University), the city's inclusion in tourist itineraries, and the so-called Vilnius liberation campaign that took place in the Republic of Lithuania. In the Introduction, the author states that 'In the twentieth century, which properly only starts with World War I, the intensity and brutality of nationalizing measures increased considerably' (p. 8), but the information provided in the book calls into question this kind of claim: in interwar Vilnius, there were Lithuanian schools and societies, newspapers were being published, and so on (pp. 152–153), and if we compare this with the situation during Imperial Russian times, we notice a significant difference: the printing of books using Latin letters (and later Gothic script as well) was banned from 1865 to 1904, the Lithuanian language was not taught as a subject even in primary schools, and so on.⁹ Of course, the ruling elite of the Second Polish Republic thought along even more nationalist lines than did Russian officials, but any specific national policy measures are unlikely to find a basis in the thesis Weeks proposes.

Chapter 6, 'The Destruction of Multinational Vilnius, 1939–1955', as the heading suggests, discusses not just the Second World War period, but the postwar years as well. Here the author gives an analysis of how the situation changed in the city under each new ruling authority (Soviet, Lithuanian, Nazi, Soviet). As we might expect, there is an account of the Holocaust, although on the other hand, the author devotes a lot of attention to the rich Jewish cultural life in the Vilnius ghetto. Another part of this chapter is about the Poles' departure from Vilnius, which was organised in accordance with the agreement of 22 September 1944

⁸ Following the line of Tomas Balkelis, the author alleges that 'it was only during the actual war years that Lithuanian patriots began to demand independence (as opposed to some form of autonomy)' (p. 108). For another approach, see: D. Staliūnas, 'Apie kai kurias istorijos mokslo disertacijas, skirtas lietuvių tautiniam judėjimui, apgintas užsienio mokslo įstaigose: Tomo Balkelio (2009) ir Audronės Janužytės (2005) darbai ir jų kontekstas', *Archivum Lithuanicum* (2012), pp. 373–392.

⁹ According to Weeks, 'The purpose of this restriction was to increase the distance between Polish and Lithuanian culture by forcing Lithuanians to use the Cyrillic alphabet' (p. 60). For another interpretation, see: D. Staliūnas, *Making Russians. Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam/New York, 2007).

between representatives of the Lithuanian SSR and the Polish Committee of National Salvation.¹⁰ The author notes that the Soviet Lithuanian government wanted Poles to depart from Vilnius, but not from rural areas, thus wishing to transform the capital into a Soviet and Lithuanian city.

The period of radical transitions ended in 1955, and a period that Weeks calls ‘socialist normalcy’ commenced, which is the focus of Chapter 7. Here he talks about how the Lithuanian language and culture gradually came to dominate in the city, and pays a lot of attention to the city’s urban planning and its realisation, which, in my opinion, does not really correlate with the book’s topic that was featured in the Introduction.

The last chapter ‘Building a Lithuanian Capital City, 1985–2000’ quite unexpectedly begins in 1985, not 1988 or 1990. Thereby, the author claims that the rise in Lithuanian culture started with the beginning of perestroika, becoming more firmly established after 1990.

It is no easy task to write a city’s biography over two hundred years, especially a city like Vilnius, which was inhabited by a truly varied society, from confessional and linguistic points of view. In order for this kind of study to be conducted in a professional way, the researcher must know at least seven languages. Weeks is probably the only historian, to my knowledge, who knows all these languages and is qualified to conduct a professional analysis of 19th and 20th-century issues. This history of Vilnius as a multi-ethnic city, regardless of the criticisms expressed here, is a very valuable study that can boast of two main advantages: first, the fact that a period spanning two centuries was reviewed; and second, the author’s ability to remain academically neutral and to refrain from discussing to which of the nations/cultures Vilnius actually ‘belonged’ in the period under analysis.

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¹⁰ Reading this book, one might get the impression that the Lithuanian SSR operated independently. Nothing is said about the fact that instructions for this agreement came from Moscow, which controlled the whole process for the signing of the document: V. Stravinskienė, ‘Lenkija ir Lietuvos lenkai: 1944–1953 m.’, *Istorija*, 1 (2013), pp. 31–38.