'I CANNOT FIND ANY WORK OR SERVICE ...' THE UNEMPLOYED IN VILNIUS IN 1920–1939

Vitalija Stravinskienė

(Lithuanian Institute of History)

ABSTRACT This article analyses a sphere of the social life of the population of Vilnius that has received little attention in historiography, the unemployment problem during the 'Polish period' (1920–1939). It discusses the efforts by the government of the time to reduce the number of unemployed in the city, and to mitigate the negative outcomes of unemployment. The author shows why the unemployed of Vilnius received less support than the unemployed in other regions in Poland, and illustrates aspects of their daily life.

KEYWORDS: Vilnius; Poland; interwar; unemployment; demography; urban.

The first half of the 20th century was rather difficult for the inhabitants of Vilnius, due to various hardships: wars, epidemics, famine, various shortages, and radical political and social upheavals. Unemployment was a phenomenon that accompanied Vilnius residents for the entire period analysed. It was a constant problem, which particularly intensified at certain points in time (e.g. during the Great Depression of 1929–1933).

So far, no research has been devoted to unemployment specifically in Vilnius. It has been discussed in general studies on the development of Poland's economy in 1918–1939, as an aspect of the issue of unemployment.¹ Attention has been paid to the negative

¹ J. Żarnowski, *Spółeczeństwo Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 1973); Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Druga Rzeczypospolita: gospodarka – społeczeństwo – miejsce w świecie* (Warszawa, 1977); *Ruch zawodowy w Polsce. Zarys dziejów*, oprac. J. Kancewicz [i in.], 2/1 (Warszawa, 1980); M. Leczyk, *Druga Rzeczypospolita 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 2006); *Polityka społeczna państwa polskiego 1918–1935* (Warszawa, 1935); A. Jezierski, C. Leszczyńska, *Dzieje gospodarcze Polski w zarysie do 1989 r.* (Warszawa, 1994); M. Dolecka, D. Raczkiewicz, 'Bezrobocie w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym w kontekście jakości danych w spisach ludności', *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sekcja H, vol. XLVIII, 2 (2014), pp. 49–58, <https://journals.umcs.pl/h/article/download/95/92> (accessed on 15 01 2017); M. Dolecka, 'Roboty publiczne jako

effects of unemployment on the country and on public life, and the efforts taken to reduce them. Marta Dolecka and Dorota Raczkiewicz have said that Poland was characterised by major fluctuations in unemployment (very high unemployment in winter, that would fall in summer), which had an influence on the situation of the population who were concentrated in the agrarian sector. The economic situation in Poland was complicated during almost the entire interwar period, which is why people lived in a constant state of crisis. In order to reduce the number of unemployed, the government acted on two fronts: it offered support to the unemployed, and it worked on preventing unemployment by organising seasonal work.² I should add that in the case of the Vilnius region, the area's geographical location was exploited, and seasonal migration to Latvia was encouraged. This reduced tension in the Vilnius labour market, as potential workers searched for employment not just in their city, but in the neighbouring country as well.

There is some information about the unemployed of Vilnius in papers on the history of Vilnius.³ They mention the existence of numerous unemployed people in the city. The dissertation by Norbertas Černiauskas about the issue of unemployment in the Republic of Lithuania in 1918–1940⁴ rates a special mention, as he talks about unemployed people in Vilnius during the 'Polish period'. The author notes that unemployment figures in Vilnius were among the highest, ranging between 5,000 and 10,000.⁵ However, we should specify that in the context of Poland, Vilnius was actually counted as a region which experienced a lower level of unemployment. There were several thousand officially registered unemployed people here,

podstawowa forma walki z bezrobociem (na przykładzie Lublina w okresie międzywojennym', *Zamojskie Studia i Materiały*, 1 (1999), http://biblioteka.teatrn.pl/dlibra/Content/11040/Roboty_publiczne.pdf (accessed on 15 01 2017); K. Chylak, 'Łagodzenie skutków bezrobocia wśród młodzieży w Polsce w latach 1933–1935. Działalność stowarzyszenia opieki nad niezatrudnioną młodzieżą', *Studia z historii społeczno-gospodarczej*, t. X (2012), pp. 211–227, http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.hdl_11089_10690/c/14-211_227-Chylak.pdf (accessed on 05 02 2017); M. Ciechocińska, *Próby walki z bezrobociem w Polsce międzywojennej* (Warszawa, 1965).

² Dolecka, 'Roboty publiczne jako podstawowa forma walki z bezrobociem'.

³ T.R. Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (Dekalb, 2015); *Vilniaus miesto istorija: nuo Spalio revoliucijos iki dabartinių laikų*, red. J. Žiugžda (Vilnius, 1972).

⁴ N. Černiauskas, *Nedarbo problema Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940. Daktaro disertacija* (Vilnius, 2015).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 291–292.

while there were incomparably more in Poland's industrial regions, reaching into the tens of thousands. During the economic crisis, the numbers of unemployed soared to hundreds of thousands. In addition, contrary to the author's claim, unqualified workers predominated among the unemployed in Vilnius.

Statistical publications are an important source for analysing the theme of Vilnius' unemployed (statistical annals for Vilnius, Poland and Lithuania, the results of the census of 1931).⁶ A comparison of data from Vilnius and other locations in Poland and Lithuania allows us to define the dynamics of unemployment and its characteristics, and to search for correlations between indicators of other processes.

The memories of inhabitants of Vilnius from that time were also a reference source for this article.⁷ A prominent collection features narratives by Poland's unemployed from the early 1930s, when unemployment was particularly high, that were collected and later published, describing life after losing their jobs. Also interesting in this regard is the account by an unemployed person in Vilnius about that stage in his life, and his unsuccessful attempts at finding work in other cities in Poland.⁸

The Vilnius press also touched on this topic,⁹ informing readers about the situation of city-dwellers left without work, changes in their numbers, the means of support available to them, and other events reflecting their lives.

However, the main source for compiling this article is primary material kept at the Lithuanian Central State Archive. These are documents from various Polish institutions that tried to relieve unemployment (the representative of the Polish government in Vilnius, the Board of the Vilnius Voivodeship, the city magistrate, the city alderman, the Labour Inspectorate, etc), including various

⁶ *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1931* (Wilno, 1933); *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1936* (Wilno, 1938); *Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dn. 9.XII 1931 r. Miasto Wilno* (Warszawa, 1937); *Mały rocznik statystyczny 1930* (Warszawa, 1931); *Mały rocznik statystyczny 1939* (Warszawa, 1939); *Lietuvos statistikos metraštis*, t. 12, 1939 (Vilnius, 1940).

⁷ P. Bieliauskas, *Vilniaus dienoraštis 1915.XII.26–1919.XI.26* (Trakai, 2009); *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, pod. red. A. Andrzejewskiego et. al., t. 1 (Warszawa, 1967); Memoirs of V. Alseikienė about her husband Danielius Alseika (1960), *Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyvas* (henceforth – LLMA), f. 459, ap. 3, b. 16.

⁸ *Pamiętniki*, pp. 371–378.

⁹ *Słowo, Kurjer Wileński, Dziennik Wileński*.

announcements, reports, instructions, requests from the unemployed, and such like. With these documents, I was able to determine the dynamics of unemployment figures in Vilnius over the period analysed, and the course of action taken by the local government to reduce unemployment, also revealing the hardship in the everyday life of the unemployed, and other aspects. This group of sources was supplemented with material from the Manuscript Department of the Wrublewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences. It proved to be useful in ascertaining the public efforts to help the unemployed.

The main subject of this article is unemployment as a socio-economic phenomenon, which was widespread in Vilnius. In order to analyse unemployment and the measures taken to deal with it, the aim was to show the socio-economic situation of Vilnius and its inhabitants during the period analysed, to identify its influence on the dynamics of unemployment figures, and to discuss the activities of institutions that tried to relieve unemployment, and the results of unemployment.

The economy and population of Vilnius

The First World War had a catastrophic impact on the city's economy, reducing its population and leading to poverty, in some cases famine, and death. After the war, the situation of Vilnius' population continued to worsen. Industry and trade were cut off from their former markets in the east (Russia), which is why some branches of industry markedly declined (such as furniture and cabinet making). The result of the conflict between Lithuania and Poland over state borders (the incorporation of Vilnius into Poland in 1922) prevented it from establishing natural economic links with Kaunas and other cities in Lithuania. In addition, the city's geographical position also had a negative impact on Vilnius' economy. It found itself on the periphery of Poland, on the edge of the state, quite far from other centres. All these factors meant that at the beginning of the period analysed, in terms of levels of industrial development, the Vilnius region was the least developed in all of Poland.¹⁰ This

¹⁰ Report on the work of the State Labour Mediation Agency of 1 July 1922–31 January 1923, *Lietuvos valstybės centrinis archyvas* (henceforth – LCVA), f. 156, ap. 1, b. 8, n. pag.

situation remained essentially the same throughout 1920–1939. In an economic sense, the region was one of the most neglected in all of Poland. As representatives from the Labour Fund in Vilnius noted in 1933, the low level of economic development in the Vilnius region meant that it was rather insignificant in Polish economic life.¹¹ Plans to increase investment in the city only appeared in 1936, but they were never realised, as financing was directed to Poland's industrial regions.

As throughout the whole region, small businesses predominated in Vilnius, employing a minimal number of people. On average, 17 people worked for a company in 1923; in 1927 this number was 18; and in 1929 it was 19.¹² Organisations and businesses in Vilnius were essentially concentrated in the city centre. In 1937–1938, most (77) could be found along A. Mickiewicza Street (now Gediminas Avenue), 35 each along Wielka (Didžioji) and Zawalna streets (now Pylimo Street), 30 on Niemecka (Vokiečių) Street, and 23 on Wileńska (Vilniaus) Street.¹³ The largest industrial enterprise was Elektrit, which manufactured radios. It was established in 1925.¹⁴ At first, several dozen staff worked there. Their number grew over the decade: it had reached 600 by 1935, and was between 1,100 and 1,200 in 1936.¹⁵

In terms of the economic conditions experienced by the population of Vilnius, two stages can be distinguished: 1) the period 1921 to 1929, when the outcome of the war's negative impact was felt in the city's economy, further intensified by Poland's budgetary crisis; and 2) the period 1930 to 1939, when the drawn-out Great Depression radicalised the situation of the majority of the city's population, and squeezed industry, trade and crafts, severely reducing the number of jobs, and increasing the number of unemployed and socially at-risk individuals.

The population of the city during this period and its breakdown can be seen in Table 1.

¹¹ Activity report of the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund Committee of 1 April 1933–31 March 1934, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 5207, l. 68.

¹² Activity report by the District 12 Labour Inspector B. Lesczyński for 1928, *ibid.*, f. 1149, ap. 1, b. 504, n. pag.

¹³ List of labour offices in Vilnius in 1937–1938, *ibid.*, f. 157, ap. 6, b. 86.

¹⁴ *Vilniaus miesto istorija*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60; M. Jackiewicz, *Wilno w XX wieku. Ludzie i wydarzenia* (Bydgoszcz, 2013), p. 130.

Table No. 1. Population and gender distribution, Vilnius, 1916–1939

Distribution based on gender	1916	1919	1923	1927	1931	1939
Females	81,201	70,156	90,924	94,539	106,781	107,389*
Males	59,639	53,499	76,530	76,096	88,290	87,584*
Total	140,840	123,655	167,454	170,635***	195,071	194,973**

* In fact, the number of males and females is somewhat higher, as it is impossible to establish the gender of 1,264 individuals, due to a lack of data.

** The total population figure is approximate, as a minor margin of error is likely due to corrections in the documents and inconsistencies in certain data (e.g. the total number of people who lived at a certain address, and the numbers of those differentiated based on their native language).

*** A somewhat larger city population was given in the author's earlier works (173,630). However, having re-checked the primary data, it appeared that summary data provided by police representatives was not accurate, being slightly exaggerated. Once the number of individuals registered in the suburbs of Vilnius was recalculated, the total city population could be corrected.

This table was compiled based on data from the Vilnius City Central Statistical Bureau's report for July 1919, Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Vrublevskių bibliotekos Rankraščių skyrius (henceforth – LMAVB RS), f. 29-321, l. 3; data about inhabitants of Vilnius registered at police commissariats for October 1927, LCVA, f. 64, ap. 20, b. 761; Vilnius' population based on gender, age, confession, native tongue and literacy in 1939, *ibid.*, b. 986–990; *Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dn. 9.XII 1931 r. Miasto Wilno* (Warszawa, 1937), p. 13.

Data from 1916 and 1919 is not given, for it illustrates the demographic situation on the eve of the period analysed. A significant change in the city's population took place in 1919–1923, when former residents who had fled to Russia or Belarus returned to the city, and people from other locations in Poland and Lithuania tried to settle. Data from the census of 1931 is our only source for the number of families and their sizes at this time. It shows that there were around 58,500 families in the city at the time (not including 207 families that lived in hotels, communal apartments and shelters), including 37,100 Catholic families, 16,800 Jewish families, and 4,500 families of other confessions and of unknown nationality.¹⁶ Small families predominated. Families of one or two people made up 42%, families of three or four made up 32%, five to seven 22%, and eight to 12 made up 4%.¹⁷ Surviving archival data indicates that the quantitatively dominant Polish and Jewish families differed.

¹⁶ *Drugi powszechny*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Polish families were larger than Jewish ones, and the families of Polish workers were larger than those of the Polish intelligentsia. The list of unemployed people in Vilnius in 1926 confirms that the largest family of an unemployed Pole consisted of 11 members, with families of six or seven being more common. The largest Jewish family consisted of eight members, with families of three to five people being more frequent.¹⁸

At the beginning of the 1930s, most of the city's population was involved in industry (35%), and slightly less in trade (18%), government administration, education and social welfare (15%), and transport and communications (10%).¹⁹

The situation of the inhabitants of Vilnius depended on the ratio between their wages and their expenditure on food, the home, and other expenses. Vilnius was not known for its high wages, and lagged behind other regions in this sense. Wages in the eastern part of Poland were and remained lower than those in central and western Poland. For example, in 1924 a bricklayer could receive 15.33 złoty for a day's work in Warsaw, but only 10.17 złoty in Lviv.²⁰ Comparing the cost of food and the wage ratio in Vilnius, the following picture emerges: in November 1924, a kilogram of bread cost 0.27 to .47 złoty, a kilogram of salt cost 0.25 złoty, a kilogram of pork 2.10 złoty, a kilogram of fine sugar 1.20 złoty, a kilogram of paraffin 0.33 złoty, and a cubic metre of firewood cost ten złoty. Meanwhile, a day's wage for an unqualified labourer was around 2.5 to three złoty.²¹ In terms of the cost of food, on the eve of the economic crisis, Vilnius was considered among the more 'expensive' cities. For example, in 1928, based on the cost of bread, meat (pork) and sugar, it was top among the larger cities in Poland.²² The situation changed somewhat in the 1930s, when food prices fell across all of Poland, and expenditure on food in Vilnius decreased. In 1928 the minimum expenditure on food for a labourer's family of four reached 4.42 złoty. In 1932 the sum was 2.64 złoty, and in 1937 it was 2.22 złoty.²³ However, the cost of

¹⁸ Lists of unemployed in Vilnius in 1926, LCVA, f. 64, ap. 24, b. 253, n. pag.

¹⁹ *Drugi powszechny*, p. 23.

²⁰ *Mały rocznik statystyczny*, p. 103.

²¹ Price list of goods in Vilnius in November 1924, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 279, l. 67.

²² *Mały rocznik statystyczny 1939*, pp. 254–255.

²³ *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1931*, p. 74; *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1936*, p. 62.

non-food items increased: in 1931 paraffin cost 0.64 zloty, and ten kilograms of firewood cost 0.37 zloty.²⁴

The difficult economic situation of city-dwellers increased social tensions in the city. Strikes were a frequent occurrence. They took place during the entire period analysed, usually focusing on economic demands (wage increases, timely payment, etc). Workers in various sectors of industry would go on strike (tailors and bricklayers, and workers in sawmills, flour mills, oil extraction presses, printing presses, cigarette factories, etc).²⁵ The staff of state (local government) institutions, such as electricity and water supply enterprises under the Vilnius city magistrate, who would not accept the late payment of their wages, also went on strike. Their strike paralysed life in the city.²⁶ The global economic crisis, or the Great Depression of 1929–1933, added to the already tough conditions under which inhabitants of Vilnius had to live. Their wages decreased by 20% to 25%, and the working week and working day were also shortened: they would work for three or four days instead of six, and at most six hours per day, instead of the usual eight. This was due to the closure of enterprises. In 1926 a total of 9,131 industry and trade permits were issued in Vilnius, but by 1929 only 8,790 were issued, and 6,627 in 1931.²⁷ In addition, employers reduced the number of their employees by laying them off, thus contributing to the total number of unemployed people.

Labourers pulled together during these difficult times. In 1926, the owner of the *Wolkow* confectionery factory was going to lay off some staff. However, they agreed to reduce their working hours (by working two days a week) so that no one would have to lose their job. The owner agreed with this arrangement, and everyone was able to continue working.²⁸ But this kind of solidarity did not exist among the more numerous Polish and Jewish labourers in the city. Competition for job vacancies played a part in inter-ethnic relations

²⁴ *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1931*, pp. 71–74.

²⁵ Top secret note by the Polish government's commissar of Vilnius City about the situation in the city in November 1922, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 26, l. 7ap.; weekly report of the Vilnius Voivodeship State Police Commandant regarding the situation on 8–14 February 1926, *ibid.*, f. 15, ap. 2, b. 233, l. 58.

²⁶ Top secret note by the Polish government's commissar of Vilnius City about the situation in the city in December 1922, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 26, l. 3.

²⁷ *Rocznik statystyczny m. Wilna 1931*, p. 186

²⁸ Weekly report by the Vilnius Voivodeship State Police commandant regarding the situation on 8–14 February 1926, LCVA, f. 15, ap. 2, b. 233, l. 59.

as well. Relations between Polish and Jewish railway workers were influenced by 'innate anti-Semitism', in the words of the Vilnius city commissioner Kazimierz Wimbor, which was widespread among the Christian working classes. This eventually led to a physical clash between Poles and Jews at the Vilnius railway station.²⁹ In this and in other cases, once the police intervened, the discontent was defused, at least temporarily. But the tensions did not disappear completely.

We should note that the Polish local government often tried to quell social tensions in the city, by introducing various prohibitions and by making use of the police. For example, a certain J.S. had a criminal case brought against him for inviting the unemployed to actively show their dissatisfaction in public, while other individuals were interrogated. These measures were effective: the unemployed were no longer inclined to demonstrate. However, strikes did not always achieve the desired goals. In September 1922, when the workers from the *Fortuna* saccharin factory went on strike, the owners of other similar production plants organised lock-outs in response to the strike, and closed down their factories,³⁰ leaving their staff without wages.

The situation of Lithuanians in Vilnius differed from that of other nationalities. Due to the strongly opposing positions between Lithuania and Poland on the Vilnius question, and Lithuania's plan to offer support to Lithuanians living in the city, their chances of being employed in state or municipal institutions were rather low. The Polish government did not trust local Lithuanians. In the spring of 1919, when the Poles occupied Vilnius, Lithuanians were immediately dismissed from various public service positions.³¹ They were informed that if any kind of Polish agency was established, then only acquaintances would be hired, and even then only as guards or couriers.³² This meant that Lithuanians were forced to move to Lithuania proper. According to the Vilnius resident and medical doctor Veronika Alseikienė, 'Lithuanians are fleeing to Kaunas. All

²⁹ Top secret note by the Polish government's commissar of Vilnius City about the situation in the city in October 1922, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 26, l. 16.

³⁰ Top secret note by the Polish government's commissar of Vilnius City about the situation in the city in September 1922, *ibid.*, l. 21ap.

³¹ Requests from the Lithuanians of Vilnius to the Lithuanian Society for War Refugees dated 19 April, 18 May and 13 June 1919, LMAVB RS, f. 225-35/1, l. 68, 98, 121.

³² Request from Juozas Rymkevičius to the Lithuanian Society for War Refugees dated 18 May 1919, *ibid.*, f. 225-35/1, l. 98.

that is left are those who were involved in some kind of organisation [...] There are very few members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia in Vilnius. The Poles have created such conditions for Lithuanians that they cannot find work anywhere. Teachers are not given the qualifications to be able to teach.’³³ However, employment in a Lithuanian organisation offered no guarantee that if a Lithuanian was suspected of disloyalty to the Polish state or of harbouring an anti-Polish stance they would not be forced to leave. Such occurrences happened as early as in 1922. Some Lithuanians who had adapted to the changed political conditions ‘became’ Poles. The long-standing Vilnius resident and active Lithuanian activist Pranas Bieliauskas noticed in the population census of 1916 that ‘Almost all the Lithuanians who are guards, drivers or servants were forced to identify as Poles, as they were threatened with losing their service or apartment.’³⁴ Similar tactics were used later as well.

Institutions that worked to relieve unemployment and their activities

Attempts were made to resolve the issue of unemployment in Vilnius as early as 1920. The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Lithuania discussed the matter during one of their meetings in September that year.³⁵ At first, they planned to register the unemployed, though not including citizens of other countries, and organise public works projects. However, they ran out of time to implement any specific actions, as after the military intervention by Lucjan Żeligowski on 9 October 1920, the Lithuanian government was transferred to Kaunas. The issue of unemployment came under the jurisdiction of Żeligowski’s Temporary Ruling Commission. One of its first tasks was to revise positions and to grade people searching for employment. Employment in a state or municipal office guaranteed a living for the whole family. However, even though the number of public service positions was very inflated, it was nevertheless limited. The demobilisation of the Polish army and the ever increasing influx from Russia and Belarus escalated the situation. There were more people searching for work

³³ Memoirs of V. Alseikienė about her husband Danielius Alseika (1960), LLMA, f. 459, ap. 3, b. 16, l. 16.

³⁴ P. Bieliauskas, *Vilniaus dienoraštis*, p. 23.

³⁵ Meeting protocol of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Lithuania dated 1 September 1920, LCVA, f. 923, ap. 1, b. 86, l. 275–276.

than positions available. Complaints were made that public service positions were taken by people with a higher material standing, and often by members of the same family.³⁶ A commission was established, led by Bishop Władysław Bandurski, to review the situation, but it did not produce the expected results. As such, directives were issued to resolve the problem. Instructions from Warsaw indicated that demobilised servicemen and incomers from the east should have first priority in being accepted for a vacancy. Former soldiers were to be treated first for lower positions in state institutions (couriers and the like).³⁷ The heads of state institutions were ordered to cooperate with the State Labour Mediation Agency, to inform it of existing or expected vacancies, and to employ individuals it had recommended.³⁸ Only if it could not find a suitable candidate for a certain position could the vacancy be filled by an employee found elsewhere. However, in reality, the situation was somewhat different. This can be said firstly about local industries where potential employees would be recommended by professional trade unions.

Efforts were made to resolve the unemployment problem at the highest and local levels (ministries created special structures, with branches in separate territorial areas, and municipal and local communities). Several institutions dealt with unemployment in Vilnius, including the Polish government's representative for the Vilnius region, and the Labour and Social Welfare Department of the Board of the Vilnius Voivodeship which later took over its functions, the State Labour Mediation Agency in Vilnius, the Vilnius Voivodeship Committee for Unemployment Affairs, the Labour Fund Bureau, and the Vilnius City Magistracy.

Under the strain of rising unemployment, Poland's Council of Ministers established a committee of seven ministers in 1925 that was charged with effectively organising public works across the whole country.³⁹ People who were registered with the State Labour Mediation Agency had to fill these vacancies.⁴⁰ A certain threshold can be distinguished in the activities of institutions responsible for

³⁶ Circular No. 32./10 11 1921 by Sosnowski, the temporary head of the Temporary Ruling Commission, *ibid.*, f. 19, ap. 1, b. 50, l. 6.

³⁷ Circular No. 35./26 04 1921 by S. Mokrzecki, the temporary head of the Temporary Ruling Commission, *ibid.*, l. 25.

³⁸ Draft of the Temporary Ruling Commission's circular, *ibid.*, l. 38.

³⁹ M. Dolecka, 'Roboty publiczne jako podstawowa forma walki z bezrobociem'.

⁴⁰ *Polityka społeczna państwa*, p. 135.

reducing unemployment at the beginning of the 1930s, when the number of unemployed people in Poland increased drastically (see Table 2). At this point, the government initiated a reform of the activities of the institutions responsible, and implemented a labour 'redistribution' plan. In essence, its aim was to see that only one member of a family was employed, people who had other sources of income had to be laid off, and as many people as possible had to be hired by limiting the number of days and hours each person worked.⁴¹ This saw the end of the previously existing principle whereby some unemployed people were given jobs while others were given some form of state support. Later on, the two groups would change over. As part of this plan, the Vilnius Labour Inspectorate contacted 165 enterprises and offices, requesting they hire as many people as possible.⁴² However, due to the difficult financial situation, the majority of these enterprises sent back negative responses, and only a few agreed to hire a handful of unemployed people.

At the same time, the working hours of certain groups of workers were increasingly being regulated. For example, women and teenagers were denied working rights. This meant that women could not take up or stay in certain positions. The staff at one Jewish bakery in Vilnius complained that due to the nature of their work they had to work at night, but the prohibition meant that they would lose a job they had held for dozens of years and which was their only source of income.⁴³

The main institution which registered the unemployed and advertised vacancies was the State Labour Mediation Agency, or in other words, the Labour Office. Based on the example of other areas in Poland, a similar office opened in Vilnius on 1 July 1921.⁴⁴ It operated under this name until the end of 1933, when in accordance with a decree from the Polish president, it was reorganised into the Unemployed Foundation Employment Bureau.⁴⁵ However, unable to bring the ever-growing unemployment figures under control,

⁴¹ Circular from the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare dated 3 October 1931, LCVA, f. 1149, b. 882, n. pag.

⁴² List of industries and other enterprises that were approached to help in the fight against unemployment (October 1931), *ibid.*, b. 916, n. pag.

⁴³ Request to the Vilnius Labour Inspectorate dated 6 October 1931, *ibid.*, n. pag.

⁴⁴ Report about the work of the State Labour Mediation Agency, 1 January–30 June 1922, *ibid.*, f. 156, ap. 1, b. 8, n. pag.

⁴⁵ *Polityka społeczna państwa polskiego*, p. 18.

the further reorganisation of responsible institutions took place. The Unemployed Foundation ceased to exist in the spring of 1935, and instead became an integral part of the Labour Fund. Thus, the government's policy changed, from supporting the unemployed to seeking their eventual employment. The Labour Fund financed the public works projects that the unemployed were hired to conduct.⁴⁶ This form of employment was related to status (married or single) and the size of the family. Unemployed people who were married and had large families would be given employment for the longest period.

A plan of 'internal colonisation' was one measure for reducing unemployment. Discussions started in the first half of the 1930s. In order to bring down the number of unemployed people, the idea was to create rural and suburban farms that would be run by the unemployed. The point of this idea was to focus on the eastern voivodeships that were less densely populated. However, the leaders who dealt with the matter of unemployment in the Vilnius voivodeship were not very impressed with the plan. The main problem was a shortage of available land. In 1933, the State Land Foundation allocated 20,000 hectares of land reserves for it, even though the population's needs were several times greater, up to 150,000 hectares.⁴⁷ The Vilnius City Magistracy also did not have any free land to create suburban farms. The idea necessitated major investment to purchase land from private individuals and to see to its modernisation (drainage and irrigation, etc). Another reason for the growing scepticism about the implementation of 'internal colonisation' could have been the desire to avoid the further worsening of the situation. As we know, small-scale farms (up to five hectares) dominated in the region, and their owners wanted more land. The distribution of land to people who had arrived from other regions could have led to unnecessary social tensions. In addition, let us not forget that many of the people who already lived here were not Poles, and if Poles were to be settled among them, an increase in inter-ethnic tensions was almost guaranteed.

Efforts to reduce unemployment and to provide support to the unemployed in Vilnius included the following: 1) the organisation of public works (e.g., the installation of drainage and water supply networks, repairs to streets and the riverbank, the more educated indi-

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Activity report by the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund Committee for 1 April 1933–31 March 1934, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 5207, l. 23.

viduals among the unemployed participated in population and property censuses); 2) the provision of support for the unemployed (food, firewood, clothing and footwear, additional meals for their children at educational institutions, the organisation of summer camps); and 3) the allocation of plots of land (gardens) for growing vegetables.

People would register with the State Labour Mediation Agency hoping to find work, and also with private employment offices representing their profession. The Brotherly Help Polish Youth Employment Office tried to help students from Stephen Bathory University who were tutors to find work. The St Zita Society and the Russian Charitable Society tried to help servants find work. The Malwina Baginska Society tried to help teachers, nannies and governesses.

The number of unemployed in Vilnius and their dynamics

It has already been mentioned that unemployment was a problem across all of Poland. However, the beginning of the economic crisis delivered a serious blow to industrial regions, where the number of unemployed leapt into the tens of thousands. Table 2 shows unemployment levels in various regions of Poland in the 1920s and 1930s.

Table No. 2. Unemployment in Poland in 1925–1938

Voivodeship	Number of unemployed people			
	01 12 1925	01 03 1935	1937	1938
Katowice		128,077	82,968	62,878
Kielce	47,750	54,547	51,101	34,943
Łódź	82,440	69,818	72,484	40,932
Lwów	17,660	13,740*	22,758	16,470
Nowogródek	750	1,493*	2,596	1,667
Toruń		19,535	30,109	27,344
Warsaw	19,920	34,127*	64,411	38,393
Wilno (Vilnius)	3,540	9,060	8,934	4,656
Kaunas	4,058**	5,690***	4,764****	

* Based on data from 1 July 1935.

** Based on data from 1927 (N. Černiauskas, p. 235).

*** Based on data from 1933 (N. Černiauskas, p. 235).

**** Based on data from 1936–1939 (N. Černiauskas, p. 239). Official data indicated that in 1935–1939 there were 2,000–4,000 unemployed people in Lithuania (*Lietuvos statistikos metraštis 1939*), p. 237.

The table is based on unemployment figures in Poland per voivodeship from 1 March 1935 to 1 December 1938, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 2406, 3105, n. pag.; N. Černiauskas, *Nedarbo problema. Doktoro disertacijos rankraštis* (Vilnius, 2015), p. 235; *Ruch zawodowy w Polsce*, p. 35.

Data about unemployment figures for Kaunas is given in order to allow a comparison with the situation in Vilnius. In a demographic sense, at the beginning of the 1920s, the two cities were similar. Unemployment levels in Kaunas were not very high, being somewhat lower than in Vilnius and its surroundings. Comparing Vilnius and its area with other regions in Poland, we can say that unemployment was not as high. Unlike the industrial voivodeships of Poland (e.g. Katowice), agriculture dominated economic life in the Vilnius voivodeship and other voivodeships nearby, which is why they felt a lower decline following the world economic crisis. In 1920, Poland's industrial voivodeships already had tens of thousands of unemployed people. For example, in the Kielce voivodeship, there were more than 25,000, in Warsaw around 45,000, and over 108,000 in Łódź.⁴⁸ Over time, these figures increased markedly.

Table No. 3. Unemployment in the Vilnius voivodeship in 1926–1938

Area	07 1926	12 1930	12 1931	10 1932	12 1935	12 1936	12 1937	1938
Oszmiana		2	16		19	19	32	38
Brasław		10	85		30	48	24	13
Dzisna		4	26		31	101	120	69
Mołodeczno		52	36		12	26	56	68
Postawy		11	35		9	36	34	41
Święciany		22	41		35	62	87	142
Wilejka		33	70		42	86	274	116
Wilno-Troki		176	142		402	261	504	281
Wilno city	5,155	3,559	5,444	4,679	7,087	8,190	7,803	6,685
Total	5,910*	3,869	5,915		7,667	8,829	8,934**	7,455

* There were 755 unemployed people in the remaining areas.

** Note that a more realistic number of unemployed would have been 11,700, of which 9,500 were in Vilnius (LCVA, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 2930, n. pag.).

The table is based on the following data: weekly reports about the labour market situation in 1930–1938, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 1271, n. pag.; b. 2930, l. n. pag.; b. 3105, n. pag.; b. 2885, n. pag.; b. 2406; data from the Board of the Vilnius Voivodeship's Department of Social Welfare on the number of unemployed people who had found work in the period 10–14 October 1932, *ibid.*, f. 53, ap. 23, b. 3898, n. pag.; secret note from the District 12 labour inspector to the senior labour inspector dated 21 October 1926, *ibid.*, f. 1149, ap. 1, b. 316, l. 41–41ap; 'Bezrobocie w Województwie Wileńskim', *Kurjer Wileński* (1926), p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Pośrednictwo pracy w Polsce* (Warszawa, 1920), Appendix No 1.

The data from the State Labour Mediation Agency that registered unemployed people is nonetheless approximate. The Polish government's delegation in Vilnius which oversaw the office's activities informed Warsaw that the registration of the unemployed was formal, and that the data presented was not necessarily accurate.⁴⁹ Data from different institutions indicates that there were actually more unemployed people than the State Labour Mediation Agency had registered. The alderman of the Wilno-Troki administrative area which bordered Vilnius informed his superiors that 'determining the precise number of unemployed people is very difficult, as those who were officially registered made up only a small percentage of those who were actually unemployed.'⁵⁰ Studies by Polish authors claim that there were actually twice as many unemployed people compared to the numbers given by the office where the unemployed were officially registered.⁵¹ Statistical sources from this period confirm these claims. For example, based on census data from 1931, there were around 23,000 people seeking work in Vilnius.⁵² However, we should note that this figure included both individuals who had official unemployed status, and those seeking work in general.

Economic and social factors played a part in the increasing unemployed figures for Vilnius. Among the most important are: 1) the influx from Russia from 1920 to 1924; demobilisation from the Polish army. Surviving data indicates that in the middle of 1922, out of the 2,568 registered unemployed people, 957 were demobilised servicemen.⁵³ During the next six months, both the number of unemployed and the number of demobilised soldiers increased, and reached 4,047 and 1,062 respectively by the beginning of 1923;⁵⁴ 2) the economic reforms of 1925 to 1928, which determined the reorganisation of state institutions. One outcome of this was that staff from offices that had closed joined the ranks of the unemployed; the introduction of state monopolies in the tobacco and alcohol

⁴⁹ Note from the government representative for the Labour and Social Welfare Department dated 21 November 1925 to the Labour and Social Welfare Department, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 133, l. 17.

⁵⁰ Report by the Wilno-Troki administrative area alderman about the situation in December 1925, *ibid.*, ap. 1, b. 65, l. 695.

⁵¹ M. Ciechocińska, *Próby walki*, p. 33.

⁵² *Drugi powszechny*, p. 67. According to statistical data for Vilnius, in 1931 there were 24,400 people looking for work, *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1936*, p. 84.

⁵³ Report on the work of the State Labour Mediation Agency for the period 1 June 1922–31 January 1923, LCVA, f. 156, ap. 1, b. 8, n. pag.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

industries meant that private companies had to lay off staff. In 1928, the number of unemployed grew by 200 to 300 individuals every week;⁵⁵ 3) due to the world economic crisis, in the first half of the 1930s, industry, trade and crafts all declined in Vilnius, the number of people left without work increased, and the ranks of the 'semi-unemployed' grew (those who worked only a few hours). In 1929, there were 4,800 people who lost their jobs; in 1930 there were 70,000; and in 1931 there were 14,700 people.⁵⁶

There is no data about the ethnic composition of the unemployed. Surviving documents testify that people of various nationalities faced unemployment. Lists of officially registered unemployed individuals tell us that at the end of 1926 in Vilnius, out of the approximately 3,900 unemployed people, 18% were Jews.⁵⁷ There were also Old Believers and Orthodox believers among the unemployed in the city.

Portrait of an unemployed person

Most registered unemployed people were men, but there were some unemployed women as well. The figures are given in Table 4.

Table No. 4. The unemployed by gender, 1925–1938

Number of unemployed	End of 1925	First half of 1926	First half of 1927	First half of 1930	End of 1931	First half of 1933	Beginning of 1935	Beginning of 1938
Men	2,927	4,364	3,686	3,243	4,844	6,366	6,829	8,136
Women	753	1,161	1,498	1,084	1,071	1,373	1,486	798
Total	3,680	5,525	5,184	4,327	5,915	7,739*	8,315	8,934

* Only Vilnius city.

The table is based on the following sources: report from the Vilnius City Magistrate Department of Social Welfare about the number of unemployed who found work in March 1930, LCVA, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 1035, n. pag.; report about the situation in the labour market for the period 21–24 December 1931, *ibid.*, b. 1271, n. pag.; data about the number of unemployed in Vilnius on 31 March 1933, *ibid.*, b. 1891, n. pag.; note from J. Trelle, the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund's director of the Labour Office, to the Ministry of Social Welfare's Department of Employment and Migration, dated 5 January 1935, *ibid.*, b. 2406, n. pag.; data about the number of unemployed on 1 January 1938, *ibid.*, b. 3105, n. pag.; 'Kronika', *Slowo* (1930), p. 5; 'Stan bezrobocia', *Kurjer Wileński* (1926), p. 3.

⁵⁵ Note from the head of the State Labour Mediation Agency J. Baranowski, dated 26 January 1928, to the Vilnius city commissar; notes dated 24 and 31 December 1928 to the Vilnius city alderman, *ibid.*, f. 53, ap. 23, b. 3898, n. pag.

⁵⁶ *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1931*, p. 94.

⁵⁷ List of unemployed for 1926, LCVA, f. 64, ap. 24, b. 253, n. pag.

Unemployed women dominated among the group representing domestic servants. Even though there were vacancies for maids, there was no rush to fill these positions, the reason being the very low wages offered for such work. For example, in 1924–1926, a maid could expect to receive board and lodging, and a wage of 25 to 35 złoty per month. The situation of maids in the labour market remained basically unchanged: due to the difficult working conditions and low wages, there was sometimes a shortage of domestic labour.

People from urban and rural areas, from Vilnius and other voivodeships in Poland, men and women, Poles and Jews, Russians, Belarusians and others all competed for job vacancies in Vilnius. Men were at a disadvantage in certain fields in this competitive struggle, especially among office staff. Due to the war, they were conscripted into the army, and women were forced to search for a way to earn a living. Work in various offices was one field where women predominated. Following the demobilisation, there were few positions available for men in offices. An attempt was made to resolve this problem in a centralised way (under orders from Warsaw), by dividing those seeking work into specific groups. Demobilised army officers had priority for filling a job vacancy; civilians could apply only if it was still not filled.

On the other hand, women faced discrimination in the labour market. A law was passed in 1924 which restricted the employment of women and under-age children.⁵⁸ Later, they were also denied working nights. This meant that women were gradually pushed out of the labour market. In 1923 women made up 32% of all those employed in Vilnius and its region, but by 1927–1928 they made up only 20% or 21%.⁵⁹ In addition, women earned less than men. Unqualified female workers received a lower wage than their unqualified male counterparts in 1933. The men received two to 2.50 złoty per hour, while women received only 1.50 to 1.75 złoty.⁶⁰ However, a paradoxical situation developed in this regard. As female labour cost less, employers would hire them rather than men. Most women worked in the food, weaving, clothing-haberdashery and service (domestic) sectors. At the beginning of the 1920s, they

⁵⁸ K. Chylak, *Łagodzenie skutków*, p. 212.

⁵⁹ Activity report by the District 12 labour inspector B. Lesczyński for 1928, LCVA, f. 1149, ap. 1, b. 504, n. pag.

⁶⁰ Note from the Vilnius voivodeship to the Labour Fund Directorate's Labour Department dated 15 May 1933, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 1889, n. pag.

made up from 55% (food) to 80% (haberdashery) of all workers in these sectors.⁶¹

We should note that the intelligentsia made up a fairly significant part of the unemployed. Their numbers grew after 1925, following the Polish economic reforms. One outcome of that was the reduction in funding for various fields, so that some offices and organisations in Vilnius were reorganised or closed down altogether. The staff from those organisations were laid off, and joined the ranks of the unemployed. Some had been sent to Vilnius just a few years earlier to take up positions in public service (such as police officers), others had found work independently. For example, one woman had been a teacher in Łódź, and later moved to Vilnius, where she found work as a machine operator in a printing press. However, she soon lost that job, and found herself in a financially difficult position.⁶² There were more cases like hers. Gradually, a rather large group of 'intellectual' unemployed people formed. Towards the end of 1926, there were around 5,000 unemployed people in the Vilnius voivodeship; a third (around 1,400 people) were white-collar workers.⁶³

The government's approach to unemployed intellectuals changed in the mid-1930s. Representatives from the Labour Fund in Vilnius started to take measures to reduce their numbers. In 1935, unemployed intellectuals were re-registered, and had to provide evidence (e.g. educational documents) of being qualified to apply for the status of a 'thinking' unemployed person.⁶⁴ After this reform, the number of unemployed people was reduced by half. In addition, another segregational step was taken. Following a medical check, a group of members of the intelligentsia who could engage in physical labour was drawn up. If a person refused this kind of work, they would lose their unemployed status and the material support offered. As could be expected, the intellectual unemployed did not entirely approve of these reforms.

⁶¹ Report on the work of the District 63 labour inspector in 1923, *ibid.*, f. 1149, ap. 1, b. 126, l. 99.

⁶² Request from M.A. dated 17 January 1927, *ibid.*, f. 156, ap. 1, b. 35, n. pag.

⁶³ Report by the State Labour Mediation Agency in Vilnius on its work in December 1926, *ibid.*, n. pag.

⁶⁴ Note from the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund office dated 11 May 1935 to the Senior Labour Fund's Social Welfare Department, *ibid.*, f. 157, ap. 6, b. 191, n. pag.

Probably the largest group of intellectual unemployed were office staff. In 1924, there were around 100, and three years later over 300 former office staff searching for work in other voivodeships in Poland.⁶⁵ From the lists of unemployed, we can see that this group included teachers, musicians, actors, and other similar professions.

Senior officials in Poland were often approached regarding the situation of the intellectual unemployed of Vilnius. One note about the life that such people had to lead to Edward Rydz-Śmigły, the general inspector of the Polish army, asked: 'Is it possible to live for weeks on end without having a hot meal, when you are thrown out on to the street (the apartment moratorium did not apply to this group of unemployed), when you receive food only five days a month, and only three złoty a day in benefits from the Labour Fund? [They are] completely sold-out, sleeping on the floor, physically and morally worn out, [they must] meet the harsh winter ahead [...] The weaker of them cannot continue, seeking solace in death.'⁶⁶ Of course, not all the intellectual unemployed found themselves in such tragic circumstances as described above. For example, the sculptor J.N. requested the Vilnius magistrate to renew his unemployed benefit, as, in his words, his family's material situation was very poor, and he had been evicted from his apartment.⁶⁷ His request was not granted, as the material situation inspectors determined that the applicant actually received some earnings from the sculptures he sold, as well as some rental income. In general, we should note that some individuals tried to acquire unemployed status for the various types of benefits offered and other assistance (e.g. food), and were not looking for work at all. They would not accept the jobs they were offered, or they would send someone else in their place, or they would turn up just as the work was nearing its end. A forestry officer from the Kena Forest District in the State Forests Directorate complained to the Labour Fund that he was aware of

⁶⁵ Report by the Vilnius City Commissar on the situation in November 1924, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 279, l. 66; report about searching for work in other voivodeships in Poland dated 9 April 1927, *ibid.*, ap. 12, b. 305, n. pag.

⁶⁶ Note from the chair and secretary of the Vilnius Voivodeship Trade Union of the Intelligentsia to the general inspector of the Polish army E. Rydz-Śmigły dated 9 November 1935, *ibid.*, f. 157, ap. 6, b. 191, n. pag.

⁶⁷ Request from J.N. to the Vilnius voivode dated 1 July 1927, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 2, b. 304, n. pag.; regarding the rental of residential space and eviction matters 'Ochrona lokatorów', *Słowo*, 11 (1922), p. 3; 'Originalny sposób wyeksmitowania 18 osób', *Kurjer Wileński*, 208, 213 (1932), p. 3.

the tactics of the so-called 'unemployed', who would come to work when the forest had already been cleared, and all they needed was a certificate.⁶⁸

One means of supporting the unemployed was free lunches. The tradition of a free lunch in Vilnius had been known since the 19th century.⁶⁹ In the period discussed, free lunches were offered on an ethnic-religious basis; that is, there were separate soup kitchens for Jews, Catholics, Orthodox and Old Believers. There was also a separate kitchen for the intelligentsia (in the Franciscan monastery on ul Trocka (Trakų) St). The city magistrate would cover the cost of a certain number of meals, having first checked the material situation of those requesting this assistance. Jewish unemployed people received 56% of the sum allocated to unemployed Christians for their lunches from the Vilnius city magistrate. These funds were administered by the board of the Jewish Food Kitchen Society, led by Abram Nejszun. However, in 1928 the management of the allocation for Jewish meals was transferred to the Vilnius City Magistrate Department of Social Welfare, which reduced significantly the number of free lunches available. Before that, over 800 Jewish people had been fed each day, but once the magistrate took over, the number dropped to 250.⁷⁰ This drastic change in circumstances resulted in great dissatisfaction among those who had been taken off the free lunch lists. However, the more stable overall material position and community traditions meant that Jews organised assistance independently for the unemployed among them. There were several credit agencies in the Jewish community that offered interest-free loans to Jews,⁷¹ but we have no data as to whether the unemployed used these services. In addition, Jews received funding from abroad. For example, in the mid-1920s, the Vilnius Jewish community received 4,000 dollars from the United States to support the unemployed.

⁶⁸ Note from the State Forestry Directorate's Kena Forest District forestry officer R. Rubik to the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund dated 10 December 1931, LCVA, f. 157, ap. 6, b. 192, n. pag.

⁶⁹ V. Petronis, 'Vilnius ir vilniečiai: miesto ir jo bendruomenių kaitos bruožai XIX a. antrosios pusės oficialiojoje spaudoje', *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 2016/1 (2017), p. 43.

⁷⁰ Weekly report by the Vilnius alderman's office on the situation in the period 15–21 October 1928, LCVA, f. 53, ap. 23, b. 874, l. 102.

⁷¹ Top secret report by the Vilnius City Commissar about the activities of cultural, educational and charitable societies in Vilnius [1925], *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 1234, l. 75 ap.

These funds were to pay for a larger bread ration.⁷² However, this temporary support was not enough. Unemployed Jews thought that their people should stand in greater solidarity, and proposed that Jewish merchants pay a tax to support other unemployed Jews.⁷³

No archival sources were found that contain data suggesting that the Vilnius magistrate would have offered support to unemployed Lithuanians. We can presume that the Lithuanian community in Vilnius acted as the Jews did, i.e. they supported one another. At first, support was allocated via the Lithuanian Society for War Refugees, which maintained shelters, crafts schools, etc. In 1926, the Lithuanian Charitable Society in Vilnius supported six children's shelters and a trade school, where people could learn the trade of a tailor, weaver, washer or baker.⁷⁴ On some occasions, Lithuanians received help from their fellow countrymen in the United States.⁷⁵

Unemployed status guaranteed that a person would receive assistance in the form of money for a set period (13 weeks, this term was later extended to 17), food and firewood. According to instructions from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, unemployment benefit was allocated as follows: a family of two or three would receive 30 złoty, a family of four or five 50 złoty, a family of six 65 złoty, and seven or more 85 złoty.⁷⁶

The unemployed also received support in the form of food. For example, at the end of 1934, before the Christmas holiday, 6,245 families were given from three to six kilograms (for larger families) of bread.⁷⁷ They could also receive potatoes or porridge (from ten kilograms for smaller families to 45 kilograms for larger families). Children from such families would also receive additional meals at their school. In January–February 1934, 5,261 families received one cubic metre of firewood.⁷⁸ But we should note that families gradu-

⁷² Weekly report by the Vilnius Voivodeship State Police commandant on the situation in the period 8–14 February 1926, *ibid.*, ap. 2, b. 233, l. 60.

⁷³ Weekly report by the Vilnius Voivodeship State Police commandant on the situation in the period 8–14 February 1926, *ibid.*, f. 15, ap. 2, b. 233, l. 58.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 61.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Instructions from the minister of labour and social welfare on unemployment benefits for unemployed labourers, *ibid.*, f. 156, ap. 1, b. 3, n. pag.

⁷⁷ Report by the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund Committee about its activities in the period from 1 April 1933–31 to March 1934, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 5207, l. 35.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 40.

ally refused this support in the form of food. They would have to work in return for it, and as this condition was not very popular, people would try to get around it. It was found that support in the form of food only inflated the number of people who wanted to receive food but were either unwilling or unable to actually work in return. This contributed in part to the disorganisation of the local labour market (flour would be bought in from elsewhere, leading to the closure of some local mills, and money had to be set aside for the storage of food, and accounting and transport costs).⁷⁹ As a result, food distribution was replaced by short-term employment in public works projects. This was the most widespread means of countering unemployment. First of all, employment was organised for the main breadwinner in larger families. The size of a family determined how many days' work would be offered. Nine days' work were offered to single people or married couples without children, and married couples with one child, 18 days' work were offered to married couples with two to four children, and 26 days' work to married couples with five or more children.⁸⁰ Later, the number of work days was shortened, and most unemployed could work six days a month.⁸¹ These people were employed to pave new streets, fortify riverbanks, and construct public buildings (e.g. schools). In October–November 1926, over 200 people were employed in the construction of technical and primary schools. In the autumn of 1932, public works were carried out on Taurakalnis (Góra Bouffałowa), and street repairs in 1933.⁸² In April 1934, the Vilnius Magistracy employed 471 people to carry out public works.⁸³ The next month

⁷⁹ Note from the Vilnius Voivodeship Committee for Unemployment to the Presidium of the Senior Committee of Assistance for the Unemployed dated 1 December 1932, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 1889, n. pag.

⁸⁰ Report by the Vilnius City Magistrate Department of Social Welfare about the employment of those without work in March 1930, *ibid.*, b. 1035, n. pag.

⁸¹ Note from the Vilnius voivode to the Ministry of Social Welfare (March–April 1933), *ibid.*, b. 1891, n. pag.

⁸² List of labourers sent to work on public works in the period 20 October–5 November 1926, *ibid.*, b. 305, n. pag.; meeting protocol dated 22 September 1932 of the State Labour Mediation Agency Commission for the Employment of the Unemployed, *ibid.*, f. 156, ap. 1, b. 113, n. pag.; report on the use of funding in February 1933 that was allocated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, *ibid.*, b. 1891, n. pag.

⁸³ Data about individuals employed to work on public works in April 1934 in the Vilnius voivodeship, *ibid.*, f. 156, ap. 1, b. 113, n. pag.

there were 2,601 people employed in this capacity, of whom 748 were under the Magistracy's control.⁸⁴

Various trade unions also tried to cater for unemployed members. This is especially evident during the years of high unemployment, in 1931 and 1932. Surviving documents show that the leaders of certain trade unions forced their employed members to reduce their own work hours and wages for the benefit of fellow unemployed members.⁸⁵ But the amount of state funding determined how many unemployed people could be given work or receive another form of support. The eastern voivodeships of Poland were allocated less funding to counteract unemployment due to their lower unemployment levels. The Vilnius voivodeship and its institutions planned work to the value of 2.5 million złoty for 1933.⁸⁶ The Communications and Utilities departments of the Vilnius City Magistracy alone foresaw work to the value of 1.4 million złoty.⁸⁷ However, the central institutions in Warsaw allocated significantly less funding than requested. A total sum of 552,500 złoty only was allocated. The sum for the Vilnius region was increased only a few years later, when a slight recovery could be felt after the world economic crisis. For example, in 1935–1936, the Vilnius voivodeship was allocated 1,211,000 złoty for public works projects. This sum had to cover the wages of around 2,000 unemployed people.⁸⁸ In effect, almost all the money was given to support the unemployed in Vilnius. Of the total amount, 340,000 złoty was set aside for Vilnius, which had to be enough to employ 560 people. The rest of the money was intended for work outside the city's boundaries; however, 75% of people employed to carry it out had to be unemployed people sent from Vilnius.⁸⁹ Some money also went towards organising summer

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Note from the Leather Trade Union to the Vilnius labour inspector dated 31 October 1932, *ibid.*, f. 1149, ap. 1, b. 916, n. pag.

⁸⁶ Note from the Vilnius Voivodeship Board Department of Labour and Social Welfare to the Ministry of Social Welfare dated 19 September 1933, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 1691, l. 5.

⁸⁷ Note from the Vilnius voivode to the Labour Fund Directorate dated 15 May 1933, *ibid.*, b. 1889, n. pag.

⁸⁸ Report on the work of the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund in 1935, *ibid.*, f. 157, ap. 6, b. 29, n. pag.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

camps for the children of the unemployed, and to cover the costs of meals for children in educational facilities.

Shoes and clothing were another form of support offered to the unemployed. These items were sourced from the Vilnius customs office and the uncollected packages department. In this way, out of 621 pairs of men's and women's shoes, most were given to the unemployed (240 pairs), and out of 3,585 pieces of men's and women's clothing, people who had lost their jobs received 651 items.⁹⁰

The allocation of plots of land (gardens) was also a form of support for the unemployed of Vilnius. In the spring of 1933, the Labour Fund department rented around nine hectares of land from the Vilnius Magistracy and private individuals, and divided it into plots of four ares each, which were then allocated to the unemployed.⁹¹ They were also given 60 kilograms of potatoes and the necessary amount of vegetable seeds, and that way 189 families could grow their own vegetables. Demand for these plots was very high, as they were requested by people from other suburbs of Vilnius who were out of work. Plans were made to establish gardens like this in the suburbs of Zarzecze (Užupis) (or Leoniszki (Leoniškės)), Zwierzyniec-Saltoniszki (Žvėrynas-Saltoniškės), Nowy Świat (Naujininkai) and Antokol (Antakalnis), where 945 plots of land could potentially be formed.⁹²

The public was also involved in supporting the unemployed. Through the organisation of special charity events (e.g. 'Winter Support'), the public were encouraged to donate money, food, and items they no longer needed to the unemployed. The unemployed would be given a set percentage from the public's regular wages, property and trade turnover, and fee-based permits to engage in industrial or commercial activity and crafts.⁹³ This meant that practically the whole population, regardless of their desires, paid a duty to support the unemployed for five months a year. The Catholic Church and other confessions were also involved in this project, but it should be noted that the Catholic clergy did not show a particular interest in the matter, even going so far as to avoid paying the duty. The

⁹⁰ Activity report by the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund Committee for the period from 1 April 1933–31 to March 1934, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 5207, l. 46.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, l. 26.

⁹² Budget of the Gardening Department of the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund for 1934–1935, *ibid.*, f. 157, ap. 6. B. 2, n. pag.

⁹³ *Sprawozdanie miejskiego komitetu obywatelskiego zimowej pomocy bezrobotnym w Wilnie z działalności w okresie 1936–1937* (Wilno, 1937), pp. 27–32.

coordinators of 'Winter Support for the Unemployed' approached the heads of the archdiocese with a request to encourage their priests to make larger donations, as the clergy of the other confessions had.⁹⁴ One exception was the Archbishop of Vilnius Romuald Jałbrzykowski. He received a wage of over 700 złoty, and thus would be expected to devote 1.5% of that sum, i.e. around ten złoty. However, he generously donated 20 złoty.⁹⁵

Unemployment-related problems

Unemployment was one of the most important social problems that plagued the city, which in turn led to other problems. The mood in the city grew more radical, inter-ethnic relations worsened, some people went into moral decline, the security situation in the city worsened, etc. As has been mentioned, over 24,000 residents of Vilnius were searching for work in 1931. This was around 12% of the city's population. In addition, as these people had families to support, the number of people who experienced financial difficulties was quite significant. Probably one of the most dramatic requests came from an unemployed mother of six to the Vilnius City Magistracy: 'I cannot find any work or service, my children cannot attend school because they have no shoes and go hungry for several days on end [...] I go out hungry early in the morning to look for work, and I always hear the same answer, that there's no service or work. I come home to a cold apartment, my children are crying, Mama, we're hungry, give us a piece of bread.'⁹⁶ There were many such hungry families in the city, living under *kampininko*⁹⁷ rights. Unemployed parents could not feed their children, and so they tried to

⁹⁴ Secret note to the Archdiocese Curia from I. Gruca, the secretary of the Executive Branch of the Vilnius City Public Committee for Winter Support for the Unemployed dated 20 January 1937, LMAVB RS, f. 318-1204, l. 25.

⁹⁵ Note from the chancellor of the Vilnius Metropolitan Curia to the Executive Branch of the Vilnius City Public Committee for Winter Support for the Unemployed dated 30 November 1936, *ibid.*, f. 318-1204, l. 2.

⁹⁶ Request from J.S. to the Vilnius City Magistracy Social Welfare Department dated 24 November 1925, LCVA, f. 64, ap. 24, b. 190, n. pag.

⁹⁷ A '*kampininkas*' (Lithuanian for 'a corner-dweller') was someone who rented part of a residential space from another tenant of an apartment. Vilnius was also known for having '*kampininko kampininkas*', i.e. a person or people who rented part of a residential space from someone who was already renting part of a space (the same 'corner' arrangement, only one degree further along). A. Richter, 'Bezrobotny proletariat', *Wilno*, 1 (1939), p. 49.

place their offspring in shelters in the city. But this was not always possible either, as they were over-crowded.

Unemployment also contributed to a rise in crime in the city (there were more robberies, break-ins and muggings), and was a cause of suicide. For example, in September 1922, the police recorded around 1,800 crimes in the city, of which over 150 were robberies from apartments, shops or people's pockets. In October, these figures grew to 2,100 and 300 cases respectively.⁹⁸ The difficult economic conditions were given as a reason for the rise in crime, when, left without work and enough money to survive, and not being able to buy food, people were forced to resort to such measures. Poverty forced some to beg, while some women turned to prostitution. The police knew of over 1,000 women who sold their bodies (Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish and Lutheran, etc).⁹⁹ Even though attempts were made to stop this activity, they were not successful, and poverty forced women to take up this 'trade' time and time again. A lack of money and work led others to commit suicide. For example, in 1928–1931 there were 172 suicides in Vilnius, of which 23 were blamed on unemployment and the subsequent poverty.¹⁰⁰ However, the continuing economic crisis only served to increase the number of such cases. In 1932–1937 there were 808 attempted suicides, 228 of which were due to not having work or enough money to survive (28%).¹⁰¹

Various re-qualification courses were organised in order to reduce unemployment. For example, in the spring of 1934, a series of courses were organised for young women from unemployed families. The 209 young women aged between 18 and 35¹⁰² were taught how to cook and sew, or, basically, how to be good housewives. Similar courses were organised for men as well, where they could learn how to be bricklayers or agricultural instructors, and other trades.

⁹⁸ Top secret announcements from the Polish government's commissar for Vilnius about the situation in the city in September and October 1922, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 15, b. 26, l. 16 ap., 22.

⁹⁹ Data about prostitutes in Vilnius in the period 15 October 1920–1 July 1930, *ibid.*, f. 53, ap. 23, b. 3849, l. 1.

¹⁰⁰ *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1931*, p. 32.

¹⁰¹ Data about the number of deaths, according to the cause of death in 1932–1937, LCVA, f. 64, ap. 20, b. 717, n. pag.

¹⁰² Activity report by the Vilnius Voivodeship Labour Fund Committee for the period 1 April 1933–31 March 1934, *ibid.*, f. 51, ap. 12, b. 5207, l. 67.

Conclusions

Due to a series of unavoidable factors (the failing economy, the negative legacy of the First World War, markets, Vilnius' geographical location, and economic crises) and policies (the economic and social policies implemented by the Polish government), the population of Vilnius faced the problem of unemployment throughout the period under discussion. The Great Depression, or world economic crisis (1929–1933), only served to intensify the problem. Of the approximately 200,000 inhabitants of Vilnius, 35,000 were looking for work.

The Polish government tried to solve the unemployment problem through various regional institutions, which implemented the following measures: 1) supporting the unemployed (in the form of money, food, free meals, firewood, etc); and 2) reducing unemployment by organising public works. A relative threshold dividing these two stages was the beginning of the 1930s, when the government reverted to employment programmes, instead of merely supporting the unemployed financially. However, due to the Polish government's economic policies, the financial support aimed at reducing unemployment was not directed towards the country's eastern territories, such as Vilnius, but towards the 'industrial' regions in central and southern Poland. Thus, no significant improvement in reducing unemployment in Vilnius was achieved.

The official number of unemployed people in Vilnius ranged from several thousand to tens of thousands. Most were unqualified male labourers. A large number of unemployed women had worked in the service sector as maids. State support for the unemployed, which was allocated on an ethnic-confessional basis, was insufficient. The situation of these individuals and their families was quite difficult.

Unemployment had a negative impact on public life in the city. It led to a more radical public mood, the growth of inter-ethnic tensions, and the moral decline of some people, and it worsened the crime situation in the city. As Vilnius was a multinational city, where over a third of the population were members of ethnic minority groups, among which Jews undoubtedly dominated, cases of inter-ethnic tensions arose, as the outcome of competition for jobs, unemployment benefit, and other forms of support. The crime rate grew due to not having enough money to survive, begging and homelessness increased, and so did the number of people who found themselves on the fringes of the community. There were more cases of suicide and abandoned children.

The government organised various events to support the unemployed, which involved churches of various confessions, charitable organisations and the city community, trying to attract donations through charity events and other activities that would go towards helping people who found themselves in a difficult material situation.

Author Details

Vitalija Stravinskienė is a research fellow in the Department of 20th-Century History at the Lithuanian Institute of History. Her area of research is Vilnius and east and southeast Lithuania in the 20th century.

Address: Lithuanian Institute of History, Kražių g. 5, Vilnius LT-01108, Lithuania

E-mail: vitalija.stravinskiene@istorija.lt

Bibliography

BIELIAUSKAS, P. *Vilniaus dienoraštis 1915.XII.26–1919.XI.26*, par. R. Laukaitytė (Trakai, 2009).

CIECHOCIŃSKA, M. *Próby walki z bezrobociem w Polsce międzywojennej* (Warszawa 1965).

CHYLAK, K. 'Łagodzenie skutków bezrobocia wśród młodzieży w Polsce w latach 1933–1935. Działalność stowarzyszenia opieki nad niezatrudnioną młodzieżą', in: *Studia z historii społeczno-gospodarczej*, t. X (2012), pp. 211–227.

ČERNIAUSKAS, N. *Nedarbo problema. Daktaro disertacijos rankraštis* (Vilnius, 2015).

DOLECKA, M., RACZKIEWICZ, D. 'Bezrobocie w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym w kontekście jakości danych w spisach ludności', in: *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sekcja H, XLVIII/2 (2014), pp. 49–58.

DOLECKA, M. 'Roboty publiczne jako podstawowa forma walki z bezrobociem (na przykładzie Lublina w okresie międzywojennym)', in: *Zamojskie Studia i Materiały*, 1 (1999), http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/11040/Roboty_publiczne.pdf (accessed on 15 01 2017).

JACKIEWICZ, M. *Wilno w XX wieku. Ludzie i wydarzenia* (Bydgoszcz, 2013).

JEZIERSKI, A., LESZCZYŃSKA C. *Dzieje gospodarcze Polski w zarysie do 1989 r.* (Warszawa, 1994).

LANDAU, Z., TOMASZEWSKI, J. *Druga Rzeczpospolita: gospodarka-społeczeństwo-miejsce w świecie* (Warszawa, 1977).

LECZYK, M. *Druga Rzeczpospolita 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 2006).

Pamiętniki bezrobotnych, pod. red. A. Andrzejewskiego et. al., 1 (Warszawa, 1967).

PETRONIS, V. 'Vilnius ir vilniečiai: miesto ir jo bendruomenių kaitos bruožai XIX a. antrosios pusės oficialiojoje spaudoje', in: *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 1 (2016), pp. 21–48.

Polityka społeczna państwa polskiego 1918–1935 (Warszawa, 1935).

Pośrednictwo pracy w Polsce (Warszawa, 1920).

RICHTER, A. 'Bezrobotny proletariat', in: *Wilno*, 1 (1939), pp. 47–53.

Ruch zawodowy w Polsce. Zarys dziejów, oprac. J. Kancewicz [i in.] 2/1 (Warszawa, 1980).

Sprawozdanie miejskiego komitetu obywatelskiego zimowej pomocy bezrobotnym w Wilnie z działalności w okresie 1936–1937 (Wilno, 1937).

Vilniaus miesto istorija: nuo Spalio revoliucijos iki dabartinių dienų, ed. J. Žiugžda (Vilnius, 1972).

WEEKS, T.R. *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (Dekalb, 2015).

ŻARNOWSKI, J. *Spółczesność Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 1973).

‘NEGALIU RASTI NEI DARBO, NEI TARNYBOS...’: VILNIAUS BEDARBIAI 1920–1939 METAIS

Santrauka

VITALIJA STRAVINSKIENĖ

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Vilniaus gyventojų nedarbo problema 1920–1939 m., aptariama ši klausimą kuravusių institucijų veikla, nedarbo pasekmės miestiečiams, nustatomi kiekybiniai Vilniaus bedarbių rodikliai.

Dėl objektyvių (atsilikusio miesto ūkio, Pirmojo pasaulinio karo neigiamo paveldo, rinkos pokyčių, Vilniaus geografinės padėties, ekonomikos krizių) ir subjektyvių (Lenkijos valdžios vykdomos ekonominės, socialinės politikos) veiksnių Vilniaus gyventojus visą aptariamąjį laikotarpį lydėjo nedarbas, kuris ypač išaugo pasaulinės ekonomikos krizės (1929–1933) metais. 1936 m. darbo ieškojo apie 17 proc. miesto gyventojų.

Siekdama sumažinti nedarbą šalies ir lokali valdžia veikė dviem kryptimis: 1) materialinė parama bedarbiams (lėšomis, maisto produktais, nemokamu maitinimu, kuru ir kt.); 2) nedarbo prevencija per viešuosius darbus. Į paramos bedarbiams akciją buvo įtraukta ir miesto bendruomenė, įvairių konfesijų bažnyčios. Tačiau dėl ekonominių veiksnių (didesnio nedarbo kituose Lenkijos regionuose, prioriteto teikimo pramoninių rajonų plėtrai ir kt.) Vilniaus miestas nesulaukė didesnės finansinės paramos kovojant su nedarbu. Todėl su šiuo reiškiniu susidūrę asmenys ir jų šeimos vertėsi labai sunkiai ir iš esmės daugiausia galėjo pasikliauti tik savo jėgomis.