CENSORSHIP IN LITHUANIA: A TOOL OF RUSSIAN POLICY; 1831–1865

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ABSTRACT *This paper deals with the specificities of Russia's policy of censorship conducted in the Northwest Province by the Vilnius Censorship Committee between 1831 and 1865. In the general context of the Province an attempt is made to give answers to the questions: (1) by whom and in what way the attitudes of the censors of Vilnius were regulated with respect to the Lithuanian and Polish press 'under local conditions' and (2) what requirements of the Censorship Committee were caused 'by local conditions' and by the implementation of Russia's policy in the Northwest Province. The study is based on official documents, censorial lawsuits, and the censored manuscripts. It is maintained that the opinion and initiative of the governor general of Vilnius were crucial in formulating the 'local' policy of censoring. The principal aim of the censorial activity was to ensure the integrity of the Russian Empire by preventing the spread of disintegrational anti-Russian ideas and those of propagating the independence of Poland and 'Polish patriotism'. Attempts were also made to weaken the influence of the Catholic Church, in particular among the peasantry and to create conditions favouring both religious tolerance and the dissemination of Orthodoxy.*

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Russian nationality policy as well as the 'Polish Question' or Russia's policy in the Polish Kingdom and in the Northwest Province have been subjected to increasing historical scrutiny. Researchers have noticed that imperial nationality policy pervaded the established social, economic, estate and educational issues in these regions. The same holds true of censorship, which was not only an internal matter but also a tool of nationality policy. Censorship is a promising field of study. All sorts of documents (mostly secret), dealing with censorship policy and the practical activity of the censors fully alive to the slightest changes in the mood of the government and to the shifts in the political, social and cultural situation, reveal the attitudes of the central and local authorities on various domestic and nationality issues. On the other hand, censorship itself was a political tool,

which together with the educational system could influence the views, values and ideas of the subjects of the empire. An investigation of these two aspects of censorship politics discloses the objectives of national policy, the general principles and concrete approaches to separate nationalities, but also ways of implementing that policy.

Russian censorship has been researched quite intensively both in Russia and abroad. However, research has focused mostly on the relationship between censorship and the Russian press, its impact on Russian journalism and on certain aspects of the government's censorship. Meanwhile, despite some attempts and encouragement, censorship policy and its details in respect of other nations as parts of the Russian Empire have not yet received due attention. Recently attention was drawn to this problem by Dmitrii El'ashevich.¹ Making heavy use of archival materials (some of them used for the first time) he investigated censorship of the Jewish press in the Modern Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian languages as an expression of tsarist nationality policy and 'the Jewish Question'. Stressing the priority of his work in research on censorship of the national press he expressed the need for the continuation of such studies. The author of this paper has published a book, devoted to the analysis of the peculiarities of the censorial policy conducted by the Russian authorities with respect to the Polish and Lithuanian press in the Northwest Province between 1826 and 1865.² El'ashevich's work gave the author a pretext to return to her theme and to present the 'Lithuanian' variant of Russian censorship to a wider readership. She believes that her materials will be useful in revealing the similarities and differences in censoring the press of different nations by the same committee of censors, which controlled the Polish and Lithuanian press in the Northwest Province. At the same time, being established in the centre of Yiddish publishing, it controlled the Yiddish press as well. On the other hand, the investigation of the policy of censorship in this territory reveals certain tendencies of Russian policy, which became evident after 1831 and were merely continued after 1863.

Thus the aim of this paper is to analyse Russian nationality policy in general and its policy in the Northwest Province in particular within the framework of the implementation of one of its measures, i.e., the politics of censorship conducted in the former Grand Duchy

¹ D. El'iashevich, *Pravitel'stvennaia politika i evreiskaia pechat' v Rossii, 1797–1917: Ocherki istorii tsenzury* (St Petersburg, 1999).

² Z. Medišauskienė, *Rusijos cenzūra Lietuvoje XIX a. viduryje* (Kaunas, 1998).

of Lithuania. Attention is focused on the Polish and Lithuanian press. Two main issues are dealt with in this paper. Firstly, by whom and on what level the censorship policy was conducted specifically with respect to the Northwest Province and in what way it was performed. Thus it would be possible to check the correctness of the statement that Russia's nationality policy was merely a series of separate responses to surmount challenges – only 'reactions' to the challenges posed by concrete political situations.³ Simultaneously that would reveal the mechanism of the formation of 'local' policy. Secondly, what kind of specific censorship policy was adapted to 'local conditions' and what requirements submitted manuscripts and imported books had to meet? The material under consideration could be related to the scholarly debate: did Russia pursue the policy of Russification or did it only endeavour to preserve the integrity of the empire in various ways and by every means at its disposal?⁴ The study will cover the period between 1831 and 1865. The year 1831 is generally accepted as a turning-point in the policy of the Polish Question. Actually it coincided also with the period of the introduction of severe censorship by Nicholas I, which began with the 'cast-iron' (*chugunnyi*) Censorship Regulations of 1826 and was continued by the Regulations of 1828. In the entire policy of Russian censorship the year 1865 marks an introduction of new censorship regulations and the re-organization of the system; these modifications, however, did not affect significantly the Polish and Lithuanian press in the Northwest Province. The administrative measures of the governor general of Vilnius, Mikhail Murav'ev, directed against the Polish and Lithuanian press, practically made publications in Polish impossible (until 1869) and the Lithuanian ones (until 1904) in the Latin script.

The sources, used in this investigation, can be divided into two groups. First, official documents, censorship regulations, imperial decrees, directives of the ministers of education and internal affairs, the regulations of the Supreme Board of Censors, materials related to the banning of specific books, the correspondence of the governor general of Vilnius and the curator of the Belorussian (Vilnius) Educational District with the Vilnius Censorship Committee and the materials

³ Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb, 1996), p. 198.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 5, 12; Leonid Gorizontov, *Paradoksy imperskoi politiki: poliaki v Rossii i russkie v Pol'she* (Moscow, 1999), pp. 8, 216.

about their activities. The second group of sources vividly and clearly revealing censorial practice are the censored manuscripts themselves, which afterwards were not always published.

Who Implemented Censorship Policy in Lithuania and how?

Formally censorship committees did not have any ‘zones of influence’. However, although vaguely defined, they did exist in practice. The Vilnius Censorship Committee (hereafter VCC) ‘served’ the Belorussian (Vilnius) Educational District, comprising the gubernias of Vilna, Kovno, Grodno, Minsk, Vitebsk and Mogilev; though occasionally books and manuscripts from the gubernias of Kiev, Volyn’, Podole, St Petersburg and even from the Polish Kingdom were forwarded to Vilnius. Thus, the sphere of the activity of the VCC was the area under the Vilnius governor general or the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Nineteenth-century Lithuania or the Northwest Province was a multi-ethnic area. It was inhabited by the Lithuanians, Belorussians, a number of Latvians (all of them constituted the overwhelming number of the peasantry), by the Jews and a small number of Russians; the gentry, though many of them considered themselves Lithuanian as citizens of the GDL, had been affected by ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural Polonization. The censors of the Vilnius Committee had to deal with multi-linguistic writings, imported from abroad and produced locally. Polish literature predominated; it represented the gentry (elite) culture and was treated by the authorities as the expression of the viewpoints of the gentry and clergy – the leading layers of Lithuanian society. The Jewish press was extremely plentiful; the history of its censoring was investigated at length by El’ashevich. Lithuanian publications proportionately were few, and during the entire period under consideration they were attributed to the category of publications meant for the common people. Several Belorussian and Latvian books (the latter intended for the Catholics of the Courland Gubernia) also belonged to this category. The publications controlled by the censors of Vilnius differed in respect of the estate as well, and that left its imprint on the practice of censorship.

Between 1831 and 1865 the activity of the VCC and that of other censorship committees in the Russian Empire were conducted by the Censorship Statute of 1828, and since 1862 by the Provisional Censorship Rules, imperial decrees, resolutions of the Senate and the Committee of Ministers, regulations and rulings of the ministers of education and internal affairs, the Director of the Third Department and the Supreme Board of Censors.

The Censorship Statute of 22 April 1828 was presented in 16 paragraphs concisely defining the main constant provisions without any regard to the changing situation. On the other hand, this principal law on censorship was accompanied by 'the provisional part' – a changeable confidential appendix comprising imperial decrees, ministerial circulars and those of the Supreme Board of Censors, which modified the conditions of censorship taking into account the current political situation at home and abroad. These documents defined more precisely the instructions for the censors and interpreted frequent abstract, vague and obscure censorial rules. Precedent was cited quite often when similar works were banned.

In the course of time 'the provisional part' suppressed the very Censorship Statute, and in the last years of Nicholas I's reign the Statute was only a nominal document. New censorship regulations, reflecting the political changes in the country, were prepared on the initiative of Alexander II. On 12 May 1862 the tsar approved the Provisional Rules of Censorship, which were in force until the adoption of a 'provisional' law on censorship in 1865. The Rules defined the principal requirements of censorship. Their first appendix indicated particular requirements for the articles on the army, the law court system, finances and issues at the disposal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (estate institutions, matters concerning the peasantry, non-Orthodox believers, Jews, and the situation in the Northwest Province); the second appendix enumerated still valid decisions and rules adopted between 1828 and 1862. The Provisional Rules were also commented by separate circulars and instructions.

The laws on censorship and the accompanying acts were essentially rather general and could be applied to any censorship committee in the empire. The specific character of the Northwest Province and the Western gubernias in general, as well as ethnic issues (with the exception of the Jews) were not taken into account. Attention to nationality problems became evident only in the documents dating between the forties and fifties. Those changes were provoked possibly by the events beyond the boundaries of the empire: the events in Galicia, the Cracow Uprising, nationalist movements in European countries, and some ethnic (primarily Ukrainian) movements within the empire. Already in 1847 the minister of education, taking into consideration the ideas propagated by the Ukrainian literati, issued a circular requesting the censors 'to pay attention to the works of the literati, in particular in respect

to the local provincial patriotism'.⁵ The renewed attention to nationality problems is to be related to the preparation for the peasantry reform in 1859. The instructions of the authorities witness that on the eve of the abolition of serfdom attempts were made to strengthen the influence of the government among the peasantry at the expense of the influence based on the gentry-Polish-language culture in the Western gubernias. The Cyrillic script was used as an approach road to Russian culture. Therefore on 30 May 1859 the deputy minister of education issued an instruction to publish books in Ukrainian ('the Little Russian dialect'), intended exceptionally for the common people, only in Cyrillic letters and to prevent the import of unsuitable books from abroad.⁶ On 26 September 1859 the Supreme Board of Censors banned the publication of all Belorussian books in the Roman script.⁷ The publication of Russian books in the Roman script had been forbidden in 1853; in 1859 that ban was repeated.⁸

In the aftermath of national liberation movements in the countries of Europe and the events of the early sixties in the Polish Kingdom the minister of internal affairs drew the attention of the censors especially to the political columns of the periodical publications in which the descriptions of the events in Western Europe disseminated 'the most revolutionary nationalistic theories'.⁹ The instructions to local censors were sometimes provoked by Ukrainian books in which the propagation of national ideas was noticeable.¹⁰

The aforementioned instructions of 1847 and 1862 dealt mainly with the nationality problem or 'local patriotism' and the spread of national ideas – a burning political issue in 'the recovered gubernias'. However, the reflections of the implementation of the policy of

⁵ Minister of education to the curator of the Belorussian Educational District, letter of 2 June 1847, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 53, fo. 2.

⁶ Minutes of the sessions of the VCC of 9 June 1859, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 145, ff. 27–28; *Sbornik postanovlenii i rasporiazhenii po cenzure s 1720 po 1862 god* [hereafter *Sbornik postanovlenii*] (St Petersburg, 1862), p. 445.

⁷ Minutes of the sessions of the VCC of 7 November 1859, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 145, ff. 47–48.

⁸ Precept of the minister of education of 7 Apr. 1853, *Sbornik postanovlenii*, p. 288; Instruction of the deputy minister of education of 30 May 1859, *ibid.*, p. 445; Minutes of the sessions of the VCC of 9 June 1859, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 145, ff. 27–28.

⁹ Letter of the minister of internal affairs to the VCC of 28 Sept. 1862, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 174, fo. 30.

¹⁰ Letter of the deputy minister of education to the VCC of 23 Feb. 1862, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 174, ff. 6–8.

‘the merger of the Northwest Province with Russia’ are found only since 1861. A secret circular of 29 April 1861 to the censorship institutions contained an imperial instruction not to publish newspaper articles promulgating the re-establishment of Poland’s independence, even if that idea was expressed only in relation to Galicia or the Grand Principality of Poznań.¹¹ Shortly afterwards special attention was drawn to the spread of ‘Polish ideas’ among ordinary people, possibly taking into account consistent endeavours of the gentry of the Northwest Province to educate the peasants during the reform of the abolition of serfdom, to instil the spirit of citizenship and ‘to make them real Poles’. On 28 May of the same year the censors were instructed to be particularly attentive in checking Polish elementary readers and all Polish books meant for the common people and to decline articles supporting ‘Polish nationalism and Polish tendencies’.¹² These requirements were reiterated in the Provisional Rules of Censorship in 1862. An appendix to them states that

taking into consideration the current efforts of Polish propaganda to disseminate Polish national influence among the less educated population classes of the Northwest Province and inciting their hostility to the government, censors must be particularly careful in checking works and articles, in which such influence is fostered, by going into the essence and form of the matter. With this aim in view, censors must prevent the publishing of articles asserting the necessity of re-creating Poland’s independence and self-rule, even if these articles did not relate directly to the Polish Kingdom or former Lithuania and regions previously under temporary Polish rule, but to Galicia and the Grand Principality of Poznań.¹³

The instructions of 1861 and the Provisional Censorship Rules of 1862 are the only official documents known to me to describe the specifics of the censorship policy in the Northwest Province in greater detail. That certainly does not mean that a policy of that kind had not existed before 1861. The practical activity of the censors witnesses that in addition to the general requirements, contained in the laws and regulations on censorship and intended for the whole empire, the censors of Vilnius also followed the

¹¹ Circular of the minister of education to the institutions of censors of 29 Apr. 1861, *Sbornik postanovlenii*, p. 461.

¹² Circular of the VCC to the committees of censors of 31 May 1861, *ibid.*, fo. 461.

¹³ Appendix No. 1 to the Provisional Censorship Regulations of 1862, *ibid.*, p. 473; LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 174, fo. 53.

regulations fulfilling ‘the local conditions’. The highest regional officials – the governors general of Vilnius and the curators of the Belorussian (Vilnius) Educational District participated in the formation of the ‘local’ policy of censorship. The curator of the educational district, in the capacity of the chairman of the VCC, was in charge of the everyday work of the Committee, and being the head of the educational system he implemented the government’s policy in the ideology of this system. The authority of the governor general was particularly vivid in more complicated situations and separate censorial cases. The governor general was well informed of the governmental policy in respect to the Northwest Province, and being also fully aware of the current situation in his gubernias he could best foresee the reaction of the local population to the ideas propagated in a particular book or article. His authority was acknowledged by the ministers of internal affairs and education who used to apply to him in more complicated cases. The opinion of the governor general outweighed the provisions of the law on censorship for the censors of Vilnius.

When Sergei Uvarov was minister of education, there were differences of opinion (regarding tactics rather than aims) between the minister of education on the one hand and the tsar, the director of the Third Department and the governors general of Vilnius on the other regarding policy towards the Northwest Province and the Western region in general. The latter preferred stringent ‘political’ measures, while Uvarov was an adherent of a subtler long-term course. ‘Tactical differences’ in the higher echelons of the power conditioned the differences of opinions between the VCC and the St Petersburg Foreign Censorship Committee that regulated book imports. The Vilnius censors turned out to be much stricter than their colleagues in St Petersburg, who were inclined to heed the attitudes of the Ministry of Education and the Supreme Board of Censors. The fate of a book was usually determined not so much by the Ministry of Education as by the opinion of the governor general, based on the argument of ‘local conditions’.

A most notable example of such disagreements is the banning of Stefan Witwicki’s book *Podarunek ślubny* (Wedding Gift) in 1839. This Paris publication was approved without any reservations by the Foreign Censorship Committee, which rejected several cuts proposed by the Vilnius censor Jan Waszkiewicz. Shortly afterwards, the book attracted the attention of the governor general of Vilnius, Nikolai Dolgorukov, who discovered many statements in it that

were incompatible with the government's policy in the Northwest Province. A lengthy correspondence followed, and at the insistence of Dolgorukov (and his successor Fedor Mirkovich) the minister of education had to prohibit the book.¹⁴

The influence of the governor general on the work of the Vilnius Censorship Committee is yet more evident in the censoring of Lithuanian books. A more thorough checking of Lithuanian books started only in 1851. A special non-staff censor with a good knowledge of Lithuanian was appointed (there was no Lithuanian censor on the staff); his review, however, was only advisory, as the final recommendation had to be signed by staff censors. Apart from the general documents, related to censoring throughout the entire empire and special regulations about people's books (Lithuanian publications were attributed to this category, since in the opinion of the authorities only common people spoke Lithuanian), no exclusive instructions of the higher censorship organs concerning Lithuanian books were found; some later indications of the censors show that such documents had not been issued altogether. The very Russian policy implemented in the Northwest Province served as the guidelines in the activity of the censors of Lithuanian publications. The curator of the educational district and the governor general of Vilnius, often participating directly in the censoring of Lithuanian publications and solving related problems, personally instructed the censors. Reports of the censors of Lithuanian books were discussed and corresponding decisions were taken at the sessions of the committee of censors presided by the curator of the educational district. New censors were briefed by the curator as well. Il'ia Bibikov, who combined the duties of governor general and curator of the educational district between 1851 and 1855, directly participated in the work of the committee of censors. Vladimir Nazimov, having replaced Bibikov as governor general, did not directly take part in the activity of the committee; nevertheless, he often dealt with the problem of Lithuanian books (in particular with those on temperance). Being in doubt, censors applied to him for advice – usually in verbal form – as is evident from the materials of the Commission for checking Polish and Žemaitian books.¹⁵

¹⁴ The case of *Poradunek słubny*, 1839, LVIA, f. 378, PS 1839, b. 147.

¹⁵ Letter of the VCC to the Commission for checking Polish and Žemaitian books, 18 Sept. 1865, LVIA, f. 378, PS 1865, b. 442b, fo. 44.

Archival evidence shows that in many cases the governor general of Vilnius expressed his opinion on some particular issue of censoring, and subsequently it was approved by the ministers of internal affairs and education and even by the emperor, stating that in a particular book, published at home or abroad, he detected undesirable ideas. It should also be said that the ‘undesirability’ and ‘impermissibility’ of the ideas were variables, dependant on the political situation and contemporary policy.

Governor general Murav’ev’s administration is a specific period in respect to the influence of local authorities on censorship. In the gubernias of the Northwest Province enjoying unlimited powers in the military situation, Murav’ev created a peculiar ‘autonomous’ region with his personal regulations and instructions (often verbal ones) in which the regulations of the governor general and the decisions of the VCC were of primary importance on the basis of ‘an exceptional situation within the territory’. The general imperial laws on censorship were applicable there insofar as they did not clash with the policy and decisions of the local authorities. The practice of secret administrative regulations and instructions without any legal endorsement were taken over by the central authorities as well. That is attested by the emperor’s instruction which was forwarded to Murav’ev by the minister of internal affairs Piotr Valuev prescribing the ban on the sale of all Polish primers and textbooks; it contained a request ‘not to issue any official regulations’, instead to see to it strictly confidentially that the textbooks and primers were not sold.¹⁶

The Orthodox Church was concerned only occasionally with the politics of censorship in the Northwest Province. That depended primarily on the relations between the governor general of Vilnius and the spiritual authorities of the local Orthodox and on the close ties between some censors and the authorities. The Orthodox bishop was most influential possibly during Murav’ev’s period in office, while the relations of all other governors general with the Orthodox hierarchy in Lithuania were rather cool.

One cannot simply discard the initiative of the censors themselves in checking publications. Censorship regulations offered much freedom for the censors’ political intuition. And that was of particular importance in the Northwest Province, where a censor

¹⁶ A secret letter of the minister of internal affairs to the governor general of Vilnius, 15 June 1864, LVIA, f. 378, BS 1864, b. 215, fo. 242.

had to perceive the officially undeclared policy of the government and the ‘local conditions’, which supplemented and corrected considerably the functioning of the general regulations. Again it should be taken into account that the governors general and the curators of the educational district, who could read neither Polish nor Lithuanian, formed their opinion about a particular book only on the basis of the censor’s review.

‘Local Conditions’ and Censorship of Polish and Lithuanian Books

When they checked Polish and Lithuanian books, the censors of Vilnius made use of general laws and regulations on censorship; they also paid attention to the specifics of the policy of the Russian government in the Northwest Province on the basis of information from the governor general and the curator of the educational district as well as from the ministers of education and internal affairs and occasionally from the emperor, who used to follow concrete cases of censorship. Therefore information on ‘local censorship policy’ could be found not only in such cases but also in the censored manuscripts, containing the cuts, corrections and even notes of the censors.

1. Censorship of the Polish Press All the general requirements of censorship were adhered to in the Northwest Province.¹⁷ The specificity of the instructions and practice of censorship can be attributed to two areas – the idea of Poland’s independence or ‘the Polish Question’ and the Catholic Church and Catholicity.

The attention of Vilnius censors was focused mainly on the slightest manifestations of ‘separatism’, ‘the Polish Question’, the display of ‘Polish patriotism’, in particular after the Uprising of 1830–1831 – a real attempt ‘to tear away’ the Western region from Russia. The official attitude to the idea of the re-establishment of Poland’s independence was expressed already in 1828 by the senator Nikolai Novosiltsev in his report about Adam Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod* when he stated that ‘dreams of a future Polish independence’ abuse the fidelity of subjects ‘by separating their hearts from their real motherland and tying them to a future non-existent one’.¹⁸ In 1833 and again in 1850 attention was drawn to

¹⁷ In greater detail, see Medišauskienė, *Rusijos cenzūra*.

¹⁸ Józef Tretiak, ‘Raport urzędowy Novosiltseva o “*Konradzie Wallenrodzie*”’, *Pamiętnik Towarzystwa Literackiego imienia Adama Mickiewicza*, ed. Roman Pilat, r. 5 (Lwów, 1891), p. 246.

the 'revolutionary' and 'pernicious' books.¹⁹ These were books which openly propagated the necessity of the re-establishment of an independent Poland (in the middle of the nineteenth century this was the usual name for the Commonwealth of the Two Nations), called to the struggle for this aim, argued the illegality of Russian rule, discussed ways of achieving freedom and models of the behaviour of the subjugated populace in respect to the occupiers and analyzed the experience of the uprisings of Tadeusz Kościuszko and of 1830-31. The ban related not only to books discussing issues of independence. In the imported books the censors struck out any passages, sentences and lines of the poems merely hinting at (the hopes of) independence. Being sufficiently vigilant, they picked up the slightest allegorical, mystical or historical or religious allusions to freedom in the works of authors resident in Lithuania.

Discussions of the causes of the Republic's demise, and the evils and advantages of the former social order were prohibited topics. From the censors' viewpoint the topics of dissatisfaction with the contemporary situation, pessimism, statements about the decline in the social life and any 'murmurs' of discontent, which could attest to a silent resistance to Russian rule, were equally undesirable.

The censors paid particular attention to the manifestations of 'Polish patriotism'. In the above-mentioned report Novosiltsev indicated an 'improper' tendency of the works of historical fiction – attempts 'to foster Polish patriotism'. Several years later, in 1833, governor general of Vilnius Dolgorukov and afterwards the minister of internal affairs pointed out a propensity of historical literary works to deal with current matters under the cover of historical events and 'to cultivate false patriotism among the young'.²⁰ The Russian government considered it its mission to instil 'genuine patriotism' in the population of the 'recovered gubernias' and to make them believe that Russia is their motherland and that they are loyal subjects of the Russian emperor. Charged with this task the censors had to help and eliminate the main obstacle – 'false patriotism' and loyalty to *ojczyzna* (Pol. 'fatherland').

¹⁹ Letter of the curator of the Belorussian Educational District to the VCC, 13 (?) Feb. 1833, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 13, ff. 1, 3; Minutes of the VCC sessions, 4 Oct. 1850, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 78, fo. 192.

²⁰ Letter of governor general of Vilnius to the minister of education, 2 Aug. 1833, LVIA, f. 378, PS 1833, b. 31, ff. 2-3; letter of the minister of internal affairs to the governor general of Vilnius, 24 Aug. 1833, *ibid.*, fo. 5.

The word *ojczyzna* had acquired a special meaning in Polish literature in the nineteenth century – it related both to the memory of the former independent Commonwealth of the Two Nations and to the anticipation of the future independence. Russian officials were fully aware of that interpretation. Respectively, the censors replaced *ojczyzna* by such words as *kraj* ‘territory, region’, *strona* ‘country’ and other synonyms. The same was the fate of *ziomek*, *rodak* ‘(fellow-)countryman, compatriot’ and *narodowy* ‘national’ as words connoting spiritual affinity and Polish nationalism and opposition to Russianness. The terms for the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had to disappear from Catholic religious hymns as denoting non-existing states. The censors became more tolerant to the word *ojczyzna* only after 1856.

The censors tried to eliminate from literature, scholarship and religion phrases dealing with the entire gamut of feelings related to the motherland – love and loyalty to one’s native land, sacrifice and concern for its future and fight for its freedom. Therefore any episodes about the deeds of the noble forebears, their struggle for the freedom and independence of the motherland, about the condemnation of the traitors and those indifferent to the fate of the country, the idealization of certain traits of the Commonwealth, in particular, the principle of the freedom of the nobility did not escape the clutches of censorship. An example of such censoring can be Antoni Pietkiewicz’s story *Spowiedź* (Confession), written under the pen name of Adam Plug. An extensive passage, in which the main character speaks about his love to Lithuania, was crossed out.²¹ Reviewing another book a Russian official added the following note to the sentences about the respect to the laws and customs of one’s country and the love to one’s people: ‘the rule is instructive, however, in this country it should be repeated as rarely as possible, since understood in its direct sense it could have disastrous consequences’.²²

The patriotism of the works was one of the most ‘unpardonable sins’, and in these cases the date of the creation of the work was ignored by the censors of Vilnius in contrast to their colleagues in the Supreme Board of Censors and the St Petersburg Foreign Censorship Committee. Thus, taking into consideration the political

²¹ A. Plug, ‘Spowiedź. Ustęp z życia mego przyjaciela’, a manuscript of *Athenaeum*, t. 3 (1849), MAB RS, f. 9–661, p. 174.

²² Review of the book *Poradunek ślubny*, 1839, LVIA, f. 378, PS 1839, b. 147, fo. 10.

and social circumstances of the nineteenth century, the censors banned the publication of Polish translations of some Latin odes of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets of the Commonwealth Klemens Janicki and Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. The prohibited odes directly called upon the readers to assess the universal civic and patriotic values.²³ The principle of ‘extemporality’ was also applied in censoring Catholic hymns and prayers, created between the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and containing allusions to the historical events of the period. Laments on the misfortunes that befell the Polish Crown, the decline of the country, the ravages of the enemy, the address to the patron saints of Poland to defend the motherland, etc., were considered ‘politically unacceptable’. For the first time these references were denounced in 1833, when the governor general of Vilnius proposed to ban the hymnbook *Pieśni nabożnie* (Religious Hymns).²⁴ The prohibition of this hymnbook afterwards became common practice when in 1838 the prayer book *Ołtarzyk Polski* (A Little Polish Altar) was banned for similar hymns. In the same year religious literature referring to the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was criticized. Subsequently Polish prayer books used in Lithuania underwent a thorough revision.

The idea of Polish independence was based on the tradition of the former independent Commonwealth. Historical memory occupied a particular place in the spread of this idea and respectively in the policy of censorship. The principal requirement for historical writings was not to make them a means of fostering ‘Polish patriotism’. Such writings became unsuitable and were barred every time when emotions prevailed in them and historical events became a pretext for glorifying the civic, military or moral values of the Lithuanian or Polish gentry, for praising the structure and political and social institutions of the Commonwealth and for worshipping the glorious past. ‘The Polish nation of the former times, its political relations, the level of education and the form of administration are generally presented in such a favourable light that reading about them can give new impetus to the patriotism of those belonging to

²³ Władysław Syrokomla, *Przekłady poetów Polsko Lacińskich epoki Zygmuntońskiej*, zes. 1, poemata Klemensa Janickiego, a manuscript, 1847, LMAB RS, f. 109–556, p. 67; *ibid.*, t. V, *Poezye X. M. K. Sarbiewskiego*, manuscript, *ibid.*, f. 109–560, ff. 1–4, 41, 73–75, 99–100.

²⁴ Letter of the governor general of Vilnius to the minister of education, 17 Aug. 1833, LVIA, f. 378, BS 1833, b. 2005, ff. 14–16.

that nation', the censor, Burhard Hombladt, wrote in his review in 1852.²⁵ The Russian administration did not accept such a history of Poland and Lithuania which was most necessary for the society of these countries – a history which could raise the self-esteem and patriotism of the two nations and strengthen their resolve in the struggle against the oppressor and stimulate their self-reliance and trust in the future.

There was one more imperative requirement – Russia's participation in historical events could not be presented negatively, and in historical writings there could be no anti-Russian sentiments. The image of Russia, its policy and history could be only positive in the eyes of Lithuanian society, no matter what the historical truth was. In this respect the most delicate issue was the partition of the Commonwealth, in which Russia was not in a position of the righteous. Therefore the censors had to do their best to draw the curtain over this affair, to keep silent over it or to present only the official version of the event.

A kind of concentrated contempt to Russia was the word *moskal*. Originally it meant 'the inhabitant of Muscovy', later it acquired a negative connotation to refer to the Russians in general. Being familiar with this undertone, the censors banned the use of the word, the more so when it was in such phrases as *przeklęcy Moskale* 'the damned Muscovites' or *złośliwe Moskale* 'the cruel Muscovites'.²⁶ The word *moskale* had to be replaced by *rossyanie* 'Russians' or *Rossya* 'Russia'. Even in the publications of seventeenth-century documents *Moskwa* had to be changed into 'Russians'. Only in 1853 'a concession' was made – *moskale* was allowed in old writings and in previously published books.²⁷

The struggle of the censors against 'separatism' and 'Polish patriotism', against the political tradition of the Republic of the Two Nations and anti-Russian tendencies was conditioned by the endeavours of Russian politics to safeguard the integrity of the empire, 'to amalgamate' the annexed territories for ever and to prevent the recurrence of such events as the Uprising of 1830-31. It is also worth noting that in the middle of the nineteenth century

²⁵ Hombladt's review of *L'Europe vivante ou relation nouvelle, historique et politique de tous ses états selon la face qu'ils ont sur la fin de l'année MDCLXVI*. (Geneva, 1667), 1852, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 93, ff. 15–16.

²⁶ Do dziejów Chanów w Krymu, Manuscript of *Athenaeum*, 1850, t. 5, LMAB RS, f. 9-669, p. 69.

²⁷ Letter of the Committee of Foreign Censorship to the VCC, 25 Sept. 1853, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 98, fo. 11.

the modern Polish nation and Polish nationalism, embracing the culturally Polonized Lithuanian gentry, were forming. The ideas attributed by the censors to 'separatism' and 'Polish patriotism' or to the historical tradition of the Commonwealth were also part of the modern national ideology. Thus, in its attempts to preserve the integrity of the empire, censorship eventually prevented the formation and spread of Polish nationalism in Lithuania.

Any infringement of the integrity of the empire was prohibited by the censors. The criticism of all levels of government and of the activity of civil servants was strictly forbidden. Criticism itself was not tolerated and was permanently suppressed. In Lithuania this hostility was strengthened by the fact that the critique of the negative aspects of life and of the activity of the officials or the discontent with the reality was identified with the critique of Russian rule and opposition to it. The censors did not tolerate the criticism of Lithuanian society, its woes and separate social groups. In general, Russian autocratic rule did not allow the participation of society in the governmental affairs of the country. Therefore, censorship strictly prohibited any discussions of crucial social issues and restricted any manifestations of unauthorized initiatives.

The chances for Lithuanian society to participate in discussions about the prospects of its development were limited additionally by the ban on the private (non-governmental) Polish press in the Northwest and in the entire Western Territory. During the period under consideration there was only one periodical publication – bilingual *Litovskii vestnik* / *Kurier Litewski*, issued in Russian and Polish since 1833 (in 1840 re-named *Vilenskii vestnik* / *Kurier Wileński*). The official *Tygodnik Peterburgski* published under the supervision of the Third Department and intended for the Polish Kingdom reached Lithuania, too. Any attempts to publish more weekly or monthly periodicals were vetoed by the censors. Periodical publications had to be replaced by 'selected' continued but not periodical publications issued at irregular intervals as books or brochures. All continued Polish publications in Lithuania were of this kind. With regard to contents they had to conform to certain restrictions: regular and consistent information on contemporary scholarly, literary, artistic and social life, book reviews, polemics and bibliography were prohibited in them. Instead they were orientated towards historical research in the above-mentioned fields. Between 1851 and 1856 even such constrained publications were forbidden. The situation did not change much in the thaw period

of Alexander II. The ban on periodical Polish publications was continued; permission was given only to broaden the contents of the official *Kurier Wileński* and to renew the publication of non-periodical collections. Thus, publication conditions in Lithuania were much worse than those in the Polish Kingdom, where the press was much more varied in regard to themes and diversity of ideological trends.

Requirements for works related to social issues were particularly stringent. A categorical prohibition was introduced on the abolition of serfdom, the critique of serfdom relations and the instigation of the peasants against the landowners. In Lithuania the principle of 'social peace' was practiced despite a doubtful political loyalty of the local gentry. The protection of the contemporary social contacts was dropped only about 1863 on the initiative of governor general Murav'ev of Vilnius. That was due to the fact that after the abolition of serfdom the authorities were able to control peasant communities directly without the mediation of the landowners and could foment the conflict between 'Polish landowners' and 'Lithuanian or Belorussian peasants'. A ban was introduced on Polish publications advocating a peaceful coexistence of the gentry and the peasants. However, even at that time all social issues were eliminated from Valerijonas Ažukalnis' *Raštai lietuviški* (Lithuanian Writings), approved for publication in Cyrillic characters.

In the sphere of religion, censorship prevented all Christian religions from heresies and deviations and their clergymen from criticism and disrespect. Freethinking and atheism were forbidden altogether. Only the 'leading' Orthodox Church had the right to disseminate its faith among the adherents of other religions. Respectively, publications of other Christian faiths debating with other religions and propagating their faith (in particular among the Orthodox believers) were banned. Equally unacceptable was the inciting of religious feud, observed in the manifestations of intolerance and descriptions of religious riots. Critical and unfavourable appreciation of Orthodoxy, of the Orthodox Church and its believers was not tolerated.

The years 1838 and 1839 became a kind of milestone marking a turn to a more rigid attitude to Polish religious literature in Lithuania. As has already been mentioned at that time the minister of education introduced a stricter censorship of Polish Catholic prayer books eliminating not only 'political' hymns and prayers but also the names of the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1839 local authorities formulated their approach to

certain dogmas of the Catholic Church, which were acknowledged as ‘unsuitable’ and being against the aims of the government in the Northwest Province. Such dogmas were the statements that the Roman Pontiff is the Vicar of Christ and that outside the Roman Church there is no salvation. Censors forbade requirements that people be faithful to the Catholic Church. In the middle of the 1860s or perhaps a little earlier the phrase ‘the Catholic Church’ was banished from Polish religious publications. These tendencies in the work of the censors could be part of the campaign, directed against the Catholic Church in Lithuania, the subordination of the Uniates to the Orthodox Church being one of such measures. Treating the Catholic Church as the main obstacle in the realization of their aims, Russian authorities attempted to curb the influence of the Church and of the Catholic clergy on the life of the lay Catholics and to obliterate the dogmatic differences as most clearly keeping the Catholics and the Orthodox separate.

2. Censorship of the Lithuanian Press Attributed to the category of publications meant for the common people, Lithuanian books had to meet some additional requirements after 1851: they could deal only with primary education, religious practice, elementary economic schooling or folk art. Such limitations imposed on the press conformed to the Russian education policy preventing the children of common people from acquiring an education other than elementary one and thus preserving the social structure without change. Any periodical publications intended for the common people were also banned. Therefore all the endeavours of the Lithuanian cultural workers to obtain permission for a Lithuanian newspaper ended in failure. This prohibition was revoked only in 1862. Publications, meant for the common people, had to be censored particularly rigorously and carefully.

Between 1831 and 1851 the censoring of Lithuanian publications was rather perfunctory and relied mainly on the reviews of clerical censors. After 1851 the reviewing of Lithuanian books was particularly censorious, based not only on the general principles but also taking into account ‘local conditions’. This turn in the policy of censorship can be accounted for by the general moves in the internal and nationality policies of Russia after 1848–1849, when greater attention was paid not only to nationality problems but also to the common needs and attitudes of the people. In 1851 several previously published books (among them *Žemaičių vyskupystė*

(Diocese of Žemaitija) by Motiejus Valančius²⁸) were re-censored, the printing of several Lithuanian books was prohibited between 1853 and 1855, and in 1855 legal proceedings were taken against *Būdas senovės lietuvių, kalnėnų ir žemaičių* (The Character of Ancient Lithuanians, Aukštaitians and Žemaitians) by Simonas Daukantas²⁹ – the book, which formerly had been published without any hitches on the part of the censors, was banned. This time the censor found seven forbidden passages, which could only serve as a negative pretext for the second impression of the book. The main cause for the ban seems to have been the fact that the book overstepped the limits set for the books meant for common people. Valančius' *Žemaičių vyskupystė* could not be attributed to the category of books for common people either, and Murav'ev placed an official ban on it in 1865. Actually any chances of re-issuing the book were denied by the censor Petkevičius' remark in 1852, stating that 'by its spirit and intentions this work undoubtedly is written in order to foster Žemaitian nationhood (*narodnost'*) as a region belonging to Poland'.³⁰

Restrictions conditioned by 'local conditions' mainly touched upon Lithuanian historical and religious books and separate texts. As in Polish cases, the censors endeavoured to prevent the spread of the idea of statehood and the tradition of the Republic of the Two Nations. Particularly undesirable were suggestive narratives about a free and thriving Grand Duchy of Lithuania or the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, which could effectively promote the formation of the historical conscience of the peasantry. Therefore, the censors, actually allowing the publication of bare historical facts (except a few, such as the uprisings of 1794 and 1831, etc.) in the form of chronological tables, as it was practiced in the calendars, prohibited the publication of their interpretations clashing with official Russian historical scholarship. Censorship had to ensure a space for the propaganda of a Russian Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the conscience of the peasant.

For the same reasons both in Polish and Lithuanian texts, the words *ojczyzna* 'fatherland' (according to the censor, meaning 'the

²⁸ Motiejus Valančius (1801–1875), a bishop, writer and enlightener; his *Žemaičių vyskupystė*, published in 1848, was one of the first major Lithuanian historical works on the history of Catholicism in Lithuania.

²⁹ Simonas Daukantas (1793–1864), a historian; his *Būdas* was the first historical work written in Lithuanian.

³⁰ Petkevičius' letter of 17 March 1852 on censoring books proposed for re-publication, LVIA, f. 378, BS 1851, b. 2630, ff. 34, 46.

unification of the two states, i.e., Poland and Lithuania') and *maskolius* and *gudas* 'Muscovite, Russian' as carrying negative connotations (after discussions it was decided to give preference to *maskolius*) were crossed out, and all descriptions of historical events and religious hymns, unfavourably relating to the Russians, were eliminated.

The majority of Lithuanian books published between 1851 and 1865 were religious and they were equally heavily censored as secular texts. Particular attention to Lithuanian religious publications could be accounted for by an extraordinary impact of the Catholic Church on the spiritual life of the people. The Catholic Church in Lithuania was opposed to Russian rule, and therefore one of the aims of censorship was to curb the influence of the Church on the peasantry. Though severe censorship of Lithuanian religious books was introduced only in 1851, it was conducted according to the rules formulated with respect to Polish religious publications in 1838–1839. Lithuanian books could not promulgate the principle of the priority of the spiritual authority over the secular one, and the attempts of the Catholic clergy to direct the spiritual life of the people were restrained. Especially unacceptable was the papal idea for a certain diarchy: the authority of the Pope (the head of a foreign state) in the spiritual sphere and that of the tsar in the secular life. In political terms such a situation was undesirable for the autocracy, and Catholic publications had to avoid mentioning the teaching itself and the Pope (including the prayers for the Pope). All censorial measures were taken to resist the influence and power of the Catholic Church and prevent the establishment of structurally organized religious mass fraternities among the peasants. These schemes were directed primarily against the spread of the numerous renowned temperance brotherhoods. The censors used to strike out the manifestations of the so-called 'Catholic fanaticism' by putting a stop to disrespect and even hatred to the people of other Christian and non-Christian faiths – the Orthodox, Protestants, the Jews and Moslems in Catholic literature.

The censors did not tolerate hatred of other Christian religions, their representatives, and the source of that hatred – the Catholic dogma about a single true and infallible Catholic Church and the Catholic faith as the only way leading to salvation. Religious animosity to the Orthodox inspired the hostility to the Russians, undesirable to the authorities. Among other things, that antagonistic idea was supported by the images of the persecution of the Christians in the early ages, which the peasants could easily associate with the

activities of Russian rule in the nineteenth century. Therefore censors eliminated such episodes from the publications. Similar was the attitude to the prayers or hymns referring to Sts Casimir, Josophat and Stanislaus, who once either fought against the Orthodox or their cult was exploited in the struggles against the Russians. At the time when religious consciousness of the peasants replaced their political orientation, religious hostility to the Russian Orthodox equalled the political hostility. Therefore the elimination of the Catholic hostility to other (mainly Christian) religions from Lithuanian publications had to entail Lithuanian political loyalty.

Devotion to the Catholic Church was also a forbidden topic. The Catholic Church like any other took care in the preservation and enlargement of its flock. Therefore writings always urged to be faithful to the Catholic religion, never to retreat from it and endure all sorts of persecutions for its sake. The censors categorically struck out such inducements. Those precepts of religious books addressed to the believers could be an effective antidote to the propaganda of Orthodoxy and the policy of the state-supported Orthodox Church.

Since early 1850s the censors tried to 'de-Catholicize' Lithuanian religious texts by eliminating the Catholic specifics (comments on the celibacy of ordained ministers, the prohibition on reading the Bible, etc.) and make them generally suitable for all Christians. In Petkevičius' words, it presumably meant 'the preservation of the purity of the Word of God'. In practice, such 'de-Catholicization' looked like this. After the interference of the censors the text 'What is it necessary in order to obtain salvation? - baptism, the Roman Catholic faith, humility, good behaviour, good works and love of God' became 'What is it necessary in order to obtain salvation? - baptism, humility, good behaviour, good works and love of God'.³¹ A statement like this is acceptable both to an Orthodox and to a Protestant. Sometimes it seems that there were intentions to eliminate the term 'the Roman Catholic Church' itself from Catholic books. No documents contain any hints as to the purpose of such actions. It could only be surmised that these activities were conceived as ways of easing the spread of Orthodoxy by obliterating the differences between the Catholic and Orthodox faiths.

The revision of Lithuanian Catholic writings, begun in 1851, continued after 1865 as well. Having returned to the post of the censor in Murav'ev's day, Petkevičius worked until 1874; he checked

³¹ V. Aramavičius' account of Tadas Juzumas Aplankymas parakwijos par jos klebona ...', 15 March 1860, LVIA, f. 1240, ap. 1, b. 153, fo. 23.

Lithuanian books, and prepared an instruction on their censoring adhering to the policy of censorship, formulated for Lithuanian religious publications in the 1850s. The Lithuanian people rejecting Catholic texts written in the Cyrillic script and illegal Latin-script publications spreading, Catholic texts distorted by the censors did not have any greater effect.

Conclusions The nationality issue began to figure prominently in the general censorship documents only in the late 1840s. Simultaneously, Russian bureaucratic thinking on social and political issues was changing as well, and that found its expression in bureaucratic phraseology, too. One more change related to the nationality problems of the early 1860s was a special definition of the governmental attitude towards the endeavours of re-establishing Polish independence in the laws on censorship.

Censorship specifics dealing with the peculiarities of the Northwest Province and the aims of Russian politics in that region were defined by special regulations issued by the tsar, ministers of internal affairs and education and the Supreme Board of Censors and addressed to the governor general of Vilnius or directly to the Vilnius Censorship Committee. Such regulations were usually provoked by individual law cases (of particular books), initiated by the governor general of Vilnius. His opinion and solutions suggested by him often served the basis for the guidelines of the higher bodies. It could be stated that in the formation of the 'local' policy of censorship the right of initiative belonged to the local authorities. On the other hand, the ban of a particular idea expressed in a particular book at a particular time was conditioned by a concrete political situation and the aims of Russian policy in the 'recovered lands'; in such cases the governor general of Vilnius was informed personally by the minister of internal affairs or the tsar himself. Thus, the practice of forming censorship policy corroborates the historians' statements about the 'responsive' nature of the Russian nationality policy.

The instructions of the officials, formulating the policy of censorship implemented by the VCC in concordance with 'the local conditions' between 1831 and 1865, were dominated by undertakings to preserve the integrity of the empire. The censors' attention was concentrated on those ideas and statements in the writings, which could be hazardous to the integrity of the empire and could prevent the integration of the population of the Northwest Province into Russia (emphasis seems to have been placed on political integration, i.e., on loyalty to Russia): the idea of Poland's independence, Polish

patriotism, the tradition of the independent Commonwealth of the Two Nations, hostility to the Russians, etc. Endeavours to prevent the penetration of the idea of Poland's independence as well as the tradition of a free, powerful and flourishing Grand Duchy of Lithuania were manifest in the censoring of the Lithuanian press.

The specific character of censorship policy implemented in the Northwest Province was also evident in the censoring of religious texts and in the assessment of the fundamental statements of the Catholic faith. Already the orientation of the Russian policy prescribed by the (First) Committee on the Western Provinces³² towards strengthening the positions of the Orthodox Church meant the weakening of the influence of the Catholic Church in the region. That political course had been implemented in the Polish press since 1838-1839 and in the Lithuanian press since 1851. The prohibition of the propaganda of Catholicism and of the Catholic faith as the only truthful, of the fidelity to that faith and the elimination of the anti-Russian and anti-Orthodox tendencies and those directed against other Christian faiths coincided with the rules of censorship preventing the incitement of religious discord. At the same time the ban on anti-Russianness and the tolerance of the Orthodox coincided with the programme of the integration of the Lithuanians and the Poles into Russian society and the striving towards their loyalty. Inter-religious tension could be weakened by the censorial prohibitions, aimed at belittling the dissimilarity of the Catholic faith and of its dogmas, and in general by 'de-Catholicizing' religious books, sometimes even striking out the very name of the Catholic Church. Such actions could incur more serious consequences, not only the stimulation of religious tolerance. On the one hand, they could ease the spread of Orthodoxy by 'fading away' the differences between the two religions in the course of time. On the other, taking into account that Catholicism occupied a special place in the Polish national consciousness and 'Catholic fanaticism' was inseparable from 'Polonism' in the eyes of Russian officials, that kind of elimination of religious intolerance and of the dogmatic differences of the Catholic faith and the belittlement of the very Catholicism meant placing a limitation on Polishness. Additionally, as the people had still preserved religious rather than ethnic consciousness, the emphasis on Catholicism and the insistence

³² It was a secret committee established on the basis of personal confidence as an advisory body for the emperor in the preparation of fundamental approaches of Russian policy towards the Northwest Province; it functioned between 1831 and 1848.

on the preservation of the Catholic faith were important factors in distinguishing the Lithuanians from the Russian Orthodox and a feeling of unity with the gentry as being of the same religion.

The restrictions imposed on the people's (respectively, Lithuanian) writings as well as the entire system of education were aimed in essence at preserving the existing social structure; after 1851 only publications related to elementary and economic education, religious practice and folk arts were allowed, and periodical publications were forbidden altogether. Those restrictions were a serious obstacle to the development of the literacy and culture of peasant nations, keeping them uneducated and uncivilized.

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CENZŪRA LIETUVOJE: RUSIJOS POLITIKOS ĮRANKIS (1831–1865 M.)

Santrauka

ZITA MEDIŠAUSKIENĖ

Straipsnyje Rusijos politikos Šiaurės vakarų krašte problematikos kontekste tiriamos Rusijos cenzūrinės politikos, kurią įgyvendino Vilniaus cenzūros komitetas 1831–1865 m., ypatybės. Bandoma atsakyti į du klausimus: kas ir koku būdu formavo „vietinės aplinkybės“ atitinkančią Vilniaus cenzorių poziciją lietuviškos ir lenkiškos spaudos atžvilgiu; kokius Vilniaus cenzūros komitete taikytus reikalavimus išprovokavo „vietinės aplinkybės“ ir Šiaurės Vakarų krašte įgyvendinama Rusijos politika. Remiantis oficialių dokumentų, cenzūrinių bylų, cenzorių patikrintų rankraščių medžiaga teigiama, jog formuojant „vietinę“ cenzūros politiką nulemdavo Vilniaus generalgubernatoriaus nuomonė, jam priklausė ir iniciatyvos teisė. Vilniaus cenzūros komitete vykdytos cenzūrinės politikos pagrindinis tikslas buvo užtikrinti Rusijos imperijos integralumą, neleidžiant skliti dezintegruojančioms antirusiškoms ir Lenkijos nepriklausomybę bei „lenkiškąjį patriotizmą“ propaguojančioms idėjoms. Kartu buvo siekiama mažinti Katalikų Bažnyčios įtaką (ypač valsietijai), niveliuoti katalikų tikėjimo skirtingumą ir taip sudaryti palankesnes sąlygas ne tik religinei pakantai plisti, bet ir stačiatikybės skleistis.