CHAPTER 3


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Introduction

The interwar period in East Central Europe is often characterised as a short era of national statehood between longer periods of imperial rule.¹ The politics of nationality were pronounced in Tsarist Russia and even more in the Soviet Union, but it was only between the First and the Second World Wars that they were implemented by the titular nations themselves. This period led to an ethnic homogenisation that is generally overshadowed by the far more radical processes of ethnic cleansing associated with the Second World War. Nonetheless, the difference in the ethnic fabric between the western periphery of the pre-1914 Russian Empire and the post-1918 nation states is profound. The Russian evacuation policy led to a massive depopulation of the cities and countryside at the beginning of the First World War. As Russian rule collapsed, the majority of Jews and Germans were deported, and many of them did not return.² Continuing warfare against the Red Army, the Polish Army, and German Freikorps delayed repatriation after the Great War.³ Whereas a number of studies have examined certain manifestations of homogenising nationalism after the consolidation of statehood, such as “ethnic democracy”⁴

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¹ Soviet historiography has even described it – at least in the case of the Baltic States – as an “unnatural interlude.” Cf. Joseph Rothschild, East Central Europe between the two World Wars (Washington, 1977), 367.
or “economic nationalism,” the population policies of the immediate post-war period, which emerged in the shadow of war and the consolidation of statehood, have so far been neglected – the exception being the works of Tomas Balkelis.

This chapter argues, using the example of post-WWI Lithuania, that the establishment of the post-war order, i.e., the drawing of borders and the nationalisation of the economy, profoundly changed the lives of the local population and former refugees alike, as they found themselves in an unfamiliar and fundamentally altered economic and social context. This, in turn, required them to develop strategies of adaptation. As Aleksandar Pavković and Peter Radan have recently pointed out, “secession by itself does not improve the standard of living of its citizens or enhance their employment opportunities or their control over their government of their own state.” Beyond the violence usually associated with civil war, a focus on the economy may provide some answers to the general question: how was the local population affected by secession on a social level? This chapter thus poses the following questions: How did the post-war border redrawing affect the opportunities for people – particularly merchants – to return to their pre-war professions? How did central or local rule try to mitigate or exploit the effects of territorial changes? How did uncertainty with regards to applicable law, state belonging and citizenship affect the lives of the borderland population? And finally: to what extent did responses to border changes form part of a process of homogenisation?

The chapter thus looks specifically at those regions that were transformed beyond recognition by secession – the regions created by the newly drawn borders. As Lithuania formed part of the imperial periphery, some borders changed only slightly (the German-Lithuanian border), some followed former administrative borders (the Lithuanian-Latvian border), while others were new and volatile (the Polish-Lithuanian border). Tassilo Herrschel has pointed out that residents of border regions “are confronted with the impact of national borders in an immediate way.” They are affected by their function as economic and political barriers, which, in turn, create “a sense of being on the edge of the

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5 See among others Eduard Kubů and Helga Schultz, eds., Wirtschaftsnationalismus als Entwicklungsstrategie ostmitteleuropäischer Eliten (Berlin, 2005); Alice Teichova, Herbert Matis and Jaroslav Pátek, Economic Change and the National Question in Twentieth-Century Europe (Cambridge, 2012).
