Theodore R. Weeks


In recent years, Vilnius has been the object of several excellent English-language studies, notably David Frick’s superb monograph on the city’s communities in the seventeenth century and Laimonas Briedis’s work on the Lithuanian capital’s historic intercultural relations; ¹ both authors endorse _Vilnius Between Nations_ on the back cover. Theodore Weeks is a professor of history at Southern Illinois University and an acknowledged expert on the history of the western borderlands of the Russian Empire. His studies reflect impressive multilingual skills, and in _Vilnius_ he employs a distinctive array of mainly secondary sources in Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, German and Hebrew. Weeks acknowledges that most “cities in East-Central Europe…bring together diverse populations,” but insists that “with no slight intended,” “the importance of Vilnius to a variety of cultures…is unparalleled.” For example, in the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic grand dukes of Lithuania would attend mass in Latin and then issue decrees in a Slavic chancery language, identified by Weeks as “Old Ruthenian.”² Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, Belarusians and Russians have laid claim to this historic capital on various religious, cultural, national and political grounds. Over the centuries it was also home to German and Dutch merchants, as well as Muslim Tatars, a heritage still reflected today in the names of Vilnius streets.

But we should be careful in describing this diversity. Weeks correctly insists that words matter. It is important to grasp the manner in which the usage of “nation” (a community, a _Volk_) and “state” (a purely political entity) differs fundamentally in East-Central Europe from the way these terms are understood in Western Europe and the U.S. In the case of Eastern Europe, the borders of “nations” and “states” did not much overlap until well into the twentieth century. Weeks points out that one should not confuse the remarkable diversity of cultures on display in Vilnius with current notions of embraced diversity or “multiculturalism.” This “city of strangers,” not unlike Sarajevo, was rather a paradigm of ritualized co-existence based on custom and civic codes brought

---


² Other linguists have used different designations for what is basically a derivative of Old East Slavic.
down through many generations. Religious affiliation rather than language and ethnicity constituted the most important marker of identity: Catholic (Poles and Lithuanians), Protestant (many Germans), Orthodox and Uniate (mostly persons of East Slavic origins), Judaic (Jews and, to some extent, Karaim), Muslim (Tatars). Weeks is also justifiably wary of the notion of a “golden age” of communal tolerance, a narrative which has some basis, but has become a cliché among many Lithuanians who see their current road to European integration as a historic continuum, a reaffirmation of the heritage of the Grand Duchy period. Even if Lithuania avoided (mostly) the horrors of the vicious religious massacres of Central Europe, communal conflict based on confessional animosities flared up from time to time.

Weeks’s study encompasses the period from the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until the end of the twentieth century. The partitions of the Commonwealth (1772–1795) constituted a seismic event in world history: the deliberate obliteration of a centuries-old major European state by neighboring powers. However, it should be noted that the long Russian century in Vilnius (1795–1915), especially during the initial decades, was less transformative of the old order than the changes on the map would lead one to believe. Weeks points out that even after the insurrection of 1831, as the Tsarist regime suppressed many of the restless Polonized nobles of Lithuania, much remained of the old order. Vilnius continued as “at least three cities:” Polish, Jewish and Russian. Polish culture still dominated the city’s social milieu, while the emergence of a modern Jewish Russian-speaking elite had still not significantly disrupted traditional life. For its part, Russian political and military control was pervasive, but the influence of Russian bureaucrats, officers and clergy on cultural and social developments was limited. The Grand Duchy’s Lithuanian Statute first established in the sixteenth century remained in force until 1840. There is one omission here: Weeks mentions the Lithuanian historian Simonas Daukantas (1793–1864) but does not consider what is termed in historiography as the “Lithuanian movement” (lituanistinis sąjūdis) of petty Samogitian gentry, the only social class aside from the peasantry who still spoke Lithuanian in the nineteenth century. These men studied at the University of Vilnius during the 1820s and constituted a tenth of the student body, including Dionizas Poška (1764–1830) and Stanislovas Stanevičius (1799–1848), now regarded as important innovators in the development of Lithuanian literature. They certainly saw their native language as “a cultural and patriotic value” even before the national movement of the second half of the nineteenth century.

The situation changed after the Polish-Lithuanian insurrection of 1863, which Weeks identifies as the “period of Russification.” The anti-Catholic and