# War, Ethnic Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in Lithuania, 1939–1940

T O M A S   B A L K E L I S

## Abstract

*After the destruction of the Polish state by the invading Nazi and Soviet armies in the autumn of 1939, about 30,000 Polish nationals fled to eastern Lithuania. This article examines the relationship between population displacement and ethnic rivalry in Lithuania at the onset of the Second World War. As 'war victims' in need of help and protection, over time these Polish refugees became increasingly 'ethnicised', socially differentiated and isolated from Lithuanian society, and vilified as a potential political threat. Furthermore, the official decision to create a legal category of so-called 'newcomers' deprived those Poles who had settled in Vilnius between the wars of citizenship and residence rights in Lithuania. This policy inflated the number of 'refugees' to more than 100,000. Various other official measures, such as the creation of camps, forced labour schemes, deportations and repatriations, show how the government manipulated the refugee crisis for its own political purposes.*

## Introduction

Hitler's attack on Poland in September 1939, following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, destroyed the last illusions of peace and stability in Europe. The rapid two-pronged destruction of the Polish state by the Nazi and Soviet armies precipitated a humanitarian crisis which spilled over into adjacent states. Hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians, government officials and military fled the path of the invading armies into neighbouring Slovakia, Romania, Hungary and Lithuania, in the hope of finding a safe haven. The first weeks of the war thereby rendered them homeless refugees.

This article explores the refugee crisis in eastern Lithuania, where around 27,000 refugees from Poland sought sanctuary.[1] For the small and truncated Lithuanian state –

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[1] Regina Žepkaitė, *Vilniaus istorijos atkarpa, 1939–1940* (An Episode in the History of Vilnius, 1939–1940) (Vilnius: Mokslas, 1990), 110.

in March 1939 Germany had annexed the region of Memel (Klaipeda) – the influx of so many refugees presented a considerable challenge.[2] The government in Kaunas faced a humanitarian crisis because these refugees had to be fed and accommodated. It dealt simultaneously with international pressure from the Polish government-in-exile and its Western allies, and from Germany. While the Allies requested full protection for the refugees, Germany demanded that all anti-German political and military activities among the Polish population in Lithuania should be curbed.[3]

After the Soviet-backed transfer of the Vilnius region from Poland to Lithuania in October 1939, the Lithuanian government attempted to integrate the region politically, economically and culturally. This was marked by a sustained process of 'Lithuanisation', strongly supported by many members of the Lithuanian public. This policy was made easier to implement as a result of interwar hostility and ethnic conflict between Poland and Lithuania, a hostility derived from the military coup led by Lucjan Zeligowski in 1920 and Poland's occupation of Vilnius. Lithuania never recognised this 'annexation', which poisoned relations between the two states throughout the interwar years. (Lithuanians based their claims to Vilnius as the historical capital of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania, whereas Poland staked its claim on the grounds that the city and surrounding area were predominantly ethnically Polish.) The two states failed to develop diplomatic relations, attempts to settle the Vilnius dispute internationally having come to nothing.[4]

For those Polish citizens who fled into Lithuania the onset of war entailed physical displacement. For the many thousands who stayed in the Vilnius region, and found that the frontier had shifted instead, the onset of war brought about their political expatriation. Both the refugees and those who became politically disenfranchised joined the ranks of stateless persons. These displacements reinforced each other and combined to ensure that the refugee crisis remained at the centre of Lithuanian politics until the Soviet occupation in June 1940.[5]

The Lithuanian government attempted to steer a course through this volatile domestic and international situation. However, the unpopular authoritarian regime, seriously weakened by the Polish ultimatum of March 1938 and the loss of Memel (Klaipeda) in March 1939, produced only a series of short-lived and indecisive governments. Despite the fact that the government attempted to regain its popularity

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[2] According to the Lithuanian census of 1923, Lithuania had a population of 2 million (without the regions of Klaipėda and Vilnius). At the end of 1939, following the loss of Klaipėda and the acquisition of the Vilnius region, Lithuania's population stood at 2.9 million. *Lietuvos statistikos metraštis* (Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania) (Vilnius: Centrinis statistikos biuras, 1939), XII, 13.

[3] Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 118–19. According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Lithuania the population of the Vilnius region was 482,500 on 31 December 1939. *Lietuvos statistikos metraštis*, X, 4.

[4] For background works in English, see Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Alfonsas Eidintas and Vytautas Žalys, *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of the First Republic, 1918–1940* (London: Macmillan, 1997); John Hiden and Patrick Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1991); Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 54–82.

[5] The implications for the Jewish population of Vilnius are considered by Sarunas Liekis, 'The Transfer of Vilnius District into Lithuania, 1939', *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 14 (2001), 212–22.

by claiming the return of Vilnius as a diplomatic victory, the refugee crisis contributed to further destabilising the political scene. Lithuania embarked on contradictory policies that ranged from attempts to assist the refugees by involving international agencies in their relief on the one hand, to administrative measures to control their movement on the other. Refugees and the politically disenfranchised were enumerated, classified, controlled, isolated, forcibly employed, resettled or even jailed. In other words, compulsory 'rooting' and 'sifting' of the population went hand in hand with relief efforts. In practice, as we shall see, the various measures applied to refugees served to achieve the state's political objectives.[6]

Not surprisingly, the political loyalties of the homeless and uprooted played a significant role in this process. In March 1940 the government denied citizenship rights to around 83,000 Poles who had settled in the Vilnius region between 1920 and 1939, while confirming them for all other residents. This decision effectively swelled the number of refugees to more than 100,000 (almost one in four people in the Vilnius region could now be regarded as a refugee), creating serious unrest among Poles in Lithuania and causing profound disquiet among the Polish government-in-exile and its Western allies.[7] This crisis not surprisingly exacerbated the existing tensions between Poles and Lithuanians and would ultimately provide the backdrop to the expulsion of more than 196,000 Poles from Soviet Lithuania to Poland in 1945–6.[8]

Lithuania's policies towards the displaced population emerge from official records, the papers of various international relief agencies and the local press. The experiences and the political mood of refugees are, however, much more difficult to capture. Government officials, public opinion and international relief agencies often portrayed them either as victims in need of help or as potential subversives who needed to be controlled. Yet, however they were characterised, refugees could not be ignored. Their presence left a significant mark on east European politics throughout the Second World War.[9]

### The birth and scale of the refugee crisis

Polish refugees found their way into Lithuania as early as the first week of September 1939. The first refugees, mostly well-to-do members of the Polish community, arrived from Gdansk (Danzig) and received warm support from Polish residents of Vilnius, who saw them as the first 'heroic victims' of the local Nazi takeover.[10] By

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[6] My thoughts on these issues have been influenced by recent work on population politics, such as Amir Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[7] Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 111.

[8] Jerzy Kochanowski, 'Gathering Poles into Poland', in Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak, eds., *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944–1948* (Oxford: Rowman, 2001), 138.

[9] An overview of the impact of the war in east-central Europe is provided by Jan T. Gross, 'Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration', in István Deák, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15–35.

[10] *Lietuvos žinios* (Lithuanian News), 9 Jan. 1940, 4.

mid-September Lithuanian border guards reported that Polish army units had also begun crossing into Lithuania, where they were immediately disarmed and interned. In total, Lithuania received about 9,500 Polish military personnel. They were placed in special camps administered by the Lithuanian army.[11]

The largest wave of refugees, mostly civilians with their families and small children, poured into Vilnius in the last days of September. These destitute and hungry people had been on the march for more than two weeks from their homes in western Poland. Their arrival abruptly changed the face of the city: as one contemporary noted, 'the prices of property shot up, while scores of the people slept on the street'.[12] The local population was shocked by their appearance and mood; the refugees' sense of panic finally destroyed any lingering hope that the Polish army could withstand the Nazi invaders. For this reason the refugees received a chilly reception. As Poles they induced what one contemporary Lithuanian observer described as the 'warshawisation' of the city: 'Vilnius started to "warshawise", and city cafés became totally "warshawised"', by which he meant a transformation in the size of the city and a further growth of its ethnically Polish population.[13] By early December some 18,000 registered war refugees had arrived in Vilnius from Poland, among them 7,700 Poles, 6,860 Jews and 3,700 Lithuanians.[14] Adult men formed the highest proportion. But these numbers underestimated the real total. An early attempt by the Lithuanian government to count the refugees revealed that 'the majority of the registered are only those who are in need of relief. Those who can support themselves avoid the registration, since they are afraid that the registration lists could end up in the hands of the Soviets.'[15]

From the perspective of refugees and local Poles alike, the destruction of Poland and the subsequent transfer of the Vilnius region by the Soviets to Lithuania on 10 October 1939 did not amount to a permanent change but rather a temporary development that would be rectified by the Allies in due course. Certainly the refugees (not to mention most local Polish residents) did not welcome the Lithuanian army that marched into the city with great pomp and ceremony at the end of October.[16] In the mind of the refugees, Vilnius remained a little unoccupied island of Poland.[17] Local residents looked upon the symbols of Lithuanian power as unfamiliar and regarded as alien the Lithuanian language that was spoken by a minority of the city's population.[18]

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[11] Lietuvos centrinis valstybinis archyvas (Central State Archive of Lithuania, hereafter LCVA), Collection 923, Subsection 1, File 1033, 327.

[12] *Lietuvos žinios*, 9 Jan. 1940, 4. All translations of quotations from untranslated sources are by the author.

[13] Ibid.

[14] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 151.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Stanislawa Lewandowska, *Życie codzienne Wilna w latach II wojny światowej* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1997), 28–9.

[17] A Report of the Lithuanian Secret Service (Saugumas), 23 Feb. 1940, LCVA 383, S. 7, F. 2234, 69–75.

[18] According to the Polish census of 1931, 66 per cent of the city population consisted of Poles, 28 per cent were Jews, 4 per cent were Russians, 1 per cent were Lithuanians and 1 per cent were Belorussians. However, in the census the Polish authorities replaced the question of nationality with two separate questions, 'religion worshipped' and the 'language spoken at home'. Lithuanians and Jews protested that their actual numbers were misrepresented. *Drugi Powszechny Spis Ludności z dnia 9 XII 1931 roku* (Warsaw: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1931), 34.

An official count of refugees in February 1940 gave a total of around 27,000 registered refugees. Among them were 12,000 Poles and Belorussians, 11,000 Jews and 3,700 Lithuanians.[19] In all likelihood the total number exceeded 30,000, because some refugees still refused to register. The steady growth of the registered refugee population reflected government efforts to control refugees. Those who failed to register before the deadline of 20 January 1940 faced imprisonment for up to six months. The increasing numbers also implied a worsening of the refugees' material condition: only those registered could expect any help.[20] Most of the ethnic Lithuanian refugees were farmers, while Jews were largely merchants, artisans and professionals. Poles were reportedly 'for the most part former government officials with their family members, while some were public figures and people of the free professions'.[21]

### Relief as a state strategy?

After their sudden arrival, refugees encountered social and economic difficulties. With a pre-war population (in 1937) of about 210,000, Vilnius could not easily absorb the intake of 30,000 refugees, given the disruption of the local economy.[22] Although well-to-do refugees might survive on their savings, the majority faced serious deprivation because of the depreciation of the currency. Around 12,000 refugees depended totally on some kind of assistance.[23] In November 1939 a representative of the US Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) noted that half the 12,000 Jewish refugees were being fed in kitchens operated by various Jewish relief organisations. The refugees were also in dire need of winter clothing. 'Today one can practically identify the refugees in Vilna by the fact that they wear raincoats' he noted. He concluded that the local relief agencies would not be able to support the refugees without external funds.[24]

At first the relief efforts took on an informal and largely decentralised character. The Soviet military council of the Vilnius region attempted to house the first group of refugees in September, while local Jewish, Polish and Lithuanian organisations tried to provide emergency aid for their ethnic compatriots. The most efficient and largest of these organisations was the left-wing Polish Komitet pomocy uchodźców (Committee for Aid to Refugees) led by a well-respected lawyer, I. Zagórski.[25] This was the sole agency that took care of all refugees regardless of their ethnicity, and included representatives of all the city's major ethnic groups. In addition, several large international relief agencies, notably the US Red Cross, the JDC and Herbert

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[19] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 33.

[20] 'Karo atbėgėliams tvarkyti įstatymas', *Vyriausybės žinios* (Government News), 9 Dec. 1939.

[21] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 10, 37.

[22] Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 49. Around 10,000 inhabitants left Vilnius during the Soviet evacuation of the city in late October. LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 191.

[23] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 114.

[24] The number of 12,000 included Jewish refugees who did not register with the Lithuanian government. See LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 192.

[25] Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 50. An official report described Zagórski as a member of the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna) as well as a loyal supporter of the Lithuanian government. See LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 307.

Hoover's Commission for Polish Relief sent representatives to Vilnius to begin negotiations with the Lithuanian government.[26]

The Lithuanian government did not expect a humanitarian crisis on such a scale. Its main priority was to carry out a rapid administrative and economic integration of the newly acquired region. This was evident in the decision to move some government offices into Vilnius as early as October and November 1939 and in the establishment of local branches of Maistas and Pieno centras, the largest state food-processing companies, whose task was to ensure a steady supply of food for the local residents. Having seen the lengthy queues in front of the shops in Vilnius, the government introduced food rationing.[27] Notwithstanding the economic hardships, which did little to enhance its popularity, the Lithuanian government tried to gain the political loyalty of the local population during the first two months of its rule in Vilnius. Many Jews and Belorussians viewed the appearance of Lithuanian troops in the city as a welcome relief from the rigid policies pursued by the Soviets in autumn 1939. During the All Souls Day celebrations on November 1, Lithuanian troops even placed a guard of honour at the tomb of Jósef Pilsudski. According to one enthusiastic observer, this gesture was intended 'to win over Polish society'.[28]

The serious challenge posed by the refugee crisis was reflected in the creation of a department of war refugees in the ministry of the interior.[29] In mid-December the Lithuanian foreign ministry representative in Vilnius urged the government to assume full control of relief work as 'a pressing matter'. Against this background the government welcomed an offer made by the Red Cross, the JDC and the Hoover Commission to provide about US$100,000 per month, on condition that Lithuania added $50,000 from its own funds for the relief of refugees.[30]

What motives led the government to accept this offer of international aid? According to one official report, 'the government does not regard the proposal as a matter of funding refugee relief, but as a very useful economic deal, which might be compared to an export premium. Even the possibility of obtaining 7.2 million litai in hard currency annually would be of great significance for our economy.'[31] Furthermore, Lithuania's acceptance of the deal 'would be politically advantageous

[26] LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 307; LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 152. See also H. E. Wert, 'Flight and Survival: American and British Aid to Polish Refugees in the Fall of 1939', *Polish Review*, 34, 3 (1989), 227–48; Bradley E. Fels, '"Whatever Your Heart Dictates and Your Pocket Permits": Polish–American Aid to Polish Refugees during World War 2', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 22, 2 (2003), 3–30. Hoover had helped to provide similar support to Poland for economic and social reconstruction after the First World War. See Harold H. Fisher, *America and the New Poland* (London: Macmillan, 1928).

[27] Gediminas Vaskēla, *Lietuva 1939–1940 metais* (Lithuania, 1939–1940) (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2002), 63.

[28] Longin Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna lat wojnych i okupacji, 1939–1945* (Warsaw: Rytm, 1999), 4.

[29] Gintautas Surgailis, 'Lenkai, antrojo pasaulinio karo atbėgėliai Lietuvoje,1939 m. rugsėjis – 1940 m. birželis' (Polish refugees of the Second World War in Lithuania, September 1939–June 1940), in Garšva, K., ed., *Rytų Lietuva: istorija, kultūra, kalba* (East Lithuania: History, Culture, Language) (Vilnius: Mokslas, 1992), 107.

[30] LCVA 923, S. 1, F. 1065, 318.

[31] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 109.

for our international prestige and reputation'. Economic and political motives seemed to take precedence over humanitarian considerations.

The international credibility of Lithuania was soon put to the test when the existence of concentration camps for refugees came to light. The Lithuanian Refugee Law of 9 December 1939 envisaged these camps as a means of controlling 'refugees who are a danger to public order'.[32] The camps, such as that in Žagarė, became an embarrassment for the government. British radio reported that 'Lithuania is preparing to force all its Polish refugees into concentration camps', a view that the government found disturbing.[33] In April 1940 the Polish government-in-exile concluded that the Polish population in the Vilna region faced a 'tragic' situation. Max Huber, the secretary of the International Red Cross, even accused Lithuania of conducting a 'policy of terror against its refugees'.[34]

The Lithuanian Red Cross expressed its concern about the one-sided publications in the local press which devoted more attention to punitive aspects of the Refugee Law than to the government's relief efforts. It also criticised those who advocated giving ethnic Lithuanian refugees preferential treatment. I. Jurkūnas–Šeinius, its director, urged the government to bring into line those who advocated giving support exclusively to Lithuanian refugees, and advised that 'building refugee concentration camps should be halted for the time being'.[35] The government responded to these suggestions by curbing anti-Polish propaganda in the press and by relabelling the camps as 'forced labour camps'.[36] This shift in policy came about as a result of agreeing to international assistance, which was granted on condition that the Lithuanian government contributed $75,000 per month to the relief of refugees.[37]

By July 1940 the Lithuanian Red Cross, which had become the central agency administering refugee relief, had received 8 million litai ($1.36 million), of which the American JDC contributed around 3 million litai, the Hoover Committee 800,000 litai, and various British agencies (including the Polish Relief Fund and Save the Children Fund) 1.2 million litai. The Lithuanian government granted 2.5 million litai from public funds for the relief effort.[38]

Thus economic and international political considerations prompted the government to permit external agencies to participate in the relief of Polish refugees. The internationalisation of the relief effort earned Lithuania a degree of international credibility, albeit short-lived. It confirmed Lithuania's neutrality and helped to maintain an uneasy balance between its aggressive neighbours and Poland's allies in the West.

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[32] 'Karo atbėgėliams tvarkyti įstatymas' (Law of War Refugees), *Vyriausybės žinios*, 9 Dec. 1939.

[33] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 113–14.

[34] 'E. Turauskas, Pro memoria, 28 January 1940', LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 308; Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 125. Huber's career is traced in Yves Sandoz, 'Max Huber and the Red Cross', *European Journal of International Law*, 18, 1 (2007), 171–97.

[35] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 110, 116.

[36] LCVA 317, S.1, F. 2, 113–14. It is not clear whether this minor change of name assuaged the international critics.

[37] LCVA 923, S. 1, F. 1033, 287.

[38] LCVA 757, S. 9, F. 6, 68; Surgailis, 'Lenkai', 110; Vaskėla, *Lietuva*, 59, 70; Wert, 'Flight and Survival'.

### The deepening crisis: *newcomers*

For the Lithuanian political elite the refugee crisis constituted one element in a much broader project. Throughout the interwar years Lithuania's domestic politics and its external relations had been shaped and permeated by the threat from Poland. On the diplomatic level, this was expressed by the refusal to accept Poland's occupation of Vilnius. At a domestic level, it found expression in the struggle against the attempted Polonisation of Lithuania. Efforts were made to curb Polish cultural and linguistic influence throughout Lithuania and to destroy the social basis for Polish influence.[39] The fortunes of successive governments between the wars depended on how far they could mobilise public opinion against the Polish cause. The public campaign to regain Vilnius became a cornerstone of interwar policy, finding expression in the popular slogan 'mes be Vilniaus nenurimsim!' (We shall not rest until Vilnius is ours!)

There was thus little doubt that the government would attempt to integrate the Vilnius region into Lithuania. In terms of the refugee crisis, this meant distinguishing between potentially loyal citizens of the nation-state on the one hand and those who could not be integrated on the other. Only the former would be accepted as full citizens. Having arrived in Vilnius in November 1939, A. Merkys, the chief representative of the Lithuanian government noted that

We inherited a very difficult legacy. Here, in Vilnius, there is a mixture of everything: demoralised soldiers of the former Polish army, partisans, freed criminals, various refugees from everywhere without any future, adventurers, foreign agents.[40]

The editorial of the government daily *Lietuvos žinios* (Lithuanian News) offered a similar assessment and proposed a programme of action:

Eventually we need to clarify who is a local resident and who is a stranger. We have to treat differently the locals whose biographies will need to be checked by the state and the newcomers, namely the war refugees, imported from the Polish interior . . . The people of this kind have to be . . . isolated from local life . . . because they are a foreign element that might be very dangerous.[41]

The public campaign went hand in hand with the rapid Lithuanisation of Vilnius. Lithuanian became the sole official language. Polish social and educational institutions were closed down, including Stepan Bator University, where several hundred Polish professors and staff lost their jobs. Polish street and shop signs were removed and property requisitioned by the Lithuanian government.[42] The municipal police force was disbanded and Polish officials were replaced by ethnic Lithuanians. Particularly at risk were those former Polish officials who had settled in Vilnius following Żeligowski's coup in October 1920. They became a target of the Lithuanian press,

[39] In 1919 large landlords, most of them Polish-speakers, constituted only 1 per cent of the total population in Lithuania but owned 26 per cent of land. Following the land reforms of 1922–6, three-quarters of their estates were transferred to the peasantry, with minimal compensation to the landlords. Gediminas Vaškėla, 'The Land Reform of 1919–1940: Lithuania and the Countries of East and Central Europe', *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 1 (1996), 116–32; Eidintas and Žalys, *Lithuania in European Politics*, 45–9.
[40] *Lietuvos žinios*, 2 Nov. 1939, 1.
[41] Ibid., 3 Nov. 1939, 2.
[42] Lewandowska, *Życie*, 39–41.

exhilarated by the takeover of Vilnius. As *Lietuvos žinios* wrote, 'it is not only refugees who create a difficult problem. Vilnius has so many so-called newcomers, who, according to Lithuanian law, are foreigners.'[43]

It did not take long for the government to impose restrictions on Poles who had settled in the Vilnius region between 1920 and 1939. Officially these settlers were now described as *ateiviai*, or 'newcomers'. The law of 20 March 1940 denied them Lithuanian citizenship. They were obliged to register as 'war refugees', but, unlike others in this category, they were debarred from receiving official assistance. Furthermore, they could not travel freely, buy property, work (except in agriculture and forest industry) or join political organisations.[44] According to the Lithuanian Red Cross, in February 1940 these 'newcomers' numbered around 150,000 in the Vilnius region, including 83,000 in Vilnius itself.[45] Around two-fifths were workers, one-quarter were former Polish government officials and members of the free professions, while the remainder were ex-Polish railway employees, teachers, postal workers and pensioners.[46] The government dismissed approximately 7,000 former state employees, while 12,000 lost their jobs 'for various reasons'. On the eve of the Soviet annexation of Lithuania, Vilnius alone was home to around 100,000 'newcomers', including 85,000 Poles, 10,000 Jews, and 5,000 Belorussians and Russians.[47]

According to international law, the imposition of the above disabilities on people who had resided for more than ten years in the same location constituted an illegal act. But the government took no notice. A confidential report prepared by the Lithuanian Red Cross claimed that

The sudden addition [of 100,000 'newcomers'] to our somewhat disloyal Poles or the Polonized [Lithuanians] is a heavy burden to Lithuania. If Lithuania were a larger, richer and stronger state, then it could absorb this element, which is unpleasant, hungry, totally unproductive and unstable. . . . They are a well-known and absolutely harmful element, which the Lithuanian nation should avoid as much as it can.[48]

Evidently the government believed the 'newcomers' to be a much more serious danger than the war refugees. Whereas it perceived the latter as unorganised, homeless and rootless victims of war, the former constituted a 'rooted' and tightly knit community which included members of the Polish intelligentsia known for their political disloyalty to Lithuania. According to a secret report, 'the Polish newcomers already feel at home here. Many of them believe that they are on a great mission on Poland's behalf.'[49]

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[43] *Lietuvos žinios*, 13 Dec. 1939, 6.
[44] 'Karo pabėgėlių komisaro įstatymas', LCVA 317, S. 1. F. 10, 16.
[45] LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 299; LCVA 379, S. 1, F. 293, 390.
[46] The data includes all family members. See 'The Problem of the Newcomers of the Vilnius Region: What Is To Be Done by Lithuania? 5 February 1940', LCVA 379, S. 1, F. 293, 363–64.
[47] Surgailis, 'Lenkai',113; LCVA 757, S. 9, F. 5, 36–7; 'Pro memoria, 20 March 1940', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 13.
[48] LCVA 379, S. 1, F. 293, 390.
[49] Ibid., 373.

In accordance with this interpretation the Lithuanian secret service (Saugumas) closely followed the political mood and activities of the Poles in Vilnius. It identified four major political groupings. The first group – the largest – included people who had no serious ties with the former Polish state. They were represented by such newspapers as *Gazeta codzienna* (10,000 subscribers) and *Nowe słowo rolnicze* (12,000). The secret police regarded these as 'the central objective of our policy'. The second, smaller group, represented by *Kurjer wilenski*, included former Polish university teachers and government officials. They were 'politically unreliable'. The 'newcomers' constituted a third grouping, 'politically the most disloyal to Lithuania'. Saugumas believed that 'under certain conditions this element can form itself into an anti-Lithuanian military organisation. Therefore they must be controlled not by political, but by police means.' The last and smallest group was that of the Polish war refugees, who 'are not a political object and can be dealt with solely by technical and police means'.[50]

Vilnius's political life in early 1940 included a small group formed around Professor Michał Römer, who was well known for his loyalty to the Lithuanian state as well as his sympathies towards Lithuania's Polish population. He convened a small discussion club of intellectuals, including some old Vilnius autonomists (*krajowcy*) and Lithuanian intellectuals (Krėvė-Mickevičius, Jurgutis, and Veleckas). They argued that local Poles had a separate local identity (*tutejszosc*) and that 'the aim of state policy should not be segregation along ethnic lines but rather to give a chance for all to become Lithuanians in the civic sense of the word'. This group had a very limited popular following and the government took no serious notice of their proposals to tackle the refugee crisis by a more liberal approach.[51]

By the beginning of 1940 the material condition of the 'newcomers' had become critical. Having lost their jobs and property and exhausted their savings, they turned increasingly to various relief agencies. According to the Lithuanian Red Cross,

> The condition of the 'newcomers' is far more critical than that of the Polish war refugees ... More than 65,000 of the 'newcomers' need food, housing, clothing or medical care. Belorussians and Russians fare no better. Jewish refugees are doing somewhat better since they had worked as artisans and traders, not as state officials ... The Jews also receive ... much more help from abroad. [52]

The Lithuanian Red Cross tried to help the 'newcomers' through a special Supervisory Committee for the Polish Newcomers which received most of its funds from various British relief agencies and from the Polish government-in-exile via the Hoover Committee. In total, the committee received 1.5 million litai ($255,000): 500,000 litai from the Lithuanian Red Cross, 800,000 litai from the Hoover Commission, and 200,000 litai from the UK Polish Relief Fund.[53] Even so,

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[50] 'V. Čečeta. Pro memoria. 13 April, 1940', LCVA 393, S. 11, F. 1033, 235–6.

[51] Ibid., 237. On Vilnius' autonomists before 1939 see Rimantas Miknys, *Lietuvos demokratų partija 1902–1915 metais* (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 1995).

[52] 'Lenkų ateivių būklė. 12 July 1940', LCVA 379, S. 1, F. 293, 358.

[53] 'Atbėgėliams šelpti komiteto apyskaita, June 1940', ibid., 433.

the relief effort suffered from a shortage of funds: Jurkūnas-Šeinius warned that at least 300,000 litai a month were needed to avoid a worsening of the crisis.[54]

Lithuania's decision to segregate and disenfranchise the long-term Polish residents in the Vilnius region greatly inflamed the refugee crisis. By 1940 Lithuania was home to more than 100,000 refugees. For a small state with a fragile economy this was a heavy burden. Furthermore, the government's decision to remove their citizenship rights and social security was a hostile act that only served to foster their mistrust and political disloyalty. This, in turn, allowed local right-wing extremists to accuse the government of insufficient energy in dealing with the Poles in the Vilnius region.

### Ethnic conflict and refugee relief

After October 1939, the Polish–Lithuanian ethnic conflict in the Vilnius region was transformed from an interstate and minority–majority conflict into a clash between the Lithuanian state and the Polish 'newcomers' and war refugees. The state gave the refugee crisis a clear ethnic undertone: the Poles were targeted as a disloyal element, while the Jewish refugees were seen as politically 'neutral'.

Without a doubt Lithuanian public opinion played an important part in pouring oil on the fire and bringing about a gradual change in official policy. The government found it increasingly difficult to control radical voices. Jurkūnas-Šeinius, the director of the Lithuanian Red Cross, pointed out that many Lithuanian officials who moved from Kaunas into the Vilnius region in 1939 lacked any understanding of its multicultural character. They were inclined to embrace radical slogans and policies.[55]

The most radical attack against the local Poles, refugees included, came from Lithuanian nationalists. As early as October 1939, the newspaper *Lietuvos aidas* (Lithuania's Echo) warned that 'Vilnius's Poles had already received orders "from the top" and they hope according to the old Klaipėda recipe to organise a separate Polish community in Lithuania'.[56] Public organisations such as the Society of the First Lithuanian Army Volunteers openly urged the government to incarcerate refugees in labour camps or to employ them on public works.[57] The most vehement view was expressed by right-wing youths. The newly reopened Vilnius University became a hotbed of radical student societies such as Ramovė, Neo Lithuania and Geležinis vilkas (Iron Wolf), which conducted 'patriotic' activity designed 'to spread Lithuanianness in those areas most damaged by the propaganda of the occupiers'.[58] On 7 April 1940 these societies staged a riot and carried out attacks on Poles in city cafes and streets.[59] Even the moderate Lithuanian social democrat Steponas Kairys

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[54] Ibid., 360.
[55] 'Dar ir dar dėl nusiskundimų, 15 January 1940', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 119–23.
[56] *Lietuvos aidas*, 11 Oct. 1939; Lewandowska, *Życie*, 34.
[57] LCVA 923, S. 1, F. 1032, 22. Stanislawa Lewandowska claims that 'from the very beginning Lithuanians adopted a negative attitude towards refugees'. Lewandowska, *Życie*, 34.
[58] Ramovė (literally 'imperturbability') is a pagan place of worship.
[59] Žepkaitė, 115, quotes secret data collected by the Lithuanian Secret Police. See LCVA 378, S. 10, F. 225, 428, 462, 479.

wrote of the refugees that 'this element, having lost its equilibrium, is irreparably terrorist [*diversiškas*]. At the current time it is ready to take any risks.'[60]

Although the government refused to cave in to extremist opinion, it was difficult to ignore the calls to Lithuanise. The tensions were most evident in the state's efforts to organise relief work by giving preference to those agencies that seemed to be politically most loyal and putting pressure on those seeking to pursue a more independent-minded agenda. The main attack came against the Polski komitet ofiarów wojny (Polish War Victim Relief Committee), which included several leading Polish intellectuals, such as Professors Pelczar and Zwierzchowski, and had twenty-five branches in the Vilnius region. One official observed that 'in [the Polish Committee] there are people who aim not only to help the needy, but also . . . to conduct Polish propaganda in order to keep all the Poles together and . . . to strengthen their spirit'. The government tried to take control of its administration and funding by including a number of pro-Lithuanian officials in its structure, but the Polish Committee refused to accept them and protested not only to the central authorities in Kaunas but also to international bodies. Eventually the government agreed not to close it down, but reduced the number of local branches and insisted on taking full control of its finances.[61] Official support was given instead to the aforementioned Komitet pomocy uchodźców, run by the liberals Zagórski and Pietrusiewicz who (as one official put it) 'seemed to be totally loyal people'.[62]

The second target of the state's attempt to take full control of relief was the Polish Red Cross in Vilnius. This was one of the oldest institutions in the city involved in refugee relief work. Polish activists in the city lobbied the international relief agencies to give the Polish Red Cross full responsibility over the ethnically Polish refugees, but the Lithuanian government refused to accept this proposal, preferring instead to concentrate relief efforts in the hands of the Lithuanian Red Cross. Eventually the Polish community was forced to accept the closure both of the Polish Red Cross and the Polski komitet ofiarów wojny.[63]

Understandably, in the minds of local Poles the legacy of the interwar conflict remained very much alive. According to Lewandowska, 'the Poles did not understand the intentions of the new government and viewed it with . . . disdain'.[64] On 31 October 1939 Vilnius witnessed street riots involving refugees. Lithuanian police reported that Jewish food stores had been sacked by a hungry mob; twenty-three people were wounded and three arrested. This was described as a full scale anti-Jewish pogrom. According to one Polish observer, it was prompted by the desire of Poles to seek revenge against pro-Soviet Jews. Another explanation is that many local Jews had welcomed the Lithuanian takeover, which produced anger among the Poles. The

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[60] *Mintis* (Thought), November 1939, No. 10, 333.
[61] 'Komitet Polski bandymai kištis į lenkų pabėgėlių šelpimo darbą. 13 March 1940', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 18–19.
[62] 'Pabėgėlių šelpimo reikalai Vilniuje. 6 December 1939', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 152.
[63] LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 118.
[64] Lewandowska, *Życie,* 31.

police reacted sharply and forcibly dispersed those Poles who gathered the following day to commemorate All Soul's Day in order to march to the tomb of Pilsudski.[65]

One Polish observer summed up the political situation in Vilnius as follows: 'Lithuanians do not feel strong enough to conduct a decisive policy in Wilna, but at the same time they feel uncomfortable about the strongly patriotic mood of the Polish city populace.'[66] Some forty Polish organisations worked on behalf of Polish interests in Vilnius. They included organisations such as Koła pułkowe (Regimental Circles), Komisariat rządu (Government Council), Związek bojowników niepodległości (Union of Independence Fighters) and many others, covering the entire spectrum of interwar Polish politics. At least one of these, the socialist Wolność (Freedom) run by Waclaw Zagórski, was formed entirely of Polish refugees from central Poland.[67]

Refugees were actively recruited by Vilnius-based Poles, who regarded them as a reliable and politically loyal element that had nothing to lose. Polish radicals, such as Jastreżembski, Stankiewicz and others, conducted a propaganda campaign among the refugees and spoke on their behalf. In January and February 1940, Saugumas arrested 168 members of the semi-military Polish Fighting Organisation (Organizacija Polska Wojskowa), but this formed only part of the Polish resistance to Lithuania. The PFO was well organised, with separate sections devoted to intelligence, surveillance, recruitment, radio contacts and technical support. The Lithuanian historian Žepkaitė has claimed that it had ties with the Polish government-in-exile in Britain and France.[68]

Thus between November 1939 and January 1940 official policy towards the refugees hardened. It began to shift from broadly humanitarian assistance to a policy of stricter control and 'security'. Although the government tried to steer a middle way between a radicalised Lithuanian public and an increasingly angry Polish population, its policy towards the Vilnius Poles, refugees included, became increasingly repressive. This change was reflected in the replacement of Antanas Merkys by Kazys Bizauskas as the government's chief representative in Vilnius at the end of November 1939.[69] The hardening of Lithuanian policy was also inspired by pressure from Nazi Germany, which became increasingly hostile to the pro-Polish underground movement in Vilnius. The Nazi governor of East Prussia, Erich Koch, expressed his displeasure at the Polish organisations in Vilnius, which were also active in occupied Poland.[70]

Lithuania sought to obtain international support from the Western allies for its tough policy. Its diplomats lobbied embassies and international relief agencies in order to put pressure on the Polish government-in-exile and the Polish underground in Vilnius. A spokesman for the Polish Relief fund, H. F. Anderson, addressing a meeting of Polish refugee journalists and intellectuals, urged them 'to stop any activities that

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[65] Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna*, 52–3.
[66] *Armia Krajowa w dokumentach, 1939–1945* (London, 1970), I, 68.
[67] Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna*, 74.
[68] Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 114. Among those arrested were eleven Polish war refugees and more than forty 'newcomers'.
[69] Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna*, 55.
[70] Žepkaitė, *Atkarpa*, 119; LCVA 383, S. 7, F. 2244, 11–12.

could be harmful to the Lithuanians. The sole aim of the refugees should be to survive and find shelter.'[71] He claimed British support for Lithuania's refugee policy on the grounds that the Kaunas government sought primarily to alleviate the plight of the refugees. A Lithuanian diplomat based in London also reported that Britain supported Lithuania's efforts to strengthen its position in the Vilnius region.[72] Anderson urged Lithuania to use refugees as cheap labour in public works programmes. In a meeting with A. Trimakas, a Lithuanian representative in Vilnius, he noted that 'this would be useful to Lithuania because you can build more good roads using their cheap labour, while the "newcomers" will be kept busy and quiet and will earn some cash for their tobacco'. He even offered to provide food for the forced labourers using funds of the Polish Relief Fund so long as Lithuania supplied tools and technical equipment.[73] In due course the government introduced a forced labour scheme. A labour camp was established in Pabradė, north of Vilnius, housing refugees who had been arrested or deported from Vilnius for their political activities. In Žagarė, too, thousands of refugees were put to work digging dolomite, clearing stones from fields and repairing roads. They were also graciously 'loaned' to the other Baltic states; Estonia, for instance, received 1,500 refugees from Vilnius for agricultural work.[74]

### The end of the crisis

The government's policy towards refugees including 'newcomers', besides having as its main aim the wish 'to neutralise refugees politically and to reduce the economic costs of their support', was also designed to reduce their numbers.[75] The government attempted to achieve this by their repatriation, emigration and systemic transfer from Vilnius to the surrounding province. To be sure, Vilnius was overcrowded with refugees, making relief work difficult, while living costs were lower in the Lithuanian countryside. The unemployment rate was high and refugees were expected to find better employment opportunities outside the city. The dispersion of the 'newcomers' was also regarded as a means to improve 'security'.[76] Ultimately the government established more than fifty refugee camps to which refugees were transferred. Žagarė alone housed 2,000 refugees. The transfers started in the middle of March 1940. Those who refused forfeited any support from the Lithuanian Red Cross and could be jailed for up to six months.[77] Even so, the forcible relocation had only limited success, in that only 5,200 refugees had been moved to the camps by June.[78]

Not surprisingly, the policy provoked a harsh reaction from the refugees as well as from the international press. Most refugees tried to evade the round-up by hiding or changing their place of residence. Staying in the city at least provided a modicum

[71] 'Trimako pasikalbėjimas su Linskiu, 7 February 1940', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 82.
[72] LCVA 383, S. 7, F. 188, 532.
[73] 'Pro memoria: Trimako pasikalbėjimas su Andersonu, 2 March 1940', LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 242.
[74] Surgailis, 'Lenkai', 108, 112.
[75] LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 288.
[76] 'Pabėgėlių dislokacijos klausimu, 20 March 1940', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 13.
[77] Surgailis, 'Lenkai', 113–14.
[78] LCVA 757, S. 9, F. 5, 242.

of anonymity and freedom as well as strengthening a sense of community. Thus the refugees tried to circumvent the repressive government measures designed to create a controlled contingent of purely passive recipients of relief.

Trying to reduce further the number of refugees, Lithuania decided in March 1940 to free interned soldiers who were residents of the Vilnius region and to return to the USSR and Germany those who had lived in those countries before the war. This repatriation was co-ordinated with the Western powers, which agreed in principle but in practice would repatriate only those who wished to leave. Britain and France objected to the return of those who could be used by the Wehrmacht as soldiers or forced labourers. Nevertheless, Lithuania went ahead and shipped to Germany about 5,000 refugees, including 1,500 internees. The government also tried to return Jews to Nazi-occupied Poland, but the German representative in Kaunas replied that their return 'kommt nicht in Frage'. The Soviet Union accepted about 3,000 refugees and internees. Finally, Lithuania tried to convince the United States, Sweden, Norway and Argentina to accept some of its refugees, but these countries turned down the offer, pointing to existing immigration restrictions.[79]

The government also promoted the voluntary emigration of the refugees by providing them with necessary visas. Some Jews managed to leave Lithuania via Latvia and Scandinavia for the West or Palestine. For the majority of the Polish refugees, however, travel through Scandinavia became impossible because the Scandinavian countries agreed to a German request not to allow their transfer to the West.[80] On 8 May 1940 the pro-government *Lietuvos žinios* reported that 'there are no more refugees in Vilnius . . . Some left for the provinces, others were repatriated, while others have gone to Estonia.'

The final chapter of the refugee crisis took place with the Soviet occupation of Lithuania on 15 June 1940. Many refugees received permission to return to Vilnius, while others moved to the Soviet interior. According to the new refugee registration by the Soviet Lithuanian government, 18,000 refugees still remained in Lithuania. Most of these were offered Soviet citizenship; those who refused for various reasons were arrested and deported.[81] The Soviet authorities continued to select and sift the refugees by refusing citizenship to those deemed to be 'class enemies'. Thus, ethnicity gave way to class as a means of drawing distinctions between citizens and non-citizens.

## Conclusion

The influx of refugees from Poland into Lithuania in 1939 created a humanitarian crisis which coincided with other dramatic developments such as the loss of Memel (Klaipėda) in March 1939 and the unexpected acquisition of the Vilnius region in October 1939. The refugee crisis put a heavy burden on Lithuania that could be alleviated only with foreign help. By making the crisis an international issue, Lithuania tried to resolve not only the humanitarian problem, but also to gain international

[79] 'Pro memoria: internuotųjų ir pabėgėlių reikalu. 29 March 1940', LCVA 393, S. 1, F. 1033, 282–83.
[80] 'Pro memoria, 7 February 1940', LCVA 317, S. 1, F. 2, 83.
[81] Surgailis, 'Lenkai', 114–15.

credibility and economic advantage. The Lithuanian government saw refugee relief as a profitable and risk-free venture that could improve the struggling national economy.

However, refugee relief was of only secondary importance to the Lithuanian government, whose priority was to incorporate and Lithuanise the Vilnius region. Social and cultural integration entailed the de-Polonisation of an ethnically heterogeneous territory. The old Polish–Lithuanian ethnic conflict provided an additional dimension to the refugee crisis in so far as refugees and the largest ethnic minority, the Poles, were regarded as people from a historically alien state. The government's decision to isolate those who came to Lithuania between 1920 and 1939 (the so-called 'newcomers') greatly exacerbated the refugee crisis. It used the arrival of war refugees to settle political scores with the local Poles. In this way the refugee crisis became a political instrument for staging ethnic conflict. More than 83,000 became 'newcomers' after their residence and political rights were removed in the Vilnius region in March 1940. By this means the government virtually transformed a large proportion of the local population into refugees.

Against this background the Lithuanian government singled out the refugees of Polish ethnicity as an 'uprooted', 'disloyal' and 'unreliable' element that had to be 'rooted down': registered, controlled, filtered, isolated, forcibly employed and either resettled or repatriated. The mass uprooting of the population further fostered discontent and political activism among them, leading the authorities to adopt an even more repressive policy. Thus between December 1939 and May 1940 Lithuania pursued a radical policy whose purpose was to contain, neutralise and repatriate the refugees.

If initially refugee relief was a matter of international reputation, in due course state-led humanitarian intervention was used largely as a smokescreen for mass uprooting of the civilian population perceived as politically disloyal. The refugees' political loyalties were verified and tested by state-controlled relief agencies led by the Lithuanian Red Cross. The centralisation and bureaucratisation of relief were seen as prerequisites that could help to control the refugees and increase security. Independent relief work was seen as a potential danger to the state. Nevertheless, it was more tolerated in respect of the Jewish refugees, who were largely perceived as politically neutral, unlike the Poles.

Meanwhile, the Polish refugees as well as most of the indigenous Poles in the region refused to recognise the new political reality. In their eyes, Lithuania's presence in Vilnius was only a temporary episode brought about by the war and would be rectified by the victory of the Western Allies. Local Polish anti-government radicals spoke and acted on behalf of Polish refugees and tried to recruit them into their secret organisations. The Polish government-in-exile eagerly conducted anti-Lithuanian propaganda both internationally and locally. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian radical right exerted pressure on the government, calling for open attacks against the 'disloyal' Polish element in the region. In this situation, the scope for the government's options narrowed. Overall, the refugee crisis weakened the state politically and economically.

The collapse of independent Lithuania in June 1940 alleviated the refugee crisis. By this time thousands of them had been repatriated or deported to the Soviet Union and Germany, while others left for the West or were granted Soviet citizenship. As a result

of changes brought about by the Second World War, the Vilnius region gradually became absorbed into Lithuania. However, this process took place at great cost. The convergence of the refugee crisis and the ethnic conflict in 1939–40 provided the backdrop to the subsequent expulsion of Poles from Soviet-occupied Lithuania in 1945–6. Despite the fact that their expulsion formed only part of the broader process of Soviet postwar redrawing of eastern Europe, the Soviet Lithuanian government was able to achieve what the interwar state failed to do – to create an ethnically more homogenous Lithuania.