

*The Collective Memory and its Transformations:
The Great War and the Battle for Independence in
Lithuania (1914–1920)*

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Abstract. The author aims to discuss three topics using the memory research method. The first part discusses construction of the imagined community and collective memory of 19th century Lithuanian intellectuals in a country where education in the national language, and the printing of books and papers, were banned. The second part of the article presents the impact of the Great War and the struggle for independence on collective memory as revealed in memoirs written in the 1914–1940 period by fighters on the front lines, refugees, intellectuals, and people in the occupied country. The third part discusses the extinction of the Great War and the battle for independence from collective memory as a natural and specially constructed phenomenon, caused by the Soviet regime.

Keywords: history, imagined community, collective memory, the Great War, memoirs, censorship

Introduction

“Those guns may have fallen silent eighty years ago, but their echoes neither die nor even fade away.” These words, by poet Andrew Motion (1998: 38), are often used to begin books dedicated to the memory of the Great War and to stress the extraordinary endurance of this War in public memory. The Great War had a crucial impact on the Western World, drastically changing the map not of Western, but Eastern Europe, where four big multinational empires collapsed and several new national states emerged in the form of republics. In contrast to Western Europe, memory of this historical event hasn't been so long-lasting in Eastern Europe. On the Western Front there were more educated young people who had enough time to write in the trenches, stuck as they were for more than three years in almost the same place. They were able to perceive not only how this was a new kind of war (i.e. the first modern, technical war) but also how the ‘spiritual mechanism’ of war itself revealed its false ideology, absurdity and everlasting psychological trauma caused not only by its shocking reality but also through the perception that the heroism of the war had collapsed forever. The

second big difference is related to the historical events of the second half of the 20th century, which were again more drastic for Eastern Europe (for example the advent of the iron curtain).

The commemoration of the centenary of the Great War (2014–2018) was widely celebrated around the world. In Lithuania historians published several books some of which were in English (Safronovas 2018; Balkelis 2018), but fiction and memoirs on the subject were reviewed in only two articles (Jokūbauskas 2016; Žmuida 2017).

The concept of collective memory, introduced by Maurice Halbwachs soon after the Great War, developed long afterwards in the 1980s. Other related names are Pierre Nora, for his study of memory sites, and Jan and Aleida Assmann, who successfully established the discipline of the ‘anthropology of remembrance’, which connects literary studies with historical science, anthropology, psychology, theology, and neuroscience (developed in works by Astrida Erll, Ansgar Nünning, Bred Wagoner, Ann Rigney, Andreas Huyssen, and others). The Great War and the literature of the Great War are handy for memory research.¹ The literature of the Lost Generation is a medium of collective memory, expressed by specific modes of narrating (Erll 2004).

Since the content of memory does not coincide with the facts and knowledge of history, it is impossible, in our view, when studying the ‘fate’ of a particular memory (in this case related to the Great War), to do without the term ‘imagined community’, introduced by Benedict Andersen. Therefore, in this work, we will first focus on the formation of an imagined community. Only an imagined community is capable of ‘remembering’ a country’s history, defining its identity, and finally maturing as a political nation, capable of making political demands and actively participating in history.

However, from the perspective of the current century, it is obvious that communicative memory is no longer configurable, so we will focus solely on cultural memory and cultural policy. Since it isn’t possible to provide an overview of all forms of cultural memory, we intend to present only memoirs from participants in the Great War and the events relating to it.

In researching the literature of the Great War, Erll distinguishes “four modes of literary remembering: the experiential, the monumental, the antagonistic and the reflexive mode” (Erll 2009: 40). As memoirs are a semi-fictional, semi-documentary narrative this division suits him only in part. Notwithstanding, it can be argued that memoirs belong to the first type of relationship with memory, the experiential mode, as they are based on authentic experiences.

¹ See Winter 2006, Dodman 2015, Krockel 2011, Rigney 2010, Mosse 1990, Nünning & Erll 2005, and others.

Constructing the imagined community

While Anderson associates the birth of national consciousness with the Reformation and the invention of book printing, the smaller nations, especially those that remained Catholic (and continued to use Latin), were more influenced (and sensitive to nationalism) by another cultural revolution, i.e. Ossianism. James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1762–1765) shocked the literary world with the stunning idea of searching for fascinating mythology in the folk art of every nation (Gaskill 2004: VIII). The works by Johann Gottfried Herder gave a theoretical background from which to evaluate folk art and the uniqueness of national language and to search for a national spirit, hidden in old manuscripts, folk tales, and beliefs. In his two-volume publication, *Folk Songs* (*Volkslieder*, 1778–1779), Herder included several Lithuanian folk songs, emphasising their archaic and musical nature. The ideas of Herder and the works of Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) and others inspired Romanticism in Europe.

Polish Romanticism grew and matured in Vilnius, that is, in that community of intellectual young people who considered themselves Lithuanian but spoke Polish, the cultural language of the former Polish–Lithuanian commonwealth. The most famous of them was Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), who used motifs of the history, mythology, and folklore of ancient Lithuania. At the beginning of the 19th century, students and intellectuals created an imaginary community connected by new ideas. However, the problem was that the majority of the population spoke Lithuanian, and this fact was difficult to reconcile with the most important ideas of nationalism. At the same time, Lithuanian-speaking intellectuals began to express themselves. They could directly implement the requirements of nationalism, despite it being more difficult for them to create their own imagined community: they didn't have a periodical (communicated by letters), it was more difficult to obtain higher education, and they did not have a sufficient circle of readers. However, in the first three decades of the 19th century, several theoretical works were written, folk song collections were released, and even the first history of Lithuania was written in Lithuanian, by Simonas Daukantas (1776–1864), who later became the flagman of Lithuanian nationalism (Baár 2010:14). So, there were two imagined communities in Lithuania in the first half of the 19th century that coexisted, sometimes in tension but generally in fruitful cooperation, until their natural maturity was disrupted by political repression. After several major political cases against university students (one of them, Mickiewicz, was sent to Russia in 1824 without the right to return to his homeland), there were massive political uprisings (in 1831 and 1863) that sought to restore the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Russian government had to use large forces of the regular army to quell the uprising. This was followed by repression, deportations to Siberia, confiscation

of manors, and the eviction of entire Russian villages to Lithuania. The Russian government sought to dismantle imagined communities, to tear Lithuanians away from Polish and Catholicism, and therefore closed the University of Vilnius in 1832, banned periodicals in Polish, banned the Latin alphabet in 1864, and started a policy of russification. These drastic means suppressed Lithuanian culture, which could only barely exist as an underground.

From then on the whole country was officially called the North-West Region, to erase even the name Lithuania from people's minds and to rewrite collective memory. Educated Lithuanians were forbidden from working in their native country. School books and other books in Lithuanian could only be printed using the Cyrillic alphabet. So, in the middle of the 19th century, Lithuanian culture found itself probably in the most difficult situation in Europe.

Nevertheless, the harsh constraints on the whole nation did not prevent the formation of an imagined community. The first such community was organised by Bishop Motiejus Valančius (1801–1867). Valančius first founded a temperance movement and later started organising the printing of Lithuanian books abroad, as well as an illegal distribution network. This worked for several decades and a community of Catholic awareness developed in the churches and secret private rural schools. The absence of a Lithuanian gymnasium and high schools was an obstacle to the creation of an intellectual society, but some of them were created abroad among Lithuanian students. The foundation for collective memory had to be the knowledge of the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The turning point became the newspaper *Auszra* (Aurora), founded in 1883. This first periodical brought together Lithuanian intellectuals from outside the Russian Empire and abroad. Hroch distinguishes three stages typical of most national movements as they prepare the nation for statehood: the research period; the period of national agitation; the period of mass development (Hroch 2003:10). In the first period, Lithuanian intellectuals were obsessed with the ideas of historicism. They returned to Daukantas and tried to rehabilitate him: they spread his ideas, paid a lot of attention to paganism and theories of Lithuanian origin. However, these specific studies were difficult to comprehend and of little interest to the average reader. There was a definite need for a new, interesting cultural memory text written in clear language. This was first understood by Maironis (1862–1932), who was soon destined to become a national poet. Using the material of Daukantas and Valančius he wrote a new history of Lithuania (published in 1891) in which he emphasises the importance of culture for the nation. He proclaimed that Lithuanians, as a nation, had not yet realised themselves in history, but that they would do so in the future, and do it by culture. He extended the thread of history up to his

lifetime, making a completely new model of Lithuanian history that stated the history of the nation does not coincide with the history of statehood, that a nation can live and create without a state for a while until better times come again. These new historical ideas were also popularised by the same Maironis in his verses. Thus, Maironis, as the national bard, contributed greatly to all stages of nationalism, creating collective memory and transforming his nation into the imagined community. The 1904 abolition of the ban on printing in the Latin alphabet was a great cultural victory for Lithuanians. The congress of representatives of all regions of Lithuania, in Vilnius in 1905 (later named the Great Seimas), showed that the nation was already politically mature (Motieka 2005: 21). Most representatives were of peasant origin. During this short period of liberalisation of the tsarist regime, it was possible to make bold and radical demands formulated by Congress. However, the tsar was not inclined to liberal reforms, and immediately after the revolutionary unrest of 1905–1907 reaction forces intensified. This situation did not change and the political aspirations, which could no longer be formulated as requirements, remained the same until the Great War.

The Great War in memoirs

Lithuania found itself in the Great War zone from the first days and stayed there until the last. There was no family whose life would not be disturbed by the war. When the Germans occupied Lithuania, “we all became immigrants in our country”, stated Martynas Yčas (Yčas 1991: 165)². Thousands of Lithuanians were killed, thousands were taken prisoner by the Germans, where they spent all three years of the war; thousands were moved deep inside Russia; the majority, of course, remained in occupied territory. These events provide many perspectives on war.

Tens of thousands of Lithuanians took part in the Great War. Most of them fought on the side of Tsarist Russia, and to a lesser extent on the Prussian side. Most Lithuanians died in the first years of the war, when the Germans surrounded and destroyed entire battalions at the Battle of Grunwald (August 27–30, 1914), near the lakes of Masuria (February 1915), and when Kaunas Fortress was seized (August, 1915). During this period the whole country was occupied by the Germans.

Because it is not possible to present the memories of all participants on the war front, we want to present three of the most valuable books. Two of them were written by Tsarist army officers Aleksandras Uspenskis (1872–1951) and

² All the quoted excerpts from Lithuanian works were translated by the author.

Teodoras Reinhardas (1883–1943), and one by Jurgis F. Jonaitis (1880–1963), an American Lithuanian who fought on the Western Front.

A citizen of the Republic of Lithuania during the interwar period and officer in the Lithuanian army, Russian Aleksandras Uspenskis, a graduate of the Seminary of Priests (Orthodox) in Vilnius, later volunteer as an officer in the tsarist army. Uspenskis left an exclusive testimony of the first battles on the Eastern Front. He and his company, formed in Vilnius, achieved an impressive victory at Gumbine and marched with the first Russian army to Königsberg. But when the balance of power changed, and reinforcements and supplies dried up, the winners were left to be destroyed, initially in the northern part of East Prussia and then in the forests of Augustów. In his memoir, Colonel Uspensky opens up as an infinitely talented narrator who has taken over the traditions of great Russian prose. His memoirs, written in Russian and immediately translated into Lithuanian, are characterised by warm bright language and interesting descriptions of events. “Not Marna’s miracle, not the genius of the Allied warlords, but the incomparable sacrifice of the Russian soldiers saved Paris and the whole of France then”, comments Uspenskis (Uspenskis 1935: 109) on the first events of the war. The type of narration brings the book closer to the genre of novel, although the author himself called them memories. Here imaginary language dominates, the theme of love is important, love of his homeland Russia, his family left in Vilnius, fidelity to his religion and human ideals.

Sensitive experiences of each soldier’s death, sober assessment of the situation and the soldiers’ responsibilities to the homeland, constantly accompanied by detailed reflections on human nature and the ordeal of humanity in the face of death led to the great success of the book. As soon as it appeared in 1932, it was translated into several foreign languages.

Another high-ranking officer was Reingardas, who served in the Russian navy. His memoirs were released by his son many years after the death of the father (Reingardas 2000: 3). The book *A Sailor, an officer, Condemned to Death* talks about events completely unknown to us in the North Sea during the battle against German submarines in defence of the island fortresses. The book also talks about the situation in Bolshevik-occupied Petrograd, and later about the battles against the Bolsheviks in Ukraine and finally in Lithuania. The story is concise, accurate, very biting towards the Bolsheviks. Reingardas reveals that even before 1917 several generations of memory stereotypically established the Bolsheviks as revolutionaries engaged in anti-state activities, declaring war to be “bourgeois” and “playing” with human lives:

These courses brought together all sorts of demoralised students, pharmacists, lawyers, rural teachers and some other socialist element [...] And behold, without passing any one year after the start of the war, Russian soldiers took tens of thousands surrendered to captivity, and some who had not yet contracted the psychosis of the revolution were forced to retreat, handing over to the opponent the blood of the Russian patriots abundantly sloppy territories. A little later, in early 1916, I had to read Emperor Wilhelm's New Year's order to his army. I was shocked to see the "victorious" results of the activities of this new pharmaceutical company: there were already two million Russian soldiers in German captivity (Reingardas 2000: 17).

Reingardas sees the tragedy of the Russian intelligentsia through its eyes, its rapid emigration from the homeland, leaving everything and saving only his life. And he himself sailed with his family in an overcrowded steamboat from Odessa to Constantinople, spending several years there. He also has unconventional non-peasant memories of the capital Kaunas in 1922, which he compares to Shanghai and Saigon.

The volunteer Jurgis F. Jonaitis, who came to the Western Front with the American fleet, recorded his unique experience in the book titled *My Memories of the Great War* (1920). Jonaitis was at chaplain, giving him a rare observation position. War literature hardly pays attention to priests, whose activities were important and necessary, especially for ordinary soldiers. The chaplain sees everything up close because he lives the life of a soldier, sleeping and eating with them, experiencing dirt, hunger, lice, the horror of explosions, friends' deaths, dying confessions; he gives the last rights, holds Mass at medical points, buries bodies or parts of them, writes letters to parents or relatives. The chaplain's destiny is no easier than the soldier's, sometimes harder. Jonaitis was wounded twice and received military rank. The most important thing, as he notes, is that you, as a chaplain, are destined to know the inner world of a human being. He was proud of this historic opportunity to provide spiritual help to those in great need. "I have never felt so honoured to be a chaplain as if I was alien [...]" (Jonaitis 1920: 20). All soldiers, regardless of their religion (Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, etc.), believe in eternal life and the care of a higher being, writes Jonaitis. The most significant aspect of Jonaitis' book is that it records marginal existential situations in the discourse of memory.

All three officers mentioned here, who repeatedly found themselves in the most extreme situations in the zones of death, were protected from death as if by some providence.

In repressed Lithuania: Memories of angry days

In respect of occupied Lithuania, attention should be paid to three authors from different parts of Lithuania: Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė (1861–1943), priest Pranciškus Žadeikis (1869–1933) and Antanas Gintneris (1901–1972). Bitė's *The Wartime Diary* is the most famous memoir, for a long time almost the only one to represent the literature of the Great War in Lithuania. The manor belonging to Petkevičaitė's ancestors in Puziniškis became an important spiritual centre during the war because of the extraordinary personality of the owner. Continuing the tradition of her father, a village doctor, Bitė embodied the female altruist in all her activities. The Bee (the pseudonymous Petkevičaitė) – like a real mother bee – was needed by everyone: Lithuanian villagers, German soldiers, officers, Russian prisoners. The memoir reveals a detailed picture of everyday life, giving many insights into the war, soberly unmasking it and evaluating the traumatic consequences for the human soul.

Speaking of Juodišis in this way, the irregular and ugly features of his still childish face became thicker more and more, his forehead expressing his mind was like waves, and his lips began to cramp. His eyes had been so remarkable all along: he had never shot at a man, but he was still passing by. After all, he was the most normal, always a guy of great serenity and calm. That short conversation was enough to make sure it would be better not to mention the war with him. I suggested that he go to rest immediately, fall asleep, as if a well-educated child, a minor or a person who has lost his will (Petkevičaitė-Bitė 2010: 57–58).

This description of the young man who suffered the trauma of Bitė's war is reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's (1874–1946) famous words, which she described as "lost" when she looked at Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961).

The writings of Priest Žadeikis differ from Bitė's as a more documentary narrative (he publishes various German orders and other documents or extracts from them). He likes to comment on the significant events of the war and discuss the differences between propaganda and reality. Žadeikis spoke German and greatly valued German culture, hoping for better German behaviour, although like many he was sorely disappointed.

The occupiers were very harsh and pedantic, constantly demanding more and more from the locals, whom they treated almost like animals. Žadeikis spent the difficult years of the war mediating to reduce requisitions, fighting against Jews who, talking to the Germans and controlling the trade, did not miss the opportunity to cheat and make extra money. At the end of the war, the priest explained the idea of independence to the inhabitants, unmasked the Bolsheviks, and established a Lithuanian gymnasium in Skuodas.

Gintneris collected the memories of the people of Sūduva (the southern region of Lithuania). The author presents memoirs of Lithuanian immigrants to various parts of the United States and Canada. "In this book, I have written my own experiences and selected more vivid and impressive examples that can be interesting to the reader himself and useful to historians" (Gintneris 1970: 7). Gintneris embarks on extensive history tours, illuminating contexts and comprehensively commenting on the course of war. The average story is detailed, in many ways meticulous, revealing moments of everyday life through a wide variety of situations, mainly related to the cruelty of the Germans or Russians towards ordinary Lithuanians, or the unbearable living conditions and atmosphere of constant fear. Sometimes it's hard to understand where Gintner is faithfully recording people's memories and where he is recalling events in his own words, however it is clear that much synthetic work has been done as the book contains a lot of memoirs previously published in the diaspora press, and many photographs.

Vilnius, the centre of the German administration and gathering place of the Lithuanian intelligentsia, had a special place in various memoirs. Many people left shorter or more detailed accounts of Vilnius at that time, which can be related to each other as intertexts that also preserve the uniqueness of individual memory. The life of a multinational urban community markedly dominates personal contemplations. As the war front pushed east, refugees gathered in Vilnius, and when the country was finally occupied by the Germans, various ethnic communities – Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, Belarusians – tried to draw attention to themselves, competed with each other, and tried to adapt and organise cultural, religious and educational work.

The chronicle of such a life is presented most fully by Pranas Bieliauskas' (1883–1957) book *Vilnius Diary, 1915–1919*, in which this priest rethinks the most important events in Lithuanian public life. Bieliauskas was chairman of the Vilnius branch of the largest Lithuanian organisation at that time, the Society for War Victims. His activities, like those of other intellectuals in Vilnius, were aimed at making the city as Lithuanian as possible, teaching Lithuanians to fight for their rights, not to be afraid to speak Lithuanian, and to defend the national. The fiercest 'battles' on this 'front' took place, of course, with the Poles, who misled the German administration, convincing them that the city was Polish. Bieliauskas often mentions the prices of products and conveys the gloom of everyday life: there is a constant lack of food and firewood, the Germans often announce new mobilisations, it is impossible to leave the city even to visit parents in the countryside. The author reveals himself in the diary as a medium of social and political life. On the one hand, his focus is on ecclesiastical activities and he listens to many confessions, which allows him to

get to know the daily life of Lithuanians in Vilnius directly; on the other hand, he closely monitors global events, relying on witnesses and gives information about Lithuanian political activities.

After the Bolshevik coup in Russia, thousands of Lithuanians returned from Russia, which was then drowning in turmoil. At the end of 1918, the grip of the Germans weakened. Bieliauskas notes (Bieliauskas 2009: 98): “Someone has said that we live in very exciting times. No one knows what Europe will be like after the world war. The sates brazen, the throne of kings is swaying. And small nations are looking forward to a better future”. Lithuanians were overshadowed by the feeling that armed conflict with the Poles and Bolsheviks would soon begin. Already in January of 1919, a red Bolshevik flag flew on Gediminas Hill. Hopes were placed in the “Lithuania of Kaunas”.

Later, after the Poles expelled the Bolsheviks from Vilnius and were winning the war against Soviet Russia, France and England planned to build a strong anti-Bolshevik Poland and supported it at the Peace Conference. Lithuanians in Vilnius were in a gloomy mood again as the aspiration for an independent Lithuania seemed unrealistic. In August of 1919, Bieliauskas visited the independent “Lithuania of Kaunas”.

He saw that Lithuania was growing stronger. “Schools grow in villages like grasslands when the snow melts in spring” (Bieliauskas 2009: 185). He was called to stay but felt a moral commitment to return to Vilnius to continue his pastoral and Lithuanian work. Bieliauskas’ memories do not record personal, but general, phenomena related to various news and facts, therefore his diary can be considered a document of communicative memory, valuable in its specificity.

Martynas Yčas (1885–1941) presented in detail the political visions and activities of Lithuanian intellectuals during the war. He was the deputy and chairman of the Russian State Duma, the chairman of the Lithuanian Society to Assist Victims of War, and was acquainted more than anything else with the life and affairs of Lithuanians who had gone to Russia, as well as with the work of Lithuanian intellectuals on the future of Lithuania. He left three volumes of fascinating memoirs.

In 1914 and the first half of 1915, as the Russians withdrew from East Prussia, thousands of refugees flocked in a huge chaotic squads into Lithuania, to Vilnius, as soon as the Germans entered Lithuania and moved further and further towards Russia. Refugees had to be taken care of, fed, protected against robberies, etc. Lithuanian intellectuals undertook organisational activities, a committee (later society) was set up but the question of funds immediately arose. Those issues were tackled by Yčas, who was well known in government corridors in the capital, St Petersburg, had many influential acquaintances, and revealed himself as an extraordinarily talented diplomat and strategist. Yčas

soon managed to provide Lithuanians steady revenue from the Russian budget (the Tsarite Tatiana Foundation), which tens of times exceeded the expectations of his compatriots. Thanks to him, Lithuanians who left chaotically were organised into a rather harmonious structure and there was no Lithuanian urban centre that was not supported. Yčas organised over 250 schools in various Russian cities; in Voronezh, the main Lithuanian refugee centre, he opened and maintained two gymnasiums and taught teacher training courses. About 300,000 Lithuanian-speaking people had left their homeland. In total, there were estimated to be about 6 million refugees in 1917. This caused a real humanitarian crisis that contributed to the revolutionary unrest and facilitated the Bolshevik coup (Sanborn 2014: 64).

Most importantly, as Yčas himself points out, in the face of the war, party differences were forgotten and the committee worked as one force. Lithuanians revealed their organisational abilities and believed that they would be able to govern the state if they had one (basically this 'imagined' state already existed).

Thus, during the activities of the society, the idea of independence became not only the vision of the intellectuals documenting their steps at conferences organised by Juozas Gabrys (1880–1951) abroad but also the vision of the whole nation. "[...] exile forced Lithuanian refugees to rethink their ties with both the empire and the homeland. The experiences of the war gave these concepts new meanings, which in other circumstances would be unthinkable. During the war, the fate of refugees began to be realised as both a personal and a collective disaster" (Balkelis 2012: 222).

During the war, it became clear that after the war Europe would be different, and that a historical chance of independence would emerge for small nations. Historians tend to consider the resolution of the Lithuanian conference in Bern (March 1916) as the first public declaration of independence. Yčas, as a leader of the Lithuanian Society of Victims, received an audience with the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, on 11 June 1916. Yčas asked for moral support for the Catholic Lithuanian nation's quest for liberation from national oppression and in upholding the right to independence.

At that time, the total support fund for Lithuanians (by combining the funds collected by Tsarist Tatiana and the Lithuanian diaspora abroad) amounted to about one million roubles per month (Klimas 1955: 38). "In the middle of 1917, the idea of Lithuania's independence had already won the hearts of thousands in the Lithuanian diaspora in the United States. In the first years of the war, they donated \$30,000 to war victims in Lithuania, and at the end of 1918 similar amounts were collected each month" (Balkelis 2012: 217). Some kind of non-existent Lithuanian representations, largely initiated by the Lithuanian Central

Committee, were located in Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland. In Lithuania, the Central Committee was headed by Antanas Smetona (1874–1944).

An important Lithuanian achievement was the Congress in Petrograd, May 27–June 3, 1917, after the resignation of the tsar, when Lithuanian political parties united for the first time in the Russian capital to adopt a resolution demanding political freedom. In September of the same 1917, The Lithuanian Council was established in Vilnius and assumed the responsibility to act on behalf of Lithuania until the Constituent Seimas could be convened. However, this process and the project of the future state was dismantled by the Bolsheviks at the end of the same year.

Yčas recalled that “Russia is in a state of anarchy, where no organised action has become impossible. All Lithuanian work is disorganised, all efforts are for one cause – a faster return to the homeland” (Klimas 1955: 49). Lithuanian communists, headed by Vincas Mickevičius-Kapsukas (1880–1935) and acting as a Bolshevik government section, made efforts to attract refugees to its cause. All of the Lithuanian chapters were hijacked first in Petrograd, and repression soon began in Voronezh. Yčas, along with other important figures, was captured and imprisoned in Voronezh. Later, as circumstances and events change like a thriller, he does everything possible to return to Lithuania. These last pages of autobiographical experience are no longer so important to collective memory, but they can be read as a work of cognitive literature.

In Lithuania, Martynas Yčas, who had been taking care of the refugee return for some time, became Minister of Finance and the first banker in autumn 1918, laying the foundation for the emerging economy. In April 1919 he secured a loan of 100 million marks from Germany, which was the main financial source for the Lithuanian Army, which was already involved in the war with Poland (March to November 1919). “The Polish–Lithuanian conflict was a ‘dirty war’ because officially it was never declared” (Balkels 2018: 136). During this war the Poles often did not follow the agreements emboldened by the support of Western states.

The first Prime Minister of Lithuania, Augustinas Voldemaras (1883–1942), and some intellectuals believed that, following the example of Switzerland, Lithuania could pursue a policy of neutrality so that the country would not need an army. It was a big mistake that had very costly repercussions. Germany still had different ideas about ‘Ostland’, and other major neighbours had urgent plans.

The Bolsheviks appeared as soon as the German army began to withdraw from Lithuania. A Bolshevik Lithuanian project was drawn up in Soviet Russia. Several regiments were sent in the direction of Lithuania, and Kapsukas’ government was prepared. The Soviet government’s proclamation was part of the project of world revolution. “The Bolsheviks did not think that socialism

could be built in one country, and the Red Army rushed to help the German proletariat. This led to the Soviet Russian–Polish war, in which Lithuania became part of the transition” (Bružas 2012: 243).

In 1919 and 1920 Lithuania had to focus on a new test, that of defending its independence with the gun and in international diplomatic debates. These events are widely reflected in the memoirs of witnesses.

The fate of the great memory of the Great War: Natural and staged oblivion

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990–1991 Lithuania became an independent state again. The centenary of the Great War and the Declaration of Independence has been commemorated, historical knowledge has been restored, but very little attention has been paid to the literature and memoirs of the Great War.

There are two reasons for this. The cultural oblivion of the Great War was brought about by the more recent, from the present perspective, collective trauma of the Soviet occupation in 1940 and mass deportations in 1941 and later; life during World War II; the mass exodus to the West, avoiding retaliation; and finally, resistance against the Soviet Union in the forest (1945–1952). After recovering freedom of the press (1987–1988), a huge number of memoirs, documentaries and fiction accounts became available (Soviet censorship had banned the literature of the Lithuanian diaspora in the USA, as well as any information on the deportations to Siberia and the literature of resistance).

In the 1990s some of the witnesses of those events were alive, and communicative memory continued to function. In this context, it is clear that the events of the Great War and the struggle for independence were of little interest, they were too distant and almost erased from collective memory. Such oblivion is a natural organic occurrence. Memory cannot be separated from oblivion: both are necessary and indispensable memory operations. The restoration of monuments to the Great War, even the entire memorial gardens with its altar to the unknown soldier at Kaunas War Museum, was more a formal elimination of the damage caused by the Soviets than a complex restitution of cultural heritage and collective memory.

The second reason for the Great War to be forgotten is related to political censorship. Censorship, or the second cause of oblivion, was the result of political engineering. The Soviet Union began preparation for war in 1941. Lithuania became a border zone, from which it was necessary to remove the unreliable element (according to which argument the deportation to Siberia began). The German attack on the Soviet army was unexpected, and the Soviets

soon withdrew from the Baltic republics. This was followed by the tragic events mentioned above, which automatically overshadowed previous historical events, as well as their memory. With the return of the Soviets in 1944, the systematic planned rewriting of collective memory continued. The aim was to introduce the most important idea – Lithuania was lucky to have joined the Soviet Union, which represents and realises the most advanced political and social system in the world. The whole course of history had to be rewritten according to this poster slogan. The continuation of the Great War in Lithuania was a struggle for independence (1918–1920), which also took place against the Bolsheviks. Therefore, during the Soviet era, this topic and related literature were banned (all publications from before 1940 were banned). A transcript of collective history was created: the armed coup carried out by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 (the Great October Revolution) was raised as an event that radically changed the course of world history, to which no ‘local’ national phenomena could equate.

The civil war in Russia of 1917–1922, which covered the Lithuanian struggle to defend its ethnic territories, was raised as the struggle of the most advanced proletariat state against the conspiracy of the bourgeoisie.

Halbwachs (1992: 37) emphasised that “[...] memory depends on the social environment”. Of course a “social environment” needs to be complemented by political environment. The new (Soviet) ideology raised the concept of social class and opposed it to the concept of nation, which had guided the Lithuanian revival from the 19th century to the Great War and the struggle for independence.

Social origin became more important than national. The formerly united nation, which existed as an imagined community with its own inner life, became artificially divided and opposed, its past distorted according to this imposed scheme, collective memory rewritten. Rewriting history from a Marxism-Leninism position, the struggle for national liberation was changed to the struggle of the Lithuanian proletariat against bourgeois nationalists who had been temporarily removed from power between 1918 and 1940. Such an interpretation of history was shared through all means of education and publishing, and persisted until about 1988, when the Soviet press of that time began releasing articles unmasking the Russian Bolshevik Party and its ideology. Memories, even knowledge, of history, of the two different political groups (the Lithuanian diaspora and the people locked in Soviet Lithuania) began to vary over time. The cultural memory of the Great War as the transmission of meaning through cultural texts ceased, with those texts no longer being read and even knowledge of them fading. “Cultural memory nurtures tradition and communication,” says Jan Assmann (2011: 8), but it can be enriched in the

light of the present, restoring oblivion by re-reading the forgotten or forbidden cultural heritage. Objective perception of historical knowledge, the publication of historical documents, even memorials to the restoration, cannot be equated to the influence of memoirs and fiction in this field. Those who remain from 'those times' are so important for national consciousness and homeland history. The stories they write are exciting, and come from long and deeply held memory, conveying unique experiences that go to make up a nation. Therefore, it is expedient to return to these texts and to include them in history textbooks, turning them into the personal and collective property of everyone.

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