

***A NEW MASTER AND NEW SERFDOM:  
UNDERSTANDING THE COMPULSORY  
LABOUR EXPERIENCE OF LITHUANIANS DURING  
THE GERMAN OCCUPATION, 1914-1918***

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In a letter addressed to the German Chancellor<sup>1</sup> on 17 June 1918, Antanas Smetona, the President of the Lithuanian Council (*taryba*), referred to the compulsory labour<sup>2</sup> for the inhabitants of Ober Ost as a new form of serfdom (*baudžiava*). The particular moment at which Smetona was writing can at least partially explain why such an emphasis was put on the liberation from the yoke of a foreign ruler. Nevertheless, the mention of serfdom reflected the dramatic situation of a three year-long exploitation of local labour. Since the end of the 18th century, serfdom in the former lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had undergone a gradual decline, symbolically crowned with the official abolition of serfdom by the Tsar in 1861. Although the decline of serfdom was among the factors that gave rise to the forming of an ethnic consciousness among Lithuanians, nonetheless subalternity remained widespread among the peasants which remained the main foundation of the ethnic Lithuanian movement.<sup>3</sup> The serfdom Smetona wrote about was, however, markedly different from the one many peasants had experienced in previous centuries. In 1915 after the frontline had become stable, the war, which was earth-shattering in both its geographical scope and technological advancement, brought a new collective master to Lithuanian lands that was known for its 'modernity' and high culture: the Germans. The re-organization of the occupied lands into the administrative unit

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<sup>2</sup> By compulsory labour I mean "...any sort of work or service demanded of a person under threat of punishment and which is not started freely" ((Bruno Simma (ed.) *Übereinkommen über Zwangs- und Pflichtarbeit der Mitglieder der Internationalen Arbeitsorganisation vom 29. Juni 1930 (Art.2.1)*, in *Menschenrechte, ihr internationaler Schutz. Textausgabe mit ausführlichem Sachverzeichnis und einer Einführung*, 122–32 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Egidijus Aleksandravičius, Antanas Kulakauskas, *Carų valdžioje: Lietuva XIX amžiuje* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996), 213–217.

Ober Ost and its administration policy soon showed another side of German 'culture'. Despite the hopes of some inhabitants, the Germans' goal was to transform the occupied territories into a (potentially longstanding) rural colony supplying the Fatherland with raw materials, food and, at least in wartime, a cheap workforce to be used on site or moved to Germany.

In this article I will discuss the meaning of the compulsory labour experience for Lithuanians<sup>4</sup> that remained in Ober Ost during the German occupation. In particular, I will analyse how Lithuanian male civilians<sup>5</sup> made sense of compulsory labour and in which forms this new serfdom was seared into their generational memory.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of women's experience, which should be the object of a separate study,<sup>7</sup> remains over the goals of this article. Paolo Jedlowski has observed that after the end of the war in Europe, the personal experience of participants during the war remained far from becoming a concrete part of a shared cultural memory, and mainly survived in the form of personal trauma.<sup>8</sup> In Lithuania, the 'reclusion' of personal traumatic experiences connected with the occupation was accompanied by a striking lack of academic interest for the German occupation in general. Instead it was the medieval past of

<sup>4</sup> Here I will consider the Lithuanians as a separate *ethnos*. By *ethnos* I mean a group whose members *consciously* share "...a [common] way of understanding, interpreting, and framing experience..." See Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity as Cognition*, in Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University press, 2006), 86.

<sup>5</sup> The issue of authorship is fundamental for life narrative analysis. Although the issue of the authorship of analyzed life narratives is not going to be widely discussed here, one must pay attention that all of life narratives considered are characterized by a number of common features: they were written by both priests and secular males who (1) considered themselves as ethnic Lithuanians, (2) spoke Lithuanian, (3) were Catholic, (4) generally possessed at least lower education, (5) were born peasant families and (6) lived and worked in Ober Ost countryside or in small villages. The choice not to analyze the authorship of life narratives in detail is related to the fact that my only goal here is to find out the *constants* of male generational experience.

<sup>6</sup> In this essay I call generational memory the elements of communicative memory (J. Assmann) collected around a main socialization event such as World War I and. See Karl Mannheim, *The problem of generations*, in Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 276–322.

<sup>7</sup> Women played a significant role in Ober Ost society. The diary by woman writer –Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė– remains among the most important examples of life narrative on the German occupation period which appeared in Lithuania. The complexity of women's writings and experience in these years is worth a separate study. See Virginija Jurenienė, *Lietuvių moterų judėjimas XIX amžiaus pabaigoje–XX amžiaus pirmojoje pusėje* (Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2006), 66–92; Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Raštai II: Karo meto dienoraštis*, (Vilnius: Vaga, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Paolo Jedlowski, *Memoria, esperienza modernità. Memorie e società nel XX secolo* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002), 20.



Lithuania, an eminently anti-Polish and (even if less accentuated) anti-Russian mood, as well as the 1918-1920 independence wars that took on a much more prominent place in the cultural memory<sup>9</sup> of the new nation state. The analysis of the Lithuanian compulsory labour experience will thus try to shed light on one side of that trauma experienced collectively by a substantial part of the Lithuanian population and attempt to explain very briefly the main reasons why it was regularly outside the frame of mainstream Lithuanian cultural memory.

Compulsory labour in Ober Ost has recently become an issue of scholarly analysis thanks to the studies by Christian Westerhoff. The works of Vejas G. Liulevičius, Abba Strazhas, Gerd Linde and Edmundas Gimžauskas<sup>10</sup> also mention the issue. With the only a partial exception of Gimžauskas and Liulevičius, however, none of them focused on the civilians' experience as a separate topic, but instead concentrated on issues variously connected with the building process of the Lithuanian nation state, or the German military and the experiences of soldiers.<sup>11</sup> The extensive use of life narratives<sup>12</sup> by those who directly experi-

<sup>9</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forma e mutamenti della memoria culturale* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2002); Jan Assmann, *La memoria culturale. Struttura, ricordo e identità politica nelle grandi civiltà antiche* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Edmundas Gimžauskas, "Vokiečių karinės okupacijos poveikis Lietuvos visuomenei ir besiformuojančiam valstybingumui 1915–1919," *Karo archyvas* 25 (2010), 98–123; Gerd Linde, *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag 1965); Vėjas Gabrieliūsius Liulevičius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Abba Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: Der Fall Ober Ost 1915-1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1993); Maria Urbšienė, *Vokiečių okupacijos ūkis Lietuvoje* (Kaunas, 1939), 111–127; Christian Westerhoff, "A kind of Siberia': German labour and occupation policies in Poland and Lithuania during the First World War," *First World War Studies* 1, 2013, 1–13; id. *Deutsche Arbeitskräftpolitik in den besetzten Ostgebieten*, in *Über den Weltkrieg hinaus: Kriegserfahrung in Ostmitteleuropa 1914-1921* (Nordost-Archiv: Zeitschrift für Regionalgeschichte: Neue Folge Band XVII/2008), 83–107; id., *Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg? Rekrutierung von Arbeitskräften aus Polen und dem Baltikum für die deutsche Kriegswirtschaft 1914-1918*, in Dieter Bingen, Peter Oliver Loew und Nikolas Wolf (ed.), *Interesse und Konflikt. Zur politischen Ökonomie der deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen, 1900 bis 2007* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag 2008), 151–154.

<sup>11</sup> Among the huge amount of scientific literature devoted to the experience of World War I, I just recall here Richard Bessel, *The "Front Generation" and the Politics of Weimar Germany*, in Mark Roseman (ed.), *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation, 1770–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 121–136; William C. Fuller, *The Foe Within. Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); G. P. Gros (ed.), *Die vergessene Front. Der Osten 1914/15. Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Paderborn-Vienna: Verlag Schöningh, 2006); Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914-1917* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> About life narrative concept see Sidonia Smith, Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 1–14.



enced the occupation (and mainly stored in the Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences or published in interwar periodicals such as *Karo archyvas* or as separate books)<sup>13</sup> appeared to me as the best way to fill the gap.

### Getting used to war

By the time German troops had taken control of all ethnic Lithuanian lands in August 1915, civilians already had had enough time to shape their idea of how war looked like. Far from perceiving it as a geopolitical event, the peasants in the Tsarist *Severo-Zapadni kraj* looked at the very first steps towards war in the summer 1914 as the very break-up of their mainly rural and traditional life. As the Tsarist Empire declared the mobilization of troops, the spectre of war appeared as a threat to the solid character of their rural economy and values, i.e. family and village communities:

I still remember, A. Nezabitauskis wrote in his memoir, the terrible impression the declaration of war had upon us. I was with my whole family at home. In our village, Baidotai, every wall and pole held the mobilization call decreeing any national-service-age man to go to the collection points. My father felt that a catastrophe was coming. He was very worried and contemplative. All the peasants were similarly troubled. In my family there were no young men, so mobilization did not worry us directly. It was, however, extremely painful to see many men from our village leaving for the army and an unknown future.<sup>14</sup>

Not only was traditional society as a whole under threat by conscription,<sup>15</sup> but the looming frontline led to an increasing sense of confusion, both visible and perceived, among the civilian population. War –and especially a European

<sup>13</sup> The interest for German occupation has always been limited in Lithuania. Nonetheless, some memoirs and diaries were published in the 1920s and 1930s in the journals *Karo archyvas* and *Mūsų senovė*. In the same period the diaries of some eminent personalities (for example, Žadeikis' and Daugirdas' ones) were published as books. Petras Ruseckas edited various memoirs in his volume *Lietuva Didžiąjame kare* (Vilnius: Wydawnictwo „Vilniaus žodis“, 1939). A similar operation was made by émigré Antanas Gintneris who published *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose. Atsiminimai iš I Pasaulinio karo laikų 1914 – 1918 m.* (Chicago: 1970).

<sup>14</sup> A. Nezabitauskis, *Karas mūsų žmonių nepalaužė*, in Ruseckas, *Lietuva Didžiąjame kare*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Earlier experience in the military represented a further reason to avoid any enthusiastic approach to war service. As people mobilization was declared, as priest Pranas Žadeikis noted in his diary, “[o]ur hearts stopped beating, especially those of people who had to go and fight for ‘Motherland’”. It remained unclear what that ‘Motherland’ really was. I myself had spent three years breaking my bones in Manchuria during my compulsory service. As I had come back to Lithuania, I had asked the administration for a place, but they answered me: ‘You can’t, there is no place here, if you




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or worldwide war— was far beyond what the average peasant could imagine, as their world often ended at the borders of their village. Thus one should not be surprised that if before Russians used to be associated with Muravyev’s repressions and oppressive 19th century policies in Lithuanian discourse, nevertheless, in the context of an unseen technological war that threatened the very foundation of the peasants’ moral world, they started being perceived as the last expression of known and, as such, ‘civilized’ world. That’s why, for example, the march of the Russian army towards the Prussian border in August 1914 was perceived by witnesses as an event of dramatic beauty rarely seen before:

There were some squadrons of soldiers... Those men were high and handsome! It was nice to look at them. And how clean they were! Their clothes, long boots and blue trousers twinkled, shined, flittered! Children were impressed, they had never seen anything like that before! And also their shoulder pieces twinkled, as during a parade. It seemed that all of horses were prepared to go to a parade, not to go to war and fight with the sword against the Germans.<sup>16</sup>

Food, raw material, hay and cattle requisitions introduced at the beginning of the mobilisation unavoidably interfered with the familial economy.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, despite some stereotypical complaints about Russian soldiers’ lack of politeness and good manners,<sup>18</sup> the bitterness of deprivation was somehow smoothed by a generally acknowledged correctness towards civilians and compensation for goods that were taken.<sup>19</sup>

It was the move of the frontline from the West to the East that made a huge impact on characterising the Germans as an expression of Otherness. From the point of view of culture, the fact can be explained through at least two different reasons. On the one hand, since August 1914 the Lithuanian press had published articles describing the German–Russian front as the scene of a veritable clash of civilizations. According to the contributors of the clerical newspaper *Viltis*, the conflict appeared as the inevitable result of the eternal clash between “Slavs” and “Germans”. In the 20th century, the Lithuanians who lived between these

really want and you’re poor, go to Siberia and we’ll give you, as a former soldier, a place down there!’ I knew what the work conditions in Siberia are and I thought it’s better to live in indigence but in my own land” (Pranas Žadeikis, *Didžiojo karo užrašai. I dalis, 1914-1915-1916 metai* (Klaipėda: Lituania, 1921), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Pirmojo krikšto rezultatai*, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Jackus Sondeckas, *Europos karo istorijai medžiagos žiupsnelis* (6–10.11.1914), Lietuvos Mokslų akademijos bibliotekos Rankraščių skyrius (LMAB RS) F255-375, II notebook, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Antanas Vireliūnas, “Atsiminimai iš Didžiojo karo,” *Karo archyvas* 1 (1925): 107–120, 112.

<sup>19</sup> Kun. J. Breiva, “Atsiminimai iš vokiečių okupacijos laikų Dauguose,” *Karo archyvas* 11 (1938), 192–197, 192; Jonas Rimkus, “Karo vėtroje (Onos Vaitkėvičienės pasakojimas),” *Karo archyvas* 10 (1938), p. 105–125, 107.



two groups, were to experience what the flow of history had already shown: a new prevalence of Germanism over the Slavs.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the Russians were a force that in the course of history that had tried to subdue the Lithuanians. In recent times, Russian violence had been a serious threat to the development of the Lithuanian national movement. Nonetheless, Russian excesses constituted something visible, known and *paradoxically familiar*, which the locals were able to cope with. Conversely, the Germans were characterized by two contrasting elements – violence and culture.<sup>21</sup> German violence was a *topos* of new Lithuanian (and Polish) historical literature, influenced mainly by the dominant memory of the Teutonic Order and the violence they had perpetrated. The correlation between the Germans and the Teutonic Order, was strengthened by the German themselves in August 1914, as their victory against the Tsarist army in Tannenberg became discursively identified as the final revenge for the 1410 defeat.<sup>22</sup> The characterization of the Germans as a cultivated nation was mainly the result of Germany's growth as an industrial, financial and political power. Vulgar positivism considerably influenced the mindset of Lithuanians and their views on German industrialism *tout court* as the logical result of German civilization. As a consequence of history and the times, the double characterization of the Germans as brutal and cultivated fed, at first, a sense of uncertainty among the Lithuanian civilians getting ready for war. As J. Pikčilingis noted "Some assure that we mustn't fear the Germans, for they are highly cultivated people... Others imagine the war more bleakly and have no illusion about the fruit of German civilization".<sup>23</sup> Soon news from the front made this latter opinion more popular by the day.<sup>24</sup>

However, the first contact with the German military turned out to be extremely surprising for many civilians. As diaries and memoirs attest, the inappropriate behaviour of the Germans upon arrival led to an opinion they were people that "...disappointed even the hopes of many cultivated Lithuanian men who had too often imagined the Germans as educated and gentlemanly".<sup>25</sup> Far from fitting the positive characterization that met someone's hopes, the occu-

<sup>20</sup> E. D. [?], "Lietuva ir karas," *Viltis* 13.8.1914 : 3.

<sup>21</sup> D. [?], "Tarp kūjo ir priekalo," *Viltis* 3.8.1914: 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> On the memory of the battle of Žalgiris / Grünwald / Tannenberg in Lithuania see Dangiras Mačiulis, Rimvydas Petrauskas, Darius Staliūnas, *Kas laimėjo Žalgirio mūšį? Istorinio paveldo dalybos Vidurio ir Rytų Europoje* (Vilnius: Mintis, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Jonas Pikčilingis, "Pergyventos valandos," *Karo archyvas* 3 (1926): 90–111, 92.

<sup>24</sup> J. [?] Mažūika, "Didžiojo karo atsiminimai," *Karo archyvas* 6 (1935): 292–297, 293.

<sup>25</sup> Breiva, "Atsiminimai iš vokiečių okupacijos laikų Dauguose," 194; K. [?] Norkus, *Iš Kalvarijos padangės. Pasakojimas apie karo veiksmus tarp Vokietijos ir Rusijos (1914 m. atroji pusė)*, LMAB RS F255-221, I notebook, 13.



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pation of the western lands of the Russian empire was followed by acts of reprisal, appearing to civilians as absurd and totally aimless behaviour.<sup>26</sup> The process of consolidation of the Ober Ost administrative system, especially since August 1915, just served to strengthen the image of Germans among locals as a group characterized by an inexplicable cruelty. Even if measures such as food and cattle requisitions did not differ much from the ones experienced earlier, the inflexibility and regularity of requisitions, as well as soldiers' sense of superiority and total lack of attention for the needs of civilians transformed the occupation into a metaphor of illegitimate and radical 'robbery':

Our land remained as empty as the plains of the Sahara. Our fields were empty and bare. You could see no one ploughing or seeding. No cattle, nor horses in the field, nothing, nothing! You couldn't even hear dogs barking, because the Germans had shot them all... The land seemed to be suspended, as if the God of plague had passed through with his bloody handkerchief.<sup>27</sup>

In comparison to the period of Russian mobilization, the changes were not perceived as part of one particular period that was to pass, but as the results of a new and potentially long standing rule that would soon be dictating the norms of public and private life.

### **The new master's rule**

In analysed life narratives, Lithuanian civilians unanimously described the Germans as colonizers.<sup>28</sup> At the very beginning of occupation, the perception of the new German rule as colonialism could actually not be defined on the basis of experience, but relayed upon the visual perception of a changing social geography. After their arrival, the German troops had set their headquarters in manors which historically had been associated with the dominant social class' rule over the peasants and still echoed in Lithuanian discourse as symbolic places of Polonization and national oppression. By occupying manors aban-

<sup>26</sup> Antanas Juozapavičius, "Vokiečių okupacija Varniuose," *Karo archyvas* 11 (1938): 183–191, 186.

<sup>27</sup> Stefanija Jablonskienė, "Didžiam karui siaučiant," *Karo archyvas* 6 (1935): 298–300, 298. Consider that the description by Jablonskienė -a woman- coincides totally with the sense of desolation described by men. The visual perception of landscape changes was actually identical both in men and women's life narratives.

<sup>28</sup> Juozas Stankevičius, *Mano gyvenimo kryžkelės* (Vilnius: LKMA, 2002), 239.



done by the aristocracy that fled to Russia after the beginning of war, the Germans unconsciously accomplished a remarkable symbolical operation. As new masters of the land, German officials established themselves in geographically symbolic places associated with the elite, which stood for social stratification and domination. With this act, they involuntarily, but inevitably gave new meaning to the dialectical relation between the centre (manors) and subjects of power (the Germans) within the traditional topography of social relations.

Even if the behaviour of German officials living in manors appeared to local observers as a caricature of an aristocratic way of life,<sup>29</sup> German policy and informal practices soon reminded the civilians of serfdom. As German troops were getting closer, news about requisitions had been accompanied by rumours on the possible mobilization of men.<sup>30</sup> In the summer of 1915, civilians started to understand that German officials considered not only the men, but all local inhabitants as a useful workforce at their disposal.

Looking at the entire period of German occupation, one can distinguish three kinds of compulsory labour aimed to “the maximization of local labour”<sup>31</sup>: forced agricultural labour in manors and elsewhere in the occupied territories; service in labour battalions in Ober Ost; and compulsory labour in Germany.<sup>32</sup> Compulsory agricultural labour probably impacted the imagination of most civilians starting at the very beginning of German rule. Although, as in past centuries, agricultural labour was done on manor estates according to the specific needs of officials for an extremely low (if any) retribution and represented the first reason of the population’s hatred, the category of compulsory labour in Ober Ost was much broader. One could even say that the occupational regime changed not only the timing of seasonal, but introduced a new ‘German order’ strictly regulating the entire world of rural society. On the one hand, due to the planning of the German war economy, civilians were compelled to adapt their fieldwork to the decrees of the German administration. Seeding and fieldwork became centrally coordinated operations, while a variable percentage of the harvest had to be given to German authorities. This interference with the cycle of agricultural life and works appeared to civilians not so much as a rational way to govern the war economy, but rather the evident expression of the licence

<sup>29</sup> Kazimieras Pakalniškis, “Rusų vokiečių karo užrašus,” *Karo archyvas* 12 (1940): 95–147, 112–113.

<sup>30</sup> Žadeikis, *Didžiojo karo užrašai. I dalis*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Westerhoff, ‘A kind of Siberia,’ 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Referat w sprawie robót przymusowych i sytuacji z tymi robotami związanych w Wilnie i w kraju, in Litwa za rządów ks. Isenburga* (Kraków: Nakładem Krakowskiego oddziału Zjednoczenia Narodowego, 1919), 129–144.





(*sauvalė*) the German masters gave themselves.<sup>33</sup> Seminars, which from time to time accompanied labours decrees and calls to work, were mainly met with aversion as humiliating measures. Seminars mirrored also German's fundamental misunderstanding of local civilians. In February 1917, for example, due to the increasing lack of potato seeds, Ober Ost authorities published an instructional booklet and organized seminars aimed to regulate how potatoes should be planted and even cooked! One can easily understand that the response of civilians was not enthusiastic. As priest Pranas Žadeikis reported in his diary, Lithuanian civilians "...paid no attention to these 'seminars' because they weren't used to them. On the other hand, we realised Germans' incredible naivety: they probably thought – or at least wanted to get convinced – that although they had insulted and abused them, the Lithuanians will trust them and take their advice into consideration".<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Germans' decrees and educational aims became opportunities for Lithuanians to test their masters' ineptness and, conversely, strengthen the sense of community through an 'unconventional' cleverness.<sup>35</sup>

Although, as we have already seen, compulsory labour services had been introduced in Ober Ost since the very beginning of the occupation, "hard coercive labour" was officially introduced only after Hindenburg and Ludendorff had been promoted to the Supreme Army Command in August 1916.<sup>36</sup> Recruitment to labour battalions remained intense the whole winter of 1916-1917.<sup>37</sup>

Even if enrolment was also possible on a voluntary ground and was introduced as "a new way to earn a good salary", the decree in November 1916 called every inhabitant that was able to work to go to collection points for a medical check-up. People that were able to serve in a battalion were given a chance to buy their freedom by paying up to 600 marks. The recruitment system remained like this until January 1918 when a new decree systematized the con-

<sup>33</sup> *Vokiečių administracija, rekvizicijos ir prekyba*, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 356.

<sup>34</sup> Pranas Žadeikis, *Didžiojo karo užrašai. II dalis: 1917-1918-1919 metai* (Klaipėda: Rytas, 1925), 20.

<sup>35</sup> A particular kind of 'cleverness' (*gudrumas, gudrybė*) was often mentioned in diaries and memoirs as a character common to main Lithuanian civilians facing Ober ost authorities. Most often it expressed adaptation skills and the ability to infract prohibitions, but also the major rationality of peasant wisdom in comparison to the German incapacity to demonstrate the infallible rationality of their decrees. See, for example, *Kratos, baudos ir žmonių gudrumai*, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 377–383; Petras Jakštas, *Atsiminimų tėkmėje. Stramiliai, Rokiškis, Sankt Peterburgas* (Vilnius: Margi raštai 2004), 116; J. [?] Lapinskas, "Mano atsiminimai iš okupacijos laikų," *Karo archyvas* 11(1938): 201–213, 202.

<sup>36</sup> Westerhoff, 'A kind of Siberia,' 5.

<sup>37</sup> See Liulevičius, *War land*, 73–76; Urbšienė, *Vokiečių okupacijos ūkis*, 125.



cepts connected with compulsory labour: workers were divided into three categories – free workers, workers' groups, and workers' sections. Everyday practice, however, remained unchanged.<sup>38</sup>

The creation of labour battalions in Ober Ost represented an “unexpected storm”,<sup>39</sup> a traumatic breaking point for Lithuanians. Firstly, recruitment was mainly directed toward young men that in an agricultural society represented the very core of societal and economical life. Secondly, fidelity to a kind of peasant moral code stimulated civilians to underline in diary and memoir files that people were not afraid of work itself, but of the work conditions, the news of which had started to spread after the formation of the very first battalions.<sup>40</sup> Although some young people saw work in the battalions far from home as a chance to “...see the world”,<sup>41</sup> the rounding up of workers was perceived with increasing sense of frustration and oppression as an offensive against local society. As ordered in official decrees, the task of rounding up workers was done by local village authorities. Apart from the cruelty of recruitment process in itself, reporters recorded their indignation at seeing officials that often lacked morals and a sense of respect for civilians' lives. As a note of protest addressed by inhabitants from the Utena *Kreis* to German authorities in mid-1917 testifies, recruitment was eventually seared into their memory as a tragic game whose results could be fatal both for individuals and entire village communities:

In Kupiškis, Traškunas and other regions workers used to be collected in the following way: the Germans order some inhabitants to round up a given number of people in the villages, for example 20 or 30. People cast lots to decide who would be sent to compulsory labour services. If one was chosen and has money, he can pay a sum of money and be freed from captivity and another one must substitute him, regardless of whether it is a man or a woman. The substitute receives from 60 to 80 roubles. In June 1917 in the village of Uoginiai, Antašava parish, Kupiškis District, 14 or 15 year-old Antanas Montvila, the only child of an old mother was chosen. He was forced to leave his widowed mother and their farm and do forced labour. He told that many young boys (10) and girls (6) were transferred to Germany with him.<sup>42</sup>

This indignation reflected the fragmentation of village unity as an economic

<sup>38</sup> According to the decree, free workers were supposed to be 1. people occasionally implied in work services in their living areal and paid for them; 2. workers having a regular contract and 3. people called to accomplish work service in particular situations. See Urbšienė, *Vokiečių okupacijos ūkis*, 116–118.

<sup>39</sup> Juozas Audickas, “Didžiojo karo atsiminimai,” *Karo archyvas* 9 (1938): 198–211, 206.

<sup>40</sup> Žadeikis, *Didžiojo karo užrašai. I dalis*, 153.

<sup>41</sup> J. Takulinskis pasakoja, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio nuguose*, 233.

<sup>42</sup> Protest to German authorities (1917), LMAB RS F23-47, 3.

entity and a community of values, a lack of respect for youth that represented the future of rural community, and women, considered as a 'good' to protect and a 'naturally' passive subject in the family hierarchy. A sense of intimacy that was violated is visible also in other reports about other forms of rounding up, such as the recruitment of young men in churches during Sunday's services in the village of Marcinkonys.<sup>43</sup> Not only did such recruitment evidently break the integrated economic unity of communities, but also violated the wider sphere of the sacred, to which the village community belonged.

As an attempt to break the moral unit of village community, recruitment stimulated the formulation of familial strategies to cope with it. The payment of a sum of money, which was the only possibility officially given to workers to avoid service and often the only way to avoid the failure of familial economic balance,<sup>44</sup> which was often a far too expensive option. These circumstances represented the basic reason leading to the decision to flee into the woods or even in modest bunkers dug in the courtyards.<sup>45</sup> Noticing that troops often waited for them outside churches on Sundays, young men began to avoid mass.<sup>46</sup> The tight-knit character of the local rural communities is visible also in the role priests are told to have played in defending civilians from compulsory labour and deportation. Through their moral authority and their moral suasion, priests represented a medium influencing people's decisions, mediating between civilians and civil authorities. Authorities, on the other hand, understood the priests' role quite well and tried their moral influence upon civilians for their own goals. For example, priest Pranas Žadeikis reports that in 1917 Germans officials in Skuodas tried to get as many people in work battalions as more people without reverting to threats and maintaining that the local priest was going to join them. No priest had actually promised to join them, but the strategy is interesting and revealing: officials had understood that the main issue for people was not the compulsory labour itself, but the breaking up of local communities, values and local 'loyalties'. Priests were central figures in such loyalties.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, priests appeared to civilians as concrete opposition providing concrete aid to families without men as well providing food and goods, breaking orders and sometimes paying for such acts with their own lives.<sup>48</sup>

The breaking up of local communities was confirmed by the experience of

<sup>43</sup> J. Miškinis *pasakoja*, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 237.

<sup>44</sup> Audickas, "Didžiojo karo atsiminimai," 206–207.

<sup>45</sup> Stankevičius, *Mano gyvenimo kryžkelės*, 58.

<sup>46</sup> J. Žemaitis *pasakoja*, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 241.

<sup>47</sup> Žadeikis, *Didžiojo karo užrašai. I dalis*, 156.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

people successful in escaping compulsory service in the battalions. For those who fled to the woods, captivity was in fact substituted by uncertainty. Civilians that fled from recruitment were usually compelled by circumstances to spend the rest of the war running away from German troops. In fact, however, their existence was made difficult not only by their uneasy conditions, but also by the severe prohibition that the civil authorities forced on the inhabitants to feed or help them. Receiving limited or no means of subsistence from other civilians, they were compelled to survive by committing robberies, becoming enemies of their own neighbours. Thus the main result of months or years spent on the run was growing alienation from such people from their village communities and the further rupture of the compactness of their communities.<sup>49</sup>

A similar sense of deterioration of links with their community emerged among workers sent to labour camps. What appeared to be the most problematic were the recruitment criteria themselves. In fact, German authorities made distinctions between people according to their profession: liberal professions remained somehow privileged, while manual workers became the main object of recruitment. Class difference and hatred that resulted thus became a key point for German administration to control and break up local communities.<sup>50</sup> A sense of helplessness, economic discrimination and striking moral differences in comparison to the occupants were accentuated as recruitment reached its peak (end of 1916 - beginning of 1917) as authorities felt obliged to 'hunt' (*gaudyti*) people, and transfer them by force because of the lack in volunteers.<sup>51</sup> For those who were not able to escape recruitment or who joined voluntarily, however, compulsory labour was seared into their memory as a new serfdom that was unimaginable in comparison to anything that had happened in the past. Stories about deportations to labour camps were depicted as an unimaginable tragedy exceeding the heritage of common memory and describable only through rhetorical images of Hell. As an image expressing the further reaches of the worst of humanity, Hell represented everyday experience, a new dimension in which inhuman labour in agriculture, woods and infrastructures made life unbearable. In camps, life was 'bare' and their fight for survival, as C. Petrauskas remembers, remained the only goal possible:

In our camp we were about 300 mainly local inhabitants. During the warm period, it was possible to sleep in the camp. In autumn, when the nights became to be cold, we had no stove in the camp. And even a stove wouldn't have been

<sup>49</sup> Aleksandras Urbelis, "Vokiečių okupacijos laikai," *Karo archyvas* 3 (1926): 112–127, 127.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Audickas, "Didžiojo karo atsiminimai," 207.

helpful because the house we lived was like a stable, without a cellar or floor. We used to sleep next to one another so we wouldn't freeze.<sup>52</sup>

The cold, bad hygienic conditions, fear, lack of food, illnesses, long hours of work in any weather, and punishment starting from the very first moment of joining were things workers experienced both in Ober Ost and in Germany. Starting with threats, often aggression,<sup>53</sup> and de-humanizing standardization of individuals as workers marked by an identification number on their uniforms,<sup>54</sup> captivity 'standardized' people through an everyday fight for survival and fast deterioration of health conditions. Kazimieras Jokantas, a doctor working at the hospital in Suvalkų Kalvarija, reported that the signs of compulsory labour on people come back from camps were frightening: "...no forced labour in Russia was similar to this Hell... They used to send to me swollen, tumid, apathetic, weak young men suffering from nephritis, heart diseases, scurvy and all kinds of rheumatic deformations".<sup>55</sup> For people that went through it, the experience of reclusion only strengthened the sense of disorientation and of a totally new serfdom people were experiencing through Ober Ost. The idea of the Germans as a cultivated nation soon changed: German *Kultur*, as Jokantas remarked, was not perceivable in one's everyday experience. After the Germans had become the new masters of Lithuania, the violence revived the memory of the Teutonic order transforming the Germans into the representatives of an anthropological Otherness.<sup>56</sup>

### **Making sense of the compulsory labour experience: conclusive remarks**

On the whole, compulsory labour remained a way to exploit cheap or free manpower. Violence was used as legitimate means to 'stimulate' villagers to carry out their duty, and was recorded in civilians' diaries and memoirs as one of the primary characteristics of German troops. But what was the sense of such violence for civilians? As one can understand, the question often appeared in diaries and memoirs. Although it is fairly hard to answer univocally, we can see that making sense of experiencing compulsory labour was a complex

<sup>52</sup> C. Petrausko pasakojimas, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 235.

<sup>53</sup> J. Takulinskas pasakoja, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 233.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>55</sup> Kazimieras Jokantas, "Suv. Kalvarijoje vokiečių okupacijos metu," *Karo archyvas* 8 (1937): 117–186, 162.

<sup>56</sup> Jokantas, "Suv. Kalvarijoje vokiečių okupacijos metu," 134.

process influenced and deeply influencing national categorization and collective self-categorization.

As a new experience of serfdom, compulsory labour was perceived as the result of German *Kultur*, a civilization radically different not only from the Lithuanian, but even from that of the Russians. On the one hand, as the negative stereotypization of German civilization got historicized and linked with the national discourse, the German occupation and compulsory labour were transfigured into the violence of a renewed Teutonic order (for whom Lithuania was "...the Promised land since the time of the Crusades")<sup>57</sup> that was wrought upon the successors to the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. Thus, the German presence on those lands and the new serfdom that the local population was subjected to acted as a factor that activated a cultural memory of long ago that could potentially bring together the Lithuanian peasants.

Nonetheless, German policy in Ober Ost turned out to be much more destructive, characterized by a (conscious?) desire to 'divide and conquer' the local population. From this point of view, not only did compulsory labour compromise the unity of rural communities, but underlined the existence of Otherness even within the community of those who defined themselves as 'Lithuanian'. Diaries and memoirs say that since the very beginning of the war, German troops and later the German civil administration treated Catholic Lithuanians differently, with Protestant German-speaking Lithuanians receiving a more favourable position. Their position, however, was not limited to linguistic facilitation. German troops and officials often used Protestant Lithuanians as an informal means of control over the civil population 'from the inside' and accorded them a privileged social position. Concretely, Protestant Lithuanians were often released from compulsory labour or even appointed mayors,<sup>58</sup> obtaining therefore a new semi-official social position which memoirs described as a source of further frustration, ethnic fragmentation and tension for the Catholic majority. In a context of enduring poverty and widespread deprivation of most of essential freedom, Protestant Lithuanians, who "...used to live well, kept their best horses and cows and did not even want to speak Lithuanian any more..."<sup>59</sup> used to be described as belonging to a completely other kind of non-Lithuanian moral world. In this regard, words used describing them ('spy', 'provoker', 'drinker') one can find in the sources meaningfully reflect the deviation from the moral norm the Lithuanian ethnic movement elaborated since its dawn

<sup>57</sup> *Didysis karas Sedos valsčiuje*, in Ruseckas, *Lietuva Didžiąjame kare*, 122.

<sup>58</sup> Bendas Minialga, *Nedori mūsų vokiečių Bundžiaus darbai*, in Ruseckas, *Lietuva Didžiąjame kare*, 103.

<sup>59</sup> *Šnipai, skundikai, provokatoriai*, in Gintneris, *Lietuva caro ir kaizerio naguose*, 334.

and strengthens the link between 'authentic' Lithuanianness and Catholicism.<sup>60</sup> The Jews represented a second group of people morally 'compromised' due to a greater willingness to collaborate with the Germans. Nonetheless, such views on the Jews did not represent a novelty came along with the occupation. 'Collaborationism' appeared to be concretely connected with the idea of Jews as economical competition profiting from the arrival of a supposedly Jewish-friendly nation.<sup>61</sup>

The data we collected are, thus, sufficient to try to answer the fundamental question I formulated at the very beginning of the article, why the traumatic experience of German occupation constantly remained outside the frame of mainstream Lithuanian cultural memory. Compulsory labour experience was common only to people remained in Ober Ost. The memories of the Lithuanians displaced in Russia and of those who served in the army were considerably different and could hardly become a unifying element for Lithuanian identity. The new Lithuanian nation state needed a solid national epic which supported the idea of the indivisibility of the Lithuanian nation and which strengthened anti-Polish sentiment, while anti-German sentiment appeared politically less useful. In contrast, in the life narratives about German occupation, anti-Polish features were virtually absent and the Lithuanian nation appeared still from being a consistent unit. Such hypothesis about the link between German occupation and Lithuanian cultural memory should however be the object of a separate and deeper analysis in the future.

<sup>60</sup> Fight against alcoholism, for example, had represented a cardinal point for Lithuanian movement ideology since the early XIX century. Still at the end of the century, as Tomas Balkelis pointed out, the main protagonists of the Lithuanian ethnic movement considered abstinence from alcoholic beverages a basic point of their morality which distinguishing them –the new intelligentsia– from earlier generations. See Tomas Balkelis, *The making of modern Lithuania* (London-New York: Routledge, 2009), 11–35.

<sup>61</sup> Norkus, Iš Kalvarijos padangės, LMAB RS F255-375, notebook III, 40–41; Žadeikis, *Didžiojo karo užrašai. I dalis*, 59.