

Theodore R. Weeks

From "Russian" to "Polish": Vilna-Wilno 1900-1925

June 4, 2004

Abstract

During the first two and a half decades of the twentieth century huge changes took place in the city known by Russians and Jews as Vilna, by Poles as Wilno, and by Lithuanians as Vilnius. In this paper I will view these changes through a single axis, so to speak, that of Poles vs. Russians. To be sure, in 1900 neither Poles nor Jews made up the largest ethnic group in Vilnius (I will use the present-day name of the city for simplicity) but by 1925 at least arguably Poles had achieved a plurality among the city's ethnic groups. Population statistics tell only one side of the story, however. For the purposes of this paper the rhetoric of national possession, will feature prominently. After all, neither Lithuanians nor Russians were ever more than approximately 20% of the population (even by the most generous estimates) in this period but both groups at certain points made claims for Vilnius/Vilna as "their own." The arguments various ethnic groups used to buttress their claims to the city will for the purposes of this essay outweigh the statistical realities. Nor will the Jewish community in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," as the city was called, get their due here. While both Russians and Poles (and Lithuanians) acknowledged the large numbers of Jews in the city, neither seemed to consider the Jewish presence as essential to the character of the city. For both, the real issue was which culture dominated on Bolshaia/Wielka (now Pilies/Didžioji) and Georgievskii/Mickiewiczza (now Gedimino). This striving for cultural hegemony will be the central focus of this paper.