

**Sammelrez: Vilnius**

Tauber, Joachim; Tuchtenhagen, Ralph: *Vilnius. Kleine Geschichte der Stadt*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln 2008. ISBN: 978-3-412-20204-0; 284 S.

Götz, Irene; Makhotina, Ekaterina; Schulze Wessel, Martin (Hrsg.): *Vilnius. Geschichte und Gedächtnis einer Stadt zwischen den Kulturen*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag 2010. ISBN: 978-3-593-39308-7; 248 S.

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In 2009 Vilnius felt a brief moment of returned glory as one of the EU's „cultural capitals“. Alas, the celebrations were marred by the bankruptcy of the national airline and severe budget cuts but still, it seemed, the city ceased temporarily to be a small and rather provincial city on the periphery of the European Union. Visitors to Vilnius were treated to programs and concerts that celebrated the city's rich and multicultural past – a major topic of the two books under review here. Like many cities in Central and East-Central Europe, Vilnius in the present day is a very different place from the city of even my grandmother's day. Like Breslau/Wrocław or Lemberg/Lwów/L'viv, political sovereignty and the ethnic-cultural make-up of Vilnius changed immeasurably after 1944 and the interpretation of the city's past changed again rather significantly with the collapse of the USSR. Both books are useful in plumbing the complicated past of the city though, in the end, they leave the reader dissatisfied. Perhaps it is truly impossible to write an adequate history of such a complex and important city that does not fall into the trap of favoring the present – or a past – ruling national group. These two books, to differing degrees, illustrate the extreme difficulty of writing a city history that is equally informed and equally fair to all the city's cultures. At the same time, in particular non-specialists will find much of interest in both of these volumes.

The first thing that a historian notices about the volume edited by Martin Schulze Wessel and others is its lack of notes and a short

bibliography consisting almost entirely of titles in English and German. This book brings together interpretative essays rather than attempting to present new information. But even with such a goal in mind, the authors' apparent lack of grounding in the city's history is disturbing. At the end of the book we learn that „Dieses Buch ist das Ergebnis eines Projektkurses im Rahmen des Masterstudiengangs 'Osteuropastudien' [...]“ (p. 231). Given that these articles were composed by students, few if any of whom knew – it would seem – either Jewish languages or Lithuanian, the quality is very good indeed. It is peculiar, however, that such a project would be deemed worthy of publication. Nor are any of the main editors, as far as I can ascertain, specialists in Lithuanian or Vilnius history. It is hardly surprising that an earnest project to look at this fascinating multicultural city from a sophisticated theoretical point of view ends up stumbling over the authors' lack of fundamental knowledge of the subject. While trying to present a non-biased view, in the end they often end up presenting a narrative that is unacceptably presentist and Lithuanian.

The book is divided into five main sections, „Nationalisierte Stadtlandschaften“ (focusing mainly on the Lithuanian symbols and heritage), „Jerusalem des Nordens“ (on Jewish Vilna), „Topographie der Sehnsucht“ (Polish Wilno), „Spuren und Leerstellen der sowjetischen Ära“, and finally a short section on the present day. While none of the articles are without some informational value, they are frequently marred by a lack of „orientation“ and simple factual errors. For example, take the statement „Vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg gab es hier 69 Zeitungen, davon 35 polnische, 20 litauische, sieben russische, fünf jüdische und zwei weißrussische“ (p. 15). Apparently this statistic was taken from some secondary source without any critical analysis. In fact, while there may have been in toto this many dailies over a decade or more, this lumping together without any consideration of length of publication or number of subscribers tells us very little except that, yes, there were different nationalities in the city. Even more disturbing is the quotation – without any attempt at critical analysis – of a Lithuanian declaring (in English) about the post-war pe-

riod: „We call it genocide.“ One is reminded of Humpty-Dumpty’s famous statement from „Through the Looking Glass“: „When I use a word [...] it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.“ If one wishes to make an argument that the Lithuanian nation was subjected to specifically genocidal (i.e., ethnic-based) policies under Soviet rule, one can. Just using the word, however, does not make it so – and one should expect some kind of challenge to such a bald statement: „Why genocide? What documents? What policies, exactly?“ In particular the difficult issue of the „repatriacja“ (expulsion) of Poles from Vilnius post-1944 and the Lithuanian role in violence toward Jews needs to be brought together with the use of „genocide“ against the Lithuanian nation. Because of the book’s structure, such issues are touched on – briefly – but in other parts of the book.

The section on Jewish Vilna is both ambitious and unsatisfying. Again, the authors are clearly out of their depth but, in their defense, one must admit that it is really not possible to do justice to Jewish history and Vilna in a few dozen pages. Still, on one single page (p. 77) one gets the impression that the pogroms of 1881 also affected Vilnius (not so), we are told that Lithuanians and Jews had developed a „Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl“ under Russian rule because of mutual oppression – a very questionable statement, finally a line about Jews in independent Lithuania is thrown in – quite out of context as Vilnius was by then firmly in Polish hands. A couple pages further on, describing political repression under the first Soviet occupation 1940-41 we find the line „Unter den nach Sibirien deportierten Litauern befanden sich viele Juden“, which shows a failure to distinguish between citizenship (in any case, most residents in Vilnius retained their Polish passports in hopes of better times) and ethnicity. Throughout this section – indeed in the entire book – one gets the painful impression of outsiders diligently trying to grasp a very complex and even contradictory history but, in the end, forced to accept (often without even realizing it) the narrative presented by their Lithuanian (including Jewish Lithuanian) hosts. The point here is not that this book is without value but that it is marred by too many errors,

too little deep knowledge, and too much pious jargon. For the casual visitor to Vilnius, this book could in good conscience be recommended as take-along literature, in particular as its very faults reflect present-day conceptions of the city. But for a serious scholarly treatment, it is necessary to look elsewhere.

One can recommend, for example, the „short history“ of the city recently published by Joachim Tauber and Ralph Tucht-enhagen, both respected specialists in Polish and Lithuanian history. To be sure, the recommendation must come with some reservations. This book aims to give an overall history of the city from „the beginning“ (Gediminas and the Iron Wolf) to the present day – all in less than three hundred pages. Obviously such a book cannot delve deeply into specific events, historiographical controversies, or complicated cultural interactions. While there are notes here, and the literature cited includes Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and other languages, the authors clearly did not see it as their task – probably rightfully so – to try to incorporate primary sources into the narrative. This is not a „thesis driven“ work but an attempt to introduce a broad public – probably quite ignorant of Polish and Lithuanian history – to the most important events in the city’s history.

The resulting book is very informative and clear, but not always terribly exciting, concentrating mainly but not exclusively on political history. The authors do include short snippets of primary sources or more information about individuals or events in boxed features entitled, for example, „Polnisch-litauische Unionen im Mittelalter“, „Der Gaon von Vilnius“, „Das Ghettolied von Hirsch Glick“ („Zog nit kaynmol ...“), „Übertragung des litauischen Rundfunks, 13. Januar 1991, 2 Uhr nachts“. These titles also indicate, in particular in the earlier period, just how much space the authors needed to devote to more general Lithuanian or Polish-Lithuanian history in order to place Vilnius in context. Inevitably some errors creep in: serfs were not freed without land after 1861 (p. 147), no rule or practice specifically barred Lithuanians from employment in the local administration (p. 149) – though as Catholics they might have been singled out, and the strange statistic

about newspapers mentioned above (though with some interesting differences) is trotted out on p. 157. Jews in Odessa and Berdichev (and elsewhere) would have objected to the description of Vilnius as „Hauptstadt des Ostjudentums“. Finally and least important on the same page, the monument to Catherine the Great was not located near the railroad station. These are fairly minor things, but they do detract from the volume's usefulness. A more important criticism is that the city's history seems on the whole to be conceived as a Lithuanian city rather than one which could have „gone different ways“. There is, I think, a historical teleology at work which one sees clearly in the subtitle (p. 180): „Polnische Provinz statt litauische Metropole“, describing the city after World War I. While the city was founded by a Lithuanian ruler and is at present the capital of the Lithuanian republic, its history in the centuries between „belongs“ equally to all the nationalities that inhabited the city. While the authors would certainly endorse this statement, in practice the history, in particular the treatment of the twentieth century, suggests that Vilnius primarily is part of Lithuanian history.

As Tauber and Tuchtenhagen mention in their helpful „Vilnius in der Forschung“ (pp. 258-263), historical writing about this city demonstrates the „national priorities“ of the writers themselves. As outsiders, Germans or Americans, we should be free of such „priorities“ but of course we are not: our own research, life experiences, and relationships push us to one side or the other. In the volume edited by Martin Schulze Wessel (et al.), we see a sincere attempt to present the city through its varied and contradictory national narratives. The Tauber and Tuchtenhagen book is less ambitious on the theoretical plan, but more solid as a work of synthesis. In neither case will the specialist or the patriot (of any ethnic-national camp) be entirely satisfied. But perhaps that fact may be taken as a recommendation for both of these books.

Götz, Irene; Makhotina, Ekaterina; Schulze Wessel, Martin (Hrsg.): *Vilnius. Geschichte und Gedächtnis einer Stadt zwischen den Kulturen*. Frankfurt am Main 2010, in: H-Soz-Kult 31.01.2011.

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