

review

BRIEDIS, Laimonas. *Vilnius: City of Strangers*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2021.

Vilnius: City of Strangers was first published in 2009, with translations into Lithuanian, German, Russian, and Portuguese published to date. The English edition was re-published in 2021. The year 2023, when Vilnius, one of Europe's most culturally complex capitals, celebrates the 700th anniversary of the city's founding, is a good occasion to return to Briedis's book. Although *Vilnius: City of Strangers* focuses on historical documents, one should not think of this book as research discussing the history of Vilnius in a traditional way. The book is a contribution to the field of cultural geography. Briedis chose to tell the story of Vilnius from the perspective of strangers, those who came to Vilnius knowing little or nothing about it, more out of forced circumstances than of their own curiosity. *Vilnius: City of Strangers* researches travelogues on Vilnius written over the last seven centuries. Their authors are scholars, politicians, writers, and soldiers, who spent a longer or shorter period of time, sometimes literally only a few days, in Vilnius. The authors of these travelogues differ in the languages they speak, their background, and social status. They also differ in how they experienced Vilnius. For some, it was a positive contact, for others a negative one.

Briedis depicts Vilnius, which was controlled by many empires during the turbulent centuries, as a downright magical place, surrounded by powerful nature, rushing rivers, dense forests, and dangerous swamps that could only be crossed safely in winter, when everything froze over. One of the city's most prominent features is its multiculturalism and multilingualism, and surprisingly Lithuanian has not been the main language of the city over the course of its history. Briedis places Vilnius beyond the centre-periphery paradigm and describes it as a city characterized by "marginalised centrality" (12). He uses a metaphor drawn from Walter Benjamin and talks about *threshold*, which is a "zone where time and space swell" (13). In Briedis's book Vilnius appears as a meeting place for visitors from all over Europe and Asia, a place where West meets East, and East meets West. For Europe, it was the gateway to the Russian Empire and the Orient. For Russia, it was a gateway to the world of European culture.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each chapter focusing on successive historical periods, when domination in Vilnius was seized by different empires. The history of Vilnius and the narrative of the book are covered chronologically. The first chapter, *The Brink of Europe*, describes the circumstances of the city's founding and Lithuania's entry onto the scene of Christian Europe, showing the conflict between Pope John XXII and the Teutonic Order and their stances toward the newly forming state at the edge of the Christian world. Briedis presents the legend of the city's founding. According to the legend, Gediminas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania between 1315 and 1341, hunted in the forests where the Vilnia River flows into the Neris River. When he went to sleep in his dream, an iron wolf appeared to him at the top of the hill, howling fiercely. Gediminas asked the pagan priest to explain the meaning of the dream. The priest told Gediminas to build a castle and city on the hill where he saw the wolf, the city was to bring fame to Gediminas and Lithuania. As Briedis points out, "Gediminas envisioned Vilnius as a meeting ground of Europe" (24), where equality and religious tolerance are a given. The refusal of Gediminas and ot-

her Lithuanian nobles to convert to Christianity resulted in the initiation of a holy war against Lithuania. Briedis also describes the annual *reysa*, i.e. the northern crusade, which brought the first known wave of armed “strangers” to the Lithuanian territories and Vilnius itself.

Chapter two, Mapping Sarmatia, focuses on the political union with Poland and the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Briedis pays much attention to religious freedom, multilingualism, multinationality, and the resulting cultural complexity, which was “hard for foreigners to grasp” (45). The geopolitical context is discussed through the concept of Sarmatism, which Briedis understands after Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann as a “Renaissance national self-definition” (47). The travelogues discussed in this chapter include texts by Sigismund von Herstein, a diplomat at the Habsburg court, who was sent to secure a settlement between Lithuania and Russia, and Alexander Gwagnini, an Italian officer, who was the author of one of the first scholarly works on the notion of Sarmatia.

Chapter three, Enlightenment Shadows, focuses on one character, and the chapter can be described as a brief biography of Georg Forster. The narration is based on extensive quotations from Forster’s works and correspondence. It goes beyond the brief period in Forster’s life when he stayed in Vilnius (Forster arrived in Vilnius in 1784 at the invitation of the Educational Commission and left at the end of the summer of 1787). Forster was chair of natural sciences at the University of Vilnius, but he was also entrusted with other tasks, such as arranging a botanical garden of Lithuanian flora or establishing an agronomy program. Forster saw Vilnius as a backward city in which he could not find his place. He considered his time in Vilnius as wasted years in terms of his career. Briedis points out that “Forster’s antipathy towards the chief city of Lithuania (still a large if impoverished country) was formed through the prism of his cosmopolitan upbringing, a life-altering experience unusual even for his age of academic internationalism and extensive European travelling” (63).

In chapter four, Napoleon’s Curse, Vilnius is shown from the perspective of several characters. The first is the Frank family. Johan Peter Frank, one of Vienna’s most renowned doctors, came to Vilnius with his son, Josef Frank, also a doctor, and his family. Within a short time, the elder Frank moved to St. Petersburg, where he became a personal doctor to tsar Alexander I. His son stayed at the Faculty of Medicine in Vilnius. The Frank family experienced Vilnius quite differently from the Forsters and “fit well into the imperial world of this provincial metropolis” (84). Josef Frank conducted medical research and became involved in charitable and social activities. His devotion to Vilnius is apparent in the fact that he returned to the city with his family after the War of 1812, and it was only the escalation of the tsarist regime’s policies that led him to leave the city. In the following section, Briedis describes in detail the various stages of the War of 1812, or the French invasion of Russia – the crossing of the Russian border by the *Grande Armée*, the march on Vilnius, the capture of Moscow, the retreat, and the final calamity of the *Grande Armée*. Briedis gives voice to the soldiers and quotes from their memoirs extensively. The authors of the travelogues include: Count Philippe-Paul de Ségur, General Armand de Caulaincourt, Carabiner-Sergeant Vincent Bertrand, Sergeant Bourgogne, and Lieutenant Heinrich August Vossler.

Chapter five, Russian Intrigue, covers the period of Russian domination over Vilnius until World War I. Briedis quotes an excerpt from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and shows the contrast between the way Vilnius is portrayed in the novel and the reality. Tolstoy’s “comforting Russian town” was in reality a politically unstable city. Briedis discusses several issues, including the role of Vilnius University as the main place of resistance for the Polish intelligentsia, the question of religious loyalties, the situation of the Uniate Church and the Jewry, Russification, and the concept

of Vilnius as a *Yerushalaim d'Lita* (Jerusalem of Lithuania). Briedis describes how Vilnius became an insignificant provincial city under the Russian rule. Only the second half of the nineteenth century and growing modernization brought a change. What saved Vilnius from decline was the railroad and the opening of the Saint Petersburg–Warsaw line in 1862. Briedis cites the travelogues of Danish ethnographer Age Meyer Benedictsen, Russian playwright Alexandr Ostrovsky, and Dostoyevsky's wife Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, who all describe their short stay in Vilnius. He also shows Mikhail Bakhtin's and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky's aestheticized relationship with Vilnius. The city became an inspiration for creative work for both of them.

Chapter six, German Intrusion, deals with Vilnius's status during World War I, when the Germans took administrative power in the city. Briedis presents the demographic relations that existed in Vilnius at the time and highlights the problems faced by the Germans in daily communication, namely that Vilnius citizens belonged to several linguistic groups, with a dominance of Polish and Yiddish. Briedis describes how within a short time, Vilnius and Lithuania became not only the *Ober-Ost* (Upper-Eastern territory) but a part of the *Vaterland* for the Germans. Briedis cites descriptions of Vilnius in the German-language periodical *Wilnaer Zeitung*, published by the Tenth Army and addressed to German soldiers stationed in Vilnius. He also extensively cites descriptions of Vilnius by Paul Otto Heinrich Fechter from his guide-book *Wanderstunden in Wilna*, published under the pseudonym Paul Monty.

Chapter seven, The Absent Nation, is placed in the context of the discourse on nationhood and newly formed statehoods in Europe after World War I. According to Briedis, "a nation-state was an answer to the inherited problems of the old world, but it did not serve everyone equally or identically. On a collectivised journey of a self-discovery, New Europe demanded the surrender of a significant part of one's past, discarding personal memory and private experience as attributes of a bygone age" (194). This chapter is devoted to Jewish Vilna, its culture and history. To a lesser extent, it deals with the Poles, who, next to the Jews, constituted the largest national group in Vilnius. Briedis presents the history of Vilnius from this period through the eyes of Alfred Döblin, extensively quoting from Döblin's texts from his travels in Poland and Lithuania in search of a true Jewish identity.

Throughout the first seven chapters, one gets the impression that the title and the understanding of Vilnius as a city of strangers only applies to the authors of the travelogues. The eighth chapter, Maelstrom Europe, provides yet another interpretation. In terms of historical compilation, this is the weakest chapter. In a dozen pages, Briedis discusses the period of World War II, the years of Soviet occupation, the fall of Communism, the restoration of Lithuania's independence, up to Lithuania's accession to the European Union. However, this is the most authorial chapter and commentary on collective memory. Briedis highlights that "conversions and misinterpretations of memory" (221) are present in the discourse on Vilnius. Between 1939 and 1949, Vilnius lost 90% of its population and "became a vacuous place" (228). Furthermore, Vilnius "mislaids most of its narratives and memories" (228). Briedis quotes memories and records of visits to Vilnius written by former residents or their descendants, who could not find their city during their stay. One of the cited recollections puts it directly, "Vilnius is beautiful. Vilnius, not Vilna, which no longer exists" (239). This chapter can be considered Briedis's essay on collective memory and its significance for the culture and identity of Vilnius.

Although the book is written in an accessible language, in places there seems to be an overload of quotations. Briedis often quotes extensive excerpts from selected texts, leaving them without commentary and making no attempt to confront these opinions with other sources of the parti-

cular historical period. At times, it seems that the protagonist of Briedis's book is not Vilnius but individual historical figures, the authors of the travelogues. This comes to mind in places when Briedis devotes a lot of attention to a given author and his biography. Of course, it can be said that thanks to this, we get a more complete picture of a given character, and the narrative is placed in a broader context. However, the balance between the importance of a given source in exploring the multi-layered cultural landscape of Vilnius and the attention paid to sources is not maintained at some points. This becomes especially apparent when one realizes that the attention to particular historical periods and events varies throughout the book. Some events are described in great detail, others briefly, while some events are basically omitted. The most comprehensive discussion concerns just a few months of Napoleon's march on Moscow and the subsequent complete collapse of the *Grande Armée*. In contrast, surprisingly little attention is paid to the period of World War II, the Soviet era, the restoration of independence, and more recent times. All of these are placed in a single chapter.

The sources that Briedis cites are quite diverse, written in different languages, by authors from different backgrounds. In fact, their only common point is that they all talk about Vilnius. However, one often has the impression that they are talking about completely different cities. The historical sources are not combined into a single consistent narrative. Briedis consciously did not attempt to link these "centrifugal depictions" (14), instead he treats them as equal impressions that enable him to show the connection between Vilnius and its history and the geopolitical location at the intersection of the east-west, north-south tracks. For Briedis, these sources create a multi-voiced narrative, and they are not only texts that say something about Vilnius, they are texts that say something about the essence of Europe, or more precisely, about the changing idea of Europe.

The history of Vilnius and the history of Europe intertwine in *Vilnius: City of Strangers*. As Briedis points out, "the city [Vilnius] has never possessed a single identity. The place speaks of Jewish *Vilne*, Polish *Wilno*, Russian and French *Vilna*, German *Wilna*, Byelorussian *Vilno* and Lithuanian *Vilnius*" (14). The character of Vilnius that emerges from Briedis's book is a combination of local and universal traits. The book demonstrates an interplay of European history, geography, but above all ideology, which claims dominion over memory. Nevertheless, the city that is depicted here does not exist anymore. *Vilnius. City of Strangers* is an attempt to restore the memory of this lost city.