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DOI:10.55159/tri.2023.0103.08



The Great Evacuation of Vilnius in 1915: Losses of Cultural Property¹

Abstract

Due to the threat of Vilnius being captured by the approaching German troops, the tsarist authorities decided to hastily move to the empire not only government administration units, industrial plants, and educational and financial institutions, but also the most valuable resources of cultural institutions, movable sacred objects, and Russian monuments. The population leaving the city also took with them valuable items, including objects of historic and commemorative value, as well as works of art. At the time, the former capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania suffered colossal losses of movable cultural heritage objects collected over several centuries. Thanks to the dignified attitude of the local community remaining in Vilnius, it was possible to partially secure and save many items of cultural property from being exported, destroyed or dispersed.

¹ This article is a revised and supplemented version of the open lecture titled *Vilnius 1915: The Great Evacuation of Cultural Property*, delivered on June 22, 2023 at the International Cultural Center in Krakow within the framework of the Fellowship Program of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland.

Keywords

Vilnius, cultural heritage, World War I, evacuation, war losses

In 1915, the multinational Vilnius, the capital of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was then a governorate city and part of the Russian Empire, found itself under threat from the rapidly advancing troops of the German army. For this reason, the tsarist authorities carried out an unprecedented forced evacuation of libraries, museums, offices, banks, and educational institutions, together with the most valuable objects gathered there, which are classified as cultural property. In just a few months, the city suffered irreparable damage to its heritage of many generations. It was a period of great relocation of museum objects, book collections, archival collections, all kinds of movable monuments, and historical memorabilia – the effects of which are still being felt today.

State institutions and offices were evacuated to the cities of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Tambov, Tula, Ryazan, Yaroslavl, Kursk, Samara, and to the outskirts of the Vilnius and Minsk governorates (*Spravochnik ...*, 1916). Orthodox clergy and organizations were spread across Moscow, Usman, Nizhny Novgorod, Ekaterinoslav, and Yelets (*Spravochnik ...*, 1916).

During the evacuation, special attention was paid to institutions involved in collecting and storing archives. Administrative and military documents – various confidential letters, maps, and plans of strategic facilities – were selected for removal first. In addition, the evacuation action covered the most valuable historical and memorial objects. Also exported were a significant portion of the documents stored in the building of the post-Franciscan church on Trokskaja Street, which was converted in the 1870s into the Archives of Gubernial Government Institutions (*Arhiv gubernskih prisutstvennyh mest*), where some 700,000 folders with old files were kept. The building had five floors, while inside there was a gallery and a staircase, with shelves and cabinets (*Kościół Wniebowzięcia...*, 168v). Thus, for example, a large number of selected documents from the governorate offices (along with directories of document folders)

were transported from there, as well as some court documentation (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1922).

In addition, the archives of the Gubernial Land Management Commission (*Gubernskaja zemleustroitel'naja komissija*), a sizable portion of the documents of the Vilnius Gubernial Drawing Room (*Vilenskaja gubernskaja chertiozhnaja*) were expedited, as were almost all of the archives of the Vilnius Land Bank (*Vilenskij zemel'nyj bank*) and of the branch of the State Nobles' Land Bank (*Gosudarstvennyj dvorjanskij zemel'nyj bank*), the archives of the state railway administration and the postal and telegraphic communications offices, and some files of the Vilnius Gubernial Statistical Committee (*Vilenskij gubernskij statističeskij komitet*) (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1922).

Some of the more valuable files were taken out of the archives of the Vilnius Gubernial Noble Deputy Assembly (*Vilenskoe gubernskoe dvorjanskoe deputatskoe sobranie*), which is a valuable resource for research into the history of Lithuanian families (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1922). Also evacuated were the most valuable documents of the Vilnius Scientific District (*Vilenskij učebyj okrug*) and some files from the Court Chamber archive complex (*Sudebnaja palata*) (Chwalewik, 1927).

Regarding the evacuation of official archives, it is essential to note that among the exported files were materials that dealt not only with contemporary issues (e.g., current official documentation), but also valuable historical materials. For example, the aforementioned Archive of Gubernial Government Institutions, which was partially evacuated, included manuscripts from the 16th and 17th centuries, which are of great importance for the study of the history of the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (*Kościół Wniebowzięcia...*, 168v). Information about specific files is difficult to verify today as registration documentation (inventories, lists, and catalogs) were also taken.

In addition, it was ordered that the most valuable documents be exported from the Vilnius Central Archive of Old Records (*Vilenskij central'nyj arhiv drevnih aktovyh knig*), whose headquarters were located in a building belonging to Vilnius University, which was closed after the November Uprising. Among the documents taken were the most valuable manuscripts concerning the history of Lithuania, such as

universals and royal privileges as well as inventories of estates. It is known that the books of the Supreme Tribunal, the Treasury Tribunal, the Treasury Commission of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the files of the Vilnius Castle Court, as well as a vast stock of materials relating to the history of Lithuanian cities and counties disappeared from the archives (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1922). In 1915, court books of the Brest, Raseiniai, Upytė, and Ukmergė districts were taken from there, which, according to tsarist historians, were supposed to be proof of the “eternal Russianness” of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Ptaszycki, 1923, p. 71; Mienicki, 1923).

The evacuation action included government museums. Special attention was paid to the Museum of Count Mikhail Nikolayevich Muravyov (*Muzej gr[afa] Mikhaila Nikolayevicha Muravyova*). This institution, although clearly ideological, contained valuable historical documentation on the January Uprising, including files with information on death sentences, images of insurgents, and all sorts of documents produced by the governor-general’s office and other tsarist offices, which illustrated the course and suppression of the uprising in the Lithuanian governorates (Mienicki, 1937). During the evacuation, part of the archives (political and secret files) and museum specimens were transported to Russia (Mienicki, 1937).

In view of the approaching military operations, valuable exhibits were taken away from the museum, operating at the library of the Vilnius Military Assembly (*Vilenskoe voennoe sobranie*), whose resources consisted of donations and deposits from antiquities enthusiasts of Russian origin. The core of the collection consisted of objects donated by Alexander Zhirkevich, colonel (later general) of the tsarist army, man of letters, and collector, main donor, and *spiritus movens* of the institution. He founded the aforementioned museum, which collected not only items closely related to the history of the Russian army (Panchenko, 2014), but also specimens relating to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Examples include documents bearing the signatures of King Stephen Báthory, coins from the reign of Sigismund I, and artifacts of John III Sobieski or Tadeusz Kościuszko. The collection was adorned with interesting archival documents illustrating the course of the Napoleonic campaign in Lithuania (Vinogradov, 1904). Along with the museum,

a rich book collection of some 30,000 volumes was transported away (Kuntze, 1937).

When considering the losses of cultural property during World War I, we must not forget the fate of valuable objects that are part of the collection of the largest of Vilnius's libraries, the Vilnius Public Library (*Vilenskaja publichnaja biblioteka*) and its government museum. After the January Uprising, exhibits from the Museum of Antiquities – founded in 1855 by Count Eustachy Tyszkiewicz, a distinguished archaeologist, collector, and researcher of the history of Lithuania – were added to the collection. It also housed a vast number of prints from closed monasteries and churches and estates confiscated by the tsarist authorities.

In 1915, valuable parchments, incunabula, all kinds of rare old prints pressed in the printing houses of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and several cabinets of manuscripts were taken out of the Vilnius Public Library (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1922; Rygiel, 1928). In turn, the collections of the aforementioned government museum were impoverished during the evacuation by at least 5,300 coins, 1,333 medals, and 38 treasures from excavations (Rygiel, 1924; Keršytė, 2011). In addition, Kontush sashes, crucifixes, militaria, and 17th-century textiles were taken (Keršytė, 2011). In the summer of 1915, the museum's collection arrived in Moscow. This is evidenced by a letter from the custodian of the Imperial Moscow and Rumyantsev Museum (*Imperatorskij Moskovskij i Rumjancevskij muzej*) addressed to Dmitri Dvovgiallo, chairman of the Temporary Commission for the Management of the Vilnius Public Library and Museum, in which he relayed that on July 25 (the date according to the Julian calendar), the Moscow institution had taken over for safekeeping 23 boxes and 36 bags of exhibits taken out of Vilnius (*Letter from the curator...*, 51).

Archives and libraries belonging to the Orthodox Church were also evacuated during the period. The archives of the Orthodox Lithuanian Spiritual Consistory (*Litovskaja duhovnaja konsistorija*), housed in the so-called Arhierejskij dom (Archipastor's House) next to the orthodox cathedral, were taken away (almost in their entirety). The collection contained objects dating back to the 17th century (protocols, diaries, consistory registers, metrical books, financial records of parishes and religious orders, church visitation

documents, extracts from court records, and materials relating to the construction of religious buildings). These documents are valuable source material as they illustrate, among other things, the religious policy of the tsarist authorities in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Sprogis, 1902; Chwalewik, 1927).

Also taken was the entire book collection of the library of the Orthodox Lithuanian Theological Seminary (*Litovskaja duhovnaja seminarija*) (Rygiel, 1924), which was housed within the walls of the former Basilian monastery. The library contained valuable prints that once belonged to Greek-Catholic monks from Vilnius and Zhyrovichi (Grodno Governorate). Among the adornments of these collections was an “almost complete” copy of the 1491 Cyrillic incunabulum, *Chasoslov*, from the Krakow printing house of Szwajpolt Fiol (Chwalewik, 1927). The private book collection of Metropolitan Yosyf Semashko (Kotovich, 1878) was also stored there.

Archives and libraries belonging to other religious associations were exported. By order of the tsarist authorities, some documents pertaining to the Catholic diocese of Vilnius, mainly church inventories, were evacuated to Mogilyov (present-day Belarus) (Chwalewik, 1927). The evacuation was carried out in the library and archives of the Vilnius Evangelical Reformed Synod: incunabula and a number of other valuable prints, as well as archives, were transported to Slutsk (Minsk Governorate). During the German occupation, however, they were happily returned to Vilnius (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1932), as Slutsk came under the administration of the German authorities.

The evacuation included movable religious objects (Rygiel, 1924). The most valuable icons, crucifixes, books, vessels, and liturgical textiles were taken out of Orthodox churches. For example, an extremely valuable icon of Mary Hodegetria was sent to Moscow from the Church of the Holy Trinity. The fate of the painting and its current location remain unknown (Piskun, 2004). In addition, a reliquary with the relics of the Vilnius Orthodox martyrs St. Anthony, St. Joan, and St. Eustace was taken (Jankowski 1923; Rygiel, 1924). Objects from the Great Synagogue in Vilnius, including brass candlesticks from the 17th and 18th centuries, were also selected for evacuation (Kłos, 1929).

During the evacuation, the most valuable equipment of government facilities that were not cultural institutions was taken away. Thus, for example, the evacuation list included the following property from the former seat of the governor-general, officially called the Vilnius Imperial Palace (*Vilenskij imperatorskij dvorec*): antique clocks, sconces, candelabras, table silver, crystals, paintings, some chandeliers, and a “Napoleonic table” – a memorabilia of the French emperor’s stay in that building in 1812 (*Priblizitel’nyj perechen’...*, 9–9v). Valuable icons and liturgical paraphernalia from the palace’s Alexander Nevsky Orthodox Church were also earmarked for removal (*Priblizitel’nyj perechen’...*, 9v). However, items were excluded if, in the opinion of the decision-makers, they were of lower value or were too large for transportation: cabinetry and living room furniture made of rosewood, dressing tables, mirrors, and multi-volume encyclopedic publications (*Priblizitel’nyj perechen’...*, 9–9v).

It is appropriate to mention the evacuation of the population. According to some estimates, about 90,000 people left Vilnius during the period in question (Stravinskienė, 2023) under both voluntary and forced evacuations. The order for mandatory departure from the city was handed down to government officials, employees of strategically important organizational units, reservists, education workers, and military personnel. One of the last to leave the city was Governor Pyotr Veriovkin, who addressed members of the local elite with these words as a farewell: “Don’t forget, gentlemen, not for a moment, that we will be back!” (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 21). Indeed, after less than four years, the Russians invaded Vilnius again. However, these were not the tsarist army, but Bolshevik troops.

The departing Vilnius residents took with them their most valuable belongings, including works of art and historic or commemorative objects. One witness to the events of that time described the sight of the crowds fleeing the city as follows:

Along the streets ... there are long rows of numerous carts loaded with equipment and goods.... trains are overflowing with refugees who, in the absence of seats in the cars, travel standing up, sitting on their own bags, or crammed into train cars outside the compartments (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 4v).

Mainly employees of strategic units, high-ranking officials, and officers were allowed to bring more items. Several well-known Vilnius collectors fell into this category: the aforementioned General Zhirkevich and Antoni Brodowski, an employee of the Engineering Department of the Vilnius Military District (*Inzhenernoe upravlenie Vilenskogo voennogo okruga*) and owner of a private museum.

Zhirkevich was the owner of an extremely valuable collection, which included works of art, old prints, and historical memorabilia. A large part of these items referred to the history of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The collector kept manuscripts of Antoni Edward Odyniec, Stanisław Moniuszko, Joachim Lelewel, and other well-known people, among others (Brensztejn, 1911). In addition, he had a very interesting collection of ancient weapons and instruments of torture used by policemen and Cossacks (*Po zgonie twórcy...*, 1v), 29 poods (with a total weight of over 475 kg) which went to the Rumyantsev Museum after the war. It became dispersed and forgotten (Zhirkevich-Podlesskih, 2020).

Brodowski took with him a rich collection of clocks, numismatic items, manuscripts, old prints, paintings, textiles, porcelain, and Judaica objects. These ended up in Vitebsk, Belarus (Breżgo, 1926).

Some items from private collections, due to their weight and size (e.g., furniture, clocks, and large paintings), as well as items that were categorized as less valuable by their owners (e.g., incomplete books and magazines, specimens that were damaged or in need of thorough restoration) were left in Vilnius. Thus, for example, Brodowski left some specimens which were part of a private museum in his apartment on Poplavskaia Street, such as excavation artifacts, cabinet clocks, books, engravings, plans, natural history specimens, and arts and crafts exhibits (huge ancient padlocks). In addition, he left dozens of museum display cases. The remnants of the collection were accepted for safekeeping (for fear of possible looting) as a deposit by the Society of Friends of Science (*Dziennik...*, vol. 2, 62v–63; *Sprawozdanie ze stanu muzeum...*, 32v).

Abandoned items, if not in the care of family, friends, servants, or kind neighbors, often fell into the hands of traders (especially during the German occupation) and over time became the property of other collectors or ended up in public collections. In the realities

of the time, a number of advertisements appeared in the local press offering to take care of abandoned properties and leftover movables in exchange for remuneration or the opportunity to use the apartments free of charge (*Ogłoszenia drobne...*, 1915). Reacting to the situation, the tsarist authorities issued a decree under which plundering abandoned apartments was punishable even by death (Tumanov, 1915).

It should be noted that for many collectors the period of the First World War provided an opportunity to enlarge their collections, as those leaving areas threatened by military action (in later periods also members of their families and other people who took care of the property left behind) often sold a variety of items – including antiques – for a song. During the absence of the aforementioned Zhirkevich in Vilnius, the movable property belonging to him was sold by the collector's family, which remained in the city. According to Aleksander Śnieżko, an expert in the history of Vilnius, after returning to his own apartment in 1927, the tsarist general “found nothing left” (Śnieżko, p. 132).

During the war, valuable items from government facilities abandoned by the tsarist authorities often found their way into private collections. Count Hipolit Korwin-Milewski – a social and political activist – mentioned that antique furniture from the reign of Tsar Alexander I in the former governor-general's palace, which had been turned into a hospital, was sold by the Russian Sister of Mercy in charge of the building to his nephew and then to the socialite and collector Count Antoni Tyszkiewicz, as well as to the Germans (Korwin-Milewski, 1930).

Archives left unattended or in the care of incompetent people were dispersed and sometimes completely destroyed. They became objects of interest to bribers and paper traders, who seized for example, valuable post-Unite and Orthodox church manuscripts from the archives of the Orthodox consistory and the files of the former Noble Institute (*Dvorjanskij institut*) and former Vilnius schools, which were kept in the resources of Russian educational institutions. Thanks to the efforts of the local Polish intelligentsia, the aforementioned documents were acquired and included in the archives of the Vilnius Society of Friends of Science (*Sprawozdanie ze stanu zbiorów...*, 156–156v).

Despite the fact that the Municipal Board city, headed by Mayor Michał Węśławski, carefully organized the protection of former government facilities and residential buildings after the withdrawal of the tsarist authorities, there were frequent cases of illegal seizure of abandoned property by dishonest neighbors and watchmen who took “expensive stylish furniture, padded with expensive material, beautiful and valuable beds, bronze clocks, oil paintings and so on” (*Dziennik...*, vol. 2, 62–62v). We should add, however, that these were dwellings (houses and apartments) to which their former Russian owners, as a result of historical conditions, usually never returned.

During the German occupation, large-scale forcible seizures of public and private property were also carried out by the German occupation authorities (*Dziennik...*, vol. 2, 4v, 41–41v; Buika, 2009). An incident at the Museum of Antiquities at the Vilnius Public Library, abandoned by the Russians, was described as follows:

To the government museum, which was taken care of and sealed with its seals by the Municipal Board, was came the German Baurath (architect) who, disregarding protests, tore off the seals and took 12 paintings, supposedly to decorate the apartment of Governor [Adalbert] Wegner and Gen[eral Hermann von] Eichhorn (*Dziennik...*, vol. 2, 4v).

Great damage was done to the facilities (along with the equipment there), which had been converted into military hospitals and quarters for soldiers. In 1916, this is how the interior of the former Real School (*Real'noe uchilishche*) looked:

All of this has turned out to be in the most terrible condition, because since the evacuation the school housed Russian and German lazarets.... The physics and chemistry cabinets have suffered the most, here almost none of the items are intact; books were burned in the ovens, therefore a significant part of ... the library does not exist (Szkłennik, 2018, p. 334).

The interiors of the building of the former Piarist Nobilium Collegium looked similar. After the January Uprising, the Russian Mariinsky

Higher School for Ladies (*Mariinskoe vyshee zhenskoe uchilishche*) was located here. “Today it is a hovel: cabinets opened, in some doors hanging on a single hinge, broken glass in empty display cases, and in the assembly hall on the floor piles of ragged books, sheet music, notebooks, diplomas and letters of commendation” – this is that the diarist wrote (*Dziennik...*, vol. 2, 46–46v).

As we discuss the loss of movable cultural heritage during the First World War, the question arises: Were absolutely all valuable objects indeed taken out of Vilnius at that time? Or was perhaps something saved from the forced evacuation, looting, and destruction? Due to the extremely tense situation, the evacuation rush, the lack of sufficient logistical capabilities, and the chaos and panic that prevailed in Vilnius in late August and early September 1915 amid the rapid approach of the German army, part of the movable property of a historical nature was fortunately saved.

It is worth citing here some telling quotes that perfectly illustrate the realities and the drama of the time at the end of tsarist rule. As a diarist of the time reported,

meanwhile, cannon sounds could be heard more and more clearly in the city, at first far away, then closer and closer and more distinct. ... All sorts of news circulated in Vilnius, one story beating the other. A complete panic arose among the Russians, they fled taking their possessions or abandoning their apartments to the mercy of fate ... German airplanes began to appear more and more frequently over the city, occasionally dropping bombs, mostly in the vicinity of the ... railroad station (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 10–11v).

As for the question of the tsarist officials overlooking or failing to take into account certain antiquities during the evacuation, it is worth citing the example of the fate of one of the prints stored in the Vilnius Public Library (in the interwar period, this was the library of Stephen Batory University). As Michał Eustachy Brensztejn – an active employee of the university library – wrote, “by some miraculous accident before all the evacuations and robberies” (Brensztejn, 1922, p. 7) a valuable old print from 1555 with an embossed super-exibrium of King Sigismund Augustus – an avid collector and great

lover of Vilnius – was saved. Other valuable objects of printing art, which were bypassed by the Russian evacuation campaign, were also discovered over time in that library (Lisowski, 1932).

Quite a few items that fall into the category of cultural property were saved thanks to the involvement of the local multinational community of Vilnius. Because the armaments industry (both Russian and German) needed a vast supply of raw materials such as nonferrous metals for the manufacture of weapons and munitions, the tsarist authorities decided to export all objects made of copper, aluminum, lead, zinc, and tin. The requisition even included everyday items: saucepans, pots, cauldrons, tools, candelabra, etc. (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 11v; Jankowski, 1923). Given that quite a few monuments were made of just this type of metal, fears about the fate of these items as well were not unreasonable. However, as witnesses to the events of the time note, the ordinance was ignored by the city's residents (*Dziennik...*, 11v; Jankowski, 1923). Vilnius residents tried every possible way to hide their most valuable items, by burying them in basements and gardens (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 9).

However, the forced evacuation of the bells of Vilnius churches was successful, despite numerous protests, requests, and appeals by the faithful and clergy members to civil and military authorities. The outrage of the city's residents was so great that clashes with the tsarist police nearly ensued. Leaflets were distributed around the city, printed on a hectograph and entitled "Ratujmy dzwony nasze" [Save Our Bells]. Their author was probably Waław Gizbert-Studnicki – a city archivist, ardent lover of monuments, and otherwise a person of Protestant faith (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 2). We should add that some objects of sacral heritage thanks to the commitment of priests and laymen, were nonetheless secretly saved from export to the empire (Buika, 2009).

Tsarist authorities also made appeals encouraging the evacuation of objects in private collections (Kuntze, 1937). Such an offer was given to Ivan Luckievich – a Belarusian socio-cultural activist and owner of extremely valuable collections concerning the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (*Pamjaci Ivana Lucikevicha ...*, 1920). However, collectors shunned this opportunity, with few exceptions (those who were subject to forced evacuation).

Some decided to deposit valuables and the most valuable exhibits in the vault of the Vilnius Private Commercial Bank (*Vilenskij chastyj kommercheskij bank*) (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 9). The Society of Friends of Science took advantage of this opportunity. At a meeting on August 19, 1915, the board members of this organization (Fr. Jan Kurczewski, Władysław Zahorski, Stanisław Kościalkowski, Count Tadeusz Roztworowski, and Aleksander Burhardt), fearing that the collections would be destroyed or looted, decided to deposit the most valuable museum, library, and archival objects in the bank's vault. In addition, it was resolved to use a special locker "halfway down the stairs" and to organize a 24-hour on-call service (*Protokoły posiedzeń...*, 27v). Among the hidden items were manuscripts, incunabula, and artifacts made of precious metals: jewelry, numismatic items, and Eliza Orzeszkowa's table silverware and guild cups. The specimens secured also included manuscript memorabilia of Adam Mickiewicz, Władysław Syrokomla, and Tadeusz Kościuszko (*Spis eksponatów...*, 2v-7).

Concern for the fate of cultural property was also shared by the members of the Lithuanian Scientific Society (*Lietuvių mokslo draugija*). Its president, Jonas Basanavičius, noted in his memoirs that on August 24, 1915, he decided to leave his place of residence and move to the society's museum premises in order to personally supervise the collections stored there (Basanavičius, 1936). Thanks to his efforts, books, manuscripts, and other valuable items were hidden in the basement of the Franciscan monastery in order to be protected from the approaching German army (Nezabitauskis, 1938).

It is also worth mentioning the merits of W. Studnicki. He was instrumental in rescuing documents from the City Archive, which was located in the building of the former Franciscan monastery, from being transported to the empire. It contained manuscript monuments dating back to the 15th century, including city records, craft guild records (*Rachunki miasta Wilna...*, 1914; Radkiewiczówna, 1929). After the tsarist authorities left Vilnius, he and his wife, Janina Kozłowska-Studnicka, also took care of other Vilnius archives as much as possible (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1922; Mienicki, 1937).

Thanks to the activists of the Association of Technicians in Vilnius, the remains of the aforementioned library of the Real School were

secured. After being temporarily housed in the City Pump Station, for fear of the negative effects of the humidity there and the lack of proper supervision, they were directed to the Society of Friends of Sciences (*Protokoły posiedzeń...*, 32v–33).

The evacuation of cultural assets in 1915 also had a positive effect. For example, tsarist monuments to M. Muravyov, Catherine II, and Alexander Pushkin were dismantled, to the joy of Vilnius residents (*Porozbiorowy kalendarz...*, p. 403). It was most gratifying to see the removal of a monument to a former governor-general nicknamed “Veshatiel” [Hangman], which during the period of tsarist rule was surrounded by a fence and guarded by a policeman, out of fear of possible destruction. The event was captured by prominent Vilnius photographer Jan Bułhak, who, hiding behind the roller blinds of the windows of the apartment of Tadeusz Wróblewski – a lawyer and bibliophile – took some interesting snapshots (Bułhak, 1939). “A scaffolding that looked like a gallows was arranged at the monument, and with ropes tied around his neck, the figure of Muravyov was raised and hung from the gallows to the delight of the crowd of spectators and even the soldiers, who spared no jokes and pranks” (*Dziennik...*, vol. 1, 3), as noted in his diary by the oft-quoted historian and social activist Władysław Zahorski.

The pedestals of the aforementioned monuments survived throughout World War I. They were an eyewitness testimony to the collapse of tsarist rule in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They were removed only during the interwar period. The tsarist monuments never returned to the city, while one of the pedestals has survived to the present day and can now be seen in the square at Vilnius’s St. Catherine’s Church. However, it is not decorated with a sculpture of the famous Russian poet, but a bust of the prominent Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko, which was set up in the interwar period.

In summary, it should be said that the evacuation carried out by the tsarist authorities had an extremely negative impact on the state of preservation of cultural property. Most of the objects have never again returned to their original locations. The lost historical monuments and memorabilia became the property of foreign cultural institutions, were damaged during transportation, or were destroyed as a result of unfavorable historical conditions (wars and revolutions).

The attitude of a number of the local intelligentsia in Vilnius at the time who made every effort to protect the material cultural heritage from forced evacuation and looting was of fundamental importance. Thanks to their efforts, quite a few valuable items were preserved, which now adorn Lithuanian archives, libraries, and museums.

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