

## Why the Union That Wasn't Actually Failed?

### Abstract:

The present study is an attempt to answer the question as to why the residents of Vilnius displayed such reluctance towards the idea of reactivating an international union, put forth by Józef Piłsudski in his “Proclamation to the inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania” (22 April 1919) in this city recently liberated from the Bolsheviks. During the Polish-Soviet War, Piłsudski undertook extensive efforts aimed at reviving the Union of Lublin in a modern, 20th-century form. The failure of the federalist concept resulted primarily from the consequences of the German special policy conducted in the years 1915–1918 in the German-occupied portion of the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, known as Ober-Ost. The German strategy, aimed at achieving political and economic domination in the occupied territories, exploited the political ambitions of all national circles other than Polish by antagonizing the representatives of various ethnic groups with the strongest and most dangerous group within the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, i.e. the Poles. In this situation, Lithuanian and Belarusian leaders under German occupation saw no benefit in a possible alliance with Poles, especially that anti-Polish measures were rewarded with subsidies from the German occupation military authorities. All attempts at a compromise made by Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian politicians proved unsuccessful,

while conflicts of interest between the successors of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania grew (on 16 February 1918, the Lithuanian side declared independence for the second time; on 25 March 1918 the leaders of the BNR issued their Third Charter; on 11 November 1918 the formation of the first Lithuanian government was proclaimed, and on 11 December 1918 the Jewish elders joined the Lithuanian Taryba). The Bolsheviks' entry into Vilnius antagonised the Polish and Jewish populations even further. In summary, the citizens of Vilnius were sceptical of the federalist concept regardless of their nationality. Implementing a system (or union) of buffer states separating Poland from Russia was therefore out of the question. Due to the ultimate failure of the federalist policy sealed by the signing of the Peace of Riga, no powerful multinational union would emerge in the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to effectively put a halt to any later expansionist attempts, either from the East or from the West.

**Keywords:** Great War, 1915–1921, Ober-Ost, Vilnius, Lithuania, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Jews, special policy, union, federation, Józef Piłsudski.