

More Than Just Neighbors

Published: 23.08.2016

Reviewed by Dr. Anat Vaturi Edited by

This review was first published as: Anat Vaturi. Review of Frick, David A., Kith, Kin, and Neighbors: Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-Century Wilno. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

Seventeenth-century Wilno (Vilnius), capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where "representatives of several religions have their temples ... and they all practice their religion without obstacles, they all ... live together in peace and connections with the papists," has attracted the attention both of its contemporaries and of generations of historians.[1] Yet only recently has David Frick examined it through the modern lenses of microhistory and social geography and produced a long-deserved monograph on human networks among "kith, kin, and neighbors," and the way these networks function within the confessionally and ethnically mixed urban space.

In this engaging and thoroughly researched book, Frick adopts Benjamin Kaplan's definition of day-to-day toleration as independent from abstract tolerance, and analyzes the daily interactions among Vilnans of different cultures and confessions--Christians (Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Orthodox, and Uniate), Jews, and Muslim Tatars--in order to "understand patterns, behavior, and rules of multiconfessional, multiethnic, and multicultural coexistence" (p. 5). While skilfully culling the archives to show, that in seventeenth-century Wilno "everyone had daily, close contact with individuals of other groups" (p. 59), Frick reveals how through continuous negotiations and the blurring of confessional boundaries the Vilnans managed to overcome inherited tensions and to operate daily in an ethnically and confessionally diverse environment.

The volume is comprised of two sections, both organized thematically, and an epilogue. The first section reconstructs the physical, confessional, and social topographies of Wilno and aptly sets the stage for the second section, which is devoted to people and human networks functioning within that complex landscape. The book opens with a unique mapping of streets and houses of Wilno in the 1630s and their description according to location and confessional or ethnic affiliation of householders. Through impressive archival work comparing the surveys of King Władysław IV's quartermaster (*lustracje*) with other available documents, Frick manages to identify the houses of people mentioned throughout the book as well as the housing tendencies of confessional groups living in intramural Wilno. While challenging our traditional understanding of religious divisions in the

seventeenth-century city's public space, the author demonstrates that although most neighborhoods had one predominant confession they also housed many confessional and religious outsiders (chapter 2). In a most intriguing third chapter, Frick even upsets our image of religious uniformity within the walls of one house. While examining all sorts of archival materials (especially a hearth-tax census of 1690) and anecdotal evidence, he proves that "neighbors" of different denominations frequently shared the same living space, both as cohabitants of houses, rooms, or even tiny alcoves, and as regular visitors. The description of shared public and private spaces is completed with "acoustic" chapters discussing how Vilnan coexistence was structured through diverse systems and habits of marking time and through a variety of languages. The emerging conclusion is that depending on constellation, the various calendars as well as multilinguistic environments expressed in stereotypes and linguistic hybrids brought Vilnians together or set them apart.

The second section presents the analysis of interconfessional human networks woven around the key aspects of the lives of seventeenth-century Vilnians: birth, baptism and appointment of godparents, education, betrothal and marriage, divorce, court litigation, care of the old, and death. On the basis of innumerable archival sources--many of them hitherto unknown[2]--Frick traces evidence of interfaith arrangements and argues that cross-confessional alliances were a frequent phenomenon that helped sustain the coexistence. For example, after showing how interfaith loyalties were established through the selection of godparents, the author moves to an engaging chapter on education and apprenticeship, in which he discusses inter-religious contacts and interconfessional allegiances established in the frame of professional training offered by Wilno's multireligious craft guilds and attendance of local schools and of the Jesuit Academy). Frick illustrates his argument with the educational curriculum of the Lutheran royal doctor Maciej Vorbek-Lettow, which shows how "Vilnians were willing to cross boundaries of confession in seeking and providing an education at all levels and [had] ability to maintain difference both during and after the experience" (p. 171). In further chapters on courtship and marriage, and death in Wilno, Frick shows that despite the teaching of religious authorities, mixed marriages and interfaith selection of guardians for widows and minor children were much more frequent than a modern reader might have expected. Throughout the second section of the book Frick repeatedly observes that in the local world secular concerns, such as social status or family prosperity, were often more important than religious preferences, and that interconfessional alliances were frequent mostly among the elite. Furthermore, he acknowledges that interfaith arrangements within the frame of the family were most common among Protestants. These conclusions are tested by the author in the surprising chapter on the Muscovite occupation, in which he examines how interconfessional human networks established in peacetime Wilno functioned during war and exile, and reasserted themselves after the liberation in 1661.

Throughout the book, Frick emphasizes coexistence and interfaith collaboration, and the reader is rarely reminded of tension and clashes, which were part of a complex coexistence. It is only in the epilogue that the burning questions of interreligious conflict and violence are finally addressed. Inspired by David Nirnberg's thesis that religious violence was an indispensable part of *convivencia*, Frick devotes the first part of the epilogue to the outbursts of religious violence in the specific conditions of seventeenth-century Wilno, and analyzes them as part of the endemic violence of the time. While arguing that tumults against Jews and the various Christian minorities often followed recognizable patterns, had constant--"scripted"--components, and culminated in rule-based interfaith litigation, the author claims that curbed religious violence played an

important role in preserving the social and religious status quo. Moreover, he claims that violence in seventeenth-century Wilno was mitigated by continuous litigation as well as through the multiconfessional character of the city, which caused a deconcentrating of violence. After this all-too-brief discussion of "communities of violence" and "communities of litigation" (also described in the more philological chapter 11), Frick goes back to Kaplan's list of necessary "arrangements and elaborations" for interfaith coexistence and devotes the closing part of the epilogue to a comparative consideration of Vilnian multiconfessional practice with other patterns of toleration in western Europe. While pointing to the similarities between Wilno's practice of toleration and the so-called biconfessional model, Frick concludes his work with an assessment, that Vilnian unique, liberal multiconfessionalism was deeply rooted in "habits of coexistence [that] predated the conversion of the Grand Duchy to Christianity" (p. 416).

Although the subtitle *Communities and Confessions* suggests that the study will concentrate solely on interconfessional relations between Christians of different denominations, *Kith, Kin, and Neighbors* sets an ambitious goal of capturing the formation and functioning of interfaith networks between representatives of all intramural Vilnian communities, including Jews. Frick achieves this difficult objective and skillfully includes Judeo-Christian encounters in his study, but at the price of undertreating them. For example, issues of vital importance to the understanding of urban relations--such as Jewish employment of Christian servants, Jews in Christian bath houses, or Christians in Jewish taverns are--only briefly touched upon, and support a somewhat alien image of the Jewish community. Undoubtedly a more elaborate inclusion of Jews in this intriguing study would strengthen the inter-religious dimension of the discussion and would also satisfy the readers of Frick's classic articles on Jews in seventeenth-century Wilno.

In short, Frick has produced an admirable monograph recommended not only for students of east-central European history or Slavic philology, but for all those interested in interfaith relations, urban history, social geography, linguistics, and multiculturalism. Exhaustively researched, well argued and inspiring, it offers a model for analysis of interfaith coexistence in other multireligious and multiethnic early modern cities, which will hopefully follow.

Notes

[1]. *News from Poland* (London, 1642) as quoted in Janusz Tazbir, *Reformacja, kontrreformacja, tolerancja* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1997), 97.

[2]. A portion of Frick's source base was published as *Wilnianie. Żywoty siedemnastowieczne* (Warsaw: Przegląd Wschodni, 2008).

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



Citation:

Dr. Anat Vaturi: Review for: David Frick: *Kith, Kin, and Neighbors. Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-Century Wilno*, 2013, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/en/publications/kith-kin-and-neighbors-communities-and->

confessions#r4891.

<https://www.pol-int.org/en/publications/kith-kin-and-neighbors-communities-and-confessions?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=4891>