

“Great Vilnius Controversy”: Jesuit–Calvinist Polemical Literature of Early Modern Vilnius (1574–1647) Within Its Domestic and European Contexts

“It is already known to all Lithuania how much commotion these distinguished theologians of Vilnius had recently made, and how cruel a slaughter they opened the doors for, while the mad crowd, incited by their voices, was already helpless, and was only waiting for the signal to carry out the murder.” This is how a prominent Calvinist writer and a passionate adversary of the Vilnius Jesuits, Andrzej Wolan, described them in 1583, following an earlier anti-Calvinist riot, for which he held them responsible.

Early modern Vilnius served as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and was one of the most important cities in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was situated at the crossroads of various cultures and religions. Indeed, the population of Vilnius in the mid-16th century consisted of (predominantly) Catholic Lithuanians and Poles, Orthodox Ruthenians, Lutheran Germans, Jews, and Muslim Tatars. Calvinists joined this unique religious mix in the late 1550s. Surprisingly, all these groups initially coexisted in relative peace. However, the arrival of the Jesuits in 1569 and the establishment of their university in 1579 changed the city’s dynamics. Indeed, in the following decades, Vilnius experienced unusually violent religious conflicts. The first was the notorious dispute between Wolan and the Jesuits, which generated much of the literature I will analyze within this project.

The conflict began rather innocently. Sometime around 1574, Jesuit Piotr Skarga, the future rector of the Vilnius Academy and famous royal preacher, sent a private letter to Wolan in which he laid out his Catholic theological views. Wolan responded with a published text, *True and Orthodox View of the Old Church on the Lord’s Supper to Piotr Skarga*, criticizing many elements of Catholic doctrine. This ignited a ferocious backlash not only from Skarga but also from his fellow Jesuits. In the following years, the Wolan–Skarga conflict gained fame throughout Europe, drawing the attention of Spanish Jesuit Francisco Torres, a professor at the Roman College, and the Italian Jesuit and esteemed papal diplomat Antonio Possevino, both of whom launched attacks against the Calvinist theologian.

Such was the origin of the multi-generational polemic in Vilnius, which in the following decades, involved many influential and lesser-known Calvinist and Jesuit writers. In its scope, it matched, or perhaps even surpassed, the famous mid-16th-century English polemic between Catholics and Protestants that erupted with Elizabeth I’s accession to the throne in 1559—dubbed “The Great Controversy”. Despite its historical significance and far-reaching impact on polemical literature in Poland–Lithuania and beyond, the Vilnius polemic, which I have named the “Great Vilnius Controversy”, has been largely overlooked by scholars.

My project seeks to address this historical gap by providing the first comprehensive examination of the Jesuit and Calvinist polemical literature produced in Vilnius (or directly related to it) between 1574 and 1647, a pivotal period that witnessed profound religious transformations in the city between the publication of Wolan’s first anti-Jesuit treatise and the so-called Świadoście affair—last successful attempt of the Vilnius Calvinists to resist the re-Catholicization efforts. By analyzing printed and manuscript texts and situating them in the context of local urban affairs, as well as national and European polemics, I will uncover the unique features of the “Great Vilnius Controversy” and its broader implications in early modern religious culture.

To achieve this, I will build a database of source texts, which I will expand throughout the duration of the project, especially with material gathered on research queries. This will allow me to take a broader look at the polemical literature of Vilnius and compare it with analogous writings produced in Poland–Lithuania and Western Europe. I shall publish the results of my work in a series of articles in English, which will present the Vilnius texts in a broad European context, so as to appeal to the international scholarly community from various areas of early modern studies. I will also disseminate the effect of my research at the most prestigious international annual conferences in the field of early modern history organized by, inter alia, the Renaissance Society of America and The Sixteenth Century Society & Conference