INTRODUCTION: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREAT WAR TO LITHUANIANS

On 23 November 1934, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier appeared in Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania. A warrior who was presumed to have died during the Lithuanian Wars of Independence provided the remains of the Unknown Soldier. There were no direct references to the First World War during the consecration of the tomb. However, the ceremony itself took place 20 years after the beginning of the Great War, and the speakers emphasised that it would be a symbol commemorating all soldiers who died for Lithuania. The concept of the Unknown Soldier emerged in Europe at that time, and had a meaning in the commemorative context of the Great War.1 Furthermore, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Kaunas was not a new memorial: the remains were placed under an already-existing monument to those who died for the freedom of Lithuania. This symbol, unveiled in 1921, was clearly dedicated to those who had died in the Wars of Independence (1919–1920). However, with the burial of the Unknown Soldier, the meaning of the monument seemed to be extended, to include new fighters in the ranks of those who could be said to have died for the freedom of Lithuania, but without formally naming them.

Just two weeks earlier, on 11 November 1934, the Lithuanian-French Society in Kaunas had held a public concert of French songs and music. We do not know whether the 20th year since the outbreak of the war (and the date of the anniversary of the Armistice at the same time) was highlighted during the event. However, it was very likely no accident that this date was chosen. In the next few years, the Lithuanian-French Society, chaired by Mykolas Römeris, a prominent lawyer, rector of Vytautas Magnus University and a veteran of the Great War, continued to organise the annual commemorations on 11 November, honouring not only the French, but also the Lithuanian soldiers who perished in the Great War. These events traditionally included prayers in the student church in Kaunas, and a flag lowering ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Ultimately, in 1937, the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga [Association of Army Predecessors] was organised, becoming the first veterans' association in Lithuania to unite exclusively the former militaries of the Great War, with the goals of collecting mate-