

Imagined national spaces and access to the sea: the case of Lithuania

Vasilijus Safronovas

As with the Poles in southern parts of East Prussia, for Lithuanians the northeastern parts of that German province became their *terra irredenta* already in the late 19th – early 20th century. During the First World War, they hoped that this territory would be annexed to the Lithuanian nation-state. However, all that the Republic of Lithuania managed to win was a smaller part of this territory—the Memel Territory (Klaipėda Region) that had been separated from Germany in 1920. Moreover, Lithuania won this territory only by resorting to military force and its diplomatic abilities, as the number of people in the Memel Territory who would have enthusiastically backed the idea of joining Lithuania proper was small.

The paper presents the contexts in which the ideas of cultural proximity of the Memel Territory to Lithuania and the role of Memel as the Lithuanian port appeared for the first time. It analyzes how these ideas were utilized in order to argue the “Lithuanian rights” to the Memel Territory during and after the First World War.

The idea of cultural proximity of the northeastern parts of East Prussia to Lithuanians was an outcome of endeavors to overcome the socio-cultural differences that existed between Prussian and Russian Lithuanians. In order to achieve it, the burgeoning Lithuanian national culture suggested the “two Lithuanias” idea, which became a key tool in the creation and appropriation of “our own” national space in East Prussia. That idea projected the association of language with a certain space back to prehistoric times. It rested on views about Lithuania’s eternal existence and thus proposed that Lithuania “split” in the thirteenth or fifteenth century due to “German” (the Teutonic Order’s) influence. According to these concepts, in the 1890s carriers of Lithuanian national culture, first in Prussia, already started to sporadically use the term “*Didžioji Lietuva*” [Lithuania Major] that was applied to the part of the “Lithuanian world” lying in the Russian Empire. Later, in 1910, the concept “*Mažoji Lietuva*” [Lithuania Minor] crept into use more often to name the space inhabited by Lithuanian speakers in East Prussia. In this case, the content of the concept “Lithuania” was released from any political links with Prussia or Russia. The objective political realities had to be replaced by a romanticized and anachronistic idea of two sisters or two branches of the same tree, the larger and the smaller. This perspective required belief in the vision of a united Lithuania, which, following the story of the Lithuanian historical master narrative, “split” into two parts due to foreign influences.

Yet this treatment of the past, where the existence of a united Lithuania was considered independently of a specific timeframe, unavoidably forced the acceptance of the existing “division” of Lithuania as temporary, and encouraged questions of how long it would last. In this way, the system of meanings in the context of which the concepts “Lithuania Minor” and “Lithuania Major” were used gradually gave rise to Lithuanian irredentism. Pre-1914 that irredentism was not expressed in public. The invasion of Russia into East Prussia in the beginning of August 1914 channeled Lithuanian politicians’ and the press’s attention to this territory at lightning speed, allowing Lithuanian irredentism to be revealed.

The trajectories along which that irredentism developed during the war, to a large extent, were determined by Lithuanian politicians’ attempts to adapt to the changing balance of power in the

region. The leaders of Lithuanian political currents realistically assessed their chances at creating a state within the boundaries that Lithuanians themselves would set. That is why they had to associate the realization of their requirements with the side that would emerge as the winner after the war. During the initial stage of the war, Lithuanian politicians linked the achievement of their goals with Russian power and the possible expansion of its territory. However, in the spring of 1916 the Russian Lithuanian intelligentsia reoriented itself from being pro-Russian to being pro-German. This was also the momentum when it discarded the idea of “assimilating” with East Prussian Lithuanians using Russia’s geopolitical influence. Believing they could sway the interest of the Ober Ost leadership and Berlin to use Lithuanians as a means of entrenching Germany’s government in Ober Ost, Russian Lithuanians were inclined to subordinate themselves to those interests. During this shift of orientation it is likely that an understanding was reached that in order to convince Germany to relinquish a part of East Prussia’s territory to a Lithuania that was somehow linked with it, the only viable argument would be economic—the necessity of a port. That would explain why from June 1916 until November 1918 in the speeches of the Lithuanian intelligentsia about the joining of Lithuania Minor, discussion increasingly turned toward the necessity of annexing the port of Memel (Klaipėda). Thus, Russian Lithuanians saw their geopolitical orientation toward Germany as an opportunity to join at least a part of Lithuania Minor, including the Memel port, to the Lithuanian state. This position lasted until October–November 1918. Now the Lithuanians who sought to realize their claims on Lithuania Minor had to convince not Russia or Germany of the necessity of a port but France, the United States, and Great Britain. This explains why alongside the economic argument (access to the sea) that had already been used in negotiations with Germany, other arguments were invoked that would not have convinced Germany, such as the Lithuanian language’s distribution in this area, the nation’s inheritance rights, and national self-determination. But Lithuanians considered the most important argument, at least from 1918, to be national self-determination, as it was based on the “advanced” idea declared by one of the main allies themselves and explained in the program of US President Woodrow Wilson. The Lithuanian arguments did not influence the decision of the Paris Peace Conference to separate part of the territory of East Prussia north of the Memel River from Germany. However, these Lithuanian arguments did not remain unheard. Moreover, the appearance in 1919–1920 of the Memel Territory, which was not joined to Lithuania immediately encouraged “transfer” of the irredentist discourse about Lithuania Minor to this particular territory. Consequently, after 1919 the term “Lithuania Minor” was applied more and more often to the Memel Territory, separated from Germany.