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THE TREATMENT OF LITHUANIAN HISTORY IN AMERICAN TEXTBOOKS

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During the last twenty years, numerous college-level history textbooks have been published in the United States.* Many of these, particularly those emphasizing Europe, have dealt with Lithuania in one way or another. Generally, one can say that as the scope of the work increases, the extent of the information about Lithuania decreases. This tendency is especially evident in textbooks focusing on surveys of Western civilization from prehistory to the present. Without using a computer, it would be impossible to cite all the works applicable to Lithuanian history, and this is not the purpose of this paper. Rather, I will share some general impressions gathered in the course of teaching 20th-century history and from my perusal of a considerable number of textbooks received from various publishers. The quality and scope of the available textbooks are uneven. Nowadays, there is a tendency to produce large-scale survey textbooks on Western civilization, which are also available in separate sections encompassing one or two centuries. One such example is Felix Gilbert (ed): *The Norton History of Modern Europe*. [1](#) This voluminous six-part text, written by six scholars, each a specialist on a particular century, begins with the Renaissance. The work outlines European history, emphasizing intellectual, cultural, and economic events that shaped European history—an approach that is now customary and does not limit itself to the treatment of political and diplomatic history, as was more or less the case before World War II. The entire text comprises 1,728 pages. In addition to the complete text, in an effort to reach a larger segment of the college textbook market, Norton has also produced separate editions of this work in hard and soft covers. Felix Gilbert himself authored the sixth volume entitled *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*.

Many texts create the impression that outside their own areas of concentration, authors tend to rely on previously published texts, merely paraphrasing sentences and at times repeating the same errors. With regard to Lithuanian history, for example, I frequently came across the statement that the authoritarian regime in Lithuania was established in 1923 rather than in 1926. Having encountered the same error several times in different works, I researched the matter and discovered that the source of this error was an encyclopedia of historical facts.[2](#) This error in itself may not be very important, but it well illustrates the fact that many specialists in European history are only superficially acquainted with the internal developments of Lithuanian history. Thus, it is not surprising that the incorrect year of 1923 frequently occurs in textbooks that give little information on Lithuanian history. These textbooks usually offer a broad-ranging discussion of general topics in European history, such as the rise of right-wing or fascist dictatorships after World War I.

Since World War II, we find a tendency in textbooks published in the United States to view European history from a "supranational" perspective. For this reason, the histories of many small nations appear to be pushed off to the side. Generally, the impression is created, although not always directly, that nationalism is an unhealthy phenomenon. Nationalism is condoned only in the Third World.

Returning to the treatment of Lithuanian history, it is important to note that the interpretations of facts are just as important as the facts themselves. There are basically four events in 20th-century Lithuanian history that are mentioned most frequently: (1) the issue of Lithuania's independence during World War I and its aftermath; (2) the loss of independence; (3) the impact of Lithuania upon the European diplomatic arena between the two world wars and (4) internal developments. In this connection I have frequently noticed that a great many textbooks treat only the first two events, the third one rarely, and the fourth one never, unless the texts are in-depth studies, such as C. E. Black and E. C. Helmreich: *Twentieth Century Europe* [3](#) and A. Rudhart: *Twentieth Century Europe*. [4](#)

We must bear in mind that Lithuanian historians discussing Lithuania's Declaration of Independence in 1918 tend to emphasize that independence was regained, thus noting that Lithuania had previously been an independent state. Many of

the texts, however, label early Lithuanian history, specifically the era of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as simply "Polish." When one reads about the partitioning of Poland in the eighteenth century, one gets the rather distinct impression that Lithuania was a mere province of Poland. Lithuanian history before the partitioning is rarely dealt with at all.

The re-establishment of Lithuanian independence after World War I is often associated with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. It is usually pointed out that Germany used the Treaty to sever Russia's western territories from her in an attempt to consolidate German influence in Eastern Europe. Rarely is it mentioned that the Baltic peoples desired secession from Russia in order to establish independent states. Instead, it is often stressed that the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk constituted a great territorial loss to Russia. By virtue of this treaty, to use Professor Gilbert's own words, Russia was in effect separated from the rest of Europe. Although a pro-Russian frame of reference is projected, it does not necessarily follow that independence for the Baltic peoples was an anachronism. Gilbert himself notes that because of their greater development the Baltic provinces were different from the rest of Russia, and he does not question the validity for their statehood in the postwar years. However, when speaking of events in 1939 concerning the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he creates the impression that in 1940 the Soviet Union merely regained control of territories that Russia had lost earlier. A map printed in one of the texts (Walter Consuelo Langsam & Otis C. Mitchell, *The World Since 1919*)⁵ refers to the area in question as "Russia's Western Border, 1939-1941." Although the text deals with Soviet expansionism in 1939 and 1940, the visual impact of the map tends to minimize or offset verbal arguments on Soviet imperialism. Similar maps are included in other texts.

In discussions of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States generally little attention is paid to the impact of Communist ideology. The subject is treated from the viewpoint of Russian *raison d'état*. Very often, the annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union is interpreted as merely Stalin's making good use of a splendid opportunity (it occurred during the German occupation of Paris). Many authors of history texts present Stalin's moves in the Baltic States as an attempt to block Hitler's drive to the East; most emphasize that this was accomplished by force, sometimes referring to it as Soviet imperialism. The present sovietization of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is rarely discussed but mention is made of the fact that Soviet-controlled assemblies of the three Baltic states requested admission to the Soviet Union and that such requests were promptly granted by Moscow. Mass deportations to Siberia and the activities of the NKVD in the Baltic States are treated superficially if at all. Readers not acquainted with the history of the Baltic States (professors as well as students) can easily get the impression that the Baltic states merely went from one dictatorial political system to another. In general, we must keep in mind that American historians have little sympathy for right-wing dictatorships and that until the advent of Khrushchev, Stalinism was still treated mildly in many textbooks. It was only Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th Party Congress that prompted many historians to take a closer look at the period of Stalinist terror. In more recent textbooks, material on Stalinism is presented in greater depth.

Even in texts not dealing with the internal history of Lithuania, the questions of Vilnius (Vilna) and Klaipėda (Memel) are frequently mentioned within the framework of Polish and German history. The effects of those conflicts on diplomatic relations of Europe is also analyzed. Black and Helmreich, who discuss Lithuanian history at greater length, also point out that the Soviet-Lithuanian Treaty of 1926 produced a great deal of apprehension in the West. The text by Langsam and Mitchell mentions that Poland attempted to create a union among the states bordering on the Baltic Sea, including Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Lithuania. These authors theorize that such a confederation would have been beneficial for the states involved. Since Moscow opposed the plan and Lithuania was undergoing a wave of anti-Polish sentiment, nothing came of the plan. Black and Helmreich also mention that in the 1930's the Baltic States had many problems with political minorities which worked in favor of both the Russians and the Germans.

The collapse of the democratic institutions in the Baltic States after World War I is often interpreted as an example of political immaturity: an ever-increasing splintering of political parties eventually led to dictatorships that the citizens accepted with very little resistance. This interpretation is stressed by Raymond J. Sontag in his work, *A Broken World*.⁶ Although used as a textbook, this book was not written primarily for this purpose but comprises one volume in the series, *The Rise of Modern Europe*, edited by Professor William L. Langer. Such interpretations as that mentioned above occur in many works.

In one specialized text analyzing the economic history of the Twentieth century (Paul Apert: *Twentieth Century Economic History of Europe*),⁷ the author presents Lithuania in a very favorable light. Lithuania is compared to Czechoslovakia and shown as a country that was able to manage its affairs very well after World War I, especially the agricultural sector of its economy. The author states that Lithuania could have been a model of successful agricultural modernization for all of Eastern Europe, just as Czechoslovakia was in the industrial sector. Geoffrey Bruun and Victor S. Mamatey (*The World in the Twentieth Century*)⁸ note that although the Baltic states did succumb to dictatorial regimes before World War II, they had nevertheless used their period of independence to make impressive strides in many fields. Their collapse is viewed as unfortunate.

To reiterate, the discussions about Lithuania and the Baltic States in modern history texts are rather superficial. Many authors (whether American, British, or ex-European) are unfamiliar with the history of the Baltic States. The problem seems to be largely based on the fact that there are few in-depth studies on the Baltic area. Textbook authors dealing with the subject prefer to cite English-language sources published by reputable publishing houses, usually affiliated with university presses. So far, there are few such works dealing extensively with Lithuania and the Baltic States. It is probable that with the present increase in the number of books about the Baltic States, there will also be an increase in the interest in this area of study, which will result in a more comprehensive treatment of Baltic history.

* This article was presented at the fifth conference of The Institute of Lithuanian Studies, held on May 17-18, 1975 in Cleveland.

1 Gilbert, Felix, ed., *The Norton History of Modern Europe*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971.

2 Langer, William, L. *An Encyclopedia of World History*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948.

3 Black, C. E. & Helmreich, E. C. *Twentieth Century Europe*, 4th ed.. New York: Knopf, 1972.

4 Rudhart, Alexander, *Twentieth Century Europe*. Philadelphia—New York— Toronto: Lippincott, 1975.

5 Langsam, Walter, Consuelo & Mitchell, Otis C. *The World Since 1919*, 8th ed., New York—London. 1971.

6 Sontag, Raymond J. *A Broken World*. New York—Evanston: Harper Torchbooks, 1972.

7 Albert, Paul, *Twentieth Century Economic History of Europe*, New York: Schuman, 1951.

8 Bruun, Geoffrey & Mamatey, Victor, S. *The World in the Twentieth Century*, 5th ed., Boston; D. C. Heath Company, 1967.