

Lithuania

part 1

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Introduction

The Baltic state of Lithuania has a land area of 25,200 sq.miles (65,268 sq.km.) and a population of 3.8 million: twice the size of Belgium with one-third the population. On the west it is bounded by the Baltic Sea, with Latvia to the north and Belarus to the east; southward it has borders with Poland and the Kaliningrad enclave which is part of the Russian Federation. The country lies between latitude 54 degrees and 57 degrees north, level with Denmark, Northern Ireland and the Alexander Archipelago of Alaska.

Vilnius, founded in 1321, is the modern capital of Lithuania, with 15% of the population. Kaunas, founded in 1361, and the capital between the two World Wars, is the second city; and the port city of Klaipeda, established in 1252, has its own



distinct and peculiar history. As the Hanseatic port of Memel it was a very important trade centre in the Middle Ages, later came under Swedish control, then Prussian. It was part of the German Reich until after WW1, when the newly

independent Lithuania asked the allied powers for possession of the port. Allied procrastination was resolved by the forcible ejection of a French garrison by Lithuanian forces, and Lithuanian sovereignty over Memel/Klaipeda was recognised in December 1923.

The German population remained unreconciled to Lithuanian sovereignty, and as National Socialism grew in Germany, so it did in Klaipeda. Anti-Semitism brought about a mass exodus of Jews in 1938, and in March 1939 Memel was returned to the Reich, Hitler's last uncontested conquest. The Soviet army captured the city in 1945 and it became Klaipeda again, incorporated into the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. The ethnic, linguistic and cultural maelstrom that is the story of Klaipeda is a microcosm of the story of Lithuania. Two-thirds of Lithuania's inhabitants are Lithuanian; the other third is Russian, Polish, Belarussian or Ukrainian, with a significant minority of Jews.¹



Historical overview

The ancient ancestors of the Lithuanians moved to the Baltic region from beyond the Volga region of central Russia. Although we know that they traded amber with Rome, the traditions of Lithuanian statehood date only from the Middle Ages.² Duke Mindaugas united the Lithuanian tribes, about 1230, to defend themselves against attacks by the Teutonic Knights. In

1251 Mindaugas accepted the 'Christianity' of Rome, perpetrated an en-masse 'baptizing' on his people, and was proclaimed king by the Pope in 1253. Such magisterial impositions of a supposedly Christian religion upon a State were not uncommon in the centuries after Constantine, doing much harm to the truth and practice of the Gospel. The new king was at odds with his nobles over an enduring problem for the Baltic nations: do we look east, or west? Mindaugas was killed, the monarchy discontinued, and the country reverted to practical paganism under nominal Roman Catholicism.

In the 15th century Lithuanians became united under the powerful rulers of the Gediminas dynasty, and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was established. This incorporated modern Lithuania, Belarus and western Ukraine, so reaching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Many Russian principalities preferred the rule of

Old maps illustrating Lithuania's history



Lithuanians to that of the Tartars. The Grand Duke of Lithuania became also, by marriage, the King of Poland, and for a considerable time, including the Renaissance and Reformation era, Polish was the 'polite' language in Lithuania.³ The expansionist aspirations of the Russian neighbours were a constant threat, and in the late 18th century Lithuania finally came under Russian domination, following the partition of Poland. Lithuania disappeared from the map of Europe for 123 years. In the 19th century Czar Nicolas I closed down Vilnius University, founded in 1579, and also declared Russian Orthodoxy to be the state religion. After 1864 the Lithuanian language itself was repressed.

The interaction of Lithuanians and Poles, their ever changing shift of alliances and rebellions in the face of Russian or German assimilation, sums up much of the political history of this small nation. There was a precarious independence in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, repeatedly threatened by border disputes with Poland: Poland actually occupied Vilnius, and Kaunas served as the Lithuanian capital for twenty years. There was even a military coup in 1926 and a Mussolini-style rule by Antanas Smetona for three years. In 1940 Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union, but in 1941 the country was occupied by German

forces. Nearly all of Lithuania's Jews were murdered in camps and ghettos.

When the Germans were driven out by the Soviets in 1944 the process of Sovietization began in earnest. Just ahead of the returning Russian forces tens of thousands of Lithuanians left for the West, so that now there are well established Lithuanian communities in Canada and Australia, and elsewhere. The Soviets were callously restrictive and repressive, and in the next ten years some 130,000 Lithuanians were deported to Siberia. Lithuania's economy was utterly subsumed to the needs of the occupying regime. Once again, as had happened under the 19th century Russian dominion, the very language seemed faced with extinction.

When Gorbachev's 'perestroika' (restructuring) initiative came in 1985 all the Balkan Soviet States moved more boldly towards independent action. In March 1989 the Sajudis ('Movement') organization was established as a kind of

democratic Popular Front, and able to represent Lithuania's interests in Moscow. In May they declared that Lithuanian law superseded that of Moscow! On August 23rd, the 50th anniversary of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, a chain of over two million Baltic people lined the road from Vilnius to Tallinn in Estonia, a 450-mile living chain,



quickly to be known as the Baltic Way. In February 1990 Sajudis candidates secured an absolute majority in the legislature, and on March 11th independence was proclaimed: Lithuania was the first Soviet Republic to declare independence from Moscow, and the first to legalize non-communist political organizations.



Religion and the Reformation

In the 14th century the Lithuanian population still adhered to its ancient pagan worship, but there came a 'reinstatement' of Roman Catholicism through the Grand Duchy in 1387. Lithuania included a large population of Eastern Orthodox Christians, as well as sizable numbers of Muslim Tartars, Karaimes, Jews, and scatterings of Roman Catholics. Because of this, religious laws were consistently more lenient in Lithuania than in Poland and this tradition continued for a while, even after the establishment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569. Lithuania, which had been a meeting ground between Eastern and Western Christianity, shifted toward the West and Western culture. In the providences of our Sovereign God, Lithuania was thus not only exposed to the Renaissance and Humanism, but also to the



Luther

Protestant Reformation, challenging the dire dominion of the Roman Church.

Roman Catholicism had been brought again to Lithuania by a Polish-speaking priesthood.⁴ It was, again, not deep rooted, and covered 'pre-Christian' religion only superficially. When the Reformation began, there was no university in Vilnius, and higher education was sought at foreign universities.⁵ Lithuanians studying in Leipzig and Wittenberg became students of Martin Luther or Philip Melancthon, gaining first-hand knowledge of the new light of the Gospel.⁶

Many Lithuanians seemed willing to leave the Roman Catholic Church and to accept the new Reformed faith. One of the first preachers publicly to teach the Augsburg Confession was Jonas Tartila-Tartilavičius, pastor of Šilalė, in 1535/1536. He was soon forced to seek asylum in neighbouring Prussia. In 1539 a young scholar and theologian, Abraham Kulva (Abraomas Kulva-Kulvietis), founded an academy in Vilnius. Kulva was well educated, expert in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and had studied with Luther and Melancthon in Wittenberg. Within three years this first Protestant school in Lithuania was closed.



Melancthon

Kulva was to stand trial as a heretic but escaped to Prussia and the new school at Königsberg. In 1543, Kulva published his *Confessio Fidei*, expounding Luther's theological position and the responsibilities of church and state.



The Reformation and a Reformed Church

The Reformation re-ignited for Lithuania in the 1550s, when Sigismund II Augustus, the king's son and heir, modelled his court in the Italian Renaissance style. Vilnius became a centre of humanist culture, and Sigismund accumulated an impressive library, with works by Erasmus, Luther, Melancthon and Calvin. He also corresponded with the reformers.⁷

Sigismund II Augustus



Another nobleman, Duke Mikalojus Radvila the Black (1515-65), was Marshall of the royal court and from 1550 Lithuania's chancellor and palatine of Vilnius. He ruled the country when Sigismund was in Poland and became the chief proponent of the Reformation in Lithuania.



Duke Mikalojus Radvila the Black

Radvila opened his palace to Protestant services, maintained his own correspondence with Melancthon, Calvin and Bullinger, helped persecuted Protestants from other countries, and secured the foundation of the Lithuanian Evangelical Reformed Church. This church was shaped in the Geneva pattern Presbyterian structure, and the first synod, convened in 1557 in Radvila's palace, officially established the church (known simply as *Unitas Lituaniae*). Eight years after the founding of *Unitas Lituaniae*, Radvila died, May 29, 1565, leaving the new church without his protection just as the tide was turning against it.



The Counter Reformation

From 1545 to 1564 the Roman Catholic Church had sat in the Council of Trent,⁸ laying the ground-plan for what came to be known as the Counter Reformation, and the Jesuit order became the papal shock troops to resist the advance of the Reformation in Europe and to reclaim ground lost to the

Reformation. When the Act of Lublin was signed in 1569, making a 'Commonwealth of Two Nations' between Lithuania and Poland, many of the Protestant safeguards at law were lost, and the Jesuit friars swarmed into Lithuania. A Jesuit college was begun in Vilnius, becoming a university in 1579, with control over all higher education. The Reformation was in retreat, and the Lithuanian and Polish nobility relapsed into Romanism.

In one of the more poignant ironies of history, Radvila's sons became ardent supporters of the Jesuits and the Roman Catholic Restoration, undoing what their father had built. In 1581, the eldest son, Nicholas Christopher the Orphan, publicly burned Protestant writings, including his father's (Polish) Bible of Brest. Another son, Jurgis Radvila, became bishop of Vilnius and Cracow, and then the first Lithuanian Cardinal. Lutheran and Reformed Churches continued in Lithuania, but very much as a minority in the midst of a predominant Romanism; in times of Russian ascendancy Romanism itself was marginalised, by the Orthodox Church.

There were some small numbers of those in the Protestant tradition who continued in the way of personal faith in Christ and the walk of faith, but these were dismissed as pietists. The Moravian Brethren were in Lithuania in the 18th century, Baptists from the mid-19th century, Methodists in the late 19th century, Pentecostals and Adventists in the early 1900s, but all of these were small and but a few men in number. These churches were yet to face the turmoil and trial of Communist Soviet suppression and

oppression, and many which endured the greater part of the 20th century under that system are now very conservative and nationalistic, rather than Biblically aware and spiritually minded, but we will return to the contemporary situation later.

In a second part of this article there will be information on the fascinating language and literature of Lithuania to consider, and the inextricable involvement of the Bible in their development and struggle for continuance. The Society has an active programme of work in Lithuanian, and we seek to engage your informed and prayerful interest in the work, and the need for the Word of God in this country where the ancient paganism is now so strongly resurgent as to alarm even secular authorities.

Endnotes

¹ In an earlier time Vilnius had been such a centre of Jewish learning and culture as to earn the soubriquet 'Jerusalem of the North'.

² There is reference to Lithuania in the *Qedlinburg Annals*, AD 1009.

³ Despite Lithuanian sovereignty and independence in the majority of national life, much of Lithuania's history in these times is gathered under the single name of Poland.

⁴ Anxieties over 'Polonization' (which appears, delightfully, in some translated documents as 'pollination') in Lithuanian life continued into more recent times.

⁵ Especially in Königsberg, then capital of the Duchy of Prussia (soon to be the 'first' Protestant state), founded in 1255, and now, since 1946, called Kaliningrad, in the Russian enclave of the same name: a 'forgotten' casualty of WWII, where 'Prussian' fought Russian and both destroyed Jews. Immanuel Kant, Herman Helmholtz, Richard Wagner, all were Königsbergers. Mathematicians will know Königsberg as the original 'town with seven bridges', and the quest for a path that would enable all bridges to be crossed, but only once each, in one continuous circuit.

⁶ One hundred years earlier, Lithuanian students studying in Prague had become involved in the Bohemian Reform movement, spiritual offspring of Wycliffe and the Lollard movement in England. Jan Hus was burned in 1415, but Hussite tendencies were never completely eliminated in the Grand Duchy.

⁷ John Calvin wrote him two letters and sent him his *Introduction to St. Paul's Epistles*.

⁸ That is Trento, a town in Northern Italy.