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# BOOK REVIEW

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## **A BEGUILING HISTORY:**

**A review of the book WARS OF LITHUANIA. Ed. by Gediminas Vitkus. Vilnius, 2014**

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All nations try to get their young inspired by the great deeds of the past. This holds especially for a state that has recently gained independence, and that needs to assert its self-identity. As a rule, that is the very task the government of such a country gives to its professional historians. The book under review, which appeared in Lithuania in 2014, illustrates this thesis.

The inspiration for the volume was an influential reference book of military history (Sarkees, M. R., Wayman, F. W. *Resort to War: a Data Guide to Inter-state, Extra-state, and Non-state Wars, 1816—2007*. CQ Press, 2010), which was published in the US. According to Gediminas Vitkus, the editor of *Wars of Lithuania*, the American work either ignores or misinterprets the role and place of Lithuania in world history. Thus, a team of Lithuanian historians set out to remedy that situation, and the book under review appeared as a result. In the past of their nation, the authors identified four armed conflicts that met, in their opinion, the criteria of a major war. These criteria were listed by the initiators of the Correlates of War project launched at the University of Michigan in 1963. The four conflicts are the Lithuanian participation in the uprisings of 1830—1831 and 1863, the Lithuanian war of independence of 1918—1920, and the guerrilla warfare of 1944—1953. Accordingly, the book consists of four chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The chapters are written by leading experts in the history of Lithuania: Dr Virgilijus Pugačiauskas, Dr Ieva Šenavičienė, Dr Gintautas Surgailis, the researcher of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, Edita Jankauskienė. The decision to publish the book was made by the Research Council of the Military Science Institute at the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania. Each chapter includes the following sections: the characteristics of the belligerents; the goals and objectives of the war; the initiator of the war; the course of the war and warfare stages; participants in the war, their leaders and allies; casu-

alties and losses; the result and consequences of the war; terminology specific to the war and used by the belligerents. The book seeks to prove that the four conflicts were interstate wars and should be treated by the international community as such. The volume contains statistical data, a bibliography, and reference materials.

The book has all the formal attributes of proper research. The chapters draw on an impressive array of sources: Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian archive materials, documents, journals, letters, memoirs, etc. *Wars of Lithuania* takes a broad sweep of the literature. Its interpretation of the materials cannot be called objective, nonetheless.

The first thing that draws the attention of the reader is that the authors see Russia in all its incarnations: the empire or the Soviet republic, the principal and perpetual enemy of the Latvian nation and state. Apparently, Lithuania has never had any other enemy. The only exception may be a small interwar conflict with Poland, in which, the authors admit, Lithuania was defeated. Germany, neither as the German Empire or the Third Reich, is considered an enemy by the Lithuanian historians. Secondly, the country always relied on foreign aid, either in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that, for the Lithuanians, independence means independence from Russia. This treatment of independence goes hand in hand with the readiness to be subjected to any other country. Thirdly, the authors of the chapters are, to put it mildly, disingenuous in their descriptions of events. Right from the start, they avoid certain topics. Still, first things first. For the sake of research integrity, the review uses nothing else but texts from the book.

The first chapter focuses on the events of 1830–1831, to which Russian historiography refers to as the Uprising in the Polish lands of the Russian Empire. The revolt sought to restore the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth within the borders of 1772. The American reference book calls these events the First Polish War. The author of the chapter rejects both approaches. He argues that it was a war fought by Poland and Lithuania against Russia. The chapter gives a rather detailed description of hostilities, drawing an epic picture: a many-thousand-strong militia, numerous battles, victories over Russian troops. When read carefully, this interpretation raises questions. Firstly, was the uprising a revolt of the *Lithuanian people* struggling for freedom? The chapter does not attempt to determine the national composition of the rebel forces. There are no Lithuanian names among the leaders of militia units. All of them were members of the *szlachta*. Despite living in Lithuania, they had a *Polish* mindset and *Polish* ambitions. It is not a secret that most of the nobility of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania underwent Polonisation. As to the *Lithuanian population* of the state, it consisted primarily of peasants who were reluctant to take part in the struggle against tsarism. The author of the chapter writes that local landowners tried to

incite rebellion among peasants, but the latter would just run home, once mobilised. The estimate of 40,000 is many times the real number of combatants. The uprising in the territory of Lithuania continued from March 25 through October 25, 1831. From May, the author stresses, the Polish expeditionary force, which came to aid of the rebels, had a significant role in the revolt. The author calls all armed encounters between the rebels and the Russian army battles. However, judging by the number of casualties quoted in the book (pp. 66–74), most of them were mere skirmishes. Classifying this event as a war between Russian and Lithuania would be a gross exaggeration.

The second chapter is concerned with the uprising of 1863 in the Western provinces of the Russian Empire. Once again, Poland was the heart of the rebellion. The American publication refers to the event as the Second Polish War and comes under criticism from the author of the chapter. He treats the conflict as a war between Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian coalition. Just as in the case of the first chapter, this seems to be an exaggeration. The author describes the creation of something resembling a central governing body in Lithuania and the participation of peasants in combat. It turns out that the uprising of peasants in the Kovno province was encouraged by disinformation spread by local Catholic priests who accused the tsarist government of harbouring plans to eradicate Catholic faith. After Catholic hierarchs addressed believers and dismissed the rumours as lies, peasants started to return to their villages. In many places, the author of the chapter concedes, the authorities were setting up peasant militia units to keep order locally, which weakened the position of the rebels. The absolute majority of the leaders of the uprising had Polish names, Poles had the leading role in the struggle, and active hostilities lasted only from April to July 1863 — all this speaks against calling the events a *war* between Russia and Lithuania.

The third chapter is devoted to the so-called war of independence, which, according to the author of the contribution, was fought in 1918–1920, on three fronts at once. Lithuania was at war with Soviet Russia, a white army led by Pavel Bermond-Avalov, and Poland; it was defeated only by the Poles. It is important to remember that Lithuania gained its ‘independence’ in a very peculiar manner, i.e. under the wing of the German Empire. The German government *permitted* Latvian patriots to establish a ‘self-government’ body — the Council of Lithuania (Taryba), which signed the Act of Independence of Lithuania on February 16, 1918 (while under German occupation!). The Germans did not recognise the act and pursued the idea of a Lithuania kingdom ruled by a German prince turned Lithuanian king. Lithuanian ‘patriots’ did not put up opposition to the plan. They mobilised only in October 1918 when the German Empire, already on the brink of defeat, allowed the occupied territories to create states and governments of their own. On November 1, 1918, recruitment to the

Lithuanian army began (once again, with the permission of the German authorities). On November 11 of the same year, the government of the new Lithuanian state was formed. It officially announced the creation of the Lithuanian armed forces with approximately 100 officers and 50 soldiers. At first, the army was built up on the voluntary principle. In March 1919, despite the call from the government saying that homeland was in danger, the army, the author of the chapter admits, numbered around 3,000 people. The country had to announce mobilisation, which proceeded rather slowly. The population of the new state was unwilling to go to war.

What is of interest is how the forces of the belligerents are estimated in the chapter. When speaking about the Soviet Russia of 1918, the author uses, for some unknown reason, statistics from 1913, completely ignoring the fact that Russia was in a civil war by the end of 1918. The Soviet government had many concerns, and the western front played a secondary role until 1920. Little attention was paid to the western theatre of operations. The enemies of the Bolsheviks on the Lithuanian front were not non-existent Lithuanian troops. For example, the Kovno offensive of the Russian army was stopped by the Germans, whom the Entente Powers charged with fighting the Bolsheviks in the Baltics. Later the Poles joined in, helping to expel the Bolshevik from Lithuania. But what of the Lithuanian army? It was still being built up and thus had a nominal role in the conflict. According to the author of the text, back then, Lithuania acted as a barrier to the spread of Bolshevism across Europe, and it continues to act as a barrier today. The author forgot to mention that the Red Army took Vilno twice and handed it over to the Lithuanians. Both times, when the Red Army departed, the Lithuanian forces abandoned the city, unable to hold it. The troops of Bermond-Avalov, the author admits, fought primarily with the Latvian forces supported by the British. It seems that the activity of the Lithuanian government was confined to appeals to the leaders of the Entente Powers to influence the Germans. The Lithuanian forces mobilised, the text suggests, when the Germans were leaving. The Lithuanians followed the retreating troops, retaking the abandoned territories. Fighting the Poles was beyond the army's capacity. During the Soviet-Polish war, the Republic of Lithuania entered into something of a treaty of alliance with Soviet Russia. Lithuania never provided any real aid — whether because it could not or because it did not want to. For the Poles, the Soviet-Lithuanian treaty was proof of Lithuania's collaboration with the Soviets. The Polish government became extremely hostile to Lithuania and dealt with the country accordingly. Lithuania lost about a third of its territory to the Polish forces. Lithuanian complaints to the leaders of the Entente Powers did not help. Finally, according to the data contained in the *Wars of Lithuania*, in the two-front war fought from February 1, 1919, to November 30, 1920 (these dates are given in the book), Lithuania suffered 1444 casualties. Of them, 530 soldiers

and officers died fighting the Bolsheviks and the Bermond-Avalov forces. Of course, any death is a tragedy, yet the number of casualties is a reliable indicator of the warfare intensity and the involvement of an army in it. In this case, Lithuania has little to be proud of, and its 'victories' over the red and the white are mostly fictitious.

The fourth chapter describes the operations of the Lithuanian resistance in 1946–1953. The author of the contribution takes great pride in the resistance: the Lithuanians fought the powerful Soviet Union longer than anyone else in the Baltics did; they proved their commitment to freedom and democracy, and so on. It seems that there is a good reason to be proud of. However, the uneasy questions arise once again. Why did some people in the Lithuanian Republic warmly welcome the German forces, take part in exterminating the Jewish population, shoot Red Army soldiers in the back, hand over families of red officers to the Germans, and collaborate with the Nazi authorities in any way possible? Does this agree with the celebrated desire for independence? The chapter mentions the anti-Nazi resistance but does not recount any of its actual deeds. Of course, there were underground organisations and a partisan movement in Lithuania; a Lithuanian division fought in the Red Army. However, all of them were Lithuanian communists and their allies. Where were the warriors of independence fiercely opposing communist dictatorship? It seems that they had little against German rule. As the chapter suggests, they tried to act nonetheless. In summer 1941, they were developing a plan to restore the Lithuanian army. The Germans, however, did not permit that. Only in spring 1944, the Nazis allowed the Lithuanians to create the so-called Lithuanian Territorial Defence Force, which numbered about 20,000 people. Later, part of these troops retreated with the Germans to East Prussia; others fled to the woods where they fought the Red Army. The only question is what the Nazis were to these fighters for freedom. Apparently, they were allies. The author of the chapter considers in detail the reasons why Lithuanian opponents of Soviet rule retreated en masse to the woods. These reasons include Soviet terror, the memory of the 'first Soviet occupation', and patriotism. The book tells about the mythic armed resistance to the Nazis, which turned to fighting the communists. An important motif is hope for intervention from the West. The author mentions attempts to avoid mobilisation by the Soviet authorities. Only one reason, which seems important nonetheless, is omitted here — the fear of having to pay for everything those people had done while collaborating with the Germans. Many Lithuanian citizens got involved too deeply, and the Soviets would have held them accountable for too many crimes.

The fourth chapter details the activities of the armed underground, glorifies the heroes of the resistance, who, the book stresses, supported the honour and dignity of the country and asserted its commitment to freedom and democ-

racy. Yet the chapter says nothing about the views of the Forest Brothers on democracy and what methods they used against their political opponents and anyone else whom they could suspect of collaborating with the Soviets. There are grand words about Soviet terror and none about the terror unleashed by the 'resistance'. The numbers of the anti-Soviet resistance speak for themselves. According to the data contained in the chapter, in spring 1945, there were about 30,000 people in the woods. Most of them were simply escaping mobilisation. By the end of 1946, they numbered 4,000–5,000 people; in 1948, fewer than 2000; in 1951, fewer than 1,000; in 1954, 139. According to the author, in 1944–1953, approximately 50,000 people joined the armed units. Many of them died, many were arrested. However, most of them were amnestied and remained at large. Probably, it is worth quoting other figures from the book. As mentioned above, one of the reasons to flee to the woods was Red Army mobilisation. Almost half of those eligible for conscription tried to stay out of the service. Still, 82,000 Lithuanians joined the army. Thus, not everyone opposed the new authorities. When fighting the armed underground, Soviets relied on the local population. The author of the chapter mentions destruction battalions (*istrebki*), which had a major part in subduing the Forest Brothers. He writes that, in 1944–1954, over 20,000 people fought in destruction battalions, which accounted for 20% of the losses of the anti-Soviet resistance. Another 18,000–20,000 fought for defence units. Without the support of these people, without their substantial help, the Soviet troops would not have won. One can hardly agree with the author of the chapter, who denies that a civil war was raging in Lithuania in the first post-war years and maintains that the struggle was nothing less than the Lithuanian guerrilla war against the Soviet Union. The US, the UK, Switzerland, Vatican, Uruguay, and some other Latin American states (sic) did not recognise the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union. Therefore, the author believes, the government of the Lithuanian SSR was illegal. In contrast, the legitimate government of Lithuania was the Council of the Movement of the Struggle for Freedom of Lithuania, which was established in 1949 by a group that apparently did not represent anyone but itself. At the time, the armed units numbered fewer than 2,000 people, which is very much in line with Parkinson's law: the fewer ships there are, the more admirals.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the above: the attempt to glorify the acts of fighters for Lithuanian independence and thus to take the prestige of the country to the next level does not seem to be successful. Of course, there were people in Lithuania who did not accept the subordinate position of their people and tried to become independent from the Russian state, people who gave their lives fighting for that goal. However, there were those who valued peace and quiet, those who easily fit in the new community of nations, and who viewed the Russians as friends and allies rather than enemies.

History had shown, only when part of the Russian state (the USSR), Lithuania was a respectable and prosperous member of the world community. The desire to sever ties with Russia and thus to ensure affluence and true independence has never done the country any good. Its resources are too scarce. As it often happens to smaller states, having escaped one suzerain, it has to seek the protection of another. As the history of Lithuania suggests, this change is not always for the better.

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