

# THE WILD EAST: GERMAN IMPRESSIONS OF LITHUANIA, 1915 TO 1918

Joachim Tauber

## Abstract

The German army entered the Russian Empire in the spring of 1915, and by the autumn it had occupied most of the territory on which later the independent state of Lithuania was founded. For almost three years, from the autumn of 1915, the area was governed by the Supreme Commander in the East (*Oberbefehlshaber Ost*), i.e. military administration. Mainly on the basis of the newspapers published in the Ober Ost area in the years of the First World War, as well as other sources, the author seeks to show how German soldiers, and Germans in a broader sense, saw the area of the prospective Lithuania and its population that it occupied in 1915. The paper analyses the impression the land and its inhabitants made on German soldiers and commentators, and examines how those impressions combined with previous ideas about Eastern Europe.

Key words: First World War, Ober Ost, Eastern Europe, Lithuanians, images, stereotypes.

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## Anotacija

1915 m. pavasarį Vokietijos kariuomenė įžengė į Rusijos imperiją ir iki rudens užėmė didžiąją dalį teritorijos, kurioje vėliau kūrėsi nepriklausoma Lietuvos valstybė. Beveik trejus metus nuo 1915 m. rudens ši teritorija buvo pavaldi Vyriausiajam karo vadui Rytuose (*Oberbefehlshaber Ost*), t. y. karinei administracijai. Remdamasis daugiausia *Ober Ost* srityje Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais leistas laikraščiais ir kitais šaltiniais, autorius straipsnyje siekia atskleisti, kaip Vokietijos kariai ir platesne prasme vokiečiai įsivaizdavo 1915-aisiais okupuotą būsimosios Lietuvos teritoriją ir jos gyventojus. Straipsnyje analizuojama, kokį įspūdį Vokietijos kariams ir apžvalgininkams padarė šis kraštas bei jo gyventojai, ir nagrinėjama, kaip šie įspūdžiai maišėsi su jau iki tol egzistavusiais vaizdiniais apie Rytų Europą.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, *Ober Ost*, Rytų Europa, lietuviai, įvaizdžiai, stereotipai.

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The following essay will present and evaluate the impressions the German conquerors had of the land and its inhabitants\*. Above all, it will make use of contemporary press reports, documents and memoirs. Notwithstanding censorship and restrictions on the press, reporting, especially by the various press organisations and the newspapers distributed to the troops, mirrored the opinions and beliefs of many of the Germans who entered the land. In order to guarantee their credibility, the newspapers distributed to soldiers had to rely on reports which seemed realistic based on their own views.

My paper will focus on three points: first I will give an impression of what German soldiers and observers thought about the country and its inhabitants; then I will show how these pictures intermingled with already existing opinions about Eastern Europe; and, last but not least, I will analyse the self-esteem of the occupiers.

I

The first distinct impression during the advance of 1915 was that the land had an almost medieval primitiveness: 'In the majority of cases, the water supply to towns in Lithuania takes the most primitive form. It consists almost entirely of draw-wells located near to manure pits, often even right next to those places where the inhabitants of the land answer the call of nature. Latrines are almost completely absent. Their dreadful condition explains why they are not used, even by inhabitants unaccustomed to luxuries'. Animal husbandry in Lithuanian villages is described eloquently: 'According to age-old customs, in so far as they fit through the door, household animals have their share of the space in which the farmers live. Chickens and goats come in freely, and, along with dogs and cats, make sure that no left-over morsel of food remains lying on the only room's hard-trodden earth floor. That they leave behind other traces of their presence does not concern the animal-friendly Lithuanian farmer.'<sup>1</sup>

These observations continued outside the peasant sheds. Here is a description from the autumn of 1918: 'Quite deliberately, all lorries drive more slowly when they approach a Lithuanian village. This is on account of the road usually becoming worse here than in other places, and having potholes which only dry out after eight days of unbroken sunshine, and consequently they almost never do under this changeable sky. The farmer in Lithuania does not worry a great deal about the roads. He leaves them to the hens, the cattle and the people who travel around the world rather than

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<sup>1</sup> EULENBERG, H. Aus Litauen, Teil I. *Kownoer Zeitung*, 19. Okt. 1916, Nr. 291; reprinted in *Korrespondenz B* (*Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Militärarchiv (BAMA)*, PHD 8/23), 23. Okt. 1918, Nr. 134, S. 1.

stay happily at home as he does. It is much more pleasant in his cottage or on a bench than on the dirty road. He is not worried about the outside of his buildings<sup>2</sup>. Also conspicuous was: 'the phenomenal infestation of most fields by weeds, which is an unavoidable consequence of the backwardness of the agrarian culture as a whole. Here, the battle between culture and nature is still in its infancy.'<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, the Lithuanian landscape was perceived uniformly. So far as the soldiers of the Imperial armies were concerned, Lithuania was primitive and monotonous. The image of a sparse, untapped landscape was in line with testimonies about the population. Not just a rustic primitiveness, but also a proverbial native cunning was attributed to them. An article in 'Vilnius News' (*Wilnaer Zeitung*) focused on idioms, from which conclusions were drawn about the Lithuanian national character: 'Quite naturally, their [i.e. the proverbs'] content is mostly to do with their own primitive national living conditions [...]. The Lithuanian is not at all unskilled at business, and often pits himself successfully against the Jew. Perhaps as a result of a natural disposition, he is distrustful<sup>4</sup>. Even love songs were interpreted as characteristically Lithuanian: 'The Lithuanian lives quietly, happily and with satisfaction among the fields and meadows which are enough for him. He is not inclined to scale heights; he prefers a languishing dependency to dissatisfied hunting and struggling after superior things.'<sup>5</sup>

The simplicity of the population was also central to a scene that was described in the first volume of 'Correspondence B', a collection of articles which appeared weekly and was prepared for the German press in Germany: 'Through the activity and energetic support of the German administration, a population which is willing, but barely able, to make decisions for itself has rediscovered quickly the basis of adequate employment [...]. But you would be demanding the impossible if you expected the population to understand the spirit of the new times all at once. Their memory is of disappointment; their lodestar is an unmistakable mistrust of new things.'<sup>6</sup> In October 1918, Herbert Eulenberg<sup>7</sup> conveyed a similar picture of the Lithuanian farmer: 'Usually people in Lithuania go around barefoot [...]. Little men and women scurry through the house without a sound, the offspring of a nation which once was free and proud, but which unfortunately was all-too-much enslaved by the Russians. In contrast to those who belong to us<sup>8</sup> and who were allowed to walk around freely and

<sup>2</sup> EULENBERG, H. Aus Litauen. *Korrespondenz B*, 23. Okt. 1918, Nr. 134, S. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Das Land Ober Ost. Deutsche Arbeit in den Verwaltungsgebieten Kurland, Litauen und Bialystok-Grodno*. Hrsg. von Oberbefehlshaber Ost. Stuttgart, Berlin, 1917, S. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Sprichwörter und Redensarten aus Samogitien. *Wilnaer Zeitung*, 15. Feb. 1917, Nr. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Litauische Liebeslieder. *Kownoer Zeitung*, 9. Nov. 1916, Nr. 311.

<sup>6</sup> Ob. Ost. *Korrespondenz B*, 11. Okt. 1916, Nr. 1, S. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Eulenberg belongs to the circle of intellectuals assembled by Erich Ludendorff in Kaunas to work on his culture policy. See: LIULEVICIUS, V.G. *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge, 2000, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> The Lithuanian minority in East Prussia, the so-called Prussian Lithuanians.

to develop themselves, it has given the non-German Lithuanians something timid, intimidated, indeed, as their enemies say, obsequious.<sup>9</sup>

Another observation concerns the premodern, almost childlike naivety of the indigenous people. When the Ober Ost administration introduced identity passes in its area, the German 'pass office' included local inhabitants in the system: 'Photography is something new and previously unknown to them. As far as most are concerned, it provides cause for celebration [...]. A piece of paper with a number is stuck on to the chest of every individual, who is photographed with it. Frequently, this process gives rise to the most wonderful confusion when the piece of paper is swapped from one person to the next, something which for the most part happens unintentionally, since many cannot read a single number. Now the junior officer checks yet again [...] the piece of paper held by the victim, who is beaming with happiness [...]. To use an extreme comparison, generally speaking, the people must be led like a herd of old sheep. Otherwise, there would be utter chaos and rapid, reliable work would be impossible.'<sup>10</sup> Who can fail to notice European stereotypes of 'natives' in descriptions such as these?

Similar observations were made at a village dance: 'You dispense with grace, dispense with the beauty of lines, the refinement of faces, of fine feet which are beautifully restrained. You see the opposite, and take pleasure in simple, rustic joy [...]. Their tunes, the form they take, is a reminder of the landscape, the harsh climate, the deep, earnest stimulus of the forest, of their tough, sad fate. I stayed there fully two hours, and it was no hardship; whoever wants to understand the Lithuanian people should not watch them at work or in their meagre crofts having still more frugal meals, but should listen to them at church and delight in them playing and dancing.'<sup>11</sup> Even Lithuanian folk songs and proverbs<sup>12</sup> mirrored this characteristic: 'In the olden-days, Lithuanians loved poetry and pursued it assiduously. This is proven by the many songs which live in the nation even today. Up to now, over 500 folk songs, which the Lithuanian calls *dainos*,<sup>13</sup> have been collected. Such a large number exists for a relatively small nation because, in the past, the Lithuanian farmer, a cheerful chap, used to accompany every job, even the very smallest, with songs. Lithuanian songs are distinguished especially by their simplicity of form and content, their purity, to which everything crude is alien, and their touching naivety, which is often associated with an inner sentiment'<sup>14</sup>. To some extent, the statements recall the language popularised in the German-speaking world by Karl May's adventure novels<sup>15</sup> set in the Wild West and in the Orient: 'Ten-

<sup>9</sup> EULENBERG, H. Aus Litauen. *Korrespondenz B*, 23. Okt. 1918, Nr. 134, S. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Das Land Ober Ost...*, S. 174.

<sup>11</sup> Litauischer Tanz. *Wilnaer Zeitung*, 5. Feb. 1916, Nr. 17.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance: Sprichwörter und Redensarten aus Samogitien. *Wilnaer Zeitung*, 17. Feb. 1917, Nr. 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Daina* (plural *dainos*) means 'song' in Lithuanian.

<sup>14</sup> Litauische Dainos. *Korrespondenz B*, 11. Okt. 1916, Nr. 1, S. 2.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example: SCHMIEDT, H. *Karl May. Leben, Werk und Wirkung*. Frankfurt a.M., 1992.

derness of feeling, a property of all *dainos*, rings out from Lithuanian love songs with particular clarity. They are so gentle, so coy, so melancholy, that you might conclude the nation almost lacks sensuality. But that is not the case. The Lithuanian possesses a good, distinctive carnality. Whoever scrutinises the products of Lithuanian art encounters almost immediately instances with erotic impact. They do not derive from the area of that modern eroticism which turns the means into the end, but from a healthy, natural sexual instinct.<sup>16</sup> The Catholic priest Johannes Wronka summarised his experiences with Lithuanians as follows: ‘they are a healthy, strong national lineage with lots of children. Their spiritual aptitude is very good. They are filled with a deep religious piety. Not yet weaned from obedience, they are frugal and honest’<sup>17</sup>.

The Lithuanian’s ‘deep sensitivity’ led to misunderstandings when he dealt with ‘practical people’: ‘The whole value of the person is seen in terms of emotional tenderness. Consequently, the Lithuanian often assesses other nations incorrectly. The often unkind, sometimes harsh character of the German is regarded as a sign of lower standing which should be despised. This explains the common and apparently instinctive dislike of Lithuanians for Germans, which only disappears when the former has learned to grasp the true value of Germandom.’<sup>18</sup>

The perception of Lithuanians as ‘noble savages’ cropped up time and again subliminally, and could be seen in Prince Isenburg’s fight against the Taryba’s demands, which, from his point of view, far exceeded what was permissible. In a letter to Ludendorff dated 27 October 1917, the administrative chief of Lithuania explained why there was no question of the land’s direct annexation: ‘Decisive domestic political concern: after a short transitional period, inevitably the Lithuanians incorporated into the Reich would have to receive active and passive rights for Reichstag elections, for which they are not ready’<sup>19</sup>. Ober Ost Chief of Staff Major General Hoffmann, who was at the forefront of the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations, where he became notorious thanks to his alleged punch, refused to discuss Lithuanian independence, with the words the Lithuanians could ‘govern themselves independently as well as, for instance, my daughter Ilse could educate herself’.<sup>20</sup>

## II

If you take an overview of the sources discussed here, it is striking how little the image of landscape and people altered in the approximately 20 years between the

<sup>16</sup> Litauische Liebeslieder. *Kownoer Zeitung*, 9. Nov. 1916, Nr. 311.

<sup>17</sup> WRONKA, J. *Kurland und Litauen. Ostpreußens Nachbarn*. Freiburg i.Br., 1917, S. 170.

<sup>18</sup> [STOROST, Wilhelm] Vidunas. *Litauen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*. Tilsit, 1916, S. 65.

<sup>19</sup> BAMA, FC 1179 N (NL Isenburg), Nr. 0391.

<sup>20</sup> Cited by LINDE, G. *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Wiesbaden, 1965, S. 100.

first and second German occupations. The width of the cultural divide had not diminished in the least. Obviously the hierarchical division between 'German' and 'Lithuanian' culture, education and technology was still palpable.

These interpretations are closely connected to another German stereotype. The associations are made manifest when a war report from 1941 says the following laconically: 'The Russian world is nearby. You can find traces of it even before Kaunas.'<sup>21</sup> The similarity of this point to an observation from 1916 is striking: 'Vilnius still lies between Europe and Asia. In cultural terms, not geographically-speaking [...]. Here, no one would believe that you are already a little way into Russia, if at every step you did not encounter conditions which we describe as Russian.'<sup>22</sup> This introduces another central theme for the new masters' perceptions, since in their eyes Lithuania was, to put it in modern terms, a developing country. Nonetheless, 'In contrast with the Russian who has governed him for so long, the Lithuanian celebrates Christmas with particular festivity. He shows he is a member of Western Europe even in this respect'<sup>23</sup>. In the essay 'Lithuania' published in 1916, Adolf Höllriegel reduced his impressions to one observation: 'Sea, sand, marsh, fever, Russians, burnt homes. Lithuania has been like that for the last millennium.'<sup>24</sup> In a literary essay written while on home leave, the sight of Vilnius' many churches moved Lieutenant Paul Lingen to phrases which amount to a classic ideological expression of cultural decline: 'Every style of tower and cupola [...]. Monstrosities from a profligate imagination, solidified, ecstatic dreams. Here, Asia's excesses mixed together with the practicality and damaging limitations of the West.'

In a rapturous allegory of Vilnius, the ideas culminated in an image of the 'rape' of the town by Russian domination: 'Poor Vilnius! Once queen of Lithuania's cities, what has been done to you? You are like a fairy-tale princess condemned to be a servant or maid, from whom the soft royal bed has been taken away [...]. The West and the East fight over you, over your proud estate. And when the West became tired and pulverised itself in battles of division and inner annihilation, there arose the young, awakening fellow in the East who was clumsy through being still half asleep, and fell on you who were defenceless. He was still a barbarian and envied you your jewellery. He was a despot and commanded you to bend to his will. He forced upon you, weeping, appealing, pleading, his coarse sensibilities from the Steppe, and robbed you of the expressions of your soul [...]. What he gave, you did not want. You knew it did not suit you. It was something alien. And what he left you, with a sneering tyrant's grin, they were, and today still are, hidden beauties of singular magnificence and glory.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> FISCHER, J. Harter Straßenkampf tobte in Wylkowyßki – Hinhaltender Widerstand der Sowjetrussen – Ständiger Vormarsch auf Kowno. *Feldzeitung von der Maas bis an die Memel*, Nr. 149 (BAMA, RHD 69–15), S. 4.

<sup>22</sup> BÜHLMANN, M. Das west-östliche Wilna. Gedenkblatt Wilna. Ein Jahr unter deutscher Flagge. *Wilnaer Zeitung. Beilage*, 18. Sep. 1916, Nr. 239.

<sup>23</sup> EULENBERG, Herbert. Weihnachtsbräuche in Litauen. *Korrespondenz B*, 20. Dez. 1916, Nr. 11, S. 4.

<sup>24</sup> 'Scheinwerfer' pictorial supplement to HÖLLRIEGEL, A. Litauen. *Die Front-Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 31. Dez. 1916, Nr. 189.

<sup>25</sup> JÄGER, W. Alt-Wilna. *Die Front-Zeitung der 10. Armee, Beilage*, 15. Sep. 1917, Nr. 363.

Uniting the image of Russia<sup>26</sup> with that of Lithuania gives rise to a complicated ambiguity: on the one hand an 'Asiatic' primitiveness, and on the other hand a 'Western' orientation towards Germany. These observations and judgements led to a view that was recognisable during both world wars: this land is located between East and West, its population exists between primitiveness and Russification (relatedly sovietisation), and both depend on German 'cultural work'. An article from 1917 construed a continuity beginning in the 14th century: 'the most up-to-date kind of economic work has always been brought from Germany to the still undeveloped land'. 'It must be emphasised consistently that the individual examples we cite are not at all isolated cases, but are typical. In Lithuania, there is an unbroken chain of German economic work, German educational activity and peace work, which stretches across the centuries without a break. This is a fact which we have too long overlooked. Here, as elsewhere, the Germans have given from the fullness of their riches, lavishly, without drawing up an account or demanding anything in return.'<sup>27</sup> Looking back, Erich Ludendorff made the same point in 1919: 'In the occupied territories, I decided to appropriate the cultural work which the Germans had accomplished in those lands over four centuries. The colourfully diverse population had created no culture of its own accord. Left to its own devices, it would decay into Polishness.'<sup>28</sup> The editorial of the first edition of 'Vilnius News', dated 20 January 1916, formulated the task in elegiac words: 'It is German nature [...] to let the occupied territories partake of the blessings of German culture. German culture! [...] Its brilliance will shine even over this land. It will bring liberation and joy here as well.'<sup>29</sup> The following saying from 1917 was formulated laconically for Reich German readers, and encouraged their fantasies: 'On average, compared to Germany, the state of national culture in the Ober Ost territory is a good hundred years behind the times.'<sup>30</sup>

It was no surprise that alongside 'cultural work' (*Kulturarbeit*), 'order' was the second key concept which, from the German point of view, proved difficult to convey to the indigenous population.<sup>31</sup> And the state of 'German Street' was noted in Vilnius, where it was hard to recognise 'that a German character had once governed here. Instead, the scene looked oriental, with an abundance of businesses and small shops, with glaring tawdriness and the indiscriminate mixture of advertising shop signs. By contrast, the concept "German" combines order and symmetry.'<sup>32</sup> When the first

<sup>26</sup> On this topic, see especially: *Das Rußlandbild im Dritten Reich*. Hrsg. von H.-E. VOLKMANN. Köln, Weimar, Wien, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> BERGSTRÄSSER, [L]. Deutsche Kulturarbeit in Litauen. *Korrespondenz B*, 24. Jan. 1917, S. 1.

<sup>28</sup> LUDENDORFF, E. *Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1918*. Berlin, 1919, S. 138.

<sup>29</sup> Ein Kriegs-Friedenswerk. *Wilnaer Zeitung*, 20. Jan. 1916, Nr. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Das Land Ober Ost...*, S. 189.

<sup>31</sup> *Wilnaer Zeitung* started this task in an editorial dated 20 January 1916: 'It [the newspaper] wants to deepen the understanding of the German spirit and the German nature, for German discipline and order.'

<sup>32</sup> Die Deutsche Straße in Wilna. *Die Front-Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 11. Nov. 1917, Nr. 412.

anniversary of the German invasion of Vilnius was celebrated in 1916, 'German work' was at the mid-point of its self-expression, and was included in a celebratory poem:

Then take a look at this city,  
Which has been in our hands quietly for a year,  
Which we have ruled just as we captured it,  
Where we have worked with diligence and love  
Taking great pains which have served as our  
reward,  
As over a noble gift bestowed on us.

If people are silent, then the stones will tell,  
What German strength has done for this city.  
And may the hatred which people still have  
the audacity to feel,  
Be vanquished by truth, one day ending  
every illusion.  
So we celebrate the day, with lowered sword,  
And remembering Germany's greatness, Ger-  
many's spirit.<sup>34</sup>

Dann sei auf diese Stadt auch hingedeutet,  
Die nun ein Jahr schon still in unsrer Hand,  
Die wir beherrscht, so wie wir sie erbeutet,  
An die wir Fleiß und Liebe selbst verwandt  
Mit Mühen, die zu unserem Lohn gediehen,  
Wie an ein edles Gut, das uns verliehen.

Wenn Menschen schweigen, werden Steine  
sprechen,  
Was deutsche Kraft für diese Stadt getan.  
Und mag der Haß sich noch so erfrechen,  
Die Wahrheit siegt, einst endet jeder Wahn.  
So feiern wir den Tag, den Degen senkend  
Und Deutschlands Größe, Deutschlands Geist  
gedenkend.

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Almost all the key ideas are in a verse which contrasts Kaunas, vacated during the invasion, with the transformation that began immediately:

The great silence did not last long,  
And overnight there arrived  
German spirit, and with it German will,  
German labour, and German power.  
Where yesterday the hand still rested in the lap,  
Already today things are being created with  
diligence,  
With an ever new, ever fresh courage,  
German strength unleashes itself with pride.  
Window, gate and doors are opened  
Light penetrates inside with unforeseen power.  
With every day you can feel anew  
German order and German discipline.<sup>35</sup>

Doch lange währte nicht die große Stille,  
und es hielt Einzug über Nacht,  
der deutsche Geist, mit ihm der deutsche Wille,  
die deutsche Arbeit und die deutsche Macht.  
Wo gestern noch die Hand im Schosse ruhte,  
da wurde heute fleißig schon geschafft,  
mit immer neuem, immer frischen Mute,  
entfaltete sich stolz die deutsche Kraft.  
Es weiteten sich Fenster, Tor und Türen  
Licht drang hinein mit ungeahnter Wucht.  
Mit jedem Tage konnt man neu verspüren  
Die deutsche Ordnung und die deutsche Zucht.

A self-assurance bordering on hubris could already be sensed in Vilnius' German administration in April 1916: 'Even those who honour the German name behind the front in the enemy's land, while they go about planting German order, German

<sup>33</sup> Wilna. *Ein Jahr unter deutscher Flagge* (memorial edition of *Wilnaer Zeitung*), 18. Aug. 1916, Nr. 239.

<sup>34</sup> Die Kauener Zeitung unserer Väter. Das Gedicht aus der Zeitung vom 23. Januar 1916 'Aus dem Leserkreise'. *Kauener Zeitung*, 10. Okt. 1942, Nr. 239.



customs and the German sense of community in a nation with a foreign essence, play their part, such that the poet's words must become true: one day the German character will heal the world.<sup>35</sup> Captain Scharwächter too did not suffer from excessive modesty when he reported on the situation behind the front: 'Thus the Germans found a land where it was necessary to rebuild almost everything from scratch. And how beautifully they have achieved this task. German diligence, German perseverance, organisation and an eye for detail have done a tremendous job in reconstructing the land over the last nine months. You only have to look at the towns and villages, fields and roads, and you can see the spirit that is abroad. It is different to the previous one under Russian servitude. Order and cleanliness, active beneficial labour, as we are used to it, have gained the upper hand: away with inefficiency and corruption in the economy. Is it any wonder that the insightful inhabitant of the land is increasing his respect for us?'

One theme certainly could not be missing from this conceptual world:<sup>36</sup> 'As German culture penetrated Ob.Ost, there was an attempt to spread German cleanliness too. But the centuries' old habituation to dirt and disorder on the part of the population, which never saw good role models in the government, caused long, if unsuccessful resistance.'<sup>37</sup> Reluctance provided a popular narrative of how the population responded to the concerns of the German government. Karl Streckler stresses the point in his travel report from the end of 1916: 'This cleanliness has cost a great deal of work, since the majority of the population not only lacks the desire for cleanliness, but also any kind of understanding of it. Compulsion was the only suitable means, and it does not go too far to say that no measure applied by the German administration has aroused such strong clandestine dissatisfaction among the population as in this case.'<sup>38</sup> The moment the German administration got to work in Ob.Ost, however, the picture changed.<sup>39</sup> Dr W. Brönn reported from Kaunas during the start of this new period: 'What a difference there is between Kaunas after the invasion [...] and Kaunas today [...]. There are still monstrous amounts of dirt [...]. But the whole lot that was there last August, at the time of the invasion, is no longer there today [...]. The subsoil was investigated with a view to [improving] drainage, and look! To the population's bewildered astonishment, there was a complete, unused cobbled surface [...]. In all eternity the Russians would never have rediscovered their own cobbled street [...]. Today, a year later, at least the streets in the city centre are utterly clean.'

<sup>35</sup> 'Scheinwerfer' pictorial supplement of Das Gouvernement Wilna. *Die Front-Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 7. Apr. 1916, Nr. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Litauischer Holzfäller. In STRUCK, H.; EULENBERG, H. *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland*. Berlin, 1916, [without page numbers].

<sup>37</sup> Zivilentlausung in Ob. Ost. *Wilnaer Zeitung*, 7. Jan. 1917, Nr. 6.

<sup>38</sup> STRECKER, K. *Auf den Spuren Hindenburgscher Verwaltung. Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse einer Studienfahrt in Ob. Ost*. Berlin, 1917, S. 27ff.

<sup>39</sup> Zivil-Entlausung in Ob. Ost. *Kownoer Zeitung*, 12. Jan. 1917, Nr. 11.

The trees along the boulevards (well, those that still have them) are pruned, as are the shrubs in the parks [...]. The gaze wanders freely over the long rows, and the local inhabitants see with astonished eyes how German soldiers have laid out ornamental gardens and allotments [...] how they remove shutters and curtains from the bleak and neglected windows, and let light and even air into all the rooms through all the available openings.<sup>40</sup> When the mayor of Kaunas, Pauly, went to Vilnius in June 1917, 'Kaunas News' said the following about his time in office: 'The external image of the city has changed completely after barely a year of his local activity. The considerable cleanliness of the streets tells even a casual observer that an energetic and purposeful hand is running business here.'<sup>41</sup> Also in a book about cultural sites published in 1917, Paul Weber summarised the general impression of the city locally: 'The German eye misses cleanliness and order.'<sup>42</sup>

### III

The picture of Lithuanian backwardness described in the preceding pages, which in a certain way describes a specific characteristic of the primitive nature of the land and its people, together with German superiority and the tasks associated with it, were nourished by colonial ways of thinking. This is shown in the following description of a harvest festival held in an equine veterinary facility, in which the 'noble savages' prove the point to their masters: 'Shortly after three o'clock the procession marched up the streets decorated with triumphal arches. At the front was a band of the home guard; then came the young worker girls from the farm dressed in Lithuanian national costume bringing the big harvest crown; next were the staff from the equine veterinary centre; and lastly the indigenous workers and villagers. Even the chief Jew was present along with his daughters [...]. Then the girls gave the centre's officers the harvest crown and wreaths whilst reciting Lithuanian poems. In a speech given in German, the agricultural officer from the farm emphasised what beautiful fruits the common labour of the soldiers and local people had yielded. True, at the start it had required many a friendly request from the gendarmerie to accustom the inhabitants to a German's order and diligence, but the large number of peasants who turned up are the best proof of the good understanding which exists between them and the German barbarians.'

<sup>40</sup> Das Kowno von heute. *Wilnaer Zeitung*, 29. Jun. 1916, Nr. 158.

<sup>41</sup> Wechsel in der Kownoer Stadtverwaltung. *Kownoer Zeitung*, 25. Jun. 1917, Nr. 173.

<sup>42</sup> WEBER, P. *Wilna – eine vergessene Kunststätte*. Wilna, 1917, S. 10. For a particularly dramatic description of the conditions which were encountered, see: STRECKER, K. Op. cit., S. 9.

Lieutenant General von Trotta, district inspector of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army, also assumed that the German and the indigenous world were separate. 'The cultural level of different national groups of our territory, particularly those on the plains, explains recent events without any need to go into the reasons which lie more deeply in the necessities of war.'<sup>43</sup> He emphasised especially the Lithuanian's limited horizon: 'The above-mentioned educational level of the Lithuanian does not permit his sense of community to extend beyond the family, at very most beyond the locality. As a result, political impact relating to higher national aims is absent from every goal which, consequently, relates only to his farm. His childlike ideas of freedom correspond to the rejection of any kind of personal compulsion'<sup>44</sup>.

Naturally, under these circumstances, cooperation with the indigenous population was strictly limited from the outset. In the book 'The Land of Ober Ost', a self-depiction of the military administration for the German public, it says: 'Owing to the considerable cultural backwardness of the population, indigenous inhabitants can only be used for administrative tasks involving subordinate services.'<sup>45</sup> In this respect, the Lithuanian parliament, which grew out of a German initiative, was viewed with a mixture of nonchalance and good-natured ridicule. In 1918, Captain von Heppe of the cavalry was administrative chief of Lithuania. He characterised the Taryba as a group which 'existed partly from good-natured, but fanatical and underdeveloped dreams, partly from coffeehouse politicians and adventurers of comparable ilk.' It had 'neither the inclination nor the capacity for practical cooperation in the administration.'<sup>46</sup> Kügler, the German liaison officer with the Taryba, frequently referred to it as 'his circus'.<sup>47</sup>

The self-conception as masters, which the district officer of the equine veterinary centre exemplified in such a patronising fashion towards the indigenous population, was extensive and took many different forms. A report mocked the peculiar business practices of the, mostly Jewish, entrepreneurs, who operated with little empathy towards their customers; at the same time, it said that regular work was the exception not the rule. It concluded: 'German colonisation is facing a tough job here.'<sup>48</sup> The areas which had to be colonised were utterly inexhaustible: 'The difference between the West European nations and the Russian borderlands can be seen in the way popular sport has developed on the different sides of the border. On one side, you find whole

<sup>43</sup> BAMA, Nachlaß Trotta N 234-7, letter of 31 August 1917, concerning 'Unruhen im Etappengebiet – Behandlung von Einwohnern', S. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., S. 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Das Land Ober Ost...*, S. 93.

<sup>46</sup> BAMA, N 196-1: HEPPE, Th. von. Aus der Rückschau, Bd. V, *Im Weltkrieg* (mss.), S. 139. Likewise the description in [HÄPKE, R.] *Die deutsche Verwaltung in Litauen 1915 bis 1918*: nur zum Dienstgebrauch. Berlin, 1921, S. 12.

<sup>47</sup> BAMA, N 196-1: HEPPE, Th. von. Aus der Rückschau, Bd. V, *Im Weltkrieg* (mss.), S. 139.

<sup>48</sup> ZIELESCH, F. Kaufleute ohne Kunden. *Korrespondenz B*, 7. März 1917, Nr. 22, S. 5ff, here S. 6.

classes of the population participating actively, so that, for instance, in Germany there are millions of members of football and gymnastics clubs, while on the other side of the border, there is indifference towards any kind of sporting activity.' In fact, German soldiers brought an enthusiasm for sport with them: 'And now something surprising has happened: initially the Lithuanians, Poles and Jews did not participate [in sport], but they assembled in ever greater numbers to watch training sessions and competitions. And when teams play a game of football somewhere, you can be sure that a large circle of locals will soon have gathered around them, following the game with lively interest. But they are not content just to watch. In the afternoon, when the sports field is empty, frequently you see senior school children chasing a ball with enthusiasm and skill. Young people will grow up here knowing the value of sport. Our soldiers can be proud to have played the part of educator and bringer of culture even here. Sport not only steels the body, it stimulates the mind and makes it nimble. And it won't do them any harm if the nationalities in Ob.Ost lose some of their clumsiness.'<sup>49</sup>

Even metaphysical intellectual games were not unknown among Lithuania's German observers. The Cathedral's bell tower prompted the following comments: 'No one gave it this barbaric and almost savage form [...] and one is inclined to preserve it for the sake of the secret soul of the city, which, by virtue of blood and nationality, which (beneath all of Vilnius's piety) still loses itself in the gloominess of the primeval forest, as is typical of the Slavic soul, a soul which is immutable and which is ready to defend its character with hidden ferocity: Lithuanian blood, over whose instincts culture and the Church are laid [...]. For this Lithuanian character, which we can understand most readily in its religious form, in truth remains secret, alien, unrecognised and full of possibilities. Those who know the language and the people, German soldiers with academic minds, speak with respect about the strong, still undeveloped characteristics of the Lithuanian soul, and of the intellect of a nation whose language originally touched on the secrets of Sanskrit, whose ornamentation bravely, independently and modestly expresses an innate feeling of form, and which today, still without schools, is exhausting itself in the twilight of an agricultural existence'<sup>50</sup>.

And a correspondent from Berlin went so far as to suppose the following: 'Even the Teutonic Knights did not describe the Lithuanians as very different from how they are today.'<sup>51</sup> In this respect, it is unsurprising to find occasional talk of the civilising mission reminiscent of the 'white man's burden':<sup>52</sup> 'Now we have been here for two

<sup>49</sup> Sport im besetzten Gebiet. *Korrespondenz B*, 22. Aug. 1917, Nr. 46, S. 1ff. A similar article, albeit oriented more towards military exercise: Feldsportfest des Feldrekrutendepots Wilna, Gruppe I. *Die Frontzeitung der 10. Armee*, Beilage, 11. Okt. 1917, Nr. 385.

<sup>50</sup> Der Turm von Wilna. *Korrespondenz B*, 8. März 1918, Nr. 98, S. 1.

<sup>51</sup> MICHAELIS, P. *Kurland und Litauen in deutscher Hand*. Berlin, 1917, S. 191.

<sup>52</sup> See MÜNKLER, H. *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft: vom alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten*. Berlin, 2006, S. 132ff. For the famous quotation from Rudyard Kipling, see S. 144.

years since Hindenburg's victory train led us to this place. We have stamped our character on the city [Kaunas] We have always done it surrounded by the din of war, and so have not be able to do and to keep everything just how we wanted it. The time was too difficult and too short, the tasks were too numerous. In this light, what has been achieved appears so much the greater.<sup>53</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The impressions of a sparse, impoverished land and of a primitive peasant population were the decisive characteristics of German impressions of Lithuania and its population. At best, Lithuanians were discovered to be a simple natural people (noble savages), at worst a population 'lacking in culture' but with peasant cunning. There is little surprising about the contrasts highlighted by the image of the German homeland. It took the form of a completely paradisiacal exaggeration which only served to highlight more than ever Lithuanian backwardness. The concept 'culture' was a code for this difference, subsuming the contrasts between Germany and Lithuania. The cultural hierarchy created in this way lent the conquerors superiority not only in terms of power-politics and military strength, but also ideology and idealism. From this idea, it followed necessarily that they could stimulate and provide a model for the Lithuanians, so rationalising their own presence in the land. In the last analysis, the cultural hierarchies between the two nations were so marked that political cooperation could not take place between equals. This is why the soldiers and the administrators only had one way of looking at the Lithuanians: the view from the top.

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<sup>53</sup> Wir. *Kownoer Zeitung*, 18. Aug. 1917, Nr. 227.

## LAUKINIAI RYTAI: VOKIEČIŲ ĮSPŪDŽIAI APIE LIETUVĄ 1915–1918 METAIS

Joachim Tauber

## Santrauka

Vokietijos kariuomenei 1915 m. įžygiavus į Rusijos imperiją, pirmas įspūdis apie kraštą, kuriame vėliau kūrėsi nepriklausoma Lietuvos valstybė, buvo aiškus – tai yra viduramžiško primityvumo apimtas kraštas. Jo kraštovaizdis buvo regimas kaip monotoniškas, skurdus ir kupinas nepanaudotų išteklių, o gyventojams priskiriamas kaimiškas primityvumas, ribotas akiratis, bet kartu ir suktumas. Geriausiu atveju jie buvo atrandami kaip paprasti natūralūs žmonės (taurieji laukiniai), blogiausiu atveju – kaip „kultūros stokojantys“, bet valstietiškų gudrybių kupini gyventojai.

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Daugiau variacijų užkariauto krašto ir jo gyventojų vaizdinys įgaudavo tais atvejais, kai jis buvo lyginamas su Rusija. Užkariautosios žemės tarsi ir nebuvo suvokiamos kaip Rusija. Lietuva buvo laikoma, kalbant šiuolaikiniais terminais, „besivystančia šalimi“. Tačiau Rusijos vaizdinys turėjo neabejotiną įtaką vertinant Lietuvą, mat ji, viena vertus, buvo suvokiama kaip „azijinio“ primityvumo kraštas, antra vertus, kaip šalis, orientuota į „Vakarų“, taigi ir į Vokietiją. Šios įžvalgos vėliau kartosis ir per Antrąjį pasaulinį karą: abiem atvejais kraštas buvo vertinamas kaip esantis tarp Rytų ir Vakarų.

Atsilikusio krašto ir ne mažiau nuo civilizacijos nutolusių jo gyventojų vaizdinys buvo maitinamas kolonijinio mąstymo būdo. Reprodukavusieji šį vaizdinį lygino tai, ką matė naujai užkariauotose teritorijose, su savo gimtine, kurią *Ober Ost* srityje matomi vaizdai tik dar labiau skatino perdėti suvokti tarytum rojų. Visas šis skirtumas buvo koduojamas į vokiškąją *Kultur* sampratą, kuria buvo matuojami ir apibendrinami tarp Vokietijos ir Lietuvos ryškėję kontrastai. Taip konstruota kultūrinė hierarchija suteikė užkariautojams pranašumą ne tik galios politikos ar karinio pajėgumo prasme, bet ir ideologiniu bei idealizavimo lygmeniu. Iš to išplaukė, kad vokiečiai galėjo pasiūlyti „atsilikusiems“ Lietuvos gyventojams tam tikrą modelį, šitaip racionalizuodami ir savo pačių buvimą užkariautoje teritorijoje. Nenuostabu, kad šioje teritorijoje „kultūrą skleidžianti veikla“ (*Kulturarbeit*) ir „tvarka“ (*Ordnung*) buvo du pagrindiniai konceptai, kuriais vokiečiai stengėsi pateisinti savo veiksmus, nors, jų požiūriu, vietiniai gyventojai naujovėms pasidavė sunkiai.

Sykiu pabrėžtinai akcentuota kultūrinė hierarchija nuo pat pradžių ribojo bendradarbiavimą su vietiniais gyventojais. Jie nebuvo suvokiami kaip lygūs vokiečiams, dėl to net bendradarbiavimas politiniu lygmeniu nebuvo įmanomas kaip lygus su lygiu. Šiuo požiūriu į Vilniuje 1917 m. sušauktą lietuvių suvažiavimą buvo žiūrima abejingai ir su geraširdiška pajuoka. Požiūriui į po šios konferencijos sudarytos Lietuvos Tarybos reikalavimus irgi darė įtaką lietuvių, kaip „tauriųjų laukinių“, vaizdinys. Bet kokia lietuvių savivalda ar dalyvavimas rinkimuose buvo neįsivaizduojami dėl jų naivumo ir nepatyrimo.