The Roots of a Nation:

Lithuania's Historical Identity and the Klaipėda Uprising

by

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Contents

Introduction

Lithuania has never been a quiet corner of Europe. It has existed as a distinct political and cultural entity since the medieval period, rooted in a cohesive population that has survived centuries of conquest, occupation, and forced erasure. Lithuanians are not Slavs, they descend from ancient Baltic tribes that can be traced back to Neolithic settlers, with a cultural and linguistic lineage that predates the written word. Their language is the oldest surviving branch of the Indo-European family, as archaic as it is resilient.[1]

This ethnolinguistic unity has been the cornerstone of their tireless pursuit of sovereignty, as well as a crucial tool of resistance in the survival and consolidation of the Lithuanian state. Indeed, it was a catalyst for change in the Baltic region during the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[2]

From the leadership of larger-than-life medieval Grand Dukes to the actions of ordinary citizens, partisans, and soldiers in modern conflicts, Lithuania has endured in a strategically significant part of Europe.

After World War I, Lithuania's relationship with its bordering nations was varied and complex: largely cooperative relations with Latvia to the North, but tense with the Soviets to the East, due to broader historic and contemporary frictions with Russia. To the South and Southwest, territorial ambitions often put Lithuania at odds with both neighbors, resulting in

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[1] A. Urnikyte et al. "Patterns of genetic structure and adaptive positive selection in the Lithuanian population from high-density SNP data." *Sci Rep* 9, 9163 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1038 s41598-019-45746-3.

[2] Aida Savicka, ed., *Lithuanian Identity and Values,* Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2007, https://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-IVA/IVA-31.pdf.

strained relations with Poland, due to ongoing disputes over the Vilnius region, and cautious albeit strategic relations with East Prussia (Germany).[3] Klaipėda, known as Memel in German, was part of the territory of Eastern Prussia.[4]

This hostile environment fueled the need to establish territorial boundaries and assert national independence: the Klaipėda Uprising in January 1923 was part of this effort, resulting in the annexation of the Klaipėda region, a strategic port in the Baltic Sea. Given its lasting geo-political impact this uprising is considered one of the most important Lithuanian battles by the Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania.[5]

The Klaipėda Uprising was significant to both Lithuanian history and to understanding how smaller conflicts helped shape Europe's borders after World War I. Although often celebrated as part of a grassroots fight for independence, some modern historians have questioned the level of military involvement and the legitimacy of the territorial claims over Klaipėda.

This project explores how shared language, culture, and identity helped ignite the Klaipėda Uprising as part of Lithuania's broader nation-building efforts in the interwar period. By drawing on historical context, revisionist interpretations, and micro-history, it connects larger events to personal narratives—revealing how a common linguistic and cultural heritage moved ordinary people to act, and how war shaped their lives.

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[3] Peter Ernest Baltutis, "The Lithuanian-Polish Dispute and the Great Powers, 1918-1923" (Honors Thesis, University of Richmond, 2001).

[4] Šarūnas Liekis, *1939: The Year that Changed Everything in Lithuania's History* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 49.

[5] Albertas Karosas and Karolis Zikaras, eds., *The Major Battles and Military Operations of the Lithuanian Armed Forces*, Krašto Apsaugos Ministerija (Ministry of National Defense), accessed January 11, 2025, https://kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Zymiausi-musiai-20x20-ENG-2019.pdf.

I am conscious that the academic debate about nations and nationalism is dense, often contradictory, and shaped by competing theories about what forms national identities.[6] Yet today, international tensions are challenging the sovereignty of some European nations in very real ways. In light of ongoing efforts by the Russian leadership to erase the histories of post-Soviet states, it is important to establish that Lithuanians have existed as a distinct ethnolinguistic group since the beginning of the Common Era, and as a historically continuous political entity since the 13th century. Lithuania's history not only underscores its resilience but also plays an important role in countering revisionist narratives and fostering informed support for Baltic sovereignty.

Chapter 1 explores Lithuania's broader history— it is a condensed account of Lithuanian resistance and fight for autonomy up to the 15th century. It is an overview that provides a better understanding of the nature of the Lithuanian character, rooted in ethnicity, cultural, and linguistic traditions which eventually led to the Klaipėda Uprising.

Chapter 2 focuses on the the period between the 16th and 20th centuries, when great territorial losses and sustained occupations took place, with emphasis on the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the cultural repression by Imperial Russia. It examines the Lithuanian underground struggle to preserve their national character and language, culminating with the declaration of independence and the establishment of the Lithuanian Republic following World War I.

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[6] According to Irma Budginaitė, in her paper *National Identity and the Teaching of History*, the terms nation and nationalism can have different definitions, and there are four major paradigms in debates about them: primordialist, perenialist, modernist and ethnosymbolist. In addition, she explains that modernists accuse the other approaches of being "expressions of nationalism itself", while ethnosymbolists argue that "modernity did not break all the ties with the previous era and that one should look for the roots of nationalism before the 18th century". See Irma Budginaitė, *National Identity and the Teaching of History: The Reflection of Lithuania's 16th - 18th Centuries Commonwealth with Poland in Lithuanian Schools* (thesis, Central European University eTD Collection, 2010), 6.

Chapter 3 visits the role of the League of Nations in the Klaipėda issue, and delves into the planning, execution, and aftermath of the uprising, weaving in primary sources and micro-historical aspects of the events. It also offers a concise look at Lithuania's enduring struggle for freedom following the post-war Soviet invasion and decades-long occupation.

Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the 100th Anniversary of the Klaipėda Uprising, and Lithuania's place in the EU and NATO.

A note on semantics: perhaps not surprisingly, all the involved players in the events at Klaipėda have a distinct take and political perspective. In Lithuanian it is called *Klaipėda Sukilimas* (uprising), in German it is the *Memelland-Putsch* (suggesting a coup or military takeover), and in French it is called *L'Incident de Memel* (downplaying the event, perhaps due to the outcome under their administration). Based on my research and on the micro-historical evidence presented in Chapter 3, I will be referring to it as the Klaipėda Uprising.

Chapter 1

The Foundations of Lithuania: From Pagan Societies to Statehood

Lithuania is a Northern European parliamentary republic located on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, covering approximately 65,284 km^2 and a population of 2.8 million.[7] Despite its modest geographical size, Lithuania's history is marked by a complex legacy of invasions and occupations. More often defined by wars and devastation than by peace, its past is shaped by instability and uncertainty. Yet, as Latvian American historian Andreas Plakans notes, Lithuania's history is "ultimately defined by courage and determination."[8]

This analysis examines how resistance to external forces— from forced Christianization to Russian oppression— stimulated cultural traditions and shaped Lithuania's collective identity around survival. It also explores how this long history of resistance fostered a reactive patriotic mobilization that, by the interwar period, made the annexation of Klaipėda not just a military operation, but a component of a centuries-old struggle to protect its cultural heritage.

It is important to point out that, unlike modern nationalism, which is often associated with political extremism, Lithuania's national consciousness seems to have developed as a means of self-preservation and nation-building in response to repeated foreign domination.

The peoples of the lands now known as Lithuania are first mentioned by the Roman historian Tacitus in the first century CE. He refers to them as the *Aestii,* of the southern shore of the Northern Sea, although this most likely was a name given to them, rather than what they

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[7] "Lithuania- EU Country Profile," *European Union*, accessed January 6, 2025, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries/lithuania_en.

[8] Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), preface, xiv.

called themselves.[9] However, according to Marija Gimbutas, a renowned Lithuanian American archeologist and anthropologist, Tacitus was probably chronicling Balts in general, rather than specific peoples of the area.[10]

Based on both linguistic and historical ethnographic data, academics theorize about the groupings of these Baltic peoples. The northernmost peoples, now known as Estonians, spoke a Finnic language that relates them more to the Finns. South of them, in present-day Latvia and Lithuania, Baltic languages were spoken. According to Plakans, after the 11th century, the tribes that later unified as Lithuania made up the densest population in the region, numbering an estimated 280,000 people.[11] Through time, Lithuania consistently remained the largest and arguably the most influential of the three Baltic countries in terms of resistance to occupation.

In the journal *Lituanus*, Tomas Baranauskas of the Lithuanian Institute of History attributes the first recorded mention of these Baltic tribes as a distinct region under the name Lithuania to a Saxon monastery. The *Quedlinburg Annals* (1009 CE), describe the killing of a Christian missionary by the pagans in *Lituae.*[12] Still, a formal state formation would only take place much later, in 1253, when Lithuania crowned its first king.

During the 11th century, European populations grew alongside more organized economies and belief systems, and interest in the pagan Baltics began to develop.[13] In his book "*An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe, 1000-1500*", Steven A. Epstein

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[9] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 3-8.

[10] Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), 22.

[11] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 14.

[12] Tomas Baranauskas, "On the Origin of the Name of Lithuania," *Lituanus*, 2009, vol. 55:3, p. 28–36., January 1, 2009, https://www.academia.edu/1824054/On_the_Origin_of_the_Name_of_Lithuania.

[13] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 20.

describes how paganism was quickly disappearing from the continent but persisted in the polytheistic northeastern corners of Europe.[14] At the time, for Christianity, and particularly for the papacy, the salvation of souls was not just a religious duty but also a means of expansion.

Therefore, in 1208, following the issuance of a Papal Bull by Innocent III, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword began an offensive to incorporate all Lithuanian tribal lands into crusader-controlled territories. It was the preface of the Baltic Crusades, which marked the dawn of a baptism by blood that would last over 200 years.

A counter-offensive campaign was organized by local chieftains (*kunigai*) and dukes (*kunigaikščiai*), despite the natural fragmentation caused by the absence of a king, as the tribes shared linguistic and cultural ties that helped them recognize the external threats to their independence and pagan religion. Certainly some figures must have emerged as *de facto* leaders and rallied forces as military strategists, taking advantage of the natural terrain to implement the Lithuanian raiding warfare tradition of surprise attacks. In his book "Teutonic Knight vs Lithuanian Warriors", British historian Mark Galeotti explains that these same tactics were used often between villages to steal livestock, and provided a constant source of training for warriors and peasants alike. In addition, these local leaders also had a contingent of warriors who, just as Teutonic Knights, refined their fighting skills through training.[15]

Lithuania's territory was made up of dense forests, rivers, and isolated farming settlements. Due to the natural landscape and harsh climate, it was a territory of difficult access. In addition, fortifications along the Nemunas River provided protection and controlled merchant

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[14] Steven Epstein, *An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe, 1000-1500* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 54.

[15] Mark Galeotti, *Teutonic Knight versus Lithuanian Warrior: The Lithuanian Crusade 1283-1435* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2023).

shipping. British historian S.C. Rowell describes how the local population resisted the advances of neighboring Christian armies with a ferocity akin to the boars and wolves of their land.[16] This is a particularly fitting comparison considering the wolf is a central figure in Lithuanian folklore. It symbolizes strength, resilience and bravery, and reinforces the cultural connection between Lithuania's natural environment and its identity.

Ultimately, in response to the continued advances of the Teutonic Order, Lithuanian dukes saw unification as necessary. Around 1245, Mindaugas emerged as their most powerful leader, uniting various tribes and ethnic Lithuanians under his rule. This was the beginning of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

After coming to an agreement with the Teutonic Knights and accepting baptism in exchange for territory, Mindaugas was crowned King of Lithuania in 1253 by the pope. However, the conversion and failed military campaigns enraged the Lithuanian elite, who assassinated him in 1263, reverting to paganism.

In the following centuries, several grand dukes ruled and considerably expanded Lithuanian territory, most notably Grand Duke Gediminas and his dynasty. The sprawling nature of the Grand Duchy provided it with power, but it also made it difficult to defend against the

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[16] S. C. Rowell, *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire within East-Central Europe, 1295-1345* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 49-81.

sustained conflict with the Teutonic Order and others. As Lithuanians were never numerous, order was maintained through sheer political talent.[17]

Paganism still differentiated Lithuania from the rest of Europe and provided legitimacy to the Grand Dukes. Several converted to Christianism when advantageous, only to repeatedly backtrack after receiving concessions. However, according to Mantas Bureika, assistant professor at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Vilnius University, paganism isolated the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from trading with Western Europe, and as a result, the economy suffered. In addition, the lack of a written language made the beliefs decentralized and disorganized.[18]

A combination of these factors eventually opened the door to the transition to Christianism. Therefore, in 1385 the Union of Krėve took place, resulting in the transactional marriage between Grand Duke Jogaila (Jagiełło) and the daughter of the Polish king, making him King of Poland. It created a dynastic union where two separate states were ruled by the same monarch. Lithuania agreed to adopt Christianity again and gave up parts of its territory to the Order.[19] This was an alliance meant to strengthen Lithuania, yet as a consequence Polish culture and language began to permeate and influence Lithuanian nobles and gentry, who chose to speak

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[17] Although the Grand Duchy implemented an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy, it was a multi-ethnic state. Several conditions allowed for a "peaceful" territorial expansion, among others, the internal fragmentation of Russian lands seeking support from the Lithuanians, Mongol-Tatars inter-tribal fights, and alliances forged through marriage. Perspectives on the nature of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania vary widely between German, Lithuanian and Russian scholars. See Zenonas Norkus, "The Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the Retrospective of Comparative Historical Sociology of Empire*s"*, *World Political Science Review*, Article 4, 3, no. 4 (2007).

[18] Mantas Bureika, "Institutions and Development in a Fragile Limited Access Order of Late-Medieval Lithuania: Journal of Institutional Economics," *Cambridge Core*, November 15, 2024, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-institutional-economics/article/institutions-and-development-in-a-fragile-limited-access-order-of-latemedieval-lithuania/6D5CCB036BA78EADB33842AE1C8C7078.

[19] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 65.

Polish over their mother tongue. In fact, Jogaila's son Casimir (1440-1492) was the last Grand Duke to speak Lithuanian.[20]

Following the Ostrow Agreement of 1392, King Jogaila became the *Supremus Dux* of Lithuania, and the title of Grand Duke and the *de facto* ruling of country was bestowed to his cousin Vytautas.

Grand Duke Vytautas was a cunning ruler, determined in his pursuit of power— he was baptized not once but three times only to revert to paganism. But it was under his reign that Lithuania reached its pinnacle, becoming the largest state in Europe. The expansion began in 1396 and at its height, the territory extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

According to art historian and medievalist Giedrė Mickūnaitė, Vytautas' rule strengthened governance, trade, and national identity. In her book "Making a Great Ruler: Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania", Mickūnaitė delves into Vytautas' glory and his appeal to national sentiment in Lithuania, standing out from his predecessors. She points out how, in reality, his life was one of many compromises and contradictions: a shifting ally, a refugee and avenger, a heathen and a Christian, in a relentless pursuit of victory and glory.[21]

Although other Lithuanian rulers were also significant, Mickūnaitė argues that Vytautas benefited from several major factors: his own propaganda efforts, Christianity— unlike other relevant Grand Dukes who died as pagans, Vytautas eventually converted, historical context, and

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[20] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 91.

[21] Giedrė Mickūnaitė, *Making a great ruler: Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania* (Hungary: Central European University Press, 2006).

the fact that records of his reign were kept, marking his successes and the "golden age" of Lithuania.[22]

Grand Duke Vytautas died of old age in Trakai in 1430, just weeks before his long-awaited coronation as King of Lithuania.

What made his memory one that embodies cultural identity for Lithuanians? Based on contemporary Lithuanian chronicles, the dynastic union of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland was a difficult one. The two nations spoke different languages, both in everyday life and in political terms, and often seemed not to understand each other well.

Vytautas not only shaped a political nation— its values and culture— through the force of his personality and leadership, he also acted as the sovereign of an independent state, seeking Lithuania's recognition as a kingdom and equal partner to Poland.[23] His legacy endured as a symbol of unity and stability. While his appeal would undergo a resurgence in different periods, it would become particularly influential during the interwar period.[24]

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[22] Even though Jogaila was a Christian and Lithuania's *Supremus Dux*, his image is controversial due to the profound influences and consequences of his decision to unite Lithuania to Poland. Many feel he "betrayed Lithuania", tarnishing his legacy. Other rulers, such as Mindaugas and Gediminas are also a source of national pride, but Jogailla is not part of that group.

[23] Jūrate Kiaupienė, "The Grand Duchy and the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in the Sixteenth Century: Reflections on the Lithuanian Political Nation and the Union of Lublin," essay, in *The Polish-Lithuanian Monarchy in European Context c. 1500-1795* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 82–92, 84.

[24] Mickūnaitė, *Making a great ruler*, 271-274.

Chapter 2

Foreign Influence and the loss of independence: Between Empires and Erasure

The period between the 16th and 19th centuries brought profound foreign influence and, ultimately, the loss of independence to Lithuania. Various Grand Dukes followed Vytautas, but his death marked a turning point in Lithuanian history. Although the Grand Duchy remained a formidable power for nearly another century, it became increasingly influenced and reliant on Poland.

The last Grand Duke of the Jagiellonian Dynasty— named after the Latinized form of Jogaila's name— was Sigismund II Augustus. He was responsible for the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth through the Union of Lublin of 1569, which merged Poland and Lithuania into a single state.

While officially a union of two nations, several Lithuanian historians argue whether this union, for Poland, had possibly been intended as an annexation from the beginning. At that time, Lithuania was weakened due to conflict with Muscovy— the Grand Duchy of Moscow, later to become Czardom of Russia, and had little leverage in negotiations. Although beneficial in keeping Muscovys at bay, the Union of Lublin came with a heavy toll to Lithuania. In effect, it embodied the political incorporation of Lithuania into Poland. It is recorded that, on his knees and weeping a Lithuanian elder lamented to Sigismund:

" Bowing to Your Majesty's will, we were forced to yield here with the deepest pain and sorrow. There are no words for our grief. For we, as loyal sons of our motherland, are obliged to

look after her welfare as much as we are able. If unable to defend her now, it is because we are forced to concede to obstacles, fate and time."[25]

Following the Union of Lublin the territorial integrity of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was breached, causing a marked decline in its size and political influence. Soon the Western model of agriculture and serfdom spread across the land. According to Robert Millward, in the Journal of Economic History, the earlier agricultural model in Lithuania was a more communal form of agriculture, with tenements containing several peasant families. The majority of these peasants were free by the end of the 14th century, paying taxes to the Crown in either grain or money.[26]

That would change in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the consequent relationship between Polish-speaking landowners and Lithuanian-speaking peasants due to serfdom would go on to become part of the interwar collective memory. That's when elites of peasant origins would trace the preservation of the Lithuanian language and cultural tradition to grassroots efforts throughout centuries of serfdom.[27]

Interestingly, according to Plakans, the multi-lingual character of the Commonwealth, and the abandonment by the Lithuanian elite of the language and culture of their native realm might have, in the long run, contributed to its fragility.[28] Yet multilingualism isn't inherently a weakness— under the leadership of Vytautas, it was actually a strategic advantage. He managed

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[25] Alfonsas Eidintas et al., *The History of Lithuania* (Vilnius, Lithuania: Eugrimas Publishing House, 2013), 79.

[26] Robert Millward, "An Economic Analysis of the Organization of Serfdom in Eastern Europe," *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 42, no. No. 3 (September 1982): 513–48, 524.

[27] Viktorjia Šeina, "The Literary Image of the Pole in the Republic of Lithuania (1918-1940)," essay, in *Imagology Profiles: The Dynamics of National Imagery in Literature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 199–213.

[28] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 94.

to maintain relative internal stability while expanding the Grand Duchy's territory by integrating diverse groups without forcing cultural homogenization.[29]

During the 15th-16th centuries, a system of writing had become necessary in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in order to govern. Unlike in Western Europe, Monasteries weren't numerous and couldn't perform this task. To this end, Chancelleries were created and writing became part of the everyday life of the gentry and townspeople. The records created by these Chancelleries are called the *Lithuanian Metrica*, and were compiled along with *Statutes* and other chronicles. The *Metrica* was written in administrative languages, mainly Ruthenian (an old East Slavic language), but also Latin and Prussian, among others. It is the most important source of the history of the Grand Duchy.[30]

The Lithuanian language remained unwritten, yet spoken in villages where peasants kept local dialects alive. Folk songs (dainos) were an essential part of rural life, passed orally— often by women, and preserved mythological themes, historical memory and pre-Christian symbols. It was also the *lingua franca* of the ethnic population in most spheres of life in the Grand Duchy, spoken by the lesser nobility, merchants, and burghers of Vilnius, Kaunas, and Trakai.[31]

It was only in 1547 that "Catechism", the first book in Lithuanian, was published in Königsberg by Martynas Mažvydas. A Lithuanian protestant fleeing Vilnius from prosecution,

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[29] "Grand Duchy of Lithuania," Encyclopædia Britannica, March 25, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/place/grand-duchy-of-Lithuania.

[30] Eidintas et al., *The History of Lithuania*, 67-69.

[31] Artūras Dubonis, "The Prestige and Decline of the Official (State) Language in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Fifteenth–Sixteenth Century): Problems in Belarusian Historiography," *ResearchGate.net*, February 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339506956_The_Prestige_and_Decline_of_the_Official_State_Language_in_the_Grand_Duchy_of_Lithuania_Fifteenth-Sixteenth_Century_Problems_in_Belarusian_Historiography.

Mažvydas dedicated the book to the Grand Duchy. Not much later, in 1570, the Vilnius Jesuit College was founded and became the University of Vilnius in 1579.

As publishing became part of Lithuanian society, interest in Lithuania's history grew and myths were created based on legends from the Renaissance. It was the beginning of the historical national conscience, when poems about Grand Duke Vytautas were written, depicting his reign as an ideal period and model. However, according to Alfonsas Eidintas et al., Polish civilization still heavily influenced Lithuanian development.

Despite publications, there was a limited rise in literacy among Lithuanian peasants, as education remained predominantly for nobles and the clergy. Still, the lesser nobility were moderately literate—and often more nationalistic and likely to speak and read Lithuanian. This was especially true for Prussian Lithuanians in Lithuania Minor, a historically Lithuanian-speaking region under Prussian rule—where modern-day Klaipėda is located.[32]

By the 1720s, as Europe embarked on the Enlightenment, the Commonwealth struggled to keep Russia away from its internal affairs, and soon Russian elites took control over the enserfed Lithuanian peasantry. A series of territorial partitions orchestrated by Russia, Prussia, and Austria gradually erased it from the map. The final partition took place in 1795 and consequently, after about 200 years, the Commonwealth ceased to exist. The main part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was incorporated into the Russian Empire.[33]

The *Lithuanian Metrica* was then taken to Moscow and never returned, encapsulating the effort by Imperial Russia to erase Lithuania's political memory and ancient statehood. In fact,

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[32] Dubonis, *The Prestige and Decline of the Official (State) Language in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania,*2.

[33] Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 124-26.

historian Artūras Dubonis suggests that the *Metrica* was taken to Moscow as a trophy after the liquidation of the Lithuanian State. Several attempts have been made to recover it, yet the requests were denied.[34] It was only towards the end of the Soviet period, in 1985, that Vilnius University began an ongoing research and publication of the *Metrica*.

Though there were brief moments of hope for self-government, particularly during Napoleon's 1812 campaign, they were short-lived. Over the following decades, the Czarist regime suppressed Lithuanian autonomy, culture, and language. A failed uprising in 1863 led to a violent crackdown on dissent, leading to a complete Lithuanian press ban from 1864-1904, in an attempt to extinguish the culture altogether. Russification efforts replaced all Lithuanian language books with Cyrillic works.

However, when schools and teachers became exclusively Russian, traditions were maintained at home. Rural residents set up clandestine schools taught by literate villagers, where children were educated in language, folk tales, and songs; underground newspapers were created.

Lithuanian books were printed in East Prussia, and secretly distributed by book smugglers (*Knigynešiai)*— an extraordinary phenomenon unique to Lithuania. In fact, the Russian census of 1897 showed that almost 50% of ethnic Lithuanians were literate, but only one-fifth of them read Russian.[35]

In 1915, during World War I, Germany pushed Imperial Russia out and invaded Lithuania, turning it into a military zone in order to exploit its resources. This occupation was

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[34] Artūras Dubonis, "The Lithuanian Metrica," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 7, no. 1 (2002): 113–138, https://doi.org/10.30965/25386565-00701006.

[35] Eidintas et al., *The History of Lithuania*, 138.

called *Ober Ost* and lasted until 1918.[36] Lithuanians were kept out of the government, but on February 16, 1918, the Council of Lithuania, chaired by Jonas Basanavičius proclaimed the restoration of an independent Lithuania.

A chaotic period followed, known as the Wars of Independence. Lithuania had to fight off the Soviets, who invaded after the German troops withdrew; the Bermontians— a hybrid German-Russian force claiming to fight Bolsheviks but attacking Lithuanian territory; and Poland, which seized Vilnius in 1920.[37]

Basanavičius, now known as "The National Patriarch", was born to a family of farmers. He became an intellectual and the editor of the first Lithuanian political magazine—Aušra (The Dawn), first published in 1883 and secretly distributed in Lithuania. It devoted attention to Lithuania's history and dissociated the nation from the traditions of the Union of Lublin. It also opposed the Czarist authority and demanded cultural and educational opportunities for ethnic Lithuanians. It was in its pages that the idea of an independent state of Lithuanian-speaking people was born.[38]

After the Wars of Independence, all three Baltic countries proclaimed their sovereignty and formed national armies. The city of Vilnius, however, remained under Polish control despite Lithuanian protests.[39] The League of Nations, formed after the war to arbitrate disputes between countries, mediated the conflict between Lithuania and Poland. It was also put in charge of the

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[36] Baltutis, "The Lithuanian-Polish Dispute and the Great Powers", 15.

[37] Klaus Richter, "Independence Wars (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia)", in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10285

[38] Eidintas et al., *The History of Lithuania*, 26-140.

[39] Richter, "Independence Wars (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia)".

territory of Memel (Klaipėda), which had been part of East Prussia and under German control, and had a mixed population. It became an "International Mandate" to prevent Germany from reclaiming it after the war.[40]

In Lithuania, the first few years of the Republic were of political turmoil. Conservative Nationalist Antanas Smetona was elected president in 1919, but after only one year relinquished his duties to the chairman of the Lithuanian Constituent Assembly. In 1926 a coup offered Smetona a return to power, in 1927 he dissolved the parliament and removed the Prime Minister in 1929. His regime was nationalist and suppressed political opposition, but despite being non-democratic Smetona was a moderate who saw himself as the unifier of Lithuania.[41]

It is interesting to mention that, for modern historians, such as Benedict Anderson, nations are a product of a recent history, of no more than two centuries. He argues they were shaped by the decline of religion, dynastic systems, and the rise of print capitalism (mass-produced printed materials).[42] However, it seems undeniable that the cultural survival in Lithuania was a bottom-up resistance to foreign domination, with roots that long predate modernity, in an environment where print capitalism was all but inexistent.

Granted, after World War I, the remote historical past of the Grand Duchy was used to legitimize the Lithuanian right to self-determination, while the education system became a means

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[40] Joseph Maiolo and Laura Robson, *League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 10.

[41] Artūras Svarauskas: "Smetona, Antanas," in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08.

[42] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

to raise national consciousness and highlight Lithuania's continuous struggles.[43] Yet, it seems that the idea of being Lithuanian persisted through centuries, lived in language, family, and tradition, only to reassert itself at crucial— albeit not always politicized— historical moments.

[43] Budginaitė, *National Identity and the Teaching of History*, 23.

Chapter 3

Where Memory Meets Action: The Klaipėda Uprising

Historically, scholars have categorized the formation of the League of Nations as a failed experiment born out of the Treaty of Versailles, one that aimed to maintain peace and stability after World War I while protecting newly defined nations and borders, as well as safeguarding both pre-existing and newly emerged minorities. However, in "The League of Nations", authors Joseph Maiolo and Laura Robson re-evaluate this first attempt at a global organization. Established at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and lasting until 1946, the League, they argue, wasn't about fostering cooperation and prosperity but was instead a tool of control for its primary powerbrokers:

> "Such accounts have broadly failed to admit the League's own overriding purpose. This was not to work towards international cooperation among equally sovereign states, to promote economic stability in a shattered post-war Europe, or to ensure new forms of global security and prosperity. Rather, it was to claim control over the world's resources, war-making potential, and populations for the League's main showrunners– and not through the gentle arts of persuasion, collaboration, and negotiation but through the direct and indirect use of physical force and the monopolization of global military and economic power."[44]

This perspective holds weight, particularly considering that one of the ways the League sought to assert power over Europe's contested lands was by controlling goods and people through the creation of "Free Cities" under international administration, often over the protests of their population.

Decoding the Klaipeda Uprising through the Maiolo and Robson's lens becomes bigger than just a determined effort to establish territorial boundaries and assert independence in a

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[44] Maiolo and Robson, *League of Nations*, 1.

hostile environment. It can also be seen as an admirable early act of defiance against the economic and strategic interest of major players, as the universal story of a small nation resisting larger powers. This is a theme that has played out over and over in history, and in Lithuania's case, a struggle for sovereignty that didn't begin in 1918, nor end in 1923—but rather was a continuous battle.

Memel (Klaipėda), was not officially a Free City, but it also came under international administration. Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles required Germany to renounce sovereignty over Memel in favor of the Allied and Associated Powers. The region was then declared a protectorate provisionally occupied by France, to be governed by an international mandate until a final decision was made on which nation it would be assigned to.[45] To that end, in 1920, French troops led by General Dominique Odry were sent to the *Territories of Memel* to assume control of the port city, triggering political disputes and tensions. Odry was tasked with maintaining security and order, while Commissioner Gabriel Jean Petisné was appointed to govern on behalf of the League of Nations.

It is important to understand that historically Klaipėda was the main city of Eastern Prussia. The region, called "Lithuania Minor", included parts of present-day Poland, the Kaliningrad exclave of Russia and south-western Lithuania. It was inhabited by a mainly ethnical Germans, but also Lithuanian-speaking Prussian Lithuanians (who were mostly rural), the *lietuvininkai*. Sources differ on percentages, but circa 1920 the breakdown of the regional

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[45] Carsten Stahn, *The Law and Practice of International Territorial Administration: Versailles to Iraq and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

population of 140,000, approximately 40-43% German, 25-27% Klaipėdan or Memelländish (local identity with regional particularities), 26-27% Lithuanian, and others.[46]

Klaipėda was significant for the Lithuanian cultural identity. For example, in the 18th century, of 1,700 parish schools, only 400 were German— a reminder of the area's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. The region also nurtured a rich tradition of Lithuanian music and folk songs (*dainos*), which remain a cornerstone of their national identity. In addition, as described in Chapter 2, it was the home to the underground literature produced and printed to fight Russian oppression during the Czarist period.

These cultural markers are often overlooked in favor of Klaipėda's Germanic past, especially when challenging Lithuanian state-building narratives. Nevertheless, German culture was also present. Lutheran schooling was compulsory in 1736, and in the 19th century, Lutheran activists from Lithuania Major found refuge in the region.[47]

Despite these deep cultural ties, opinions differ over Lithuania's claim to Klaipėda. Some historians, such as Vasilijus Safronovas, a research professor at the Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology of Klaipėda University, challenge the notion of the annexation of Klaipėda as a "reunification", arguing it was never part of any historical Lithuanian state. He points to the fact that the city was founded as Memel by the Teutonic Order in the 13th century[48]

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[46] Piotr Eberhardt, *Ethnic Groups and Population Changes in Twentieth-century Central-Eastern Europe: History, Data, and Analysis*. (United Kingdom: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 40.

[47] Rūta Girdzijauskien and Emilija Sakadolskis, "Chapter 6, Lithuania: The Continuous Assertion of National Identity," essay, in *The Origins and Foundations of Music Education* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 82–96.

[48] There are, however, accounts of Lithuanian demands over the region since medieval times. Grand Duke Vytautas claimed Klaipėda during negotiations with Michael Küchmeister von Sternberg, the leader of the legation of the Teutonic Order on 28 January 1413, using historical and ethnic arguments. In his opinion, earlier documents relating to the bequest of Samogitia "lost their legal power when Lithuania became a Christian country". See Eidintas et al., *The History of Lithuania*, 59–60.

and that the German-speaking population during the time of the revolt was either neutral or opposed to the annexation and identified as Germans who resisted Lithuanization. He also maintains that the events were a staged uprising orchestrated by the Lithuanian government then based in Kaunas. He also adds that the Lithuanian government had been encouraged by Germany to annex Klaipėda with the objective of an eventual reclamation, and by Soviets who feared Polish influence in the region.[49]

Although Safronovas' argument deconstructs nationalistic sentiment and is factually correct, particularly considering the region's Germanic past and the geopolitical forces of the time, he misses important perspectives while downplaying the agency of ordinary people over the events. His analysis is grounded in cold reality but it fails to take into account Lithuania's strategic needs, self-determination aspirations, and cultural identity that align with some of the micro-history narratives of the revolt.[50] It's an analysis that underplays the emotional and symbolic weight Klaipėda held for Lithuanians striving to reclaim their voice.

Tara Zahra, a professor at the University of Chicago, offers a distinctive perspective on the issue of identity. In her article "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis", she explores the indifference to national identities despite nationalist movements in the 20th century, and how identities can be reshaped without completely discarding local and regional allegiances.[51] In some aspects, her ideas contrast with those of

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[49] Aurelija Jašinskienė, "Historian Vasilijus Safronovas: Annexation of Klaipėda is a key event in Lithuania's history," *15min*, January 16, 2013.

[50] Girdzijauskien and Sakadolskis, "Lithuania: The Continuous Assertion of National Identity", 58.

[51] Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis: Slavic Review," *Cambridge Core*, January 27, 2017, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/slavic-review/article/abs/imagined-noncommunities-national-indifference-as-a-category-of-analysis/7DD446830C61506980E2ED2E7049DE35.

Anderson. According to her, not all people imagined themselves as part of a nation or were indifferent to the idea. While Anderson focuses on explaining how nations are formed, she argues some people resisted or didn't care about being part of one.

Zahra offers a useful lens for understanding the history of the Klaipėda, and a picture begins to emerge if combined with the point of view of Lithuanian historian Vygantas Vareikis, in his article about identity in Klaipėda region in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to Vareikis, unlike the rest of Lithuania where language expressed a common identity and was the real element that united the nation, the preservation of the language wasn't a pressing problem in the Lithuania Minor region, and most Lithuanians there were bilingual. But Vareikis does acknowledge that the movement to preserve the Lithuanian language and culture in Lithuania Minor had been a reality for the politically active Prussian Lithuanians, and many saw themselves as distinctly Lithuanian in the region. However, most were politically indifferent, so there wasn't a need for radical choices between either Lithuanian or German, or both.[52] Therefore, it seems clear that most of the local population of Klaipėda in 1923 was not inclined to rise up and fight for any perceived identity or nationality.

Conversely, in Martynas Anysas *memoirs*—a Klaipėdan and active participant in the events, he describes the movement as patriotic. Nevertheless, his account also confirms Vareikis views on the general sentiment of the residents of Klaipėda: that Lithuanian patriots of Klaipėda warmly embraced the unification with Lithuania proper, while Germans, undecided Lithuanians,

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[52] Vygantas Vareikis, "Memellander/Klaipėdiškiai Identity and German-Lithuanian Relations in Lithuania Minor in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Sociologija. Mintis Ir Veiksmas* 7 (1-2) (July 2, 2001): 54–65, https://doi.org/doi:10.15388/SocMintVei.2001.1-2.7233.

and those with a local identity were opposed to uniting the region with the newly emerging Republic of Lithuania.[53]

Anysas' account dates the beginnings of the uprising to World War I, when the men of Lithuania Minor were conscripted to join the German Army, and created laces with Lithuanian patriots during the occupation of Vilnius. They are said to have participated in secret meetings with renowned Lithuanian patriots, where early plans for national rebuilding began to take shape. He goes on to describe how these men from Lithuania Minor, upon returning home, formed the Prussian Lithuanian National Council, which as early as 1918 issued a resolution to annex Lithuania Minor to Lithuania Proper. He also describes the frustration of the patriots with the French administration that was put in place instead, in 1920.

Anysas also recounts the formation of the "Supreme Committee for the Rescue of Lithuania Minor"— the political successor of Prussian-Lithuanian nationalist movements, based in Kaunas, and semi-covertly representing Lithuanian state interests. Led by figures such as Prussian Lithuanian teacher and nationalist E. Simonaitis and publisher M. Jankus, preparations for the uprising got underway:

"We, the people of Lithuania Minor, could not carry out the uprising alone, as we lacked the men and had no weapons. Help was needed from Lithuania Proper. Separate organizations could not assist us either, as they too lacked military equipment. The only entity that could help us was the government. But it was difficult to negotiate with them. The Prime Minister did not believe the uprising would succeed and anticipated all kinds of troubles from the Allies."[54]

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[53] Martynas Anysas, "Klaipėdos krašto prijungimas prie Lietuvos: 1923 m. sausio 15 d. paminėti." *Kultūros barai*, 2014, Nr. 1, pp. 77-80, 95; 2014, Nr. 2, pp. 80-85, 95.

[54] Anysas, "Klaipėdos krašto prijungimas prie Lietuvos", 81.

But the appeal wasn't just for military aid— it was a call to reconnect with a national center defined not just by geography, but by language, memory, and shared struggle. The *memoir* goes on to explain that, to achieve the necessary troops and organization, the leadership of the insurgents was then taken over by a higher-ranking officer of the Kaunas Security Police, Jonas Polovinskas, who adopted the *nom de guerre* Jonas Budrys—the same name of a local farmer who was initially involved in the uprising but eventually stepped away. Due to this name change, for a long time, it was believed that the uprising was led by a local Lithuanian-Klaipėdan, an interesting example of the lasting impact of some historical interpretations, and of the importance of careful analysis of primary sources.

In addition, Anysas mentions economic concerns as an active reason behind the uprising. The Lithuanian currency *Litas* had grown stronger and more stable in comparison to the free fall of the German *Mark*. He describes how the local farmers began trading in *Litas* but were facing difficulties in dealing with Germany due to the inflation there, and how timber merchants, sawmills, and other traders were dissatisfied with Petisné's administrative policies. So as the economy deteriorated, the idea of unification with Lithuania became more popular. A silent 16mm documentary film shot during the uprising shows local farmers picking up rifles for the first time in their lives and joining the insurgents.[55]

Perhaps then, what came into play within some of the general population in Klaipėda is what Zahra describes as "side-switching" by some Germans in east central Europe at the time, who were more interested in privileges than nationalism. While her article challenges the

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[55] Nenustatyta, "Klaipėdos Atvadavimas 1923", *Liberation of Klaipėda 1923* (Lithuanian Central State Archives, n.d.), https://www.e-kinas.lt/ekinas-movie/movie/1181.

assumption of the irreversibility of nationalization, Zahra also points out how ordinary life and non-elite experiences reflect important aspects of society, culture, and change.

In any case, a detached Klaipėda was a diplomatic tangle, and the Lithuanian government strongly opposed the idea of a free city, even though it was favored by German residents of the city.[56] The port facilities in Klaipėda were the only ones available to Lithuania and of vital economic interest. During this time, the restored Lithuanian nation was also in a border dispute with Poland, mediated by the League, fighting for recognition of Vilnius as Lithuania's capital; Poland also had indirect aspirations over Klaipėda. That indicates that Lithuania's nation-building ideology was not necessarily expansionist, but rather directed at repelling expansionist neighbors.[57] Yet, the government in Kaunas was also one that would secretly provide the means for the uprising in Klaipėda.

According to the Lithuanian Armed Forces, on January 1st, 1923, the Supreme Committee for the Rescue of Lithuania Minor delivered a request to secure Lithuanians of the Klaipėda Region from German persecution. Secretly, Lithuania formed a Special Purpose Detachment comprised of cadets of Military School, members of 5th and 8th Infantry Regiments, 1st Cavalry Regiment, other battalions, volunteer soldiers and officers, and members of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union from the Vilkaviškis, Kaišiadorys, and Panevėžys regions. The insurgent army therefore comprised of around 40 officers, 584 regular soldiers, 455 riflemen, and about 300 citizens of Klaipėda Region, with Jonas Polovinskas-Budrys in charge. On January 10,

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[56] Leonas Sabliunas, *Lithuania in Crisis: Nationalism to Communism, 1939–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94920.

[57] Alfonsas Eidintas et al., *The History of Lithuania,*, 176.

they boarded a Kaunas-Klaipėda train, and at the border, they changed into civilian clothing with armbands bearing the letters “MLS” (Volunteer of Lithuania Minor).[58]

The events of the day are described by Anysas as follows:

“On January 15, at 3 a.m., the insurgents captured Sendvaris (Althof) near Klaipėda, taking French Lieutenant Soulier, five soldiers, seventeen police officers, and German volunteers prisoner, along with nine machine guns. By 5 a.m., the insurgents had entered the city, and, after the retreat of the Freistaat supporters, they took control of the Danė River line from the south. By noon, the French retreated to the Prefecture, where further skirmishes took place. When the volunteers tried to lower the French flag at the Prefecture, they encountered resistance from the French guards, who refused to let them do so. A firefight ensued. Eventually, one of the insurgents threw a hand grenade, killing two French soldiers. Several insurgents were also killed.”

Photos of original documents sent to me by Jūrate Katilienė, senior archivist of the Photo Document Department at the Lithuanian Central State Archives, describe the combat at the Prefecture in greater detail: “Upon approaching the building, rifleman Jonas Antanavičius and Ignas Civilis, along with Lt. Viktoras Burokevičius, threw grenades through the windows of the Chief Commissariat, but enemy fire from inside cost the lieutenant his life. After machine gun and grenade fire from the Chief Commissariat’s side, a white flag appeared”.

Nineteen-year-old rifleman Antanavičius was my grandfather, and Lt. Burokevičius, although just a few years older, was his uncle. According to Katilienė, their actions were “heroic.”[59]

Unfortunately, my grandfather passed away before I knew enough to ask the right questions about the events in Klaipėda, but I am not sure he would want to say much. Albeit

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[58] Karolis Zikaras, *Military Operation in Klaipėda, 1923 - Lithuania’s Historical Victory*, Lithuanian Armed Forces, January 15, 2010, https://kariuomene.lt/en/newsevents/military-operation-in-klaipeda-1923-lithuanias-historical-victory/1615.

[59] Jūrate Katilienė, email to author, September 13, 2024.

decorated with three medals for his service to Lithuania, he never mentioned anything to his children. My grandfather and I had a very close relationship until he died in 1986, and it was to me he made the only reference to his experience in Klaipėda.

In a conversation about the horrors of war he described to me how, before his eyes, an esteemed family member had been killed. I suppose that's why he chose to not speak about it: although a staunch patriot, this memory conveyed deep sorrow and loss, instead of pride.

In his book "Heroes of the Vilkaviškis Region: Knights of the Vytis Cross 1918-1940", Vilius Kavaliauskas, a journalist and history researcher from Vilnius University, describes my grandfather as "an engineer, military figure, and public activist. He was exceptionally talented from childhood, spoke six languages, and understood another ten. He was a classmate of Lithuanian poet Salomėja Neris, among other intellectuals with whom he kept in contact". Kavaliauskas adds that Antanavičius was a graduate of Vytautas Magnus University, and an active member of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union who arrived in January 1923 in Klaipėda with other volunteers from Kaunas. His bravery earned him the Order of the Vytis Cross (1923), the Bronze Medal for the Liberation of Klaipėda (1925), and the Lithuanian Independence Medal (1928).[60]

After Klaipėda, Jonas Antanavičius adopted a more Lithuanized version of his surname, becoming Antanaitis. He married in his mid-twenties and became an entrepreneur in the linen business, who in 1939— on the eve of World War II, moved to Bulgaria, and in 1946 relocated to Brazil. As a father of two small children, he understood that his patriotic deeds, intellectual and

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[60] Vilius Kavaliauskas, *Vilkaviškio krašto karžygiai: Vyties Kryžiaus kavalieriai 1918-1940 m.* (Vilnius: Lodvila, 2012), 276.

family ties, as well as being a successful businessman would put him in the crosshairs of the Soviet invasion, and he probably wouldn't survive.[61]

Distance, however, didn't suppress his identity. He led Lithuanian organizations in Brazil and was the conductor of the Lithuanian Choir. Just before his death, he told me "Brazil is a war-free nation, and that's wonderful. But I was born a Lithuanian, and will die a Lithuanian", and so he did. He was buried in Brazil without ever returning to his homeland, but instilled in his descendants his love for Lithuania: all of us, even his great-grandchildren who never met him, chose to carry dual Lithuanian citizenship. Two of his three medals were lost, and I am the custodian of his Order of the Vytis Cross.

My great-granduncle Lt. Viktoras Burokevičius graduated military school in 1919 as a noncommissioned officer. In 1919, he volunteered for the artillery regiment of the Lithuanian Army and participated in the Wars of Independence as an infantry lieutenant, fighting against the Soviet Army and Polish military units. From December 1920, he served as a company commander in the 8th Infantry Regiment. He held a commanding position in the Klaipėda Uprising and led soldiers into battle. Burokevičius was the youngest of a family of six children, four of which had immigrated to the United States before 1923; he was also a cousin of Jonas Basanavičius.[62] There are no records of the impact of his death on his family, but it can be reasonably assumed it was devastating— he was only 24 years old, never married, and left no children. He was posthumously awarded the Order of the Vytis Cross and is buried in Kėdainiai.

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[61] Audra Antanaitis Catafay (daughter of Jonas Antanaitis), conversation with the author, December 23, 2024.

[62] Kavaliauskas, *Vilkaviškio krašto karžygiai*, 276.

In 2023, a military wreath-laying ceremony took place at his grave on the 100th anniversary of the Klaipėda Uprising.

Why are their stories relevant? Because of what motivated both men to take action at that pivotal moment in history. In my grandfather's case, I know he was driven by a fierce belief in Lithuanian identity and sovereignty, while Burokevičius was a soldier and a patriot with a documented history of taking up arms to defend Lithuania. Their stories illustrate how the desire for self-determination among ordinary individuals was a genuine part of the Klaipėda Uprising and, therefore, its grassroots dimension should not be understated.

Their sacrifices speak to a deeper truth: that Lithuania, rooted in a shared language and cultural memory, endured not by accident, but through deliberate acts of loyalty and resistance. During the uprising, between January 14 and 15, 1923, eight Lithuanian soldiers and four members of the Riflemen's Union were killed.[63]

In the aftermath, the battle became one of diplomatic negotiations, and the handover of the territory to Lithuania was finally confirmed by the Council of Ambassadors— the League of Nations body overseeing and settling disputes— in 1924.[64]

Based on census data, between eight to ten thousand ethnic Germans chose to re-locate after the uprising— both a validation that part of the population did identify as German, and a reminder that theories like Zahra's may apply to some, but certainly not all.

Unfortunately, peace was short-lived lived. In March 1939, Hitler issued an ultimatum to Lithuania and annexed Klaipėda, forcing the Lithuanian government to sign a treaty

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[63] Palmira Martinkienė , "Pagerbė Klaipėdos Sukilimo Dalyvius," *Atvira Klaipėda*, January 22, 2015, https://www.atviraklaipeda.lt/kategorija/klaipedos-krastui-100/.

[64] "The Covenant of the League of Nations (Art. 1 to 26)," *U.S. Department of State*, accessed March 24, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv13/ch10subch1.

relinquishing the region to Germany. By September, the independence of the Baltic States had become uncertain, and Lithuania was drawn into a humanitarian crisis by agreeing to shelter more than 100,000 refugees.[65]

To regain control of Vilnius (which had been handed to the Soviets by Poland in September 1939), President Antanas Smetonas signed a mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union. In exchange, the Red Army was allowed to station eighteen thousand troops within Lithuania's borders.

By 1940, the Soviets had seized power, installed a puppet government, and initiated the first of nineteen mass deportations to prison labor camps deep in the USSR. The Soviets brought terror and trauma to Lithuania, exiling and violently executing politicians, intellectuals, and leaders. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children were sent to Siberian gulags.[66]

Nazi Germany first occupied Vilnius in June 1941. After one year of Soviet brutality, Lithuanian elites, and military and political leaders hoped this was more than just another invasion; they believed it could eventually lead to self-governing.[67] At that point, for most Lithuanians, the ousting of the Soviets had been a triumph in itself— but to their dismay, the Nazis brought further devastation and maintained control until 1944.

The end of World War II ushered in yet another Soviet invasion, marking the beginning of an occupation that, for Lithuania, extended the war for decades to come.

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[65] Mallory Needleman, "Lithuania Under the Soviet Occupation 1940-41, Observations and Operations by the United States," *Marine Corps University Press* (MCU Journal Vol 9, no 2 , Fall 2018), 64.

[66] Violeta Davoliūtė and Tomas Balkelis, *Narratives of Exile and Identity: Soviet Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2018), 19.

[67] Needleman, "Lithuania Under the Soviet Occupation 1940-41".

The Republic of Lithuania was the first to declare independence from the collapsing USSR, designating March 11, 1990, as its independence restoration day— and laying the foundation for rebuilding, stability, and sovereignty. On March 29, 2004, Lithuania became a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and shortly after, joined the European Union (EU) on May 1, 2004.[68]

Lt. Viktoras Burokevičius in uniform, circa 1920 (left), and Jonas Antanaitis (formerly Antanavičius) wearing the three medals awarded for his service to Lithuania, circa 1928 (right). Private archive.

[68] "Lithuania Country Profile," *BBC News*, November 25, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17536867.

Conclusion

The Long Road to True Sovereignty and the Challenges Ahead

The Klaipėda Uprising celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2023. It is still mostly remembered as a small conflict or a footnote of the interwar period. Yet for Lithuania, it was a pivotal moment in the shaping of its modern identity.

It was a bold step for a small, newly independent nation to secure its sovereignty—culturally, politically, and territorially. I chose to research the uprising not only because of its historical significance but also because it resonates on a personal level and echoes the resilience of a people that refuse to be erased.

The Klaipėda Uprising also invites us to reflect on the parallels between 1923, 1939, 1945, and 1990 in Europe, as well as Lithuania's recurrent fight for self-rule.

As the end of World War I offered an opportunity for independence, Lithuanians rose to the challenge despite their modest size. However, World War II proved that, without strong alliances, their scale made them extremely vulnerable— and it also revealed how little importance the great powers placed on the fate of smaller nations, which were invaded and occupied by brutal enemies.

And again, with the fall of the Soviet system, Lithuania stood at the forefront of a renewed fight for independence and international recognition of its long historical claim to sovereignty and identity.

Today Lithuania finds itself in a relatively safe position after joining the EU and NATO. Nevertheless, due to the current developments in Ukraine, Lithuania needs its allies more than ever. As tensions are rising across Europe, all three Baltic countries and Finland withdrew from the Ottawa Convention—which banned the use of anti-personnel mines— in April 2025, due to increased security threats from Russia. They stated, "With this decision, we are sending a clear message: our countries are prepared and can use every necessary measure to defend our territory and freedom."[69] In addition, the German army, following the approval of increased defense funds, announced a permanent deployment of troops to Lithuania in order to ensure the protection, freedom, and security of Lithuania and NATO's eastern flank.[70] Hopefully, the Russian leadership will be cognizant that, this time around, Lithuania has Europe behind it.

After analyzing Lithuania's history leading up to the Klaipėda Uprising, I find myself aligning with the ethnosymbolic approach to ethnicity, nationality, and nationalism—though, like all theoretical frameworks, it has its limitations. As Athena Leoussi and Steven Grosby note in *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations*, the "key for the existence of a nation is the development and relative constancy of unavoidably ambiguous significations of territorial kinship that make possible involvement in actions that are viewed as being common, that is, a collective self-consciousness."[71] In Lithuania's case, there is

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[69] "Poland and Baltic States Recommend Leaving Antipersonnel Land Mine Treaty, Citing Threat from Russia," *AP News*, March 18, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/poland-lithuania-latvia-estonia-land-mines-treaty-e3b6c3795df6bbfbd207a9b6af337c81.

[70] Chris Lunday, "Germany Launches Permanent Troop Deployment on NATO's Eastern Flank," *Politico*, April 1, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-launch-permanent-troop-deployment-lithuania-nato-eastern-flank-russia-ukraine/.

[71] Athena Leoussi et al., *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), Introduction.

a clear and continuous collective identity grounded in myths, memories, traditions, values, rituals, and symbols. This is what allowed Lithuanians to persist through centuries of adversity.

There is always room for interpretation and discussion, but we shouldn't accept the dominance of modernist theories simply because some of their advocates may be louder. Volume is not evidence. Nationalism didn't begin in the 18th century, and to suggest otherwise is to ignore the background of nations like Lithuania, whose language and culture preserved their identity long before modern political frameworks were in place, and effectively kept it from disappearing. The interwar nationalism of Lithuania was, yes, a modern movement—but it was rooted in something far older: a historical consciousness and cultural resistance that had been forged over centuries.

Modernist theories are undoubtedly the most widely accepted today, especially in academic circles. But perhaps that's partly because they satisfy a deeper impulse of our current era: the urge to dismantle what came before. This is an age that often values deconstruction over continuity, and challenging old truths has become its own kind of virtue. But in doing so, we risk ignoring the real and persistent threads that tie people to their past. Lithuania's survival wasn't conjured up by printing presses or invented traditions. It was sustained by something older, deeper, and far less easily dismissed.

In that frame, and in conclusion, the Klaipėda Uprising was more than a border skirmish or a diplomatic maneuver, it was part of a consolidation of Lithuanian identity. It was an uprising fueled not only by geopolitical necessity, but also by something deeper: a sense of belonging rooted in language, culture, and historical memory. It was not manufactured nationalism, but the lived experience of ordinary people— some of whom lost their lives. Others would go on to lose

their homeland, families, and everything familiar due to the Soviet invasion. Yet, they carried with them something that could not be taken away.

My grandfather, Jonas Antanaitis, who fought in Klaipėda at nineteen, would later write to me from exile in Brazil, while I was adapting to a new life in America:

> "I admit, now you'll have a faint idea of what your grandparents went through—losing their homeland, their relatives, leaving everything behind and wandering from country to country, across oceans and even continents, adapting to new customs, new languages, even new ways of thinking. Nevertheless, it was worth it—because we gained personal freedom and reclaimed our identity, the one we had already forged in the old world…"[72]

His words are a reminder that historical events are also human experiences, passed down through generations. Through this research, I've come to understand the weight of that legacy, and I hope it contributes to a fuller appreciation of the Klaipėda Uprising and Lithuania as a whole.

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[72] Jonas Antanaitis to Mara Catafay, letter, March 18, 1985, in the author's possession.

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