

IMPERIAL PAST OF ANCIENT LITHUANIA IN THE HISTORICAL MEMORY OF THE MODERN INDEPENDENT LITHUANIA*

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ABSTRACT

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The paper is an inquiry into the origins and impact on the historical culture of modern Lithuania of the view of GDL as an empire. The inventor or discoverer of the GDL as empire was a Lithuanian geographer and geopolitician Kazys Pakštas (1893–1960), who provided seminal imperiological analysis of the ancient Lithuanian polity in his book *Political Geography of Baltic Republics* (1929). This work was probably the main source of inspiration for the Antanas Smetona (1874–1944), who was Lithuanian President in the years 1926–1940. He repeatedly designated GDL as an empire in his speeches, starting with the celebration of the 500th death anniversary of Vytautas Magnus in 1930. An important exponent of this idea was Vytautas Alantas (1902–1990), who served as editor-in-chief of a semi-official newspaper “Lietuvos Aidas” in 1934–1939 and contributed to the discourse on GDL as an empire in the Lithuanian diaspora. Because of ideological reasons, the subject of ancient Lithuanian imperialism was avoided by Lithuanian historians in the Soviet era. In the post-communist times, Gintaras Beresnevičius (1961–2006) resurrected and popularized the idea of GDL as an empire to legitimize the Eastern strategy of the foreign policy of the contemporary Lithuanian state and to mythologize the challenges of the Lithuanian membership in the European Union. Because of the mainstream historiography’s commitment to hermeneutic methodology (historism), Lithuanian academic historiography in the interwar period remained cautious about the very idea of GDL as an empire.

Key words: comparative research on empires, historical culture of the interwar Lithuania, Kazys Pakštas, Vytautas Alantas, Antanas Smetona, Gintaras Beresnevičius

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INTRODUCTION

The paper contributes to discussion whether old Lithuanian state, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), was an empire. Scattered references to the old “Lithuanian empire” or “Vytautas the Great Empire” can be found in the Lithuanian international (Alfredas Bumblauskas, Zenonas Ivinskis, Alvydas Nikžentaitis) and international historiography (Henryk Łowmianski, Stephen C. Rowell, William Urban),¹ and also in texts from other areas of the Lithuanian historical culture (e.g. Antanas Andrijauskas, Gintaras Beresnevičius, Algimantas Bučys, Romualdas Ozolas, Kazys Pakštas).² However, there are authors (e.g. Jevgenij Machovenko, Giedrė Mickūnaitė)³ who dispute this statement. However, up to the recent time, there was no systematic investigation of the imperial features of the ancient Lithuanian state. I have made an attempt to fill up this gap in the book *Nepasiskelbusioji imperija*,⁴ which is accesible only in Lithuanian, with part of the argument published also in Polish.⁵

In the first part of present paper I provide the plea for comparative “imperiological” analysis of the ancient Lithuanian polity which is continued by the discussion of the changing perceptions of its imperial features in the historical culture of the modern Lithuania. First section of the paper explains how concepts of “empire” and “imperialism” can be useful for the historical research on the GDL. Second section provides the survey how this vocabulary was used in the interwar Lithuania (1918–1940), and third section tells about how and why the idea of GDL was resurrected in the II Republic of Lithuania.

¹ A. Bumblauskas, *Senosios Lietuvos istorija 1009–1795*, Vilnius 2005; Z. Ivinskis, *Lietuvos istorija iki Vytauto Didžiojo mirties*, Roma 1978; A. Nikžentaitis, The “Imperial” Diplomacy of Lithuania, “Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review” 2005, No. 1–2, p. 41–47; H. Łowmiański, *Polityka Jagiellonów*, 2nd ed., Poznań 2006; S.C. Rowell, *Iš viduramžių tūk. kylanti Lietuva. Pagonių imperija Rytų ir Vidurio Europoje, 1295–1345*, Vilnius 2004; W. Urban, *Žalgiris ir kas po jo: Lietuva, Lenkija ir Vokiečių Ordinas – nemirtingumo beeieškant*, Vilnius 2004.

² A. Andrijauskas, *LDK europėjimo tendencijos ir kultūrinio tapatumo paieškos tarp Rytų ir Vakarų* [in:] A. Andrijauskas (ed.), *Lietuviškojo europietiško raida: dabarties ir ateities iššūkiai*, Vilnius 2006, p. 18–48; G. Beresnevičius, *Imperijos darymas. Lietuviškos ideologijos metmenys. Europos Sąjunga ir Lietuvos geopolitika XXI a. pirmoje pusėje*, Vilnius 2003; A. Bučys, *Barbarai vice versa klasikai: centras ir periferija rašytojo strategijose*, Vilnius 2008; R. Ozolas, *Supratimai. Parinktos 1956–2006 metų metafizinio dienoraščio mintys*, Vilnius 2007; K. Pakštas, *Baltijos respublikų politinė geografia*, Kaunas 1929; K. Pakštas, *Lietuvos valstybės plotai ir sienos*, “Lietuvių Enciklopedija” 1968 (Boston), vol. 15, p. 450–464; S. Sužiedėlis, *Vytautas Didysis ir jo žygiai*, Kaunas 1935.

³ J. Machovenko, *Nelietuviškų žemių teisinė padėtis Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje (XIV–XVIII a.)*, Vilnius 1999; G. Mickūnaitė, *Empire as Nostalgia, or a la recherche de terres perdues*, “Ab Imperio. Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space” 2004, No. 4, p. 523–528.

⁴ Z. Norkus, *Nepasiskelbusioji imperija. Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštija lyginamosios imperijų istorinės sociologijos požiūriu* [An Unproclaimed Empire. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the Viewpoint of Comparative Historical Sociology], Vilnius 2009.

⁵ Idem, *Imperium litewskie w międzyjednostkowych społecznościach i systemach politycznych. Studium przypadku*, “Politeja” 2011, vol. 2, p. 129–153. On this occasion, I would like thank the translator Katarzyna Korzeniewska and prof. dr. hab. Lidia Korczak for the academic editing of the translation.

I. CAN A GRAND DUCHY BE AN EMPIRE?

The idea of GDL as empire may appear as silly for the historians, who prefer to work with concepts, which are as close to the sources as possible. As a matter of common knowledge among medievalists, in the Middle Ages there were only two political bodies broadly recognized as “empires” (kingdoms of kingdoms) – polities claiming the continuation or succession of Roman empire. These polities were Holy Roman Empire (since 962) and Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire (until 1453). As a matter of fact, some minor medieval rulers called themselves emperors at various times too, although these claims were not recognized by Roman Popes or Constantinople Patriarchs. The list of self-proclaimed emperors include Anglo-Saxonian kings in Xth, kings of Leon and Castilia in X–XIIth centuries, Bulgarian (in the Xth and the XIIth centuries) and Serbian (in XIVth century) rulers.⁶

This list may be supplemented by GDL ruler Algirdas, who called himself βασιλεύς in the letter addressed to patriarch of Constantinople: Ἀπὸ τὸν βασιλέα Λιτβῶν τὸν Ἄλγερδον (“from Lithuanian emperor Algirdas”), ὁ βασιλεύς ὁ Ἄλγερδος (emperor Algirdas).⁷ This was violation of the Byzantine diplomatic protocol of this time, which prescribed to call βασιλεύς only the ruler of Constantinople. Algirdas and the likes were expected to call themselves ῥῆξ or μέγας ῥῆξ. After Vytautas the Great died in 1430 after unsuccessful attempt to crown himself as Lithuanian king, there were some initiatives of Lithuanian magnates to elevate Lithuania to kingdom, but never to empire.

Since late XVth century, the Moscow rulers claimed the legacy of Eastern Roman empire, using the doctrine of “Third Rome” to legitimate Muscovy’s expansion. Lithuania answered claiming Roman descent of its nobles.⁸ According to one version of this genealogy, mythical ancestor of Lithuanian ruling dynasty Palemonas was a relative of Roman emperor Nero. Proud of their allegedly ancient Roman origins, Lithuanian nobles distanced themselves both from Baltic and Slavic commoners and claimed equality if no superiority with respect to Polish magnates, who believed their descent from ancient Sarmatians. However, Palemonas legend was never used to claim legacy of Roman empire for ruling dynasty Lithuania (and Poland) – Gediminaičiai/Jogailaičiai. So what is the point to describe GDL as empire?

As a matter of fact, medievalists have neither monopoly over the use of the concept of empire in general, nor over the research on medieval politics. In the Soviet Union, one could get prison sentence for calling this polity empire. Now this is established and even politically correct designation for Soviet state. United States of America is

⁶ See: R. Folz, *The Concept of Empire in Western Europe from the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century*, 2nd ed., London 1969; J. Muldoon, *Empire and Order. The Concept of Empire, 800–1800*, Houndmills 1999; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500–1453*, London 1971.

⁷ *Acta patriarchatus Constantinopolitani*, vol. 1, hrsg. F. Miklosich, J. Müller, Vindobonae 1860, p. 580.

⁸ See e.g. J. Jurkiewicz, *Od Palemona do Giedymina. Wczesnonowożytny wyobrażenia o początkach Litwy*, cz. 1: *W kręgu latopisów litewskich*, Poznań 2012.

not an empire according to its constitution, but there is a lot of books about U.S. as empire, written by famous historians and political scientists. Some of them have reputation of ardent American patriots.⁹ There are political scientists who said that European Union is an empire too – something like Holy Roman Empire 2.0.¹⁰

Neither U.S., neither USSR in XXth century, nor Inca or Aztec polities in XV–XVIth centuries claimed to be continuations, restorations, or inheritors of Roman empire. The same applies to Mongol polity, created by Chingis-Khan, China since IInd century B.C., Tamerlan and Mughal polities. However, the concept of “empire” provides best description for these very different polities, disclosing some important similarities. Romans did not invent empire. Ancient Assyria and Persian polities as well as the political conglomerate created for short time by Alexander the Great can be classified as empires too, although they antedate Roman conquests. Of course, Roman empire was “classical” or ideal typical empire, but a polity does not need to be display complete similarity to ancient Roma or claim its legacy to qualify as empire.

This is common assumption in the comparative studies of empires, which are conducted in two social scientific disciplines – in the International Relations Studies and in the Comparative Politics. From the review of relevant literature one can distill following definition of empire: this is a (1) sovereign polity with (2) the size of territory that exceeds significantly other polities of the same region and time and has at least three features from the following list: (3) it pursues territorial expansion on large scale; (4) it holds hegemony in the inter-polity system¹¹ or strives after it; (5) it is ethnically or culturally heterogeneous and includes politically dominant ethnocultural minority; (6) it is differentiated into metropole and peripheries in terms of territory.

A polity, displaying full set of attributes (1)–(6), can be described as ideal typical empire. However, only first two attributes [(1)–(2)] are necessary features of empires. To qualify as empire, it is sufficient for a polity to display at least three from remaining four [(3)–(6)] features. So the suggested definition of empire implies a typology of “non-classical” or “diminished type”¹² empires which deviate from the ideal type of empire by lacking one from the attributes (3)–(6). These diminished or non-classical types of empires are (a) peaceful empires [lacking (3)]; (c) non-hegemonic empires [absent (4)]; (d) ethnoculturally homogenous empires [absent (5)]; (e) territorially homogenous empires (no differentiation into metropolises and periphery [absent (6)]). During its history, a particular polity can transform itself from one subtype to another. Against the common wisdom saying that “all empires break down – sooner or later”, some empires can transform into national states. Then their historians tell “grand narratives” about the successful fight against “feudal disunity” by their unifiers.

⁹ See e.g. N. Ferguson, *Colossus. The Price of America's Empire*, New York 2004.

¹⁰ J. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, Oxford 2006.

¹¹ This concept is used instead “international system” to avoid anachronism impending over the application of the concept “international system” in the contexts where no modern territorial or nation states are present.

¹² Cp. D. Collier, R. Adcock, *Democracy and Dichotomies. A Pragmatic Approach to Choices about Concepts*, “Annual Review of Political Science” 1999, vol. 2, p. 537–565.

Features (3) and (4) are elaborated in the body of literature on empires and imperialism produced in the field of International Relations Studies.¹³ This elaboration includes the concepts of the spheres of hegemony, suzerainty, dominion, and imperial core to describe the elements of an inter-polity system which constitute an empire. Importantly, although all empires are human made, not all of them are of human design. Instead, imperialism as process of subordination can be driven by metropole-based (“metro-centric”), periphery-based (“peri-centric”) causes, or by transnational forces. This process involves the differentiation of an empire-in-making into the sphere of hegemony (no control over internal politics of peripheral polity by the metropolitan polity), an informal empire (control both over the foreign policy and internal politics without formal vassalage or incorporation of peripheral polity), and formal empire.

Features (5)–(6) are elaborated in the political science subdiscipline known as Comparative Politics which considers empire as composite polity antithetical to federation.¹⁴ The principle of subordination is common to both empire and federation. However, member polities of a federal polity are equal or equalized among themselves, and the federal center is different from the government of one of these member polities. This is not the case in an empire, where one of the member polities (metropole) dominates over others (peripheries). Besides that, in an empire there are no direct relations between the peripheries. It is like the hub without the rim: all relations between peripheries are mediated by the metropolitan centre, extracting and redistributing resources among peripheries according to the interests of the metropolitan polity and its ruling elite.

According to the established wisdom in the historiography of the GDL established by Mitrofan Dovnar-Zapolski and Matvei Lubavski, GDL was federation built by voluntary accession treaties which preserved complete internal autonomy of Russian lands. However, the proponents of federalist thesis mistake as federalism what was in reality a system of indirect rule characteristic of empires in pre-modern times. As a matter of fact, territorial organization of GDL displays typical features of imperial organization, as far as the relations between Lithuania in the strict sense (including also some Russian lands annexed in the XIIIth century) and Polotsk, Vitebsk, Smolensk, Volhynia, Podole, Kievan lands and other dependent territories were those of the subordination of the periphery to imperial metropole.

Because of incessant wars with other Tatar empires, internal strife and plague Golden Horde was so weakened by the mid-XIVth century that the Lithuanians were able to penetrate into Southern and Southern West Rus’ and to make the attempt to put under their rule all lands of the former Kievan Rus’. This was the central idea of

¹³ See e.g. H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, London 1977; A. Watson, *The Evolution of International Society*, London 1992; M. Wight, *Systems of States*, Leicester 1977.

¹⁴ See e.g. M. Doyle, *Empires*, Ithaca–London 1986; S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, New York 1963; S.E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*, vol. 1–3, Oxford 1997; H. Münkler, *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft – vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten*, Berlin 2005.

Lithuanian imperialism and hegemonism pursued for a century by three Lithuanian rulers – Algirdas, Jogaila and Vytautas. Algirdas and Jogaila failed to break the resistance of Moscow princes whose main source of strength was the control over the office of the highest Orthodox Church dignitary in the Rus'. However, Moscow was not able to establish its independence from the Tatar Empire that re-emerged to power for a brief time in the 1380s under Khan Tokhtamysh. But in the 1390s Tokhtamysh was defeated by the builder of another short-lived Central Asian empire Tamerlan, providing the Lithuanian ruler Vytautas with the chance for an attempt to put under his suzerainty not only all Russian lands, but also Golden Horde by making Tokhtamysh a puppet ruler of Golden Horde.¹⁵

This would mean the replacing of Golden Horde by GDL in the role of suzerain power in the Eastern European inter-polity system. The defeat at Vorskla in 1399 precluded the realization of this enlarged version of the Lithuanian imperial idea. "If it had gone the other way, Vytautas might have separated from his cousin Wladyslaw of Poland, undone the union of Krevo, and reunited the Russians round Vilnius or Kiev rather than round Moscow."¹⁶ However, during the last decade of his rule Vytautas was able to make true for a short time his program by establishing himself as the final arbiter in the power struggles among the pretenders to become a Golden Horde khan and the de facto regent (1425–1430) of the Grand Duchy of Moscow due to the preteen age of his grandson, the future grand prince of Moscow Vasily II the Dark.

However, Lithuanian hegemony in Eastern Europe lasted only few years. The 1449 treaty with Moscow sealed Lithuania's resignation from hegemonic aspirations in Eastern Europe, mainly due to the policies of the joint ruler of Poland and Lithuania Kazimieras Jogailaitis (Casimir Jagiellon). His preferences were to smash the Teutonic Order (attempted in the 1454–1466 war) and then to establish Poland's hegemony in Central Europe by placing the Jagiellonian princes on the thrones of the Hungarian and Czech kingdoms. The GDL became a non-hegemonic regional empire. Differently from many empires, (in)famous as "prisons of nations," the GDL served rather as a "cradle of nations."

The relative stabilization of its Eastern borders after huge territorial losses to the Muscovite state in the late XVth–early XVIth century was decisive for the emergence of three different Eastern Slavic nations (Russians, Belorussians and Ukrainians) instead of one Slavic ethnicity in Kievan Rus'. Although the GDL (and Poland) had succumbed to the military pressure of the Russian Empire by the XVIIIth century, neither this empire nor its successor, the Soviet Union, was able to assimilate all Eastern Slavic nationalities into the Great Russian nation. The only chance to make this Great Russian chauvinist dream come true was the eventual victory of the GDL over Moscow and the unification of all former Kievan Rus' lands under the power of Lithuanian dynasty in the XIVth or the early XVth century. A barely avoidable col-

¹⁵ See: F. Šabul'do, *Vitovt i Timur: protivniki ili strategičeskie partnery?* [in:] I. Valikonytė, E. Meilus, A. Mickevičius (eds.), *Lietuva ir jos kaimynai. Nuo normanų iki Napoleono*, Vilnius 2001, p. 95–106.

¹⁶ S.A.M. Adshead, *Central Asia in World History*, New York 1993; <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~fisher/hst373/readings/tamerlane.html> (access: 16.11.2013).

lateral outcome of such victory would be Orthodox baptism and assimilation of all Baltic population in this contrary-to-fact “Vilnius Rus’.”

Among others, so argued Polish historian Feliks Koneczny (1862–1949), who may be the first professional historian self-consciously describing GDL as empire.¹⁷ However, he wrote about GDL as empire in conjunctive, as unrealized possibility (*niedoszle carstwo wilenskie*) which could become true if Vytautas would be victorious at Vorskla. According to Henryk Łowmiański, GDL was empire by 1385 on the eve of Krėvos treaty.¹⁸ The inner circle of Gediminaičiai dynasty may have considered dynastic union with Poland as just another step in the imperial expansion which was conducted not only by military force, but also by dynastic marriages. “In the Poland these expectations were not fulfilled,”¹⁹ as far as Poland was not a patrimonial polity like GDL but institutional state.

However, another two goals of Lithuanian ruling elite were achieved. One of them was to check the expansion of Teutonic Order which endangered both Lithuania and Poland. Another goal one was to get resources for the consolidation of the Gediminaičiai dynasty power over Russian provinces. “After Algirdas’ death the material foundations of the nobility’s life were endangered by strong centrifugal forces in the Lithuanian empire which was freshly build by mechanical connection of the Russian provinces with Lithuanian center.”²⁰ However, for the “soft” and “hard” resources to maintain Russian provinces received from Poland, Lithuanians must pay the price. “Huge Gediminaičiai empire (*imperium Giedyminowiczow*) was resolved into composite parts, which became direct provinces or fiefs (*bezposrednimi dzielnicami lub lenami*) of Polish kingdom.”²¹ This was against expectations of Lithuanian nobility. “Did Lithuanians created empire to donate it lightheartedly to Poles?”²² So the Lithuanian metropolitan nobles supported Vytautas in his challenge to Jogaila.

¹⁷ F. Koneczny, *Dzieje Rosyi*, vol. 1: *Do roku 1449*, Warszawa 1917, s. 403–428.

¹⁸ Łowmiański’s idea of GDL as empire is a logical sequel to his influential theory of the emergence of the ancient state as the by-product of the Lithuanian plunder raids to Rus’ lands dating since XII century (see H. Łowmiański, *Studja nad początkami społeczeństwa i państwa litewskiego*, vol. 1–2, Wilno 1931–1932). He maintained this view also in his late work: “The Lithuanian state has emerged not on the ground of the defense against the Teutonic Order, but on that of the expansion to Rus’” (H. Łowmiański, *Studia nad dziejami Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*, Poznań 1983, p. 278).

¹⁹ H. Łowmiański, *Polityka Jagiellonów*, wyd. 2, Poznań 2006, s. 38. Similar analysis of “Krėva situation” provides Domas Cesevičius: “Coming back shortly to the ‘union’ question, it is necessary to point out that Poles and Jogaila understood Krėva treaty differently. Poles thought and expected that after becoming Poland’s king Jogaila will incorporate into Poland kingdom the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was polity of lesser status. Jogaila and other representatives of the dynasty close to him thought that they are incorporating Poland into Lithuanian Gediminaičiai dynasty, which was powerful at this time. Different interpretation and evaluation of Krėva treaty manifested itself by concrete misunderstandings soon, and even by the withdrawal of Lithuanians from the seeming union. It was necessary to norm Lithuanian-Polish relations by other agreements: the act of 1401 and that of 1413 year. D. Cesevičius, *Lietuvos ūkio istorijos eskizai*, Vilnius 1960, F98–293, p. 25.

²⁰ H. Łowmiański, *Polityka Jagiellonów*, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

²² *Ibidem*.

As a matter of common knowledge, the dynastic conflict ended with compromise, preserving both GDL as distinct polity and the union with Kingdom of Poland.

Union of Horodło is only one in the long succession of the treaties reasserting this compromise. According to the definition of empire proposed above, sovereignty is necessary attribute of an empire. What then Polish-Lithuanian union implies for description of GDL as empire? The texts of union treaties contain formulations which can be read as abolition of GDL as sovereign state or as restriction of its sovereignty. However, in terms of real politics which only matters for social scientific analysis, GDL remained completely sovereign. It pursued its own independent foreign and internal policies, and Poland had no decisive influence on the selection processes who would govern the GDL. This means the absence of external control over internal and foreign politics of GDL by Poland. Until the 1569 Union of Lublin, relations of GDL with Poland remained those of strategic alliance that was used by the GDL more frequently for its own goals than Poland was able to do.²³ The Polish-Lithuanian union provided Lithuania with resources to continue eastward imperial expansion for some time and then to defend its eastern borders from Moscow.

Although after 1430 the eastward territorial expansion of Lithuania ceased and by the 1449 treaty with the Muscovite state Lithuania had resigned from its goal to establish hegemony or annex all the lands of the former Kievan Rus', it never became a "peaceful empire" that would conduct only defensive wars. Relevant evidence are their attempts at the re-conquest of the eastern territories (first of all, Smolensk) lost to Moscow (e.g. "Starodub war" in 1534–1537), to establish its hegemony over Livonia (by the Pasvalys Treaty in 1557) that led to its annexation (in 1561) and the Livonian war that could not be won, however, by the GDL forces alone.

What did happen to Lithuanian empire after 1569? Did Kingdom of Poland become empire itself after Southern provinces of GDL were annexed in 1569? Did Poland inherit Lithuanian empire? Was Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth an empire? Mainstream Polish historiography still avoids these questions or assumes negative answer to them. Many Polish historians still subscribe to the famous idea by Oscar Halecki of federalism as "Idea Jagiellońska," embodied in the structure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.²⁴ However, there are revisionist authors, with Andrzej Nowak perhaps most important among them. Discussing origins of the Russian empire, Nowak maintains:

most contemporary scholars date the beginning of that empire to 1470s, when Moscow managed to gain control over and absorbed the enormous, multiethnic territories of the merchant republic of Novgorod. [...] Yet it is worth pointing out, that over the previous century it was not Moscow, but quite different political centre, that has created a magnificent imperial structure in Eastern Europe. It was neither Poland, but Lithuania in fact.²⁵

²³ Cp. L. Kolankowski, *Dzieje Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego za Jagiellonów*, vol. 1: 1377–1499, Warszawa 1930, p. 30.

²⁴ See O. Halecki, *Idea jagiellońska*, Lwów 1937; idem, *Imperialism in Slavic and East European History*, "The American Slavic and East European Reviews" 1952, vol. 11, p. 1–26.

²⁵ A. Nowak, *History and Geopolitics. A Contest for Eastern Europe*, Warszawa 2008, p. 40.

What about Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? In this book, Nowak avoids unambiguous answer to the question whether *Rzecz Pospolita* was Empire, presenting arguments *pro et contra*. This is perhaps most important “contra” argument: “for many critical observers of Polish history, there exists a key to its essence, as universal as the island-nature of Britain, and the empire status of Russia: it is the term ‘anarchy.’ Anarchy and empire are terms of furthestmost opposition – and not only in their Latin roots.”²⁶ So Russia or Muscovy is ideal typical empire, while Poland is the very opposite of empire. However, broad comparative social scientific approach may help to sensitize historical vision for imperial features of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth disclosing the full range of variation in imperial rule and experience, where Russian empire may be just one limit case, and Holy Roman Empire, which lacked most attributes of ideal typical empire by XVIth century, another one.²⁷

2. GDL AS EMPIRE IN THE HISTORICAL CULTURE OF THE I REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA (1918–1940)

Nowak discusses the question whether the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was an empire, but avoids unambiguous answer, because he focuses on the fates of the empires and imperialism in XIX–XX centuries in his research. They include the paradoxical outcome of the failed attempt by great fighter against imperialism Józef Piłsudski to create federal state in the territory of former *Rzecz Pospolita* in 1918–1920.

The truncated territory of the old Commonwealth – transformed into the Second Polish Republic – was to be treated for most of its existence as an ethnic Polish state in the making. This was a mini-empire, a regional power, struggling against her two powerful neighbours and their revisionist ambitions. If there was anyone approximating to the rank of emperor in contemporary Polish history – Piłsudski come the closest to that title.²⁸

As a matter of fact, the changes in the reputation of empires and imperialism going back to Westphalia peace treaty in 1648, explain best why historians do not see imperial features of some ancient polities at one time, but become perceptive at different times. Since early XIXth century, the word “empire” received negative value connotation, meaning the very antithesis of national state, which was final political goal of the national movements. The establishment of national state as a “normal state” discredited empires as illegitimate and archaic state form. The reputation of

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 38.

²⁷ Cp. H.-J. Bömelburg, *Czy Rzeczpospolita była imperium? Imperial turn w historiografii, struktury państwowe w Europie Środkowowschodniej i „imperialna” warstwa pojęciowa w XVI–XVII wieku* [in:] B. Dybaś, P. Hanczewsky, T. Kempa (eds.), *Rzeczpospolita w XVI–XVIII wieku. Państwo czy wspólnota?*, Toruń 2007, p. 43–57.

²⁸ A. Nowak, *History and Geopolitics*, p. 377.

empires reached its nadir after World War I, which was represented as the outcome of imperialism in socialist, liberal and liberal nationalist discourse communities.

Empires (not all) had to wait for their (partial) rehabilitation until the demise of Soviet polity, which was born in the battle waged to destroy world imperialism, but perished as “evil empire.” The demise of “evil empire,” crisis of nationalism and national state on the old continent in the wake of the rise of European Union, and globalization supervised by the American “good empire” levelled the ground for the recent rise of comparative imperiology struggling to transform the concepts of empire and imperialism into useful analytical tools. The self-image of Lithuania as an eternal victim of the rapacious imperialism of neighbouring nations (Russian, German and Polish) remains most powerful obstacle for the perception of imperial features of the ancient Lithuanian state in the modern Lithuanian historical culture. Similarly, self-image of Poland as rebellious victim of Russian and German imperialism provides no space for ideas of both *Rzecz Pospolita I* and *Rzecz Pospolita II* as empires, or for an idea of Polish imperialism in the social imaginary of modern Polish nation.²⁹

But of course, Grand Duchy of Lithuania was important, if not central subject in the historical culture of modern Lithuania. This may be explained by the extraordinary role of the memories about the greatness of ancient Lithuania in the making of modern Lithuania. Even by now, these memories remain important part of the modern Lithuanian identity. Most popular Lithuanian male names still are those of the ancient rulers GDL – Vytautas, Algirdas, Kęstutis, Mindaugas, with remarkable exception for Jogaila, which is much less popular. The very first strophe of the Lithuanian anthem, written by one of “fathers” of modern Lithuanian nation Vincas Kudirka (1858–1899) refers to great ancient past of Lithuania as inspiration source for modern Lithuanians: “Lithuania, our homeland, Land of heroes! Let your sons draw their strength from our past experience.” The glory of the ancient Lithuanian state along with the reputation of Lithuanian language as one of the most archaic and therefore preserving most features of the extinct Proto-Indo-European language, were among those few anchors which could be used by the literates busy to “awaken” national consciousness of the indigenous populations of the Kowno, Wilna and Suwałki governments of Russian empire between 1883–1918.

Most popular historical texts in Lithuanian, published during this time of Lithuanian “national awakening” in 1883–1918 provide proud account not only about the victories of ancient Lithuanian rulers in the defensive war against Teutonic Order, but also about their military and diplomatic action in the Rus’ lands, culminating in the creation of the biggest (in terms of its territory) European polity by the time of Lithuanian baptism in 1387.³⁰ Its extension from Baltic to Black seas and apocryphal story about the Vytautas and his warriors entering the water of Black sea on the backs

²⁹ See A. Nowak (ed.), *Ofiary imperium. Imperia jako ofiary. 44 spojrzzenia*, Warszawa 2010.

³⁰ See J. Mačiulis-Maironis [Š. M-lis], *Lietuvos istorija: su kunigaikščių paveiklais ir žemlapiu, parašė Maironis (Š. M-lis). 3-ia kartą atspausa ir partaisyta*, Petropilis 1906; A. Alekna, *Lietuvos istorija*, Kaunas 1911; On the early modern national history writing see: A. Gieda, *Istoriografija ir visuomenė: istorika, istoriko profesijos ir istorinės kultūros aspektai Lietuvoje 1904–1940 m.*, daktaro disertacija, humanitariniai mokslai, istorija (05 H), Vilnius 2013.

of their horses are usual elements of these accounts. However, the words “imperialism” or “empire” were not used to describe eastward expansion of ancient Lithuanian polity or its outcomes in the historical literature published in Lithuanian before 1929.

In this year Kazys Pakštas (1893–1960), Professor of Geography at the Vytautas Magnus university in Kaunas, who has graduated in sociology from Fordham university (U.S.) in 1918 and defended doctoral dissertation in geography at the Fribourg university in Swiss (1923), published chapter by chapter in the magazin “Židinys” monograph *Baltijos respublikų politinė geografija* [Political Geography of Baltic States], which appeared as book publication next year. In the 5th section of the 5th chapter “Lietuvių genijaus dispersija ir ateities perspektyva [The dispersion and future perspective of Lithuanian genius]”³¹ he argued that the name of “Grand Duchy” is misnomer for ancient Lithuanian polity. “It is misunderstanding to call Lithuania of the time of Vytautas Magnus ‘Grand Duchy.’ Its territory and dignity completely corresponded to the name and dignity of great empire.”³²

Pakštas was pioneer of geopolitics in Lithuania. So he provided mainly political geographical arguments to support his statement. According to K. Pakštas, most important distinguishing feature of (continental) empire is territorial extension from sea to sea. “In contemporary Europe, there are only two states extending from sea to sea: Russia and France. Small, i. e. not numerous Lithuanian people did create empire *a mare usque ad mare*, doing this in the most broad place of the continent.”³³ He elaborated his thesis by metropole/peripheries distinction by comparisons: “Vilnius, ethnographic Lithuania, was an embryo for huge Lithuanian empire, whose peripheries were many Slavic polities in the East and South. For Russia such embryo was duchy of Moscow, for Germany – Brandenburg, for France – I’lle de France, for Spain – Castille.”³⁴ Pakštas came back to topic in his later publications, providing some new observations. “The empire of Vytautas Magnus is most remarkable and unique creation in the world, as far as small pagan people ruled over big Christian colonies, while in all world history we everywhere see only the opposite phenomena.”³⁵ Writing in emigration (U.S.), Pakštas summarized his argument in the article on the territory and borders of Lithuanian state, published in the 15th volume of the *Lietuvių enciklopedija* [Encyclopaedia of Lithuanians].³⁶

Pakštas’ ideas were most probable source of inspiration for numerous digressions on GDL as empire in the speeches by Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona (1874–1944). In 1930, Lithuania commemorated 500 years anniversary of the Vytautas Magnus death. Nationalist (*tautininkai*) regime, which was established in

³¹ K. Pakštas, *Lietuvių genijaus dispersija ir ateities perspektyvos*, “Židinys”1929, vol. 12, p. 434–440.

³² Idem, *Baltijos respublikų politinė geografija*, p. 181–182.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 197.

³⁵ K. Pakštas, *Lietuva Eikumenos erdvėje* [in:] Idem, *Kultūra, civilizacija, geopolitika*, Vilnius 2003, p. 227.

³⁶ Idem, *Lietuvos valstybės plotai ir sienos*, “Lietuvių enciklopedija” 1968 (Boston), vol. 15, p. 452–454.

Lithuania after 1926 state coup, used the jubilee celebration to consolidate itself and to strengthen the Smetona's personal authority.³⁷ Lithuanian dictator gave numerous speeches, referring to GDL as empire on at least four different occasions. "Empire of Vytautas was strong wall, behind which Western countries could live more quite life and cultivate the civilization inherited from the Rome."³⁸ Pakštas' influence is revealed by the Smetona's repetition of the geopolitical argument about the extension from sea to sea as the most sure mark of the imperial stature of GDL.

Along with Pakštas work, another probable source of inspiration for Smetona was the book *Didysis Lietuvos kunigaikštis Vytautas kaip politikas* [Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytautas as politician] by Professor of medieval and Eastern European history at the German University of Prague Josef Pfitzner. This book was published in 1929 as *Grossfürst Witold von Litauen als Staatsmann* and already next year was translated into Lithuanian. Although Pfitzner did not use the word "empire," he wrote with admiration about Vytautas expansionist policies in the East. Pfitzner trusted the information of the Nikonian Chronicle about the alleged Vytautas' plans to put under his rule the whole world (!) in 1399, i. e. on the eve of Vorskla battle. "Here the plans of the universal rule (*universale Weltherrschaftspläne*) are clearly seen, because he saw himself to be God's appointed ruler of all the lands, and a Horde Khan had to obey him."³⁹

The reference to GDL as empire in Smetona's speech was no accident, which can be explained by special circumstances, because the term recurs after the anniversary year 1930. Smetona described ancient Lithuanian polity as empire in later speeches delivered on various occasions in 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1937. Importantly, Smetona was no simple circulator of Pakštas' and Pfitzner's ideas. Instead, he provided his own, much more nuanced and differentiating discussion of the ancient Lithuanian imperialism. Of course, in his speeches Smetona never forgot to make provision that being proud of its imperial past, modern Lithuania has not a slightest intention to pursue imperialist politics: "We are proud of Algirdas and Vytautas politics, but we do not attempt to act in their way. The time is different, and we are different."⁴⁰ What does this difference mean? „Free Lithuania is only a small piece of ancient huge state. It is pity, that we are so small. However, we rejoice that we are free again and understand how to be progressive."⁴¹

Celebrating ancient Lithuanian empire, Smetona at the same time attacked policies of former (Tsarist) Russia and modern Poland as imperialist. Polish imperialism caused the uncured wound of modern Lithuania: loss of Vilnius. Smetona argued that differently from Lithuanian nationalism, Polish nationalism was "imperialist nationalism." He explains this concept, describing policies of Polish administrations towards local

³⁷ See D. Mačiulis, *Valstybės kultūros politika Lietuvoje 1927–1940 metais*, Vilnius 2005.

³⁸ A. Smetona, *Vasario 16 d. minint. Įsakymas kariuomenei 1930.02.16, Nr 11* [in:] Idem, *Pasakyta parašyta*, Kaunas 1935, p. 158–159.

³⁹ J. Pfitzneris, *Didysis Lietuvos kunigaikštis Vytautas kaip politikas*, Kaunas 1930, p. 205.

⁴⁰ A. Smetona, *Jaunieji vyresniųjų viltis. Kalba jaunajam lietuviams, 1935.05.11* [in:] Idem, *Pasakyta parašyta*, vol. 2: 1935–1940, Boston 1974, p. 240.

⁴¹ Idem, *Protėvių kultūra dabarčiai reikšminga. Kalba Senovės Dienų Dauguose, 1937.06.20* [in:] Idem, *Pasakyta parašyta*, vol. 2: 1935–1940, p. 350.

population of Vilnius region: “Poland preaches for the Polishness, like missionaries are preaching religion. So Polish nationalism is imperialist, because it uses alien ethnographic material to enlarge own nation in order to marginalize conscious Lithuanian element.”⁴² In his attack on Polish “imperialistic nationalism,” Smetona appeals to the right of self-determination of nations proclaimed in famous 14 points by Woodrow Wilson on 08.01.1918:

Poles appealed to Wilson’s law, when they creted and built their state. [...] If so, then Poles should understand Lithuanians and recognize for them the same right of self-determination which they claimed for themselves. So they should abandon imperialist nationalism with respect to Lithuania.⁴³

How it is possible to be proud of the Lithuanian imperial past (or “magnificent imperial structure,” in Andrzej Nowak’s words) and to attack contemporary Polish imperialism (real or alleged)? Did not ancient Lithuania did the same for its neighbours what it suffers now from Poland? Smetona was conscious of the problem. Interestingly, he did not use historicist strategy of relativizing validity of international law and morality for different epochs. Instead, he draws the distinction between two kinds of nationalism: statist imperialism (*valstybiškas nacionalizmas* in Lithuanian) and nationalist (or imperialist) nationalism.⁴⁴ Although ancient Lithuanians pursued territorial expansion, they did not attempt the assimilation of the indigenous populations, using them as “ethnographic material.” Rather, they served themselves as such material, while contemporary Polish nationalist imperialism does exactly the opposite.

Lithuanian empire, created by Lithuanian genius, was important factor of peace in the medieval Europe, so it has big merits for civilization by countering rapacious predators. Russians then received from Lithuanians more than Lithuanians took from Moscow and Kiev. Building powerful state, great leaders of Lithuania melted in the broad space its best forces, lost to Slaves aristocracy and nobility. Lithuanian nation is now similar to tree, stripped of leaves by the winds and with branches broken by storms.⁴⁵

Because ancient Lithuania in its imperialist expansion gave more (“ethnographic material”) than received (nothing), the empire was mixed blessing. The building of empire maybe provided additional resources for the defense of Western borders against Teutonic order. But in the long-term perspective the miserable state of contemporary Lithuania may be caused by its overextension accompanied by the dispersion of Lithuanian elite among the ruled populations.

Who knows, maybe ancient Lithuania perished because of the expansion. Contemporary experiences also confirm the fear of this danger. Many our intellectuals (*inteligentu*), dispersed among aliens and taking in mixed marriages, assimilated themselves and educated assimilated children.⁴⁶

⁴² Idem, *Lietuvių tauta ir jos paskirtis, paskaita Politinių ir Socialinių Mokslų Institute, 1936.03.24*; Idem, *Pasakyta parašyta*, vol. 2: 1935–1940, p. 56.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 57.

⁴⁴ See ibidem, p. 60.

⁴⁵ A. Smetona, *Nebaigtoji byla. Įvadas A. Smetonos Raštų 4-am tomui 'Lietuvių santykiai su lenkais.' 1930.12.17* [in:] Idem, *Raštai*, vol. 4: *Atgimstant*, Kaunas 1931, p. V.

⁴⁶ Idem, *Lietuvio žymės* [in:] Idem, *Raštai*, vol. 1: *Vienybės gairėmis*, Kaunas 1930, p. 107.

So present miserable state of Lithuanian nation is caused by its ancient greatness. Smetona elaborated this early insight in his later text “Lithuanian nation and its mission” (*Lietuvių tauta ir jos paskirtis*). Here one can find most detailed exposition of his views on ancient Lithuanian imperialism.

Smetona blamed political leadership of GDL in XV–XVIth centuries for failure to achieve the synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures that allegedly was successfully started by Vytautas but was not continued by his less able successors. The idea that synthesis of Western and Eastern cultures is the historical “mission” of Lithuania was advanced by the Lithuanian philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis in the book *Sur les confins des deux mondes*, published in 1919.⁴⁷ This is how Smetona takes stand on Šalkauskis’ idea:

When Lithuania in his defense against German orders was compelled to search for stronger support in Slavic lands, when it allowed alien elements to penetrate state organism, then it needed to coordinate them, recognizing the principles of different cultures. Their synthesis was the important task for the Vytautas the Great who extended the borders of the state very far to the East and South. We know his attempt to shield his Orthodox subordinates from Moscow influence by giving them separate metropoly. On the other hand, he was in a hurry to make pagan Lithuania Catholic. His sympathy for Roman Church is evident, because he understood that the light of civilization from the West is more useful for Lithuania, than that from the East. However, Vytautas regulated the relation between two cultures by the law of justice. This means that he understood how to produce true synthesis, and therefore Grand Duchy of Lithuania could live from the fruits of his policy for centuries. If this expansive politics overshadowed Lithuanian element in the long run, the blame lays on those who after his death were responsible for the fate of Lithuania. Ultimately, Lithuanian expansion damaged Lithuanians themselves, and Poland understood how to make profit on it. In contemporary words, we should designate this as Lithuanian imperialism, but a statist and not a nationalist one (*šiandienine terminologija tai pavadintume lietuvių imperializmu, tik ne nacionalistišku, o valstybišku*).⁴⁸

This rather mild criticism of ancient Lithuanian “statist imperialism” by Smetona was radicalized by one of the leading ideologists of the ruling Nationalist (*Tautininkai*) party, Vytautas Alantas (1902–1990), who in 1934–1939 was the editor of the semi-official Lithuanian newspaper “*Lietuvos aidas*.” Alantas outrightly rejected the idea of Šalkauskis, which received some credit from Smetona (but only for ancient, not modern Lithuania) that historical mission of Lithuania is to achieve the synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures. Instead, Lithuania should just develop its cultural individuality and defend its political independence, as all “normal” nations do.

Just on the eve of Soviet occupation in 1940, Alantas published the collection of his essays *Žygiuojanti tauta* [Nation on March],⁴⁹ where he elaborated on the reflections of Antanas Smetona about the imperial past of Lithuania. Along with Pakštas, Alantas continued discourse on the ancient Lithuanian imperialism in the emigration,

⁴⁷ See S. Šalkauskis, *Sur les confins de deux mondes. Essai synthétique sur le Probleme de la civilisation nationale en Lithuanie*, Genève 1919.

⁴⁸ A. Smetona, *Lietuvių tauta ir jos paskirtis*, p. 60.

⁴⁹ V. Alantas, *Žygiuojanti tauta*, Kaunas 1990.

joined by some junior authors.⁵⁰ The particular outgrowth of this discourse is parahistorical conception of Baltic Empire by Česlovas Gedgaudas (1909–1986).⁵¹ In the emigration, Alantas mainly wrote fiction.⁵² However, shortly before the restoration of Lithuanian independence and his own death, another collection of Alantas' essays in “nationalist ideology” (*tautininkų ideologija*) was published. In these late texts, the idea of ancient Lithuania as victim of his own imperial expansion in particular receive pride of place in his reflection on the place of GDL in the Lithuanian history.⁵³

Main points in Alantas elaboration in the Smetona's incipient criticism of the ancient Lithuanian imperialism are: (1) Ancient Lithuanians were too tolerant and generous for their subordinates and neighbours.

Who does not know that Lithuania was exceptionally generous in its history? We gave for our neighbours the dynasties of kings and dukes, and gave in such a way how nobody else gives: when Lithuanian dynasts departed from Lithuania, they took pieces of territory with themselves. And Jogaila departing almost ruined whole Lithuanian empire. We were powerful and rich, but because of our exceptional generosity we gave away our power and wealth for others.⁵⁴

(2) Ruling dynasty betrayed Lithuanian state by identifying with alien (Polish) state. In the later (emigration) writings, he supplements these points with another consideration. (3) Instead of eastward imperial expansion, Lithuanian rulers should struggle for unification of Baltic tribes. Alantas maintains that under XXth century conditions a nation should have at least 10 million members to be viable for a longer time.⁵⁵ The unification of all or most of Baltic tribes in one state would open the chance for such development, while in its Eastern expansion Lithuanians just “donated” themselves as ethnographic material for alien imperial projects, with Poland benefiting most from its Lithuanian donor.

Interestingly, last criticism of Alantas was anticipated in part by A. Smetona himself. In one his speeches, Lithuanian President rebuked the rulers of ancient Lithuania for their abandonment of the task to secure the access to Baltic sea in favour of the continental expansion.

Lithuanian Empire was extended from Baltic to Black seas in the ancient times. We are proud that it was such. Lithuanians defended the sea costs, but were not able to preserve their rights on the sea, to create their own fleet and launch their own free trade. Probably because of this failure, the huge Empire perished and the nation barely survived, divided and exhausted. Now we understand our mistakes (and maybe the sins!) and want to correct them, we want repent. Lithuanians will not spare any sacrifices to protect and defend their maritime rights.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ See A.M. Budreckis, *Algirdas. Senovės Lietuvos valstybininkas, jo veikla ir laikai*, New York 1981.

⁵¹ See Č. Gedgaudas, *Mūsų praeities beieškant*, Mexico 1972, 2nd ed., 1992.

⁵² His output includes numerous novels and plays, among them historical novel on Mindaugas times, *Šventaragis* (2 vol., 1972–1974).

⁵³ See V. Alantas, *Tauta istorijos vingiais: ideologiniai mąstymai*, Chicago 1990.

⁵⁴ Idem, *Žygiuojanti tauta*, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Idem, *Tauta istorijos vingiais*, p. 220.

⁵⁶ A. Smetona, *Jūros diena. Kalba, pasakyta 1934.08.12 Klaipėdoje per jūros dieną* [in:] Idem, *Pasakyta parašyta*, p. 297–298.

So indifference to sea in general and to Baltic sea in particular was fatal mistake if not sin of ancient Lithuania rulers.

The focus on the “mistakes” and “sins” of the builders of the ancient Lithuanian empire can be explained by the occasion and time of this speech. It was delivered in Klaipėda on the August 12th, 1934 during the newly introduced national feast-day to celebrate the “recovery” of Klaipėda/Memel. Smetona’s goal was to communicate the resolve of Lithuania to defend Klaipėda against German revanchism. Exactly at this time, Lithuania was involved in the conflict in the Germany after the arrest by Lithuanian police of the leaders and activists of Nazist organizations. With no support from Western powers, which demanded to respect the “rights of German minority,” Lithuania lost. After 1937, there are no more references to GDL as empire in Smetona’s speeches. With Lithuania becoming real victim of the imperialism of its stronger neighbours, there were less and less occasions to commemorate and celebrate ancient Lithuanian empire.

But what was the political message and function of the repeated use of the “empire” in the Smetona’s speeches during the “brighter” times 1930–1937? Smetona was perfectly conscious about the ambivalence of the value load of “empire,” and occasionally voiced hopes about the future world where there will be no imperialism.

As represented by great powers in colonies, it [imperialism. – Z.N.] is now double-faced: nationalist and cosmopolitan. It has too narrow space in Europe, it is no more possible here. If one or another state without colonies moves here around and tries to expand at the cost of weaker neighbours, this may be the last attempt. The time will come when colonies will demand from metropolises their certificates of education. And then there will be the crisis of imperialism. But this time is still in so far away future, and there is no point to disseminate the pictures of this future, because most of the colonies still are on the low level of civilization.⁵⁷

In the search for political functions of the memory of empire in the interwar Lithuania, which was small, weak, poor and underdeveloped state, the observation may be helpful that ancient Lithuanian empire is almost always associated with Vytautas, and usually called “Vytautas empire.” This association is far from obvious, because Gediminas and Algirdas were real empire builders. Jogaila contributed most for its stabilization by union with Poland, and remained legal suzerain of Vytautas until his death. So why then “Vytautas empire,” but not “Gediminas empire,” “Algirdas empire” or “Jogaila empire”?

Importantly, Vytautas’ struggle for his share of power before 1392 was perceived in the interwar Lithuania as fight for independence from Poland, paralleling the independence struggles of 1918–1921. In this struggles Lithuania had several enemies. One of them was Józef Piłsudski with his programme to restore Polish-Lithuanian federation with Lithuania as junior partner. So the real major Lithuanian ancient “imperialist” in late XIV–early XVth century Jogaila had bad luck to be associated with another “traitor”⁵⁸ – Józef Piłsudski, and marginalized in Lithuanian historical memories. In its turn, the cult of Vytautas Magnus in the interwar Lithuania became

⁵⁷ A. Smetona, *Lietuvių tauta ir jos paskirtis*, p. 60.

⁵⁸ Because of ethnically Lithuanian origins of the *Naczelnik Państwa*.



Fig. 1. Monument for Vytautas Magnus in Kaunas. Picture by author.

part of the cult of the Antanas Smetona, who was represented as a major hero in the fight for creation of independent Lithuanian state, repeating Vytautas feat in the late XIVth century. In the struggle for independent Lithuania, both Smetona and Vytautas temporary “collaborated” with another “historical enemy” – Germans.

Most impressive visual representation of the idea of GDL as empire in the interwar Lithuanian historical culture was monument to Vytautas Magnus by Lithuanian sculptor Vincas Grybas (1890–1941). It was erected in 1932 Panemunė, at the gate Lithuanian military school. Destroyed in the Soviet time, it was re-erected in the downtown Kaunas in Laisvės alėja street in 1990. Part of the monument are images of 4 warriors, representing powers vanquished by Vytautas. Along with German, Russian, and Tatar captives, one finds a Polish knight, although Vytautas never fought a war against Poland, at least a victorious one.⁵⁹ How to explain the presence of a Pole?

⁵⁹ Except as ally of Teutonic Order during civil war in GDL in 1389–1392.

The comments by Giedrė Mickūnaitė on Vytautas monument in Kaunas suggest the explanation why memories about “Vytautas empire” were so important in the Lithuanian historical imaginary of interwar times.

The Vytautas monument, composed of vanquished warriors, not only recapitulates in short historical truths, but also affirms political aspirations of the interwar time. The victories of Vytautas against Russian duchies, Tatar hordes, Teutonic order are well-known historical fact. However, not Vytautas but interwar Lithuania were ‘in the war’ with Poland.⁶⁰

Tellingly, at his original location in Panemunė, Vytautas “looked” to Vilnius side. So the celebration of the “Vytautas empire” both communicated the will and nourished the hope to regain Vilnius against all odds, as Vytautas managed to win in the seemingly hopeless situations against the adversaries not less formidable than Piłsudski’s Poland.

Despite the important, if not central place of “Vytautas empire” in the historical memory of interwar Lithuania, the word “empire” was only occasionally used in the work of the Lithuanian professional historians, and never was applied as analytical category structuring the historical interpretation. “Empire” does not occur neither in the collective work *Vytautas Didysis* (1930) edited by Paulius Šležas, nor in famous *History of Lithuania* edited by Adolfas Šapoka (1936).⁶¹ Most plausible explanation for this persistent neglect of the digressions of the “leader of nation” (*tautos vadas*) on GDL as empire was the dominance the “historist” or “hermeneutical” methodology. Hermeneutics obliges an historian to remain as close to the language and concepts of his sources as possible, explaining and understanding a “historical individuum” in its own time and place. From this viewpoint, the Pakštas/Smetona’s thesis about GDL as empire was just a dilettante oxymoron, because “obviously” even a grand duchy is less than kingdom, and kingdom is less than empire. In other words, GDL was not empire, because no contemporary observers perceived or designated it as such.

3. GDL as empire in the historical culture of the II Republic of Lithuania

In the Soviet historical literature on GDL, no matter whether it was produced in Lithuania, Moscow, or other Soviet republics, GDL was never described as empire, and its expansion into Slavic lands was not designated as imperialism. According to Soviet Marxism-Leninism, which was obligatory for all “publishable” output of historians, imperialism was “highest and last stage of capitalism.” So it was generally avoided in the writings about the historical epochs preceding late XIXth century. But even if occasionally used beyond the modern history context, “empire” and “imperialism” had very strong negative emotive meaning in the Marxist-Leninist vocabulary. Therefore, the designation of Algirdas and Vytautas as imperialists and GDL as empires would be tantamount to their condemnation as “reactionary.” If this would

⁶⁰ G. Mickūnaitė, *Vytautas Didysis. Valdovo įvaizdis*, Vilnius 2008, p. 15.

⁶¹ Of course, there are exceptions, represented by the casual uses in the writings by Ignas Jonynas and Simas Sužiedėlis, written for broader readership.

happen, say, under Stalin's time, then many good Lithuanian communists would be under pressure to change their own and their sons' given names.

However, nobody was interested in the re-interpretation of ancient Lithuanian history, causing so much inconvenience. In the Tsarist Russia, GDL was described as the "Western Russian state," which before the fateful Krèva treaty was just another center for unification of Russian lands. In this framework, GDL as empire was not conceivable, because Russians could not be imperialists subjugating fellow Russians. In the Soviet historiography, it was acknowledged that GDL was created by non-Slavic Lithuanian people and ruled by the non-Russian rulers. They were praised for their fight against Germans, and rather mildly rebuked for the expansion into Slavic lands. In the 1970s, Lithuanian historians even made cautious attempt to "rehabilitate" this expansion by representing it as a part of "struggle of peoples against Golden Horde,"⁶² which was true "evil empire" for Soviet historians.

In the restored independent Lithuania, the discourse on GDL as empire was resurrected by Gintaras Beresnevičius (1961.07.07–2006.08.06). He was leading Lithuanian scholar in religion studies, specializing in pre-Christian Baltic mythology – a kind of Lithuanian Mircea Eliade. Like Alantas, he also published novels, poems, and numerous essays. In 2003, he published the book "Making of Empire" (*Imperijos darymas*).⁶³ This was an exploratory study of the prospects of Lithuanian foreign policy after joining EU and NATO, commissioned by Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius university, which was "brain trust" of Lithuanian presidency in the time when Valdas Adamkus was in office (1998–2003, 2004–2009).

Similarly to interwar times, the surfacing of the idea of GDL as empire was not the outcome of the academic scholarly efforts to provide new interpretation of the GDL history by illuminating known historical facts. Rather, "imperial" view of GDL was used to affirm political aspirations. In the May 2000, during the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, a group of countries applying for membership in NATO was established. After it was joined by Croatia, it was called "Vilnius 10" group. At this time, Lithuanian politicians felt that Lithuania is very important country. They were eager to make permanent their self-assumed and self-perceived role of the leader of the New (post-Communist) West – even if there were few (if any) neighbour countries which recognized Lithuania in such role. Lithuanian intellectuals were expected to provide ideas how rulers of modern contemporary Lithuania could use the real or imagined opportunity to upgrade Lithuania's international status.

Meeting this expectation, Beresnevičius advanced grandiose vision of the mission of Lithuania after joining EU and NATO. He invited to use membership in these international organizations as an opportunity "to make the empire." According to

⁶² R. Batūra, *Lietuva tautų kovoje prieš Aukso Ordą. Nuo Batu antplūdžio iki mūsų prie Mėlynujų Vandens*, Vilnius 1975.

⁶³ G. Beresnevičius, *Imperijos darymas. Lietuviškos ideologijos metmenys. Europos Sąjunga ir Lietuvos geopolitika XXI a. pirmoje pusėje* [Making of Empire. An Outline of Lithuanian Ideology. European Union and Geopolitics of Lithuania in the first half of XXI century], Vilnius 2003; <http://www.dangus.net/nc51.htm> (access: 26.11.2013).

Beresnevičius, this means becoming the bridgehead and vanguard of the eastward extension of EU and NATO. More specifically, this means the spearheading the export of democracy in the former republics of USSR. “We have opportunity to use current situation to lay foundation for our own geopolitical bloc, tectonic bloc, to restore GDL.”⁶⁴ The “restoration of GDL” would mean the creation of some kind of community of nations including not only states in the former territory of GDL, but also Transcaucasian and even Central Asian countries, something distantly similar to British Commonwealth of Nations. “We must enter EU as democratic empire, by acting in the spaces which possibly will exceed the territory of EU itself.”⁶⁵

Differently from Smetona, Beresnevičius does not associate ancient Lithuanian empire with Vytautas and pays no attention to the topic of the cost of imperial expansion, which was so important for Alantas. Even more importantly, ancient Lithuanian empire is not synonymous for Beresnevičius with GDL. He takes seriously parahistorical theories about active participation of Baltic tribes in the events of “Barbarian invasions” or “*Völkerwanderung*” period 200–600 A.D., with the breakdown of Western Roman empire as its most important world historical outcome. Therefore, in the parts of his text, which refer to ancient times, he avoids exact dates and prefers general descriptions where the realities of IIIrd–VIth centuries are anachronistically mixed with those of XIIIth–XVth centuries. In this way, the emergence of GDL is represented as continuation of the “empire making” activities by the ethnic ancestors of modern Lithuanians in the much earlier times.

This citation may provide the impression how Beresnevičius proceeds.

As the tillers always prevail in numbers, ruling military nobility takes over their language and culture. If this culture is higher, than higher culture is absorbed, if lower – then lower one. This is what adaptation means. Lithuanians behaved themselves in exactly same way, how Norman, Gothic or Langobard dukes did. The difference is that they did not disappear, and they did not disappear because they had unitary ethnic base. Ethnic Lithuania. If this ethnic base would have moved and arrived say to lower Dnieper or lower Volga, they would have disappeared ruling somewhere in Kiev or Sarai. On the very summit of their domination. Barbarians, which have created Europe, did finish their histories in such way. Lithuanians are unique among barbarians who have participated in the Migration of Peoples, who have preserved their ties with old fatherland, and therefore this base has survived.⁶⁶

Surviving in their ancient motherland, Lithuanians remain the same “eternal Barbarians” from *Völkerwanderung* times, which are well only when they act according to their perennial imperial drive, being in their own element. Otherwise, they perform acts of self-destruction or those of criminal activity.

Obviously, such essentialistic view has nothing in common with scholarly historical or social scientific analysis. However, Beresnevičius’ goal is not to provide academic analysis, but to construct political myth useful for the contemporary power elite of Lithuania that would inspire its citizens to bear the costs in playing the self-assumed role of the vanguard of the Eastern expansion of NATO and EU. In this role,

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 72.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 11–12.

Lithuania would challenge semi-authoritarian Russia, continuing the policy which was started in 2000 by Lithuanian Seimas' legislation which obliged Russia as the legal successor of USSR to compensate the damage caused to Lithuania by some 50 years of Soviet occupation. There is no hope that present government of Russia will ever satisfy Lithuanian demands. Therefore, Lithuanian political elites perceive the democratization of Russia as direct interest of Lithuania, as it would mean the installation in Moscow of the government more pliant to Lithuanian demands.

In the struggle for this goal, Lithuania should work decreasing ring by ring the space which Moscow still tries to keep under its control.

Europe needs our empire, I think U.S. needs it too – both powers will not need much time to understand this, and all their actions show that they understand. [...] Ukraine, Belarus should be with our help culturally and politically – immediately – integrated into Central Europe; this is the space of GDL; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia should be considered in the exactly same way. Next ring – Central Asia, going up to China.⁶⁷

How (if at all) this breath-taking vision can be implemented practically? Are the resources of small Lithuania not too meager?

Obviously, it cannot be implemented by the same means, which were used by ancient Lithuanian rulers, or those which help U.S. to control the foreign policy of so many states around the world without using military power. Practical measures proposed by Beresnevičius include, firstly, the creating of Lithuanian Legion. This is an elite military task force, which military command of NATO would free to employ in all “hot spots” of the world. The beneficial side-effect of this measure would be reduction of criminality in Lithuania. The legion “would absorb all potential criminals, depressed persons, addicts. If we will have Lithuanian legion, [...] then the dream of each adolescent school-boy will not be how to become car thief or drug dealer, but a soldier.”⁶⁸

Secondly, Beresnevičius proposed to establish the program of stipends and grants for students, scholars and intellectuals from Belarus', Ukraina and other prospective members of the restituted GDL. “All this costs, but the cost is comparatively small. All this is investition into cultivating of our ‘agents’ in these countries. All states which have political interests and perceive them, have similar foundations, fellowship programs. They shape their images from inside by hands of future journalists, programmers, statesmen.”⁶⁹ In competition with other powers eager to “grow up” their own “fifth column” in the former Soviet republics, Lithuania has two advantages. As a small state, it cannot be perceived as real threat (even by Russia). Then it can exploit the memories of the common victimhood, shared with populations of the most Soviet republics.

Curiously, Beresnevičius has nothing to say about the hotly discussed “division” of the GDL legacy between Belarus and contemporary Lithuania. One also finds no explanation in his text, how breathtaking program of the restoration of GDL can be

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 75.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 56.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 16–17.

harmonized with the aspirations of Poland to foster the heritage of Commonwealth in former “kresy,” including the territory of the modern Lithuania itself. This omission is puzzling not only because of much more greater economic and political power of contemporary Poland in comparison with Lithuania. The aspirations of Poland have real basis due to presence of numerous and politically active Polish minority in Belarus, Ukraina and Lithuania itself, while contemporary Lithuania has no such agency of its influence in the former GDL lands.

Third proposal is at the same time the most cheap and the most difficult to implement. This is the change of the perception of emigration from Lithuania. Since the restoration of the independence of Lithuania, its population decreased from 3,7 million in 1989 to 3,5 million found by general census in 2001, i.e. at the time when Beresnevičius launched his program of the restoration of GDL. This decrease was co-caused by mortality rates exceeding mortality rates since 1994, but the emigration is major cause. These demographic changes became the matter of general concern around the year 2000. Advancing his program of “restitution” of GDL, Beresnevičius made bold proposal to perceive present emigration as continuation of perennial trend since *Völkerwanderung* times, driving Lithuanian imperial expansion.

So present Lithuanian emigrants should be considered as “colonists,” spearheading latest wave of “imperial” expansion. Emigrant quarters in the cities of the advanced Western countries are equivalents of the military colonies planted by the ancient Lithuanian rulers in the Slavic lands.

We should not perceive emigration as catastrophe, because contemporary world context and internal movement in the European Union universalizes these problems. [...]. We should not impose on emigration the self-consciousness of ‘lost generation,’ ‘broken thread,’ because in this way we can infuse into our diaspora with the complex – to break away and do not come back. Jewish diaspora can set the example for our our diaspora, as far as Israel would not be a superpower with its territory.⁷⁰

By 2013, none from these proposals were implemented. As partial exception may be considered the project to ground the Institute of Advanced Studies in Vilnius, where academics from Central and Eastern European countries would be invited to spend a sabbatical year. Some preparatory work on this project was done in 2006–2007. However, it was aborted after the outbreak of economic crisis in Lithuania in 2008. Another cause may be the election of Dalia Grybauskaitė as President of Lithuania in 2009. After she started (unsuccessful) attempt to improve Lithuania’s relations with Russia, the idea of “restitution” of GDL lost support in President’s Office and Foreign office. Lithuanian armed forces participated in the American unilateral military actions in Afganistan and Iran, as well as in the peacekeeping operations of NATO. However, Lithuania did not make attempt to surpass other allies of U.S. by the zeal in sharing its burden of the sole remaining world superpower as well as its imperial glory. Last general census in 2011 disclosed further reduction of the population of Lithuania, which was 3 million in this year, and continues to decrease. In

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 17.

these circumstances, even for the political establishment of contemporary Lithuania it is increasingly difficult to follow the invitation of Beresnevičius to celebrate the emigration as the continuation of the imperial expansion of the ancient Lithuania.

Although few people in contemporary Lithuania would endorse the political mythology of the “restoration of GDL” in the Beresnevičius sense, his numerous publications in the most popular internet portals disseminated the idea that GDL was an empire in the broader public. The same effect had the book of British historian, now working in Lithuania, Stephen C. Rowell.⁷¹ Although he did not use imperiological framework for the comparative analysis of GDL, the very designation of GDL as empire in the title of the book had accustomed Lithuanian readers to the idea even before the much more daring ideas by Beresnevičius. With broader Lithuanian public remaining ambiguous about the lessons of the ancient Lithuania’s history for the present and future foreign policy of the Lithuanian state, academic historians in this country are much more open to the idea that GDL indeed was empire in comparison with the historians in the I Republic of Lithuania.

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⁷¹ See S.C. Rowell, *Lithuania Ascending. A Pagan Empire within East-Central Europe, 1295–1345*, Cambridge 1994. Translation into Lithuanian by Osvaldas Aleksa: S.C. Rowell, *Iš viduramžių ūkų kylanti Lietuva: pagonių imperija Rytų ir Vakarų Europoje, 1295–1345*, Vilnius 2001.

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