

## In Defense Of West European Culture

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The noted Lithuanian philosopher, professor St. Šalkauskis, has called Lithuania the land of contradictions and paradoxes. This statement may include many phases of Lithuania's life and many facts from the past of the Lithuanian nation. Lithuania was in a peculiar position. Standing between representatives of Western and Eastern European cultures, it played a part in shaping the destinies of both. Lithuania was a tempting land to be seized by both East and West, but it maintained its independent position for many years and it could be viewed as a prison through which Western influences were filtered through to the East and vice versa. Though composed of strands from both, Lithuania aligned herself, culturally, primarily with the West, as will be seen later. The importance of Lithuania in the cultural transfer from the West to the East is great indeed, but here we will discuss primarily the historical events throughout Lithuania's history which had great importance in this transfer between the East and the West.

More than seven hundred years ago crusades were led against the pagans of the Baltic shores, especially against Lithuanians. Only the Scandinavian peninsula, Spain, which was fighting her own wars against the Moors, and Italy did not participate in these crusades against Lithuania. It appears that all the other nations, whose soldiers had fought for the Holy Sepulchre in Palestine, did not stop sending their knights all through the 13th and 14th centuries in order to help the Teutonic Knights against Lithuania, but this Order recruited most of its soldiers from its own fatherland, Germany.

The survival of the Lithuanian nation against this pressure from Western Europe, which lasted two centuries, is a very important factor in the history of the Baltic nations, and also of Western Europe itself. The "Strong — headed and used to warfare nation" (Teutonic Order chronicler — Dusburg) was able to resist the sieges of the German Order from the beginning of the 13th up to the 15th century. The foundations of the might of this Order were shaken by two great Lithuanian triumphs. In the battles of 1260, at Lake Durbe, and in 1410, at Tannenberg, the future of the Baltic nations was being decided. In the first, Lithuania defeated the Knights of the Sword and, in the second, the Teutonic Knights — the two twin orders which constantly threatened Lithuania.

Denouncing the Lithuanians as the greatest enemies of Christianity in their propaganda in the West, although Lithuanians were officially baptized in 1387, the Teutonic Knights called them "the Saracens" of Eastern Europe, and even as late as 1410 engaged knights in the West in order to strengthen their camp. The Order tried to instill fear in the West by insisting that the "Saracen" ruler Vytautas (1392—1430) intended to water his horses in the Rhine river ... However, five years later, in the Ecclesiastical Council of Cologne (a type of medieval United Nations Assembly) the German order lost out against the opinion of European nations. For a long time it had been possible to deceive the West by claiming that Lithuanians were deep-rooted pagans. But when at that council there appeared a delegation of the newly baptized nobles, the West finally became convinced that Lithuanians wanted to unite themselves with the Western European culture. The Lithuanian representatives asked for missionaries to be sent to their land, and they expressed the need to build churches, etc.

Lithuanians resisted the cross which the German Order carried on the tips of their swords. They were spared the fate of the Vends and the Prussians, who were weakened or who completely disappeared from history as a result of these crusades. Lithuanians not only were able to defend their ethnic existence and their land, they also created a strong barrier to the German "Drang nach Osten." Thus, the strongest neighbor of the Order became the Lithuanians and their state,

instead of the Slavic princes. The Teutonic Knights did not achieve their bridge to Livonia through Western Lithuania from the conquered Prussian (East Prussia) lands. The Lithuanians energetically cut off all their efforts to secure even a narrow strip of land from Klaipėda in the direction of the Order's Livonian possessions. After all, they were fighting just as energetically against the Livonian Order (Knights of the Sword) as against the Prussian Teutonic Knights. For example, in the 13th century alone, six out of twenty masters of the Livonian Order lost their lives in wars against Lithuanians.

But in the 14th century, too, the Order besieged Lithuania from both sides. From Marienburg and Königsberg "reysen" (i.e. marches) were constantly organized, in which many knights from all Western Europe took part. The Order tried to build a whole system of castles on the banks of the river Nemunas — up to Kaunas. It seemed then that Western Lithuania would not be able to get out from under the Order's rule. However, all those castles on the Nemunas (Beyenburg, Marienwerder, Gotteswerder, Ritterswerder) were swept away in 1336-92. Thus, the Order did not acquire even that very desirable land, Žemaičiai, which would have connected Prussia with Livonia. In a few instances the Knights held Žemaičiai in their hands, like a "slippery eel by its tail" (an expression from that period, but it finally slipped out of their power during the reign of Vytautas, after the victory of 1410).

By these efforts Lithuania has played an important and interesting role in the history of Europe. She protected and defended the existence of the Lithuanian state, which, as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, lasted almost six hundred years (until 1795).

While defending herself from persistent German aggression, she also did not permit the territories of Nemunas to be consolidated into the state of the Order. Thus, Lithuania has played an important role in that the two lands of the Order, Prussia (East Prussia) and Livonia have met with entirely different fates. The Order was unable properly to colonize the Latvian and Estonian lands while it did not have a route across dry land. This served to strengthen the basis of the conquered Baltic nations. Besides, Lithuania interfered with the expansion, eventually up to the river Dnieper, of the boundaries of the politically organized and agriculturally perfected governed state of the Order. Had this happened, the history of Eastern Europe would have been different in every way. Lithuania served as a barrier to the East against these Germanic attempts. After many generations "history repeated itself," and twice have the Germans reached the Dnieper area (1915-18, 1941-44); however, Germanic hopes of finding here a strong basis for a state had flown away in streams of blood over the banks of Nemunas, in Žemaičiai and at Tannenberg five centuries ago.

In spite of her wars with the Order, the Lithuanian nation adopted Western culture and Latin Baptism. She became the barrier of the Western culture spread by the sword of the Teutonic Knights, but a defender of Western European culture in the East herself, for it extended farthest into the Slavic lands. In her wars with the Order, the Lithuanian nation played another very important role for the lands east of her. Since, in the West, Lithuania met with a strong and immovable enemy, she could not expand her state into the territories of those closely related to the Lithuanians, the Old Prussians (Pruzzi) and the Latvians. Lithuania turned into the opposite direction.

Already, since the end of the 12th century, there had appeared a systematic Lithuanian expansion into the lands of the East Slavs. During the long generations of her wars with the Order Lithuania was pushed even more in that direction. In the Russian plains Lithuanians met the Tartars who came from Asia and destroyed everything that was at that time understood as European culture. Lithuanians became the European barrier against these Asiatic nomads.

Did it not seem a paradox that the once pagan Lithuanians, who had been besieged by the representatives of Western Christianity, the Order of the Teutonic Knights, in the 13th century defended Europe against the Tartars in the Russian plains? Histories of the Central European nations usually stress the fact that the prince of Silesia and others had stopped the advance of the Tartars at Liegnitz in 1241. Very often, however, an important factor is overlooked. The first Lithuanian king, Mindaugas, who was crowned by Pope Innocent IV, seven hundred years ago (1253), stopped the westward advance of the Tartars on his lands. The great march of the Tartars into Lithuanian lands (1258) could not conquer the already strong state of Mindaugas.

The Tartars had conquered large areas of Russia and forced indemnities from her princes. But Lithuanians also ruled a large part of the Eastern Slav's lands: the boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania extended a good hundred miles along the left bank of the Dnieper. Thus the Russian was divided between the Tartars and the Lithuanian state. The latter saved the modern Ukraine and White Russia from the Tartar yoke. That means that the Russian vassals living close to the Lithuanian boundaries had no other choice but to submit to the Lithuanian princes in order to escape the hard Tartar captivity.

The Old Russian (Kiev) state had had many difficulties in bringing to order the nomadic tribes from the Asian steppe. One of the most important reasons for the fall of the state of Kiev was its inability to defend itself against nomads. They besieged and pillaged the rich state of Kiev.

The relationship between Lithuanians and nomads was more fortunate. The stand of Lithuanian Grand Duke Algirdas (1345—1377) in this question of the Eastern plains and Tartars was very interesting. He had stated that all of Russia must belong to Lithuania, i.e., to Vilnius ("Omnis Russia debet ad Litwinos simpliciter pertinere," *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, II; 79). But, of course, both the Tartars and the ruler of Vilnius were trying to conquer Russian lands. Algirdas fought them

in the steppe, the real land of the mounted Tartars in the South of Russia. By breaking the Tartar might at Blue Waters (in Podolia, at the mouth of the Dnieper) in 1362, Algirdas took not only Kiev, but conquered Podolia itself from the Tartars.

Lithuania was successful in gathering up the remains of the old state of Kiev, because Lithuanians did not disturb the unity of the Russian lands of their institutions. The principle of toleration mentioned in the letter of Gediminas, father of Algirdas, to the Pope, was generously applied to the Russian lands. Thus, to belong to Lithuania meant not only freedom from Tartar rule, but also avoidance of the Asiatic yoke.

Even in later times the Lithuanians ruled that chaotic Eastern area. Vytautas the Great devoted the most attention to subduing the nomadic Tartars. In spite of his defeat at Vorksla, in 1399, he took from them not only Russian lands, but made them acknowledge his rule and allow him to appoint their khans. In Southern Russia Vytautas guarded Europe from Asiatic destruction, built fortresses, started settlements of nomadic inhabitants of the steppe — the Tartars — and stopped the wars of their divided tribes by using Tartar warriors themselves. Thus, Vytautas, by reaching the Black Sea and balancing the thoroughly continental character of his state, subdued the wanderers of the steppe and organized an economic life there. Alongside the fortresses, custom houses were established. Even in the 17th century there remained indications of Vytautas' activity in the names of localities — "Vytauto Pirtis" (Bath of Vytautas), "Vytauto Brasta" (Crossing of Vytautas), etc.

Besides her role in the war with the Tartars, Lithuania has also played a role in the history of the Russian state. Russia was several centuries late in coming into European history. Living on the very farthest edge of European cultural life where, during the Middle and the New Ages, a cultural growth was evident in every phase, Humanism, the Renaissance, and even the Reformation, a wave of which had reached Lithuania in 1540—1570, remained unknown to Russia. Of course, Reformation from the West could only spread itself in Catholic Lithuania and not in Orthodox Russia. In other words, a great many factors united Lithuania to the West (Christianity being a very important one), while the absence of these same factors in Russia made her thoroughly Eastern.

The Russian rulers had to devote a great deal of time until they finally "collected" and united Russian lands.—For a long time Lithuania was the greatest obstacle in this unification of the Eastern Slavic lands. Two centers, Vilnius and Moscow, competed for a long time. They both acquired control of East European lands about them. In the 14th century many lands around Dnieper and Daugava (Dunai) expressed their allegiance to the court of Vilnius, i.e., the rulers of Lithuania. The princes of Moscow, having acquired in the end of the 15th century the traditions of the fallen Byzantine Empire, its coat of arms and the title of caesar, could not bear the fact that lands which were ethnically Slavic and religiously Orthodox were ruled by Lithuania. Because of this the wars with the Teutonic Knights changed into wars with Moscow, which lasted even longer. For these wars Lithuania and Poland sacrificed much. It was exceedingly difficult to defend lands which were situated far from the capital of Lithuania, even though the inhabitants of these lands were loyal. But Lithuania long remained a barrier to Moscow's advance into Western Europe, and Russia acquired direct territorial contact with the West only when Vilnius and Kaunas, (1795), along with Warsaw and Lomza, became cities of Russian imperial provinces (1815).

Russia entered into European history when the "Middle Ages" in the Moscow state were over. That was at the time of Peter the Great, the beginning of the 18th century. For a long time her war to the West was barred by Lithuania and Poland. Peter "cut himself a window" (Pushkin's expression) into Europe (founding and building of Petersburg). One hundred thirty years before Ivan the Terrible (IV) had tried to cut such a window to the sea through Livonia. Then the armies of Moscow had cruelly pillaged a large part of Livonia. Many important castles and fortresses had fallen, but the Tsar did not succeed. The ruler of Lithuania-Poland, Steponas Batoras, cut his way off.

We have mentioned these facts here in order to show that the role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is often underestimated in her efforts to stop the advance of the savage Tartar element and in her defense of Western European culture in the distant Dnieper plains. Lithuanians were able to accomplish these missions, because they themselves had become a western-minded nation. An important factor in their history is that by defending themselves against the Teutonic Knights they did not shut themselves away from Western Christianity. Christianity became the most important link uniting Lithuania with the West.