

SUMMARY

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*On the Changing Meaning of “Lithuania”  
in German-language Discourse During  
and After the First World War*

The paper examines the evolution of Lithuania’s spatial conception in the German-language discourse during and after First World War. Before the war, “Lithuania” in the said discourse usually denoted a part of German territory, i.e. one of the regions in East Prussia. True, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was at least a minimum understanding among educated people that “Lithuania” stretched not only in the Hohenzollern territories, but also in the Romanov Empire across the border. This Russian Lithuania was initially identified with the old boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and it was only since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that a linguistic understanding of cultural landscapes was applied to it. However, at any time, Prussian Lithuania in the German speaking discourse used to be more intimate than Russian Lithuania, it was granted more attention, and ultimately, on the basis of Prussian Lithuania, generalisations were made about the entire area where the Lithuanian language was spoken.

Later, however, the existence of Prussian Lithuania was half-forgotten during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as attention shifted to Lithuania on the territory of the (former) Russian Empire. This paper connects the beginning of this process of relocation to the march of the German Army into Russia during the First World War, which arguably opened the existence of “another” Lithuania to Germans and encouraged them to concentrate their attention to it. In 1915–1918, in the occupied area called *Ober Ost*, a consistent territorialisation of “Lithuania” took place, a mostly administrative process discussed in this paper in detail. Although this territorialisation was carried out purely by administrative decisions, it was increasingly masked by ethnographic criteria as well. It was a way to demonstrate the exclusivity of the territory since it was certainly not to be treated as Poland. In Germany in late 1915 and early 1916, the idea prevailed to make *Ober Ost* a colonial territory, and since spring 1917, it was transferred into a controlled sphere of influence. These German policies in *Ober Ost* stimulated the consolidation of the Lithuanian nation-state. The eventual outcome of which was the transfer of the name of Lithuania to the area where in 1918 the state of Lithuania came into being.

When the founders of that state, however, began to claim Prussian Lithuania, which was defined by Germans and where Germans themselves postulated the status of Lithuanians as autochthons, the notion of Prussian Lithuania in the German speaking discourse during the 1920’s was gradually removed. This evidence would suggest that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century not

only the implementation of Lithuanian national aspirations, but also German attempts to hinder this process levelled and removed the diversity of the cultural concepts of Lithuania that characterised the long 19<sup>th</sup> century.