

Lithuania Minor, a Vanished Land

By Donatas Januta

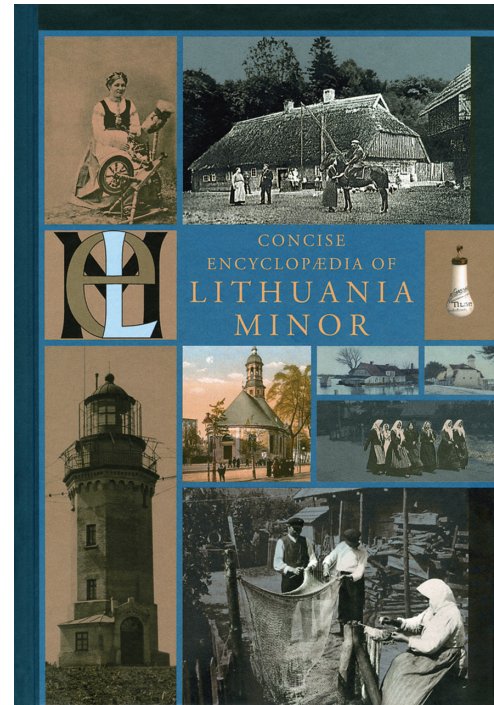
*By the holy cross,
to which you swore love and compassion,
tell me: of what were these people guilty,
who sought neither riches nor conquest,
but in the shade of their sacred oak groves,
only worshiped their own gods?
Why did you, with fire and sword, march
into their lands
to plunder their fields, destroy their sanctuaries
and their homes?*

Martynas Liudvikas Rėza (1776-1840)

The above words of Martynas Liudvikas Rėza came to mind as I was reading the recently published *Concise Encyclopaedia of Lithuania Minor* (2014 Vilnius 665 p.), which I discuss here. Rėza, a Lutheran pastor and professor at the University of Königsberg, with those words denounced the



Frydrichas Kuršaitis (1806-1884) Königsberg University professor, Lutheran pastor, director of the Lithuanian Language Seminar at the University of Königsberg. Published a Lithuanian language dictionary (1870-1883) and a Lithuanian grammar (1876).



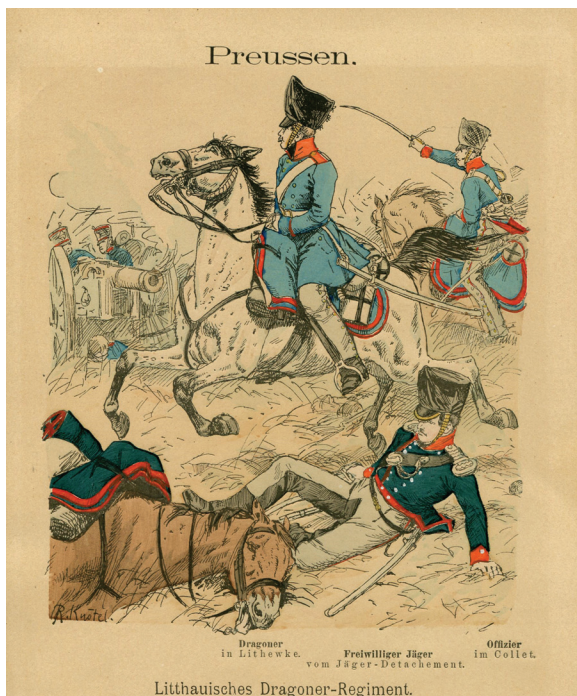
German Teutonic Knights who, in the 1200's, marched into ancient Prussia under the cloak of Christianity, and pillaged and killed.

They wiped out most of the ancient Prussians, and imposed a harsh form of serfdom, akin to slavery, on those who survived. The German Teutons then appropriated not only the lands, but also the name of their vanquished, and thenceforth called themselves Prussians, though Germans they were and Germans they remained.

The indigenous Prussians were a people related to present day Lithuanians and Latvians. In the 13th century, all three were still pagans who worshiped and respected oak trees, fire, and other wonders of nature.

There is no lack of literature, largely in German but also in English and other languages, about Prussia. Yet, the existing literature focuses almost exclusively on the German part of East Prussia's history. There is little written about the Lithuanians who lived on that land for hundreds of years, and who contributed so much to Lithuanian language and literature. The recently published *Concise Encyclopaedia of Lithuania Minor*, a compact yet comprehensive history and reference book on Lithuania Minor, goes far towards filling that gap.

Lithuania Minor, the north-eastern portion of East Prussia, a region on the Baltic sea between Lithuania and Poland including Klaipėda, was part of the Lithuanian lands governed by King Mindaugas (1203-1263). Since the end of World War II, there has been no East Prussia, and there is no Lithuania Minor. In 1944 the Soviet Red Army invaded, and pillaged and killed, just like the Teutons did 700 years before them, then evicted those few that survived. Russians replaced the Germans and the Lithuanians, and the region is now called Kaliningrad and is part of Russia.



Prussian Army's Lithuanian Dragoon Regiment, established 1717, shown in their battle dress at the 1813 Battle of Leipzig against Napoleon's armies.



Prussian Lithuanians trading in the market at Prieglius River in Königsberg 1870.

Yet, for hundreds of years after the Teutons had conquered that land, Lithuanians constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. Until the devastation by the plague and famine of 1709-1711, and the subsequent German colonization, half of East Prussia was populated almost entirely by Lithuanians, and in the remaining parts Lithuanians comprised either a majority or a considerable portion.

In 1638 the Prussian government even issued an edict that every second Sunday, at least one sermon in the churches had to be given in the German language. And to assure that the priest would not be preaching to an empty church, the German gentry together with their servants were ordered to attend.

The Germans had come as Teutonic conquerors, and stayed as the overlords of the land. The land was agrarian, and Lithuanians, with what remained of the original Prussians, tilled the soil, some on their own land and others for the estate owners. Those Germans who did not live on their estates, lived in towns as governing officials, merchants, innkeepers and tradesmen. The towns established in Lithuania Minor were like German islands in a Lithuanian sea.

The Concise Encyclopaedia of Lithuania Minor is divided into three parts, with well selected archival photographs throughout. The first part sets forth chronologically the region's prehistory and history, its administrative and legal systems, its economic and cultural life, with special attention to the region's Lithuanian inhabitants and institutions. The second and third parts, contain entries in encyclopedic alphabetical order describing the places and persons associated with the Lithuanian presence in the region.

By text and photographs, the book sets forth how Lithuanians of Lithuania Minor, known as *lietuvininkai* or Prussian Lithuanians, living under a different government, a different political system, and a different religion, developed their own cultural identity separate from that of Lithuania Major. The Lutheran Church there played an important role not only in the daily life of Prussian Lithuanians, but also in the preservation and development of the Lithuanian language and literature.

In Catholic Lithuania Major, during the period of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth, much of Lithuania's nobility and clergy became Polonized. Later, the Russian Czar's Empire imposed a harsh Russification policy in Lithuania Major. As a result, by the 19th century, in Lithuania Major, church services were often conducted in Polish and dealings with government officials were in Russian, such that the Lithuanian language was left mostly to be spoken only among the peasants.

Meanwhile, in Lutheran Lithuania Minor the Lithuanian language flourished and provided the foundation for the structure of the standard Lithuanian language. The city of Tilžė, for many years was the cultural center not only of Lithuania Minor but for all of Lithuania. During 1816-1919 approximately 2,500 Lithuanian books, newspapers and periodicals were published in Tilžė, most of which were smuggled across the border and circulated in Lithuania Major. From about the middle of the 18th century, the majority of Lithuanians in Lithuania Minor were literate, while most peasants in Lithuania Major were deprived of learning and remained illiterate.

The reason for the high literacy and the preservation and development of the Lithuanian language in Lithuania Minor was the Lutheran Church's policy, that parishioners should understand and actively participate in the church services and rituals, which is not possible if the services are presented to them in a manner or in a language that they did not understand.

Thus, education was a priority of the Lutheran Church. A full system of parish schools and town schools was established starting in the 16th century. To prepare clergymen to serve their parishioners in their own language, scholarships for Lithuanians were established at the University of Königsberg (Lith.: *Karaliaučius*), where Lithuanian language was taught as a separate subject from 1718 to 1944.

The Lutheran pastor Martynas Mažvydas (1510-1563) in 1547 published the first printed book in Lithuanian. Another Lutheran pastor, Kristijonas Donelaitis (1714-1780) wrote the epic poem *"The Seasons"* (Lith.: *"Metai"*), a classic work of Lithuanian literature, which, through the annual cycle of the seasons of the year, depicts the everyday life of Lithuanian peasants and the burdens of serfdom. The first two newspapers in the Lithuanian language which were published for readers in Lithuania Major, *"Aušra"* and *"Varpas"*, were published in Lithuania Minor and smuggled across the border into Lithuania Major.

From earliest times, agriculture was the main occupation in Lithuania Minor, though villages adjacent to the Curonian Lagoon (Lith.: *"Kuršių mārės"*) and alongside rivers were devoted to fishing. But the fishermen's lot was difficult, and they supplemented it in various ways, including an established practice of trapping crows for food. A more profitable enterprise was raising of farm animals - pigs, cows and horses. Thoroughbred horses were bred in the Trakėnai estate and other locations, and East Prussia and Lithuania Minor were the main suppliers of horses to the Prussian and German armies.

Prussian Lithuanians served in the Prussian and German armies in wars against Russia, Austria, France and Denmark, and in the First and Second World Wars. In the early wars, most Prussian Lithuanians served in the cavalry, since, having grown up on farms, they were generally good horsemen. There were separate Lithuanian cavalry units in the Prussian army in the 18th and 19th centuries. About 10,000 Prussian Lithuanians served in the Kaiser's army during World War I, and a similar number in the German Reich's Wehrmacht during World War II. Many perished.



Two Prussian Lithuanian newspapers. *Lietuviška Ceitunga*, (Lithuanian Newspaper) Klaipėda, (1878-1940). *Tilžės Keleivis*, (Tilžė Traveler) Tilžė (1883-1924).



Market day in the town of Šilokarcėma, now called Šilutė, early 20th century.

In the 18th century trade in timber and the wood industry became the core of the region's economy, and many sawmills were built. Other industries also developed - brickyards, breweries, tanneries, cellulose and plywood manufacturing. Germans and Jews predominated in trade and industry in Lithuania Minor, but the number of Prussian Lithuanians engaged in business increased after serfdom was abolished in the early 19th century.

Lithuania Minor as a place no longer exists, but communities of Prussian Lithuanians, of *lietuvininkai*, can be found in its diaspora – in the Republic of Lithuania, the US, Canada, and elsewhere in the world.

The Concise Encyclopaedia of Lithuania Minor, can be useful both to the layperson interested in Lithuanian and Prussian history, and to scholars who seek information about Lithuania Minor which is not otherwise available in English. This book is both a history book in its narrative first part, and an encyclopedic reference volume in its second and third parts.

At the end of the volume, Lithuanian place names are listed with their German and Russian counterparts. This is an extremely helpful cross-reference, since, reading various publications or looking at maps, one will be totally lost unless one knows that, for example, the Lithuanian city of *Tilžė*, the German *Tilsit*, and the Russians *Sovetsk* are one and the same place. For further reading or research, the book also contains a bibliography of publications in Lithuanian, German and Russian languages.

Prussian Germans have more than once played a dominant role on the European continent, but little has been written about the Prussian Lithuanians, among whom the Prussian Germans established themselves. This book is an important and valuable work that sheds light on a significant, and often overlooked, part of northern Europe's past.



"Biruté" society presenting a historic play "Destruction of the Kaunas castle in 1362". Tilžė, Lithuania Minor, 1895.



Buntinas family members in front of their farmstead near Klaipėda, circa 1916. From the collection of Ramūnas Buntinas, now of Chicago. Standing on the left are Ramūnas grandparents, one of their sons is on horseback.

The Concise Encyclopaedia of Lithuania Minor
is on sale at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture Gift Shop.
To order, please give us a call at 773-582-6500.