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Putting Lithuania on the map in imperial Russia

Vytautas Petronis, *Constructing Lithuania: ethnic mapping in tsarist Russia, ca. 1800–1914*, Stockholm studies in history 91, Stockholm: Acta universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2007. 302 pp. (Sammanfattning på engelska, titel saknas.)

Vytautas Petronis's dissertation, recently defended at Södertörns högskola, is a significant and novel discussion of the place of the Lithuanian ethnicity within the context of imperial Russia. To quote the author, the main task he set himself here was the "conceptualization of Lithuanian ethnic space on Russian imperial maps" (p. 18). In other words, Petronis's work is vitally concerned with how Russian science (in particular ethnography, geography, and cartography) ordered and spatially "fixed" Lithuanians both on paper (on maps) and as part of constructing a mental image of the Russian Empire. As Petronis convincingly shows, these data and images were then taken up by the Lithuanian national movement for aims quite different from those of the imperial Russian government. One may say that this dissertation contributes to our understanding of Lithuanian and Russian history, but also more broadly to our conceptions of how "knowledge" is ordered and utilized by "power". This dissertation is primarily a work of history but combines an interest in a variety of fields (and should be of interest to specialists in those areas): ethnography (e.g., who were the Lithuanians? What differentiated Lithuanians from their neighbors and what characteristics were shared by all member of the Lithuanian ethnicity?), cartography (how do maps reflect and distort reality? How was ethnicity represented on maps and what pitfalls can their be in these representations?), geography (along the lines of German historian Karl Schlögel's "spatial turn"), political history (how were Lithuanians administered and ruled by St. Petersburg?), and Lithuanian national history (the construction of the Lithuanian nationality and its location in space).

The dissertation's focus is quite broad, both chronologically and geographically. While its title mentions Lithuania alone, this work also shows how Russian administrators, ethnographers, and cartographers described and "positioned" Belarusians and Ukrainians. The time frame reaches back to the mid-eighteenth century with Catherine II's provincial reforms, but the main story begins with the first two partitions of Poland (especially the second) during which these lands – later known as the "Western provinces" – became part of the Russian Empire.

The dissertation operates on at least two levels. On the first, macro, level this is the story of how the Russian Empire – both officials and semi-private organizations like the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and Vilna Archeological Commission – tried to "make sense" of the ethnically-mixed territory that had

been annexed into the Russian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century. They did this by gathering information, translating that data into maps, and making arguments about the ethnographic data that they had collected. On the "micro" level the story here concentrates on the Lithuanian example, considering such questions as how Lithuanians were defined, counted, and fixed in spatial terms within the Russian Empire. Further, the dissertation provides information on how Lithuanian self-image as a nation was influenced by the data collected and maps created by these agents of the Russian Empire.

The source base used by the author is broad and appropriate for the questions investigated here. While the bulk of the dissertation is based on published sources, many of these are rare and hard-to-obtain maps and atlases. The bibliography of secondary sources includes titles in a half-dozen languages dealing with cartography, national policy in Russia, policies of russification, and works on the various national groups that figure here: in particular Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians. There are some surprising omissions, however: one would have expected to find used here the works of the German historian Karl Schlögel on the "spatial turn" in history and Timothy Snyder's *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (2003). On the whole, however, recent historiography is appropriately used and cited. These published works are admirably supplemented by two main sets of archival sources: the Archive of the Russian Geographical Society in St. Petersburg and the North-western section of this organization, housed at the Vilnius University manuscript division. Petronis's use of these archival files allows him to delve deeper into the specific organizational and methodological issues that confronted the first ethnographers who embarked upon study of this region, as well as their motivations and prejudices.

The dissertation's first chapter follows the traditional pattern of providing a methodological introduction. Here Petronis also explains the chronological and topical limits of this thesis. He points out correctly that this is not a work specifically on Lithuanian or Russian nationalism, though indirectly it may help in understanding the development of those phenomena. While recent authors have tended to stress language and vaguely-defined "ethnicity" (not to mention "imagined communities" and "invention of tradition") in their works on nationality, Petronis wants to stress the connection (not inevitable but common) between nationality and territory. Here he draws on recent works by the Finnish scholar Jouni Häkli as well as more familiar scholarship by Anthony D. Smith, Charles Tilly, Aleksei Miller, and others. Petronis's introduction also discusses the theory and methodology of cartography, describing in terms understandable to the layman the basic elements of how maps are made and how specifically ethnographic maps consists (like other "thematic maps") of a "base map" and "thematic overlay" (p. 29). Taking this analysis a step further, Petronis considers how maps can represent a biased and even "propagandistic" view of the world.

The first substantive chapter looks at the development of administrative divisions in the so-called Western Provinces (territory taken by the Russian Empire during the first two partitions of Poland) from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Petronis uses Leonid Gorizontov's concept of an "Empire of Regions" to stress the diversity of administration and even legal norms in this territory compared with, say, the Baltic provinces (Estland, Kurland, Livland) or central Russia while at the same time noting the Russian Empire's "urge to centralize". Included in this chapter are not only administrative reforms and the setting down of provincial boundaries, but also discussions of plans for a more sweeping reform (usually in a centralizing direction) by Mikhail Speranskii, Nikolai Novosiltsev, and the Decembrists. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Vilna Educational District (under Polish domination, 1803–1825) and efforts to survey the Northwest provinces during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855). In this chapter Lithuanians do not appear *per se*: the purpose here is to set the political-administrative stage for further discussion.

Chapter three proceeds to consider the efforts of Russian scholars (in particular ethnographers and geographers) to gather data and map the diverse ethnicities of the Western provinces. In particular Petronis concentrates on the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (IRGS), set up in 1845 to gather geographic and ethnographic information about the peoples inhabiting the Russian Empire. The IRGS definitely deserves more study as a locus of information-gathering about the borderlands of the empire (it was also active in the Caucasus and elsewhere) and Petronis's work provides both a good introduction to the organization, its aims and methods, and its role in pushing (or at least supporting) a centralizing and at least implicitly russifying imperial agenda. In the Western provinces the IRGS supported, as Petronis details, the ethnographic expeditions of Aleksandr Chiuzhbinskii (mainly concentrating on the Southwestern Ukrainian provinces), Ivan Sprogis, Iulii Kuznetsov (Kalējs), Eduard Wolter (Vol'ter; Wolteris), and (primarily in the Belarusian area) Sergei Maksimov. As will be noticed, the discussion here is not exclusively about ethnographic expeditions investigating Lithuanians: Belarusians and Ukrainians receive considerable attention. The inclusion of the Belarusians does make sense in view of their close proximity with Lithuanians; the inclusion of the Ukrainians seems less justified. However, Petronis's basic point is to emphasize how Russian scholars worked together (directly or indirectly) with tsarist authorities to investigate and "map out" non-Russians in the Western provinces. In this sense, the inclusion of Belarusians and Ukrainians is both justified and adds to the work's overall perspective.

In chapter four we pass from the gathering of ethnographic data to the actual "presentations of the Lithuanians on [...] Ethnographical Maps". At first glance it may appear surprising that Petronis begins with Pavel Joseph Šafárik's *Slovanský Zemlěvid* (1842). Šafárik was, after all, neither Russian nor directly involved in

imagining Russian imperial space. But, as Petronis makes clear, Šafárik's famous map, the first to attempt the "Slavic world" as a whole, had an important impact in Russia as well as elsewhere. As the only major Slavic state, the Russian Empire *ipso facto* played a central role in the imaginings of panslavs like Šafárik, even if the tsarist government remained on the whole cool toward panslavic enthusiasms. More to the point, Šafárik was a serious scholar who attempted to present – as much as possible – a map based on the latest information available and according to modern scientific methods. Lithuanians, to be sure, are not Slavs, but they also found their place on Šafárik's map which then became the point of departure for other ethnographic maps discussed in this chapter. The three main maps/atlas discussed here are those of Peter Koeppen (1851), Roderic von Erckert (1863), and Aleksandr F. Rittikh (1875). In all cases Petronis carefully analyses the complex interplay between ideology (all of these men, despite their non-Russian surnames, were dedicated to the Russian imperial project) and scholarship. The case of Erckert's ethnographic atlas is particularly telling: Petronis demonstrates how differences in the Russian and French versions of this atlas (both published in the year of the Polish "January Insurrection", 1863) demonstrate the scholar's bias. In the Russian publication, Erckert downplayed Polish settlements in the Northwest provinces to show the region's fundamentally "Russian" (for us, of course, Belarusian) character while the French translation showed extensive Polish settlement there, arguing that the presence of these disloyal Poles (usually in "ethnic islands" surrounded by Belarusian or Lithuanian peasants) justified strict policies from the central government to protect the "original Russian" population. It must be noted that in neither case did Erckert have to falsify out of the whole cloth: the ethnic situation in this region is complex enough to allow such "diverging interpretations" though of course in this case the "interpretations" were carefully formulated to buttress specific political arguments.

In the dissertation's last substantive chapter Petronis considers the "construction" of the "Lithuanian national territory", mainly in the scant decade between the 1905 revolution and the outbreak of World War I. Interestingly, among the first modern cartographic depictions of Lithuania in the Lithuanian language were works authored not by geographers or cartographers but by engineers. The first of these was by Petras Vileišis, *A Short Geography or Description of the Earth* (1898), basically a translation into Lithuanian of other works with expanded coverage of the Lithuanian ethnographic area. The second of these pioneering works by engineers was the first "large format Lithuanian map" which appeared in St. Petersburg in 1900, prepared by Antanas Maciejauskas. Interestingly, the map (published in 2 000 copies) could be sold legally in the Russian capital but could not be offered for sale in the Western provinces. It was not until after the abolition of the prohibition on publishing Lithuanian in Latin letters (1904), however, that the first Lithuanian-language geography textbooks appeared. The first of these

was also authored by Maciejauskas (1905) and covered both Latvian and Lithuanian lands. In the same year Jadvyga Juškytė's *Short Readings for Children* appeared. While this was not strictly speaking a geography book it included readings on "our fatherland" and a map of ethnographic Lithuanian territory (reproduced here on p. 249). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Juozas Gabrys-Paršaitis's *Textbook on Geography* (1910). Taken together, the analysis of these earliest attempts to describe the place of Lithuanians in geography represent a significant contribution to our understanding of the development of Lithuanian national identity and Lithuanian nationalism.

As with any work of scholarship, one may discern various weaknesses in this dissertation. For example, the first (methodological) chapter is, in a sense, detached from the rest of the work: the methodologies described here are not in fact pursued in subsequent chapters' analysis. One may also question Petronis's rather stereotyped portrayal of russification as a quite systematic attempt to turn Poles and Lithuanians into Russians, a view generally discarded (or at least nuanced) in recent historiography. In his effort to depict the growing importance of Russian policies of centralization (something no one, I think, would deny), Petronis at times neglects to place these policies – which were on the whole rather uncoordinated and ineffective – in proper perspective. All of these cases, however, are in great part a matter of interpretation and in no case did the author commit any serious errors of fact or interpretation.

To sum up, Vytautas Petronis's *Constructing Lithuania* is a pioneering study of how geography and cartography were used to define, count, and fix Lithuanians during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Russian Empire. It provides little-known information about Lithuanian ethnic mapping and uses an interdisciplinary (geography, ethnography, history) approach that will make it a useful work for scholars in different fields. This work is particularly recommended for those interested in nationality in the Russian Empire, in Lithuanian history, and in the intersection of ethnography, geography, and ethnicity.

Theodore R. Weeks*

* Faculty opponent