

## BOOK REVIEWS

Zenonas Norkus. *Nepasiskelbusioji imperija. Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštija lyginamosios istorinės imperijų sociologijos požiūriu* [The Undeclared Empire. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the Perspective of Comparative Historical Sociology for Empire Difference]. Vilnius: Aidai, 2009. Pp. 473. ISBN 978-9955-656-73-9

A professor of sociology and philosophy of the University of Vilnius, who also publishes on historiographic subjects, has written a book which might already be identified as one of the most significant historical studies of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Lithuania. It is perhaps symbolic that it appeared at the close of the 'millennium of Lithuania' year as a final touch to a truly impressive series of historical publications marking the anniversary.<sup>1</sup>

As may be seen from the introductory remarks, the author was prompted to write such a book by new relevance given to the notion and conception of 'empire' in politics and the academic sphere as well as the 'renaissance' of the GDL as an historiographic problem and an object of philosophy of history after the collapse of the Soviet Union (cf. p. 7 ff.). In academic terms the author perceives his task as a contribution to the field of historical-sociological comparative studies, namely to comparative studies of empires (p. 9). In addition, the author wanted his book to inspire a new 'discussion about the history of the GDL', by new subjects and questions reviving 'the memory of the GDL in our culture' (p. 18).

The book comprises three ample sections and is impressive in its scope, knowledge of the multilingual and multifaceted literature on the subject and consistency in use of the concepts. The book would have not seen the light of day without the analysis of modern social and political theories, but the analysis would have remained empty without a deeper knowledge of the broad historical materials. Naturally, the author mostly uses the secondary literature on the subject, but chooses it perceptively, consistently and competently. The first section of the book places the history of Lithuania into two closely-connected discourses, i.e. the old *translatio imperii* reminiscent of the Middle Ages and the modern discourse of imperiology. The second section might be perceived as a methodological introduction into comparative

<sup>1</sup> Z. Norkus, *Istorika* (Vilnius, 1996).

studies of empires. And finally, the third section moves to the core issue of the study, i.e. did the empire of the GDL exist or not after all? If so, what was it like, when was it and whose was it?

The striking integrity of the book is created by the vast arsenal of Norkus' knowledge of various academic fields such as philosophy, logic (a theory of defining concepts), sociology, political science, economics, and the history of the wider world as well as of Lithuania, and his ability to present the theoretical and historical materials in a clear and systemic manner. Therefore, individual sections of the book may serve as good background material for studies of one or another subject of history, sociology or political science. It is a valuable by-product of the monograph of its own accord (a good example of such text presentation may be a survey of the history of the *translatio imperii* and the 'empire' notion, pp. 23–48). However, the first two sections of the book are actually the fundamental introduction leading towards the answer to the core question of the book. Perfectly understanding that the answer depends on the definition of the empire, in the second section of his book Norkus introduces a conceptual and historiographic survey of the 'empire' notion. With the initial analytical chapter about the nature of term coinages in social and humanitarian sciences (the category of 'fundamentally disputed concepts'), the author substantiates his further actions beforehand. In the following chapters he introduces such concepts and notions (an inter-polity system, society, dominion, hegemony, world economy, etc.) which will be necessary in discussing the issue of an imperial nature of the GDL. Then, on p. 171 we find a definition of empire: an empire (1) is a sovereign polity, (2) in its size is significantly larger than other polities of the same region or epoch and has at least three out of the following four characteristics – (3) pursues vast territorial expansion, (4) enjoys hegemony in the inter-state system or has such an aim, (5) is ethnically and culturally heterogeneous and has a politically dominating ethno cultural minority, (6) its territory can be divided into the dominating metropolis and the subjected periphery. In the very beginning of the main section (p. 207) Norkus claims that in the fourteenth – fifteenth century history of the GDL he has actually found all the above imperial characteristics.

The first two mandatory characteristics of an empire (a political autonomy and the size of its territory) do not present greater difficulties to the author. He also earnestly discusses the aspects that may seem doubtful to a critic, i.e. the relations with Poland after entering into a personal/dynasty-based union and the value of the territory as the underlying parameter in the scarcely-populated areas. Not contented with the common thesis about the greatest state of Europe of that period, Norkus describes the issue of its territorial growth in terms of eliometrics (new economic history) and even calculates the dates for its emergence, maturity and decline (the period of the Gediminids, the rule of Algirdas and the Union of Lublin respectively, Chapter 3.7). The size of the territory consistently leads to another charac-

teristic of the empire, namely the territorial expansion. Then the expansion is followed by the fourth characteristic, i.e. a political hegemony where the first problems of a more serious nature appear.

Discussing the aims and achievements of the GDL hegemony (Chapter 3.2), Norkus introduces a field which is highly productive from an heuristic perspective as he claims that in the thirteenth – fifteenth centuries Lithuania simultaneously belonged to two different inter-polity systems (also cf. p. 135 ff.), i.e. to the Eastern and to the Western one. Such concepts of the contemporary theory of international relations enable a clearer description and perception of a phenomenon already known to historians: a tremendous gap between the Western and the Central Eastern Europe on one side and the Eastern Europe on another. The two regions did not have more intense relations and in general lacked knowledge about each other (it is sufficient to mention that the first more or less reliable Western source of information about Muscovy was Sigismund von Herberstein's description of his journey there in the sixteenth century). This remark concerning the nearly absolute mutual lack of interest is one more strong argument denying the myth developed in the Soviet historiography and still living in the historical memory of many nations (including Lithuanians) about the Catholic threat of the West to the 'peaceful and brotherly' Slavic and Baltic nations. However, based on such assumptions Norkus draws much deeper conclusions. He turns the theory tentatively worded by Edvardas Gudavičius (in fact following the imperial logic) regarding the diarchy into the principle of the universal (foreign) policy of the Lithuanian rulers which was determined by real interests in the Western and Eastern 'front' (p. 234). It is not the place to discuss the problems of the diarchy theory (only in the period of Algirdas and Kęstutis it is more or less substantiated by sources). Thus, let us analyze the theory of two directions followed by the hegemonic expansion.

With a view towards the West, the author postulates a 'pan-Baltic' policy (expansion into the former territory of the Baltic tribes) existence of which in the fourteenth – fifteenth centuries is being proven by two highly doubtful cases (pp. 229–230). Between those two only the claims of Vytautas to 'his patrimonial estate' in Prussia expressed in a dispute with the Teutonic Order may be considered as a declaration of expansion goals, though the origin of this idea is obscure. It is highly likely that with his intelligent clerks being mostly from Poland where similar demands to the Order had been made dozens of years ago greatly contributed to creation of such idea. It is more important to notice that the GDL before and after the Battle of Grunwald (Žalgiris) never attempted to implement the 'Baltic' policy, i.e. to establish itself in the lands of 'related' Baltic tribes. Moreover, there are no grounds for a claim that such relatedness was understood or used as a political instrument. In the fifteenth century politicians of the post-Vytautas era of the GDL did not forget the 'pan-Baltic project' as

Norkus claims. On the contrary, they continued representing the principle established as early as the fourteenth century regarding primacy of gaining strong positions in the East. Therefore, to refer to the Teutonic Order as 'the principal ideological enemy of Lithuania's existence as a state' (p. 229) sounds as anachronistic as explaining the Lithuanian expansion into the East by memories of historical Baltic regions or even attempts to 'liberate' the allegedly surviving old Baltic autochthons from Russians and Tartars (the author duly criticizes this version). As for the multi-faceted role of the Order in the history of Lithuania, it should be noted that the formation of the Lithuanian state as such was to some extent the result of the crusades epoch marked by a sudden approximation of civilization,<sup>2</sup> and the declaration of the kingdom embodying this early statehood in the era of Mindaugas cannot be imagined without the support of the Livonian Order. In fact, apparently there are no serious grounds for finding hegemonic goals in the West pursued by the GDL policy and campaigns to Prussia and Livonia should be considered either merely as pillage (before the Order gained strong positions in those areas or soon after that) or as a manifestation of the *reysen* (crusade raids) in the fourteenth century. Norkus is quite well aware of this fact and admits that 'Lithuania (perhaps with an exception of the last decade of Vytautas' rule) has never been a super-state in that inter-polity system to which its Western neighbours belonged. It became a great state only in the East where it was a member of another inter-polity system' (p. 231). Although the definition of the empire developed by Norkus allows for this option of dividing the GDL into two parts as an empire, it is still not very convincing.

Less focus on the western policy of the GDL (though the nucleus of the state was closer to its western borders and it was in that area where the influences significant to the composition of the state and society were moving) determines the fact that the issue of the union with Poland and its possible effect on the 'imperial nature' of the GDL is actually marginalized. The historians emphasize the independence of the domestic and foreign policy of the GDL which entitles Norkus almost to disregard the factor of Poland. Yet in this taxonomy it should be considered. And not only because the grand dukes of Lithuania officially (which is not the same as 'formally' though this word is often used in the text) were vassals of the king of Poland. Despite two brief episodes (the Treaty of Salynas and a few years of vitrigaila's rule), the rulers of Lithuania were never entering into international treaties (e.g. with the Order) separately from Poland

<sup>2</sup> R. Petrauskas, 'Vėlyvųjų viduramžių Europa ir Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės visuomenės ir kultūros raida XIV–XVI amžiuje', *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, vol. 23 (2009), pp. 69–84. Also cf. a collection of articles *Lietuvos valstybės susikūrimas europiniame kontekste*, ed. R. Petrauskas (Vilnius, 2008).

and in the treaties made the Lithuanian rulers were always mentioned second. In the relationship with Poland from the very beginning of the union the main task of the ruling elite of the GDL was to identify and establish forms of political sovereignty which was evidenced by Vytautas' coronation and later political plans. In general when the dynasty branch of Jogailaičiai came to the throne of the GDL after the death of Vytautas and his first heirs, the conditions (unexploited as we know) to design an empire appeared elsewhere (Poland, Hungary, Bohemia) and the GDL in this respect played only a supporting role though it remained important as a patrimonial place of the dynasty.

The true imperial GDL for the author was the state expanding to the east and the south with its world of Russian Orthodox lands and Tartar steppes. The book describes such world really globally and impeccably in terms of historiography. It is presented as going beyond the dimensions unseen at least in Lithuanian historiography, i.e. from Black Ruthenia, Muscovy and Byzantium to Iran and Egypt (p. 234 ff.). What was the scope of the plans of Lithuania to become hegemony in that 'inter-polity system'? To explain that Norkus again creatively adapts a theory borrowed from social sciences and quite reasonably divides the Lithuanian imperialism into a process prompted by 'pericentric' factors (when empires develop not as a result of purposeful political actions but as a consequence of certain accidental conditions) and a strongly directed imperial policy. In the researcher's opinion in case of Lithuania the transition from the first stage to the second occurred during the rule of Algirdas and Kęstutis (pp. 241–242, cf. the theory on p. 187). On the one hand, the campaigns of Algirdas and Vytautas against Muscovy and the Tartars seem to presuppose that such hegemonic imperial claims to dominate in the region clearly existed. On the other hand, all these questions in historiography to which Norkus is forced to refer are also full of ideological content and historic figures are often unjustly attributed plans and strategies with actually no reliable information. The alleged claims of Algirdas regarding Prussia and all Rus' are evidenced by a single source (of the Order) the author of which was clearly unconcerned with depicting the unsubstantiated claims of the Lithuanian ruler (reliability of the information from chronicles has always been problematic as Norkus found out in the case of the 'universal plans' of Vytautas referred to in the Russian chronicles, p. 251). Furthermore, on closer examination the later glorified far-reaching expeditions of Algirdas and Vytautas against the Tartars and Muscovy may seem as a solution of certain quite specific tasks: to protect the Tver' Region ruled by the father-in-law and the newly occupied Kiev. Olena Rusina's studies of Kiev during the period of Algirdas and remarks of S.C. Rowell concerning Vytautas'

crusades against Tartars would rather indicate<sup>3</sup> that it was not a well-defined policy (implementation of imperial aims), but merely a solution of short-term tactical tasks. The roles of 'balance keepers' or 'arbitrators' (p. 245 ff.) in the regional policy have been attributed to the Lithuanian rulers mostly by historians contemplating the past in terms of the contemporary policy, ignoring the actual possibilities available to Algirdas or Vytautas (the administrative potential, intelligence service, communications, etc.) to grasp and pursue such policy. And finally the conclusion concerning readiness of the Lithuanian rulers for the Orthodox baptism 'in exchange for the control over the entire territory of Rus' is nothing more than a historiographic construct unsupported by historical sources. Therefore, the fourth characteristic of an empire (hegemony in the inter-polity system) in case of the GDL remains problematic. Yet, as has been mentioned above, the flexible definition rightly constructed by Norkus allows abandoning one imperial characteristic. Thus, let us briefly survey the remaining two characteristics to finally assess the entire carefully constructed imperial building.

The latter two characteristics are perhaps least problematic. The old state of Lithuania obviously at least from the verge of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was ethnically and culturally heterogeneous and had a politically dominating ethno-cultural minority (the family of the grand duke and the associated noble elite of Lithuanian origin). Norkus describes complex ethnic-political processes in the GDL (Chapter 3.3.) consistently and discredits theories still surfacing in various forms regarding the GDL as a (quantitatively dominating) Slavic state. Again the analogies employed by Norkus from the history of the world enable us to understand this phenomenon better. For instance, the services of Chinese chroniclers used in the Mongol Empire (p. 258) remind us of the functions of Russian chroniclers in the environment of illiterate rulers of the GDL. Such instructive examples are abundant in the book. Therefore, we can logically draw a further conclusion that the territory of the GDL was clearly divided into a dominating metropolis (Vilnius and Trakai Duchies) and the subjected periphery (Russian lands, Chapter 3.4). Elaborating the insights of Edvardas Gudavičius regarding the functional political system developed by the Gediminids, Norkus reasonably questions the federal structure of the GDL lands noting that the ratio between the nucleus and the periphery observed in the GDL was much more typical of empires. However, certain reservations are to be made here as well. The state organization of the GDL hardly coincides with the strict dichotomy of empires and federations applied to classification of the contemporary states. In terms of its organization it is

<sup>3</sup> O. Rusina, *Studii e istorini Kieva ta kiivskoi zemli* (Kiev, 2005); S.C. Rowell, 'Naujiejį kryžiaus žygiuotojai: LDK ir Bizantijos santykiai XIV–XV a. sandūroje. Ar Vytautas Didysis buvo Lietuvos kryžiaus žygių prieš turkus bei totorius pradininkas?', *Kryžiaus karų epocha Baltijos regiono tautų istorinėje savimonėje*, ed. R. R. Trimoničė and R. Jurgaitis (Šiauliai, 2007), pp.181–205.

certainly not a federation. Does that make it an empire then? The author's comparison with the type of imperial indirect governing of Britain is interesting and in many cases well-grounded (e.g. application of the untouched 'old times' principle, retaining of the local authorities' forms and elites), but they also have significant differences, namely a certain criss-cross of feudal and dynasty-based governance is characteristic of the GDL along with a gradual internal integration of lands. It was that feudal mechanism of integration which might have determined a different outcome in the GDL history, i.e. unlike a number of other empires, the GDL did not collapse during the period of internal conflicts and secured loyalty of the key social groups. In terms of the political system it is more correct to define the GDL as a unique political organization of the Middle Ages distinguished by the following: underdeveloped political-administrative structures, the manner of governance based on personal relations among representatives of a narrow elite, a complicated and dynamic ratio between the centre and periphery.<sup>4</sup> It became an empire (or a state similar to an empire) only when favourable conditions allowed it and within a very short time, without a pre-conceived plan and greatly expanding to the east and south.

Irrespective of all reservations, it might be claimed that Norkus has succeeded in his task and has proven the imperial nature of the GDL according to his definition (based on the broad literature on modern imperiology). In fact he even supplements the definition indicating that like the other most distinct empires, the GDL continued its existence after its 'demise' (p. 292), surviving to these days both in the outlines of geographic and political borders, and in the historic memory of people as a relevant part of identity.

However, one problem needs separate attention. Although Norkus is opposing identification of the super-state and the empire, the reader is under the impression that from time to time such identification occurs inevitably. But do we receive any added-value in terms of knowledge from renaming large states as empires? (the empire of William the Conqueror, the Angevin empire, the Pyrenees empires) (pp. 34–35 ff.)?<sup>5</sup> The definition of empire provided in advance seems to solve the contradiction. Yet the definition in question in my opinion lacks one significant component, namely imperial self-consciousness, imperial ideology or at least manifestations of imperial self-awareness (though Norkus insightfully guesses this potential reproach, p. 297). That is not merely an issue of the emperor's title and a specific

<sup>4</sup> More on the subject see R. Petrauskas, 'Die Staatsstrukturen des frühen Grossfürstentums Litauen', *Litauisches Kulturinstitut. Jahrestagung 2003* (Lampenheim, 2004), pp. 13–26.

<sup>5</sup> It seems that the concept of an empire is used in this sense by S.C. Rowell (*Lithuania ascending. A pagan empire within east-central Europe 1295–1345* (Cambridge, 1994) and some other historians.

idea of the empire as Norkus is trying to circumvent this discussion. The status of an empire (as well as that of a kingdom) has always lain in the intersection of domestic and foreign policies. To put it differently, only a successful international policy and international recognition could determine certain (expansionist, organizational, etc.) achievements of the domestic policy.

From the very beginning disassociating himself from the search of the 'imperial self-consciousness' and already in the title referring to the GDL as the 'undeclared empire' Norkus still does not escape a hermeneutic temptation to trace such self-consciousness. The grounds for such search are provided by one letter of Algirdas (where he was titled as 'basileus') and one archaeological find (the problematic reading of the text in that find will not be analyzed here). The title used in the rulers' documents is in fact methodologically considered a significant criterion describing the concept and political claims of the leaders. However, in the case of the fourteenth-century GDL a few reservations must be made. The titles of the GDL ruler were used very dynamically until the period of Vytautas and they were not well-established (except for the short period of Mindaugas' kingdom), and the Lithuanian rulers referred to themselves as kings or dukes and Algirdas in the said instance used a 'basileus' title typical of the Greek written documents of Byzantium. Yet the use of this title can be hardly interpreted as an attempt to rank himself equally to the emperor of Byzantium and a claim to the rule of entire Rus' (pp. 31–32). The context of the letter (Algirdas' request) indicates that such claim would be difficult to explain diplomatically. The writers of the Greek letter must have used the title known to them which emphasized sovereignty of the ruler. Considering the nature of documentation of that period (written documents in Lithuania were used only sporadically and only in relations with foreign countries), it is not clear where and under what circumstances the letter was composed and in any case it cannot be stated that it was done by Algirdas' clerks (p. 33). This excursus reveals what difficulties of interpretation await the researchers of the epoch which has left few sources, but let us leave this 'hermeneutic' area (which comes only secondary in the study in question) and return to the description of the empire.

At first let us take a look how the persons who called themselves emperors and tried to pursue imperial policies perceived Lithuania of their times and how the rulers of the medieval GDL perceived their power. Such perception obviously was not the same and changed in time, but a certain association with the imperial policy might be noted. One of the last emperors pursuing the universal policy, Louis the Bavarian, Holy Roman Emperor, already in the period of the Gediminids granted Lithuania as an object to the Teutonic Order and another (even more famous) emperor, who came to the throne in the period of Algirdas, namely Charles IV, wanted to baptize it and incorporate into his imperial bloc. Patriarchs of Constantinople used to appoint metropolitans for Lithuania without even discussing the nominees. Furthermore, the GDL rulers and its political elite had never expressed



imperial claims. We may note (with great reservations) a certain imitation of Byzantine style at the close of Algirdas' rule, but that does not tell us anything about having or developing an imperial vision.

The aspect of self-consciousness in historical research is highly significant. The cases of various countries and epochs, from Spain to England when one or another king proclaimed himself an emperor as listed by Norkus reveal one important characteristic of politics. The imperial ideology implied a certain intellectual tradition of writings which could have referred to the sovereignty theory of the time, various precedents and even historic data (in this case it is not important whether it was reliable or fictional). Such intellectual tradition did not exist in the GDL before the era of Vytautas and Jogaila. The intellectual tradition in the full sense of the word was born on the cusp of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries along with the theory that Lithuanians had originated from Romans and some new political agendas (the revival of the idea of the Lithuanian kingdom, codification of a separate law and annexation of Livonia).

Therefore, the GDL was an empire undeclared and unrecognized as well as unidentified. In fact, reading the book by Norkus one is tempted to name it also an 'unfinished empire'. Apparently the expansion to Livonia and an aim to gain strong positions at the Baltic Sea was not the last (p. 230), but rather the first (and naturally the last as well) manifestation of the conscious imperial expansion which suited well the ideas of the GDL political elite in the first half of the sixteenth century (sovereignty in a union with Poland, regaining the 'borders of the Vytautas' era', etc.). The 'unrealized' idea of the imperial mission of the GDL as well as the related issues (one of the key issues was failure to maintain autonomy of Novgorod for which Norkus criticizes the then political leaders of Lithuania) might be explored only from the angle of an alternative history. Such post-historical interpretation is feasible and Norkus is representing it perfectly well. However, the historian-medievalist cannot demand responsibility from historic figures who were not even aware of the mission ('containing Russia' etc.) attributed to them. Naturally, the unification of Orthodox lands under the sceptre of grand dukes of Moscow was not an inevitable and historically necessary process as the national contemporary Russian historiography still maintains, but we cannot blame historic figures for what they did not anticipate to happen after a few hundred years. Missions originate from the ideology and articulation of the latter in the GDL began approximately only from the early sixteenth century.

However, such remarks and reservations from the workshop of the medievalist do not change the assessment noted in the beginning of the review. The history of Lithuania has never before been so skilfully analyzed in the broad framework of the history of the world (not only of Europe). More importantly the author allows his reader to contemplate the history of Lithuania alternatively. From time to time he offers interesting specific models of an alternative historical development, for instance, discussing the unrealized potential of Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia ('Ukraine') to turn

into an empire (p. 237). Yet here referring to the possibility of contemplating the history of Lithuania alternatively, I mean a more general notion. The book enables us to look at the history of the GDL high from above in terms of geography and history. Norkus with an electronic planimeter travelled across the entire area of the GDL 'from sea to sea' providing an independent image of the GDL territory dynamics and 'expanding' (in fact it seems quite reliably) the GDL territory in the period of its greatest expansion, i.e. under the rule of Vytautas, up to an area of a nice million square kilometres (p. 305 ff.). Such calculations somehow remind me of the GDL population research conducted by Henryk Łowmiański<sup>6</sup> and along with the very consistent epilogue wonderfully crowns the broad study of Norkus.

One of the major advantages of the book is that it has been prompted by an old interest of Norkus, i.e. comparative historical sociology. The notion of an empire (as well as other constructivist notions such as feudalism) is particularly convenient for a comparativist attempting to highlight structural similarities and differences of societies and states distant in time and space (cf. p. 79). The present review is intended to reveal the fact that such access is valuable and useful for historians. However, this methodological strategy as any other directed to a broad historic comparison has its limits. It helps us to see the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the perspective of the history of the world, to recognize the true or alleged 'imperial nature' of this political formation (a polity) in its light and opens new possibilities for interpretation of its structure, yet it does not and cannot grant answers about peculiarities of functioning of the GDL state which require specialized research.<sup>7</sup>

This book and the related broader sociological-historical discussion are a new wording of the old dispute between the researchers with the tendency towards typology or individualism ('representatives of hermeneutics'). Such disputes are undoubtedly some of the most interesting episodes in the development of historiography as they both enrich it with new insights and remind us that history may be perceived and told only through the contrast and comparison of unique lives (of people, nations, states and empires).

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<sup>6</sup> H. Łowmiański, *Zaludnienie państwa litewskiego w wieku XVI: Zaludnienie w roku 1528* (Poznań, 1998) (research of 1960).

<sup>7</sup> It is impossible in the present review to dwell deeper on the other claims or concepts of Norkus which are subject to doubts: 'sultan-like patrimonialism' of Vytautas and his heirs (p. 323 ff.), the analysis of the emergence of the Lithuanian state (the thesis supported by the old literature regarding the birth of the state of Lithuania by taking over the Russian state structures is particularly questionable, Chapter 3.8.), etc.