Lithuania

History

Early history

Lithuanians are an Indo-European people belonging to the Baltic group. They are the only branch within the group that managed to create a state entity in premodern times. The Prussians, overrun by the Teutonic Order in the 13th century, became extinct by the 18th century. The Latvians to the north were conquered during the first three decades of the 13th century by the Order of the Brothers of the Sword (this order became a branch of the Teutonic Order in 1237). The Lithuanians, protected by a dense primeval forest and extensive marshland, successfully resisted German pressure. Samogitia (Lithuanian: Žemaitija), lying between Prussia and Livonia, two lands already in the hands of the German Crusading knights, was a particular object of German expansion.

The German threat induced the Lithuanian tribes to unite in the middle of the 13th century under Mindaugas. He and his family were baptized in 1251, and two years later he was accepted into the feudal hierarchy of Europe by being crowned king of Lithuania by authority of Pope Innocent IV. Mindaugas, who had reverted to paganism, and two of his sons were assassinated in 1263. The Lithuanians retained their naturalistic pagan religion until the late 14th century.

Traidenis, ruler from 1270 to 1282, was probably the founder of the dynasty named after Gediminas, who began to rule about 1315. Although Lithuanian expansion to the east and south into the area of modern Belarus and Ukraine had begun after the destruction of the Kiev realm, it was Gediminas who systematically carved out the empire that was historic Lithuania, a wide region inhabited by Lithuanians and East Slavs. As his letters from 1323 indicate, Vilnius was by then the capital. At Gediminas’s death in 1341 or 1342, Lithuania’s frontiers extended across the upper Dvina in the northeast to the Dnieper in the southeast and the Pripet (Prypyat) Marshes in the south. The Lithuanians were not sufficiently numerous for colonization. Control was maintained through undoubted political talent and a spirit of religious tolerance. The ruling Lithuanian warrior caste intermarried extensively with the ruling princely families of the subject East Slav principalities and accepted Orthodoxy.

Gediminas divided his empire among his seven sons. After a brief period of internecine strife, a diarchy of two remained: Algirdas, with his capital in Vilnius, assumed the title of Great Prince and dealt with eastern affairs; Kęstutis, whose capital was the island castle at Trakai, dealt with the threat from the Teutonic Order. Upon his death in 1377, Algirdas left his eldest son, Jogaila, an expanded empire in the east, which after 1362 included Kiev. Relations between Jogaila and his uncle Kęstutis, however, were inimical. In 1381 Kęstutis
drove Jogaila from Vilnius and assumed the title of Great Prince. In the following year fortune changed. Jogaila captured Kęstutis and his eldest son, Vytautas. Kęstutis was imprisoned and killed, but Vytautas escaped and found sanctuary among the Teutonic Order, which hoped to utilize him as its vassal. The German threat had increased significantly. Jogaila had tried to stem the tide in 1382 by granting all of Samogitia up to the Dubysa River to the order. The extended ruling family of Lithuania was split. Those of Jogaila’s brothers who ruled in the East Slav regions of the realm counseled alliance with Moscow, including acceptance of Orthodox Christianity. Those in the core lands of the state favoured an alliance with Poland and acceptance of Roman Christianity.

**Union with Poland**

Jogaila chose the latter course. On Aug. 14, 1385, he concluded an agreement to join his realm with Poland in return for marriage to the 12-year-old Polish queen Jadwiga and assumption of the Polish throne as king. The agreement was effected early in the following year. In 1387 Jogaila formally introduced Roman Christianity among his Lithuanian-speaking subjects. Newly baptized nobles were granted extensive privileges. Their status was officially patterned on the feudal social structure prevalent in Western Christendom. In 1392 a reconciliation took place between Jogaila and Vytautas, who returned as ruler of Lithuania. The baptism of the Lithuanians removed the basis for the existence of the Teutonic Order, which had officially been founded to defend Christianity. Its stature was considerably reduced after a defeat on July 15, 1410, at Grünwald (Tannenberg) at the hands of a joint Polish-Lithuanian army. The battle signaled a decisive ebb of the German threat.

The Lithuanian state reached its apogee during the rule of Vytautas, called the Great, who died in 1430. The realm extended from the Baltic Sea south to the shores of the Black Sea and east almost to Mozhaisk, some 100 miles west of Moscow. The Teutonic Order was no longer menacing, but a new threat from the east appeared. In 1480 Ivan III, Grand Prince of Moscow, assumed the title of sovereign of all the Russes. In effect he laid claim to all the lands of the old Kievan state. Most of these, including Kiev itself, were part of the Lithuanian realm.

The struggle with Moscow continued over the next two centuries. Until 1569 the union of Lithuania and Poland remained a loose alliance by virtue of a common ruler. On July 1, 1569, a common Polish-Lithuanian parliament meeting in Lublin transformed the loose personal union of the two states into a Commonwealth of Two Peoples. While Poland and Lithuania would thereafter elect a joint sovereign and have a common parliament, the basic dual state structure was retained. Each continued to be administered separately and had its own law codes and armed forces. The joint commonwealth, however, provided an impetus for cultural Polonization of the Lithuanian nobility. By the end of the 17th century it had virtually become indistinguishable from its Polish counterpart. The peasantry, however, retained the old language.

**Russian rule**
During the 18th century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth declined as a political power. Attempts at reform triggered foreign intervention. Following three partitions, the old state ceased to exist. During the first two partitions, in 1772 and 1793, Lithuania lost only lands inhabited by East Slavs. The Third Partition (1795) resulted in a division of the land inhabited by ethnic Lithuanians. The bulk of it went to Russia. However, lands southwest of the Nemunas River were annexed by the Kingdom of Prussia. This region was incorporated in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw established by Napoleon in 1807. In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, the duchy became the Kingdom of Poland and was placed under Russian rule, although as a separate political entity. As a result, this region of Lithuania retained the separate administrative and judicial system introduced under French rule. These changes, including the abolition of serfdom, were significant and made the region distinct from the rest of the Lithuanian lands.

The uprisings of 1830–31 and 1863 in Poland found resonance in the Lithuanian lands. The suppression was particularly harsh after the second revolt. Both insurrections were followed by waves of Russification. The tsarist government treated the Northwest Region—as historic Lithuania, apart from the southeastern lands, was called after 1832—as an integral part of Russia. In 1832 the University of Vilnius, founded in 1579, was closed. In 1840 the Lithuanian legal code, which dated back to the 16th century, was abolished. After the revolt of 1863 the policy of Russification was extended to all areas of public life. Russian was the only language sanctioned for public use, including education. Books and magazines in the Lithuanian language could be printed only in the Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet. Such cultural imperialism triggered an indigenous reaction that fueled a national renaissance. An informal system of Lithuanian “schools of the hearth” in the villages was organized. Books in the Cyrillic alphabet were boycotted, while Lithuanian publications in the Latin script, printed mostly across the German border in neighbouring East Prussia, were smuggled into the country in large numbers.

A liberalization occurred after the Russian Revolution of 1905. The press prohibition had been annulled in 1904, allowing the appearance of the first Lithuanian daily newspaper, Vilniaus žinios (“Vilnius News”). On Dec. 4–5, 1905, a congress of some 2,000 delegates was held in Vilnius. The congress demanded an autonomous political entity formed from the ethnic Lithuanian lands. Its frontiers were to be formed in accordance with the freely expressed wish of the inhabitants.

**Independence**

By late 1915 Lithuania had come under German military occupation. The goal of the German administration was to create a Lithuanian state that would be a satellite of Germany after the final peace treaty. It authorized a gathering in Vilnius, on Sept. 18–22, 1917, of a congress of 214 Lithuanian delegates. The gathering called for an independent Lithuanian state within ethnic frontiers with Vilnius as its capital, and it elected a 20-member Taryba, or council. On Feb. 16, 1918, the Taryba proclaimed an independent Lithuanian state.

The country remained under German occupation, however. The Germans began to withdraw after the
The newly independent Lithuanian government was faced with an invasion by the Soviets from the east. On Jan. 5, 1919, Vilnius was occupied by the Red Army, and a communist Lithuanian government was installed. The national government was evacuated to Kaunas. By mid-1919 the tide had turned, and the Russians were successfully pushed back east.

**Foreign relations**

Lithuania joined the League of Nations on Sept. 22, 1921, as a recognized member of the international community of states. At that time, its frontiers had not been clearly established, and unresolved border questions characterized Lithuania’s foreign relations throughout the interwar period. The problem of Vilnius and its surrounding region bedeviled Polish-Lithuanian relations. Modern Lithuanian nationalism was based on a fusion of ethnicity and historic identity. Vilnius, the capital of the historic state, was a multietnic city with a heavily Polish cultural veneer. Many in Poland, while not averse to Lithuania’s claim, felt that Lithuania itself had historically become a part of a wider Polish cultural realm and sought to resurrect some form of the common political entity that had existed until 1795. On April 20, 1919, the Polish army took Vilnius from the Red Army and prevented the Lithuanians from reoccupying the city. The Western Allied powers then intervened and set up a line of demarcation between the Polish and Lithuanian forces, leaving Vilnius in Polish hands. In 1920 Lithuania concluded a peace treaty with Soviet Russia according to which Vilnius was recognized as Lithuanian. During the Polish-Russian war of 1920, Vilnius was occupied by the Red Army on July 14. The Lithuanians occupied it in the wake of the Soviet retreat a month later. A Polish-Lithuanian armistice signed in Suvalkai on Sept. 5, 1920, left the city in Lithuanian hands. However, two days later, Polish forces overran the area in dispute and set up a government of Central Lithuania. Vilnius remained under Polish control and was formally annexed in 1922. Lithuania, however, refused to recognize the situation and continued to claim Vilnius and its surroundings.

The status of Klaipėda also presented problems. The city, Lithuania’s sole potential outlet to the sea, had been part of Prussia and had never belonged to the historic Lithuanian state. Although the city itself was largely German in character, the surrounding countryside was largely populated by Lithuanians. The port was occupied by Allied forces after World War I. The Treaty of Versailles left its status undetermined. In January 1923 Lithuania occupied the territory. The following year an agreement was concluded with the Allied powers according to which Klaipėda became an autonomous part of Lithuania. Although Weimar Germany acceded to Lithuanian control of Klaipėda, the question resurfaced after Hitler’s accession to power. Nazi propaganda agitated Germans to rise up against Lithuania.

Border problems figured prominently during the last two years of the independent interwar republic. In the wake of a frontier incident, a Polish ultimatum of March 17, 1938, demanded the establishment of diplomatic relations and normal interstate ties. Lithuania, which had refused to maintain relations with Poland because of the dispute over Vilnius, yielded. On March 21, 1939, Lithuania yielded to another ultimatum and ceded the port to Germany.
Domestic policies

The constitution adopted in 1922 set up a parliamentary democracy. The system proved dysfunctional. Frequent cabinet changes precluded stability. A coup d’état by a group of army officers in December 1926 introduced an authoritarian presidential system with restricted democracy that lasted until the Soviet occupation of 1940. Antanas Smetona, who had been the first president elected by the Taryba in 1918, was reinstated. All political parties were proscribed, except for the ruling Nationalist Union, which supported Smetona. In 1928 a new constitution formalized this state of affairs. On Feb. 12, 1938, a third constitution was adopted, envisaging a gradual return to parliamentary institutions. Although the ban on political parties remained in force, a de facto coalition government representing a wide spectrum of political opinion was appointed. However, by the outbreak of World War II only minimal political change had been achieved.

Independence lost

A secret protocol to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of Aug. 23, 1939, stipulated that, in the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the Baltic region, the northern boundary of Lithuania should represent “the boundary of the sphere of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R.” When World War II began, Germany made a concerted effort to induce Lithuania to join in its attack on Poland, making it an ally and protégé. Lithuania opted for neutrality. A secret protocol to the German-Soviet boundary and friendship treaty of Sept. 28, 1939, revised the earlier agreement and placed most of Lithuania, with the exception of a small portion in the southwest, in the Soviet sphere of influence.

On Oct. 10, 1939, the U.S.S.R. forced Lithuania to accept a treaty of mutual assistance. Lithuania was compelled to admit Soviet garrisons and air bases on its territory. In return Lithuania received Vilnius and surrounding areas that had been occupied by the Red Army during its attack on Poland. The territory formed about one-third of the area that Soviet Russia had recognized as Lithuanian according to the peace treaty of 1920 but that had been under Polish rule since 1920.

On June 15, 1940, the U.S.S.R. confronted Lithuania with an ultimatum demanding the immediate formation of a “friendly” government and the admission of unlimited numbers of Soviet troops to its territory. The same day, the country was occupied. President Smetona fled to Germany, though without resigning. In his absence, the prime minister, Antanas Merkys, in his capacity as acting president, appointed a left-wing journalist, Justas Paleckis, prime minister. Merkys himself resigned, making Paleckis acting president as well. The moves clearly violated the constitution. The following month, the new Soviet regime staged elections. On July 21, the newly “elected” people’s parliament unanimously requested the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union. On Aug. 3, 1940, the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. acceded to this request and declared Lithuania a constituent republic of the Soviet Union.

During the first year of occupation, Sovietization consisted primarily of remolding the old political, social,
economic, and cultural structures into Soviet forms. A land reform was enacted, though its effect was limited, as the land reform of the 1920s had already to a large degree made the country one of agrarian smallholders. A relatively small number of the country’s political elite were deported in July 1940, before incorporation into the U.S.S.R. Large-scale deportations, affecting a wide cross section of the population, were initiated on the night of June 13–14, 1941. The movement was still under way at the time of the German attack a week later. It has been estimated that this wave of deportation affected some 35,000 people.

When Germany attacked the U.S.S.R. on June 22, 1941, an insurrection against Soviet rule broke out in Lithuania. On the first day, insurgents gained control of Kaunas, then the capital, and set up a provisional government. Within a week the German army had overrun all of Lithuania. The Lithuanians hoped to reestablish independence in alliance with Germany. However, on July 28, 1941, an Ostland province, consisting of the three Baltic countries and Belorussia (now Belarus), was created. The Lithuanian provisional government refused to serve as administrative agent for the German occupation and disbanded. A German occupation regime was established, but it enjoyed only limited success in fulfilling the demands of the Reich. For three years manpower mobilization efforts were effectively thwarted. Human losses during the German occupation have been estimated at roughly 250,000. The bulk of these losses came from the Jewish community, which was almost entirely exterminated.

**Soviet republic**

By the end of 1944 most of Lithuania had been reoccupied by the Red Army. The first postwar decade was a period of extensive repression and Russification. An organized guerrilla resistance, at times involving up to 40,000 fighters, lasted into the early 1950s. Several waves of deportations to Siberia and Central Asia accompanied the collectivization of agriculture: about 70,000 people were deported in late 1947; 70,000 in May 1948; and some 80,000 in 1949. Cultural life stagnated under the imposition of rigid Stalinist norms.

During the thaw in the U.S.S.R. in the late 1950s and early ’60s, the ruling Lithuanian Communist Party, which had been disproportionately composed of immigrant officials, was slowly nativized and transformed into the political machine of the long-term (1936–74) first secretary Antanas Sniečkus. The relative liberalization coincided with the industrialization and urbanization of the country. The possibility of planning socioeconomic change at the local level precluded large-scale immigration of labour from outside the republic. As a result, Lithuania remained ethnically largely homogeneous, with Lithuanians making up about 80 percent of the population in the early 1990s. The ideological reaction during the 1970s and early ’80s failed to stem the development of national consciousness. An extensive dissident movement developed. During the 1970s Lithuania produced more per capita samizdat (unofficial and unsanctioned underground publications) than any other Soviet republic. The most prominent samizdat periodical, *The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, which first appeared in 1972, outlasted the regime.

**Independence restored**
The effort during the late 1980s to renovate the U.S.S.R. through glasnost ("openness") and perestroika ("restructuring") created a new political atmosphere. A mass reform movement, Sajūdis ("Movement"), emerged in opposition. Elections in early 1990 resulted in a legislature that unanimously declared on March 11 the reestablishment of Lithuania’s independence. Soviet reaction initially consisted of a largely ineffectual economic boycott during the spring and summer of 1990. An abortive effort to topple the independent government on Jan. 13, 1991, ended in bloodshed. Political independence and international recognition were secured in the aftermath of the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991.

Lithuania held its first post-Soviet elections in 1992. The former Communist Party, which renamed itself the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDLP), won 73 of 141 seats. Despite its victory, the LDLP did not seek to reverse policies. Instead, the government liberalized the economy, joined the Council of Europe, became an associate member of the Western European Union, and pursued membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Internal disagreements, charges of corruption, and economic recession led to a drop in the government’s popularity in the mid-1990s. In 1996 the LDLP won only 12 seats and was replaced in government by a coalition between the Christian Democratic Party and the Centre Party. The new government sought to further liberalize the economy and to attract foreign capital. In 1998 Valdas Adamkus, who had been naturalized a U.S. citizen and who sought to curb corruption, was elected president.

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Throughout the first half of the 1990s, Lithuania’s economy had remained reliant on Russia and was hit by recession. By the late 1990s it had dramatically increased its share of trade with western Europe, and inflation—which had exceeded 1,000 percent in 1991—was reduced to less than 10 percent. Rolandas Paksas, leader of Lithuania’s populist Liberal Democratic Party, defeated Adamkus in the 2003 presidential election. Paksas was impeached later that year, however, when the Constitutional Court ruled that he had violated the constitution on at least three occasions (most notably, in granting citizenship to a Russian-born financial supporter). Moreover, members of Paksas’s administration were linked to Russian organized crime. The chairman of the Seimas (legislature) became acting president, and Adamkus won a second term through a special presidential election held in 2004. That same year Lithuania gained full membership in both the EU and NATO, and its economic fortunes turned as European holidaymakers flocked to seaside resorts, including Palanga and Klaipėda.

By May 2008 the country’s economy had begun to sour, and the European Commission rejected Lithuania’s application to join the euro zone because of the country’s high inflation. The ailing economy spurred violent protests in the capital, some of the worst since 1991. Running as an independent with the promise of change, Dalia Grybauskaitė, the EU budget commissioner, won the May 2009 presidential election with about 69 percent of the vote. The first woman in Lithuania to be elected president, Grybauskaitė promised to stimulate...
exports, implement EU aid, and provide tax breaks to owners of small businesses.

Relations with Russia continued to remain tense into the 21st century. In 2006 Russia ceased supplying Lithuania’s main petroleum refinery and further refused to honour Lithuania’s request for reparations for the Soviet Union’s 50-year occupation of Lithuania. In 2008 Lithuania’s parliament banned any public display of Soviet or Nazi symbols.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica