We and Homeland: German Occupation, Lithuanian Discourse, and War Experience in Ober Ost

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Some years ago, epitomizing an opinion widespread in the academic world, the scholar Samuel Hynes observed that the First World War was not only a political and military event, but also a “great imaginative event. It altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about war but about the world, about culture and its expressions”.¹ Far from being a mindscape-unifying event, the war changed the basis of experience. Such changes depended on pre-existing cultural codes and individuals’ degree of involvement in military operations. War experience in the trenches differed from the experience of civilians. Soldiers and civilians’ experience differed remarkably on the western and Eastern Fronts. Moreover, civilians’ experience differed depending on the nature of relation to the military forces, on displacement and so on.

The analysis of the First World War as an “imaginative event” among the local population in the Ober Ost² still remains conspicuous for its enduring absence in historiography. Even though the impact of the east upon German soldiers in the Ober Ost was considered in V.G. Liulevičius seminal work War Land on the Eastern Front,³ much less attention has been paid to the experience of the local masses who remained within the occupied land. Interwar, Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian historical literature has mainly concentrated upon one of the main political consequences of the war: the emergence of the Baltic nation states. In the case of Lithuania, while the steps towards the emergence of modern nation state have been widely

² The term Oberbefehlshaber der gesamten deutschen Streitkräfte im Osten (Supreme Commander of All German Forces in the East generally known as Ober Ost) indicates the German military administrative unit created on conquered Russian territory in 1914. Ober Ost was divided into three administrative districts (Kurland, Lithuania and Białystok-Grodno) and lasted until the end of German occupation in 1919.
analyzed by historiography, the German occupation has remained one of the less-studied periods in Lithuanian history.4

The war experience of ethnic Lithuanians who remained in Ober Ost during the German occupation (1915–1918) will be the object of this article. In particular, I will focus on how war changed people’s spatial coordinates and their perception of the self and otherness. As geographers and psychologists have pointed out, place is a fundamental expression of human identity and the result of a very complex web of relations and psychological phenomena.5 As far back as the 1970s, Canadian geographer Edward Relph pointed out the connection between place and identity. According to Relph, places are not only sets to human activities and particular meanings, but represent “fusions of human and natural order and are significant centres of our immediate experience of the world”.6 In expressing place through seeing, the landscape loses its purely aesthetic function and becomes the existential expression of human experience, intentions and behaviour spatially. Human relations, therefore, become a fundamental part of place in expressing and influencing interaction. The degree of identity between individuals and space is expressed, according to Relph, by the degree of ‘insideness’ people feel to a particular place. In the case of group identities, such as national identity, ‘insideness’ expresses the encounter between discursive identity and its spatial facet. The emergence and the consolidation of identity with a place are to be understood as functions of strengthening insideness.

In this paper I argue that the war and the German occupation provoked an insideness-losing process among Ober Ost Lithuanians. In turn, the insideness-losing process expressed the encounter between a mainly agricultural society and the German attempt to rationalize and modernize it. Such an alienation process occurred through a three-part track. On the one hand, the beginning of the war and the German occupation regime changed the spatial and visual coordinates of self-perception. Homeland, which Lithuanian ethnus earlier associated with a particular natural and economic environment and visually embodied peasant values, became transformed into the spatial and temporal expression of otherness. On the other hand, the German occupation regime became associated with an increasing sense of disorder and irrationality expressing the presence of inconceivable otherness within the homeland.

4 For a list of major literature devoted to the First World War in the Lithuanian provinces see bibliography.
5 For a review, see Maria Lewicka, “Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years?” Journal of Environment Psychology 31 (2011), 207–230.