

HISTORY OF LITHUANIA

First to break free from the Soviet Union, the biggest country in Europe in the Medieval times, with its name first recorded 1,009 years ago in church chronicles, Lithuania takes pride in its rich history. Though Lithuania was erased from the world maps a few times, each time it came back to reclaim its place among European nations.

Written Lithuanian history starts with Lithuania's name mentioning in the story of Saint Bruno, whose death "by angry pagans" of Litua or Lietuva on March 9, 1009 was recorded in the Quadlinburg Chronicles.

Lithuanians are the only group of Balts who successfully created a state entity in pre-modern times. German Crusaders (Livonian and Teutonic Orders) posed a serious threat to Lithuanian tribes and that led to unification of lands in 1236, after the successful battle of Saule. Mindaugas, Lithuanian Grand Duke and the leader of all Lithuanians in the battle, united Lithuanian tribes and named the country Lietuva (Lithuania). He became the first and only king of Lithuania. He was baptized, and accepted Christianity along with the crown from the Pope Innocent IV. Later, Mindaugas and his sons reverted to paganism. Lithuanians retained their nature-centered religion until 14th century, earning the fame of Europe's last pagans.

The golden age of Lithuanian history starts with the Gediminaiciai dynasty. The patriarch of this dynasty was Vytenis, whose son Gediminas established Vilnius in 1323 and built Gediminas castle - the tower of this castle is the symbol of Vilnius city. Gediminaiciai was based in Trakai, the capital of Lithuania before Vilnius, and Trakai castle is one of the iconic places in Lithuania. Lithuania became the Grand Duchy. Gediminas's sons Kęstutis and Algirdas were Grand Dukes, and ruled Lithuania successfully, further expanding its territories. Kęstutis's son Vytautas the Great was a very skillful politician who successfully fought with Teutonic Order not only on the battlefield (in Grunwald/Zalgiris battle of 1410 where Teutonic Order was destroyed by armies led by Vytautas), but even more so diplomatically. Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, not only preserved Lithuania's borders intact, but also expanded its lands far east and south all the way to the Black Sea, and east up to about 100 miles west from Moscow. Vytautas was about to be crowned as the king of Lithuania, and when Pope finally sent the crown, it did not arrive on time. Vytautas died in 1430, leaving Lithuania prosperous and the biggest country in Europe.

In 1382 Jogaila, Vytautas's cousin, baptized himself and Lithuania, reducing the significance of Teutonic Order whose main reason for presence on Lithuanian lands was to spread Christianity to pagans. The treaty of Kreva of 1383 joined Lithuania and Poland into the union - the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania. Commonwealth was successfully ruled by Jogaila, who married Polish Princess Jadvyga and became the King of Poland. Though Lithuania preserved its sovereignty and its status as the Grand Duchy, the administration of the Commonwealth was in Cracow, Poland. For the next two centuries, political influence of Lithuania declined, while Poland's increased. The last Lithuanian Grand Duke who spoke Lithuanian was Casimir, the son of Jogaila. Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth lasted over four centuries. It was beneficial to certain extent to both countries. Firstly, it protected Poland and Lithuania from Russia's threat in 1480, when Russian Tsar Ivan IV claimed ancient lands of Kiev that were previously incorporated into Lithuanian territory by conquests of Gediminaiciai dynasty. Secondly, the union helped in the wars against Livonian Order and Sweden. The continuous wars and its internal political divisions, famine, and plague weakened the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, and its political power declined. The Russian Empire used this situation to their advantage. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth went through three partitions - in 1772, 1793, when Lithuania lost its Slavic lands to the east, and the final,

third partition of 1795, which resulted in the division of the land where ethnic Lithuanians lived. Commonwealth fell apart, Lithuanian lands were incorporated into Russian Empire, and Polish lands remained to some extent autonomous, but under the Russian rule. The uprising against Russian rule and attempt to restore the Commonwealth in 1830-1831 and 1863 were cruelly extinguished, and Lithuania suffered 120 years under Czar's regime as a province and outskirts of Russian empire. Lithuanian books were forbidden, schools and universities closed, Russian alphabet was enforced, and Lithuanian books printed in Lithuania Minor (Prussia) had to be smuggled in by brave "book carriers" (knygnešiai). Lithuanian cultural movement started around the time of uprisings and "a few decades later this movement was resumed, and it became a strong political power, while ethnic Lithuanians, or the Lithuanian nation, became an independent cultural and political society that demanded independence in 1905". [The History of Lithuania, Eidintas, Bumblauskas, Kulakauskas, Tamosaitis, 2013].

Lithuanians used the outcomes of the World War I to their advantage and declared their independence on February 16, 1918. The source of the U.S. Library of Congress provides an accurate description of Lithuania during the early years of its independence:

"During 1918-20 Lithuania successfully fought a war with newly independent Poland to defend its independence. At the end of 1920, however, Poland annexed Lithuania's capital city and province of Vilnius, which it held until World War II. Lithuania refused to have diplomatic relations with Poland until 1938 on the grounds that Poland illegally held the Vilnius region. After declaring independence, Lithuania also fought against the Bermond-Avalov army, a German-sponsored group of military adventurers that sought to preserve German influence in the Baltic region, and against Russia. In November 1918, the Red Army invaded the country but ultimately was repulsed by the forces of the young Lithuanian government. On July 9, 1920, Soviet leader Vladimir I. Lenin signed a peace treaty with Lithuania, "forever" denouncing Russia's claims to the territory and recognizing the Lithuanian state.

In the early 1920s, Lithuania had a border dispute with Germany. The city and region of Klaipeda (Memel in German) had been under German rule for 700 years. Originally inhabited by Lithuanians, it was detached from Germany in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles and placed under French administration. In 1923 Lithuanians organized an insurrection and took over the Klaipeda region.

Lithuania's early disorganization caused a delay in its recognition by Western powers; the last to do so was the United States in 1922. Washington recognized Lithuania's independence only after it had become clear that Western intervention in Russia could not restore the Russian Empire."

Finally breaking free after 120 years of Russian rule, young democratic Republic of Lithuania had lots of catching up to do. Lithuania saw extensive growth in those two decades - development of industry, factories, farm reform, universities were built and schools re-opened. Kaunas (the capital during interwar period) showcased unique modernism architecture (it was included into the Tentative List of the World Heritage Convention in 2017), universities and schools re-opened. The young democratic country enjoyed the period of prosperity. All this came to an end with Molotov Ribbentrop pact in August 23, 1939. Secret protocols of the treaty defined the territorial spheres of influence Germany and Russia would have after a successful invasion of Poland. Lithuania was divided once again, this time between Germany and Russia. In June of 1940, as direct consequence of Molotov- Ribbentrop Treaty, it was occupied by Soviet army with massive deportations to gulags (Soviet labor camps) in Siberia to follow. Lithuania was "liberated" by Germans with German invasion of

the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 which lasted until January 28, 1945, battle of Memel (Klaipeda). Finally, the war was going to an end, but Lithuania once again was “liberated” - this time by Stalin’s regime and Soviet Army in 1944-1945. The partisan resistance fights for Lithuania’s freedom continued until 1953, along with deportations to Siberia. The World War II was one of the most gruesome periods in Lithuanian history with not only over one million Lithuanians lost to Soviet gulags in Siberia and the exodus to the west, but also with tragic genocide of Lithuanian Jewish population, who called Lithuania their home and North Jerusalem since the 14-th century. After German Nazi and Lithuanian Nazi collaborator genocide inflicted on Jews, Jewish population decreased by 80-90 percent in Lithuania (the exact number is unknown, it is believed that 150,000 - 200,000 Jews were killed out of around 250,000 (exact number is unknown) Jews who lived in Lithuania by 1940. The tragic loss of the two nations that have cohabited peacefully for centuries reflect one common character trait they share - it is the art of survival under any circumstances the history may present.

Fifty years later, Lithuanians once again used the political situation to their advantage (Russia became economically unstable) and declared the reinstatement of Lithuania’s independence on March 11, 1990, becoming the first Soviet republic to break free from Soviet Union, followed by Estonia and Latvia.

The first country to acknowledge the independence of Lithuania *de facto* was Iceland. US never acknowledged occupation of Lithuania by Soviet Russia, but it took almost two years for the US to acknowledge reinstatement of Lithuanian independence *de facto*. Soviets still tried to regain the control in Lithuania on January 13, 1991 by sending tanks and OMON troops - their special army forces against the unarmed crowd claiming the 14 more victims of the Soviet regime.

Lithuania caught up with the rest of Europe just in couple of decades. It fostered the democratic principles and ideals of the Western world, and successfully joined NATO and European Union. Today Lithuania is one of the leading EU countries in technologies with the fastest internet in Europe, one of the best medical care systems with highly skilled medical professionals and the newest technologies. Lithuania is also a center of culture and arts - Kaunas has been declared the capital of European culture in 2022.

[Based on the Encyclopedia Britannica and **The History of Lithuania** (Eidintas, Bublauskas, Kulakauskas, Tamosaitis, 2013)]