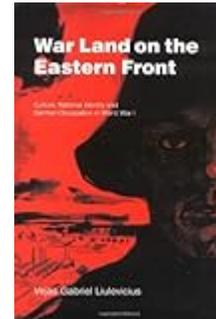




Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius. *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 309 S. BRP 37,50 (gebunden), ISBN 978-0-521-66157-7.



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Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius' new book on cultural and military politics on the eastern front in World War I makes plain how much has been lost in the historiographical fixation on the western front. The everyday brutalization in the trenches, the formation of a separate generational identity, the introduction of new and fierce technologies, and the fantastic military effort to achieve a breakthrough are crucial foundations for understanding the postwar period, the drama of defeat and humiliation, and the emergence of new, more populist politics in Germany as well as in France and Britain.

Liulevicius has another story to tell, one equally important and, in this case, one told with great authority, catching detail, and clarifying insight. Although only one-third of German troop strength was arrayed against Russia, the experiences of the soldiers and the efforts of the military administration had lasting consequences, creating what Liulevicius' appropriately refers to as "the mindscape of the East." What had been encountered first as a "complicated weaving of 'lands and peoples'" (Land und Leute) was increasingly regarded as a vast, manipulable terrain of "spaces and races" (Raum und Volk) to be ordered by German mastery and organization" (p. 8).

While the harsh German occupiers of 1914-1918 differed fundamentally from the racial masters of 1939-1945, the experience of World War I furnished many of the

tools, the lessons, and the perceptions on which the policies of World War II rested. One of the great strengths of Liulevicius' argument is that it draws out the implications of a superb case study of one area of German wartime occupation in Kurland and Lithuania (Ober-Ost) to encompass the Freikorps, the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi period.

Among Liulevicius' most effective vignettes are the train trips that soldiers, officers, and administrators take across the eastern battlelines. These fast-moving, impressionable journeys invited Germans to play the role of amateur ethnographer. They were fascinated by what they saw, commenting endlessly on allegedly more primitive agricultural practices, and making summary distinctions between primitive East and cultured West. These train journeys symbolized the detached but powerful and mobile roles that Germans had acquired as conquerors. And they helped create a powerful "Orientalizing" aesthetic of the East, which subsequently guided action and policy.

Liulevicius is at his best in his discussions of this aesthetic or mindscape. Sweeping through the cities, the newcomers saw a "riot of architectural simultaneity," with "styles densely topping one another" (38). In the countryside, they noted how "field and meadow, tree and bush are left to themselves" without the "planned order" that prevailed in Germany (70). Cutting a trench through

the sandy soil of the war zone, soldiers were shocked to find the bones and artifacts of prehistoric societies, a distant past that was shockingly close to the surface. "This unfamiliar mess of history" was a sign of the primitive, an invitation for Germans to cultivate. Ober Ost thus became the site of intensive German cultural colonization. German work and German culture was to transform the occupied territories into recognizable, civilized places.

Germany's colonial mission therefore rested on the confusing presence of Land und Leute, whom the Germans would take in hand. Under Ludendorff, Ober Ost was intended to be a place of far-reaching agricultural extraction, and the territories were surveyed and administered in the most efficient ways imaginable. Nonetheless, an identifiable, if totally patronizing German cultural mission remained in place; there were even amicable relations between Eastern European Jews and German occupiers (something Liulevicius might have expanded on), and unlikely figures such as Victor Klemperer found a role in the administration to further these.

The huge expectations that Ludendorff and his growing staff of experts and academics had for this miniature empire became clear in the administrative ambition of what Liulevicius calls "Verkehrspolitik," a kind of totalizing managerial politics. The land was closed off and then "divided up, creating a grid of control in which military authorities could direct every movement: of troops, requisitioned products, raw materials . . . manpower" (89). This effort at total exploitation totally failed, but both the effort and the failure led to a transformation of Land und Leute into Raum und Volk.

It becomes clear in Liulevicius' argument that an ethnographic vision slowly gave way to a cultivating discourse, so that the complicated intertwining of ethnicity and religion disappeared into the exclusive terms of foreign native and German expert. The riot of the land was soon revisualized into vast, even oppressive spaces. And whereas supposedly culturally backward people still had a particular, even cherishable identity, manpower, lice-carriers, resources, and space did not. Any kind of effec-

tive occupation was further undermined by the mobilization of ethnic resistance to German rule. More and more train trips were made into a "fleeing vastness," a "wild nature" of "terrible ferocity" (pp. 152-53).

This is exactly what the Freikorps saw; Bolshevism was, of course, the archetypical apparition on this landscape. In the end, writes Liulevicius, "the East appeared as an area of races and spaces, which could not be manipulated, but could only be cleared and cleaned." In reaching these well-argued conclusions, Liulevicius might have considered the general quandries of modern management, which recognizes the extreme malleability of social material and technological designs, and responds to this risk with more far-fetched intervention. To what extent did German practice and perception make Ober Ost a distinctly modern place, which authorized increasingly strenuous techniques of knowledge and practices of administration? A broader connection to the literature on German modernity would have been useful.

The process that the war had begun, speeded up during the Weimar Republic. In the newly activated fields of Ostforschung and political geography, the East was "emptied of historical content;" "Raum was triumphantly ahistorical, biological, and 'scientific.'" Although administrators in Ober Ost, unlike Nazi conquerors, maintained a cultural politics and never quite gave up on the educative aims implicit in determinations of backwardness, Liulevicius underscores the lines of continuity between the two world wars: "the vicious outlook of the Nazis as they surveyed the East, seeing their own future in its conquest, was built upon a prior experience in the First World War and the lessons it seemed to yield" (p. 272). It is the experience and the encounter that Liulevicius emphasizes, and he thoroughly makes his argument that "War Land on the Eastern Front" needs to be understood as a critical place in Germany's twentieth-century history.

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