

# Ethnography and Nation-building in Lithuania (1882-1918): The Life and Work of Eduards Volters

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Latvian ethnographer, linguist, folklorist and archaeologist Eduards Volters (1856-1941), an obscure figure in the old history of “world anthropologies”, conducted pioneering ethnographic fieldwork in neighbouring Lithuania – then divided between Russia and Prussia – between 1882 and 1918. [1] Notwithstanding the peripheral condition of Baltic nations, Volters was a cosmopolitan academic and, following his studies in German and Russian universities and also his teaching at the University of Saint Petersburg for over thirty years, was shaped by different theoretical influences and scientific approaches. Moreover, his views were developed through extensive contacts with scholarly institutions in Germany, Austria, Latvia and elsewhere. [2] Academics graduating from universities in Germany and the Russian Empire were linked by a shared theoretical discourse (Vermeulen 2018; Savoniakaitė 2019b); for example, Russian philology historian Aleksandr Pogodin, who studied dialects in Lithuania in 1893, was very familiar with the theoretical approach of Adolf Bastian, the pioneer of German comparative ethnology (Pogodin 1901). The hypothesis that Volters’ ethnography is noteworthy is compelling for several reasons, not least because of his focus on social relations and his use of new concepts. Lithuanian ethnologist Vacys Milius, who conducted the broadest analysis of Volters’ ethnography, considers it to be “comprehensive” and far-reaching (Milius 1993: 19-23). Other recent studies reveal Volters’ contribution to the Lithuanian national rebirth and to the knowledge of Baltic languages and, particularly, Lithuanian (Butkus, Vaisvalavičienė 2006; Gieda 2019). [3] There have also been analyses of Volters’ publications in the field of comparative studies of Latvian,

Lithuanian, and German languages and literature, culture and mythology (Bušmienė 1973; Nakienė, Žarskienė 2007; Sauka 2016: 65). At the same time, however, Volters' original views on ethnographic theory have never been fully debated.

## Historical Background

Eduards Volters [4] was born in Āgenskalns, near Rīga, Latvia, which was a part of the Russian Empire at that time. The son of a Latvian-German pharmacist, he was given the opportunity of following a very different path. After graduating from the Rīga Gymnasium in 1875, he began studying linguistics at Leipzig University. In 1877, he left for Tartu (then Dorpat) University, in what is nowadays Estonia, and passed his entrance exams in Russian literature. He studied at Moscow and Kharkov universities in 1880 and in 1883 successfully defended his dissertation in linguistics and received his master's degree in Slavic philology. Between 1885 and 1918, Volters was an associate professor in the Slavic Languages Department at St. Petersburg University, where he delivered lectures in linguistics, ethnography, and ancient literature. Notwithstanding the fact that it was not concerned with Slavic but Baltic languages, an additional subject was eventually added to his courses: Lithuanian mythology and folklore (Nezabitaustas 1928; Kaunas, Matijošaitienė 2011: 410; Sauka 2016: 64).

In 1882 Volters was encouraged to conduct his studies in Lithuania by the German linguist and researcher of the Slavic and Baltic languages, August Leskien, and the German linguist, archaeologist, and ethnographer Adalbert Bezzenberger (Volters 1887). The Imperial Russian Geographic Society opened its Northwestern Division in Vilnius in 1867, which is considered to have been among the first institutions to promote the collection of comprehensive ethnographic data about Lithuanians. [5] Due to Volters' efforts and under his supervision, forty-five ethnographic reports produced by various intellectuals were included in the Northwestern Division's archives. Other researchers supplied complementary data on Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. In 1884 Volters was elected a full member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, and in 1893 he proposed the creation of a Lithuanian and Latvian Commission to further pursue ethnographic-statistical research programmes. According to Lithuanian ethnologist Vacys Milius, Volters was viewed in Lithuania as an "undesirable" academic of the Russian monarchist regime. Other colleagues, however, including the renowned Lithuanian poet Father Maironis, disagreed and supported Volters and his unique studies on Lithuania (Milius 1993: 8-19).

During the "Enlightenment" – i.e. the nation-building process in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Baltic countries (until 1918, when Lithuania and Estonia became independent from the Russian Empire, and Latvia from the German Empire) – Lithuanian intellectuals referred to "their own statistics" (*Varpas* and *Uk-o* editorial, 1902), thus defying imperial data, and developed Lithuanian studies that included ethnography, ethnology and anthropology. Volters invited the editorial board of *Aušra* (Dawn), the first illegal newspaper in the Lithuanian language, published in the so-called Lithuania Minor, which was part of Prussia,

to conduct ethnographic studies (Kaunas, Matijošaitienė 2011: 410; Volters F17-294). While still living in St. Petersburg, Volters collaborated closely with Jonas Basanavičius, the leader of Lithuanian nation-building in late 19th and early 20th centuries, supported Lithuanian students, and helped found the Lithuanian Sciences Society (Savoniakaitė 2019b).

My discussion on Volters' ethnography will focus on his two main investigations of Lithuania: firstly, the ethnographic accounts resulting from Volters' travels to Lithuania and Lithuania Minor; secondly, the borderland nationality studies that he conducted in the Suwałki Governorate. [6] Concluding with a historical comparative perspective, I will discuss the specific concepts developed by Volters in relation to his researches in the period 1882-1918.

## Observations and Statistics from a Journey to Lithuania Minor, Lithuania, and Samogitia

Before Volters, Latvian ethnographer and lawyer Jūlijs Kuznecovs conducted expeditionary fieldwork in Lithuania from 1867 to 1872, according to a programme entitled “Ethnographic and Historical Knowledge in the Northwestern Governorates”, thus initiating a new ethnographical-statistic approach. [7] He has, however, been criticized for his inattentive, possibly too ambitious treatment of Lithuanian and Latvian societies, combining ethnographical, statistical, historical, economic, linguistic, and folkloristic data (Milius 1993). The Imperial Russian Geographic Society dispatched Volters to study “the Lithuanian and Latvian identity” in the 1880s. In 1883, he began studying the domestic life of Lithuanians residing in the border regions (referred to as *rubezhniki* in Russian) of Lithuania Minor. Volters spent a month in the environs of Klaipėda; he observed local life, and interacted with the academic community (Volders 1886). He outlined the results of his fieldwork in a trip report, including: birth customs and medicinal practices, superstitions in the northern Klaipėda district, and wedding traditions (Volders 1887: 9; Milius 1993: 16-18). Volters continued extended ethnographic research in Lithuania between 1884 and 1887, in ways similar but not identical to those employed by other researchers in Europe (or, for that matter, the United States) who examined the folk origins of “nations”. He used methods such as ethnographic observation, descriptions of cultural data on a given people, and analysis of information on medicinal practices contained in economic statistical and historical documents (Kaschuba 2012: 26-32). Volters valued observation in ethnography and ethnographic statistics as a follower of Polish ethnographer Oscar Kolberg (Kaunas, Matijošaitienė 2011). His ethnography was a broader concept than fieldwork and considered realistic, not romantic approaches to be the priority of ethnography.

In his 1887 book, titled *Ob etnograficheskiiu poiezdkie po Litvi i Zymdi lietomi 1887 goda* (Regarding an ethnographic travel to Lithuania and Žemaitija in 1887), Volters emphasized that the purpose of his ethnographic travel was to study the ethnographic and linguistic aspects of Samogitian-Lithuanian national relics and law. Volters asserted that the positive ethnographic results of four months of travel through the north-western region meant the

successful resolution of some historical ethnographic questions and the collection of written information about ancient relics of the Lithuanians (Volters 1887: 1-4). His hermeneutic approach even disclosed historical mentions of Lithuanians and other ethnic groups in Duke Vytautas the Great's letters from the medieval era (Volters 1887: 2). He published numerous articles about Lithuanian history, castles, castle mounds, law, and the unique Lithuanian language in this book.

Volters' research of Lithuanian people(s) (Russian *narodnosti*) demonstrated his interest in the relations between individuals and local communities as well as families. [8] Linguistic and lexical data on Lithuanians speaking the Dzūkija dialect helped him analyse relationships between the ancient Sudovians and Prussians. For example, in Lithuanian folk song lyrics, Volters identified "Sudaviškei" as the name of an old Lithuanian village in the Suwałki Governorate (Volters 1887: 3-4). Linguistic and lexical data also helped determine the antiquity of word origins, a typical procedure dating back to the early nineteenth-century cultural nationalism, or first Enlightenment (Brass 1996; Hroch 2012; explored in more depth in Savoniakaitė 2019a).

{}The "social condition" and the identity of a given "nation" were first and foremost identified by studying the Lithuanian language in historical sources and in situ, complemented by field research on rural customary law. Volters asked questions such as: "(1) Who is a son-in-law? What conflicts arise when another person is welcomed into a home? (2) What sort of relationship existed between young people and the elderly (*karsincius, isimtininkas*)? Were there any local stories about customs (...)?; (3) What views did the nation have on inheritance?" (Volters 1887: 8). In 1886, Volters created a programme titled "Establishing the characteristics of the Lithuanian and Samogitian languages" (Volters 1887: 5). Based on the then widespread interest in antiquities in Europe, he made mention of old books in his report. And, most probably, guided by the theoretical guidelines of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, he sought to establish suitable ethnographic-statistical research programmes, primarily in the field of language. He conducted this work in a deliberate way, utilizing ethnographic observation, discussions with the local population in situ [9] and analysis of historical sources.

Volters directed research into customary law to help explain issues pertaining to rural customs in family and community interactions. Volters asserted that extended families called "great patriarchal families", or "Lithuanian greater families" still existed in Lithuania. Court documents showed how villages sought to resolve inter-family conflicts such as ownership of a particular bee colony, for example. Elderly rural neighbours resolved their differences in domestic courts. These domestic courts were much less costly than district courts, which often failed to convene and required considerable outlays of vodka and time (Volters 1887: 6). An analysis of court documents helped Volters to pose questions about Lithuanian relationships within families, wedding customs, and the prevailing views of Lithuanian society and "genus" (a word he used for ethnic group [10]), including a person's place within the family and as part of the economic and legal community (Volters 1887: 8).

Volters not only conducted the studies, he also distributed a questionnaire. He received more than three hundred responses to his queries from local courts in the Vilnius and Kaunas governorates (Volters 1887: 8). The ethnographic trip had been successful.

Later, Volters' added an interest in evolution to his theoretical understanding (Barnard 2000: 15; Ssorin-Chaikov 2008: 194-195), but he clearly remained an historically-oriented scholar, focusing on historical mentions of Lithuanians and other ethnic groups from the medieval era onwards (Volters 1887: 2). Volters pointed out that the main aim of his trip was the research of Lithuanian ancient relics, customary law and ethnographic and linguistic peculiarities of the Samogytian-Lithuanian nation (Volters 1887: 1). The historical ethnographical hermeneutic approach in Volters' writings also made room for anthropological studies on the somatic type of Baltic peoples, considered to be more objective than folklore researches (see Jackson 1987: 2-5). He later increased his holistic approach, writing that anthropological studies of Lithuanians and Latvians, who were close to one another in language but were different in somatic type, should be expanded to broaden the statistical search for all three types in Lithuanian regions, together with archaeological studies of Western Prussia and ancient Prussians in Prussian Lithuania (Volters 1906: 9).

A diffusionist dimension is also revealed in Volters' work, regarding the dispersion of cultural variations in smaller areas. In studying mythology, Volters emphasized a common formula found in Lithuanian and Latvian tales: the struggle of *Perkūnas* (the God of Thunder) with *Piktibe* (the Devil), or how Perkūnas killed the devil using thunder. As he compared identities, Volters wrote that ancient Lithuanians had a particular reverence for Perkūnas, much as the Slavs worshipped Perūnas. During the trip, stories were told about Perkūnas and the devil in every district. Volters distinguished these stories as unique characteristics of Lithuania and Samogitia. He proposed recording all variations of the folk tales in order to determine the geographic spread of the stories about Perkūnas and the devil. But in a comment that revealed his own interests as a scientist, Volters asserted that "most importantly, this material gives us the opportunity to review and comment on the knowledge of medieval writers" (Volters 1887: 9), demonstrating his greater interest in historic ethnography than contemporary cultural areas. As an official of the Russian Empire, Volters also collected historic pieces for the *Kunstkamera* in Saint Petersburg to exhibit (Galiopa, Fišman 2009).

Volters' field studies were noteworthy for his observations of the domestic life of Lithuanians residing in the border regions of Lithuania Minor and rethinking the data of his ethnographic observations in broad interactions with other scholars. He was able to take advantage of the prevailing political situation, establish various types of contacts, and engage communities in his ethnographic research. Next, we will consider how Volters constructed ethnographic knowledge in statistics.

## Ethnographic Statistics: Borderland Identity Studies in the Suwałki Governorate

In 1889 Volters conducted ethnographic-statistical research in the Suwałki Governate. Under the direction of Arist Aristovic Kunik, a scholar at the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, Volters first began examining the ethnographic data collected by Piotr I. Keppeni. The Russian Empire project was aimed at determining the “genetic” make-up of the inhabitants of Lithuania and Belarus. It also sought to ascertain “local” names in the language used by area residents. The theoretical approach to ethnographic-statistical research was taken from Keppeni and was examined through a historical and philological discourse (Volters 1901: 1). The governor provided Volters with a list of inhabited areas in the Suwałki Governate. Research was conducted by collaborating with local “statistical committees” operating in the governorate. At the instruction of the respective governors, forms and questionnaire “sheets” were printed with slightly different content for the Vilnius, Kaunas and Suwałki Governorates (Volters 1901: 2-3).

Volters analysed his data in the publication *Spiski naseleennykh mest Suval'skoy gubernii, kak materia dlya istoriko-etnograficheskoy geografiiya kraya* (Lists of inhabited areas in the Suwałki Governorate as material for the historical and ethnographic geography of the region, 1901) and asserted that both the Vilnius and Suwałki Governorates were home to a large number of ethnic Poles. He explored issues pertaining to historical migration patterns and examined historical documents and state borders. (Volters 1901: 3-6; Volters 1906). His ethnographic research focused on political and economic processes, the legacy of land reform programmes, and the social change resulting from human migration associated with these processes.

The Suwałki Governorate programme was noted for its intriguing comparative approach to the study of identity, combining ethnographic and theoretical dimensions. Volters studied locals as well as those who did not reside permanently in the area. All individuals were asked about the linguistic specifics and names of local places, about nearby lakes and rivers, about which ethnic group and gender local residents belonged to, what language they spoke at home, about their religion, their level of literacy and, if illiterate, what ethnic groups (“genal”, “national”, “tribal”) and ancient monuments or castle mounds they could identify, what their historical significance was, etc. The number of ethnic Lithuanian inhabitants in the Vilnius Governorate was provided, and there was also an effort to compile a methodological record of human assimilation and the migration processes resulting from land reform programmes. The material regarding local ethnicity emerging from these new studies conducted with the assistance of statistics committees differed from previously collected census data (Volters 1901: 1-7). Volters relied on the ethnographic statistical programme used by the German ethnographer Franz Tetzner of Leipzig University in his study of the Serbs (1902). Volters considered that a minimum knowledge of other languages, and proficiency in the Polish language were paramount to identity studies; moreover, the actual use of the Lithuanian language by the masses should be approached statistically (see

Milius 1993: 60). This then revealed that identity was most strongly reflected in Lithuanian religiosity, not necessarily through language.

Volters sought to apply a new interpretation to ethnographic statistics, using statistics to explore identity assimilation and political processes, thereby newly interpreting the region's historical and ethnographic geography. The German ethnologist Adolf Bastian, well known to the academic community in the Russian Empire, asserted that science demands “well-considered statistics, statistics that would immediately [detect] the organic growth of spirit” (Bastian 1860: 428). Unlike Bastian (in 1881), Volters did not associate social evolution ideas with psychology. He sought “well-considered statistics” for every context, creating new programmes and questions for specific research tasks of identity and religion, identity and regional history, identity and material culture or economics, identity and heritage. His theoretical focus was in many cases the historical hermeneutic.

Volters demonstrated a clearly realistic view on the “genal” composition of the populations as well as the Lithuanian national rebirth. The understanding of “self” was linked to the conception of Lithuania in the early stage of the national rebirth, as well as with symbolic sites (Staliūnas 2015: 145-149) and ethnographic narratives.

## Concluding Remarks: Volters' Concepts in 1882-1918

As an ethnographer, Volters was noteworthy for his focus on social relationships and new concepts of statistics. He addressed the problem of subjectivity and objectivity in ethnography through considered observations, contextually adapted questionnaires, and heeding public opinion. His success was determined by the quality, not the quantity, of his research. In most cases, in his field studies Volters had a clear political position as a researcher and explored social relationships and sought out random social contacts to generate ethnographic knowledge (Volters 1886; 1887). Although Volters studied the north-western region as a researcher of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, his theoretical priorities implied a critique of centralization and were, for the most part, directed at complex views of European ethnography and history.

Volters provided a new interpretation of statistics (or *Staatenkunde*) and ethnographic statistics. He directed identity studies to help reveal assimilation and political processes, thereby providing a new look at the region's historical and ethnographic geography. His training in linguistics influenced Volters' ethnography as a peculiar evolutionist/historian, through comparative exploration of the language, specifics of place names and identity of a “nation”, which explains his interest in the culture, religious assimilation, diffusion, migration and borders of a “genus”.



Fig. 1

Eduards Volters, s.d.

The National Museum of Lithuania (LNM, Ft 780).

He brought meaning to nation-building ideas through studies of the assimilation of the Lithuanian “ethnicity”, antiquities and old books, language, migration and borderland identities and the creation of a politically literate Lithuanian community (see Goody 1981) and was an active member of the national movement. Volters created a modern Lithuanian nation based on broad, comparative ethnicity studies, and developed a following in Baltic countries. He helped preserve for future generations not only the invaluable collections of Lithuanian, Latvian, and other national antiquities in the *Kunstkamera* museum, but also rare books on the subject of ethnography held in Lithuanian libraries. The Russian Imperial regime drove Volters to live in Lithuania. [11] There, sometimes welcomed as an ancestor with German roots, Volters encouraged the study of the Lithuanian people as “our nation”, but considered himself a Latvian. Volters’ ethnography on Lithuania remains relevant today.

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[2] Volters F17-3; F17-207; F17-208; Hann. 152 Acc. 53/84 Nr. 86.

[3] See also Valaitis 1932, who wrote about Volters' work together with Jonas Basanavičius, following the

establishment of the Lithuanian Science Society.

[4] In Russian the Latvian name Eduards Volters is Eduard Voliter (Вольтер) or in some sources Voliteri (Вольтерь).

[5] The Imperial Russian Geographic Society had been established in 1845 (Milius 1993: 8-10).

[6] An administrative area of Congress Poland ('Russian Poland') which had its seat in the city of Suwałki. It covered a territory of about 12,300 km<sup>2</sup>. According to contemporary Russian Empire statistics, from 1889 the Suwałki Governorate was predominantly Lithuanian. Lithuanians formed a majority only in the northern part of the governorate in the counties of Kalvarija, Marijampolė, Naujamiestis, Vilkaviškis as well as the eastern part of the Sejny county. Poles were in a majority in the southern part of the governorate in the counties of Suwałki, Augustów and in the western part of the Sejny county.

[7] In the early eighteenth century at German universities in Göttingen, Leipzig, Halle and Jena, "statistics" as a new field of study was associated with research in law, linguistics, ethnology, history, geography, as well as physical anthropology and natural history (Vermeulen 2015: 221), and by the middle of the century it became its own legitimate science. Definitions of "peoples" and "nations" were sought in natural law and the "law of nations". Interests were directed toward relations between peoples and countries, as in Müller's *historia gentium*, and not in political history. An important area of research was the rights of ethnic minorities (Vermeulen 2015: 328-329).

[8] This interest had been steadily increasing within the scientific community for more than a century. According to British anthropologist Alan Barnard, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers and legal scholars were less concerned with "facts" than with abstract relationships between individuals and society, between society and rules, and between peoples and nations (Barnard 2000: 16-22). This discourse laid a foundation for anthropology. Volters' reflections may be considered, somehow, as a late echo of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's distinction between the "natural" and the "social condition", considering that his study of historical and linguistic characteristics of place names revealed his interest in how people understand nature and relate to it in ways that evoke the "natural condition".

[9] Volters distributed his report to four locations in the Northwestern region. He profusely thanked Bishop Antanas Baranauskas for his valuable comments on Lithuanian dialectology, as well as the surviving families of the deceased Samogitian writers Valančius and Daukantas: Mr. V. Beresnevičius from Pakražančiai and the Kanackis family in Kiviliai. He spoke fondly about respondents and directors who willingly provided data for use in long-term studies (Volters 1887: 1, 13).

[10] When Volters started using it as a graduate of Leipzig University, the concept of genus had been the subject of important researches for more than a century. As part of an ethnographic research programme titled "De historia gentium", the influential German historian and researcher of Siberia Gerhard Friedrich Müller first asked people about their boundaries, their territory's climate, and intermingling of peoples of different character. He studied the origins of each people according to their own tradition, "natural belief", "manners and rites", economics, and the language and "literacy". He sought to learn about place names in the local native languages, their pronunciation, and etymology. Finally, "individuals of both sexes from each people and tribe" were to be painted in customary dress, while clothing samples should

be taken to St. Petersburg (Müller 1732, as quoted in Vermeulen 2015: 164-165).

[11] He moved to Vilnius in 1918 and organized the Central Library of Lithuania, later due to the Polish-Soviet War moved to Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania, established and headed the Central Library in 1920–1922, was director of the *Kaunas City Museum* in 1922–1936, and worked since 1922 in University of Lithuania which was renamed as Vytautas Magnus University in 1930 (Nezabitaustas 1928; Kaunas, Matijošaitienė 2011: 410; Sauka 2016).