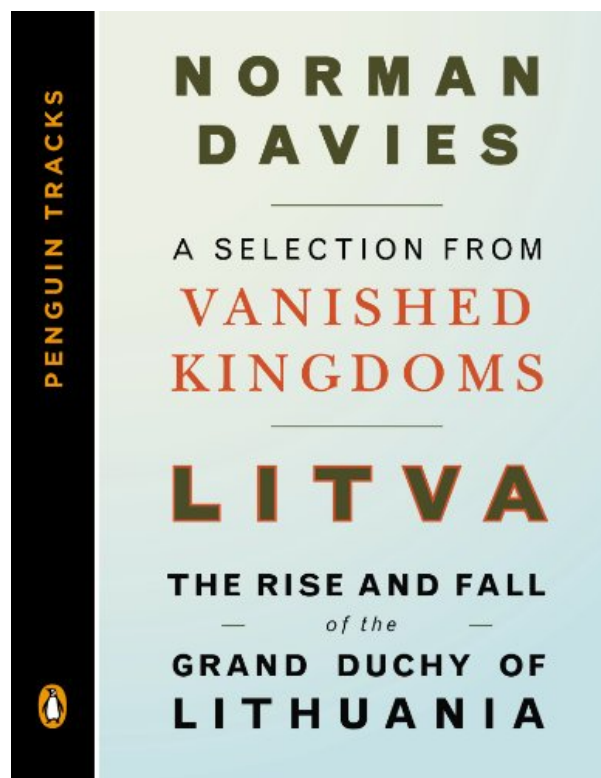
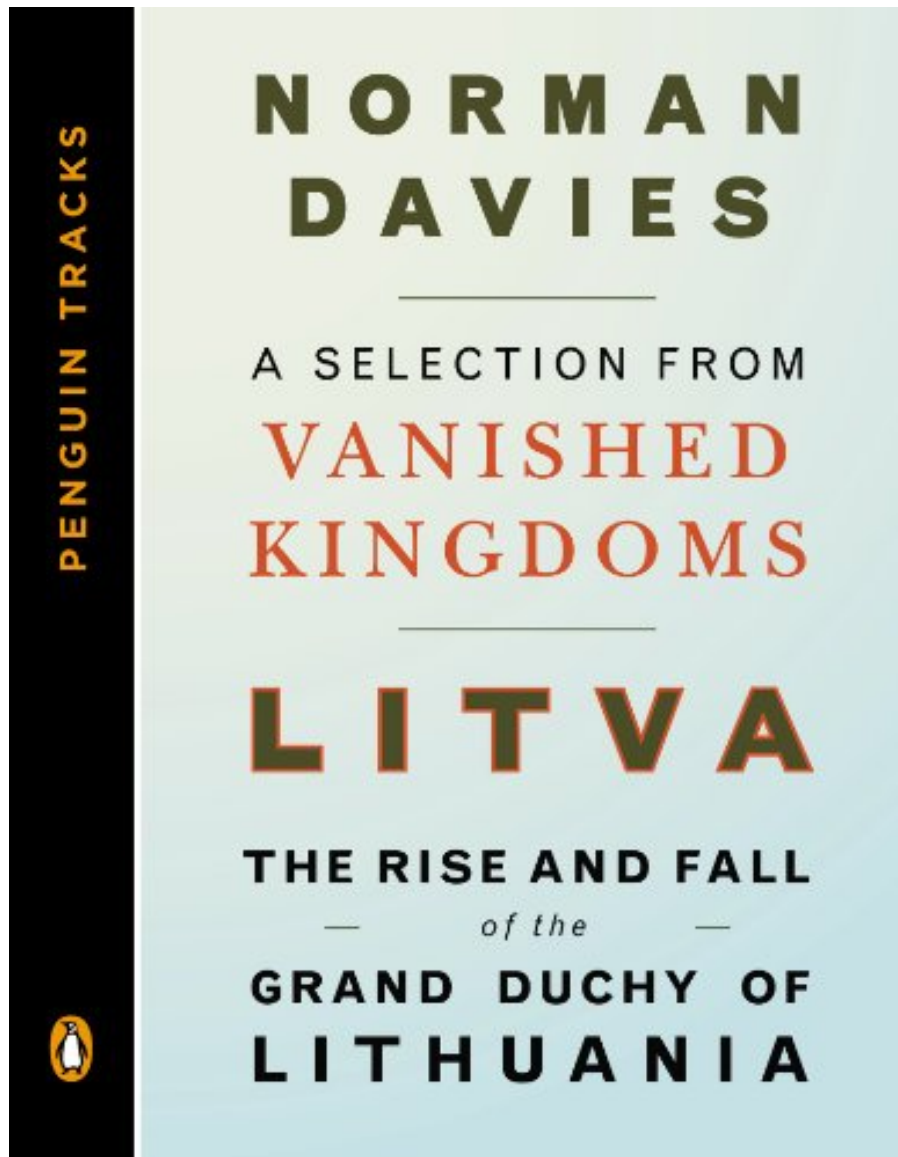


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The fascinating history of a Baltic empire's dominance and decline—excerpted from internationally bestselling author Norman Davies's *Vanished Kingdoms*

*Vanished Kingdoms* introduces readers to once-powerful European empires that have left scant traces on the modern map. In this excerpt from his widely acclaimed book, Norman Davies tells the ill-fated story of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Founded in the mid-thirteenth century in one of the continent's first settled regions, where the oldest of its Indo-European languages is spoken, the Grand Duchy at its peak was the largest country in Europe, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and it commanded yet greater influence after uniting with its western neighbor, the Kingdom of Poland, to form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Grand Duchy's huge territory included the great cities of Kiev, Vilnius, Riga, Minsk, and Brest. Despite being ahead of its time as an elective republic in an age of absolute monarchy, power struggles and foreign incursions led to its ultimate demise and forced partition by Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795.

In this selection from a work *The Boston Globe* has called “commendably accessible, magisterial, and uncommonly humane,” Davies chronicles these rich yet unfamiliar chapters in the history of modern Lithuania, Belarus, and Latvia with his signature acuity and verve.

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Most helpful customer reviews

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

The fog of history

By James Ferguson

Too bad I didn't see this kindle selection before writing a review of *Vanished Kingdoms*, as my biggest gripe was with this chapter. Norman Davies is a well respected historian, but it seemed he relied more on his reputation than scholarship on writing of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For whatever reason he chose to frame the chapter within the context of Belarus, which didn't even exist at the time. Belarus, like the Ukraine, was divided among noble families, who more or less answered to Patriarchs within the Orthodox Church. There was no federated state like you see today in the Ukraine. These lands were fought over by neighboring rivals, and eventually came to coalesce under the Grand Duchy from the 13th to the 16th century, briefly making it the largest kingdom in Europe. The central authority rested in Trakai (Lithuania), where the main castles of Mindaugas and Vytautas were located, but as their kingdom spread, castles were built in these Slavic lands, notably at Mir and Nargaudukas in modern-day Belarus.

Davies does credit the Lithuanian Dukes for the inception of the Grand Duchy, but in his Slavic-centered mind the heart and soul of the kingdom rests in Belarus. Even the name Lietuva he believes springs from the Litva marshes of Belarus, blithely unaware that most of the place names in this area have Baltic, not Slavic roots. Lithuanian predates the Slavic languages by several centuries. Unfortunately, Davies seems to have worked backward from present-day nation states rather than treating these "vanished kingdoms" within the context of their own time and place.

Belarussians would dearly love to claim Lithuanian history as their own, and have done so under Lukashenko who seems determined to dig beneath the Soviet history that so dominates Belarus. A trip to Minsk is like a trip back into the Soviet Union, as the city was almost completely destroyed in WWII and rebuilt under Stalin. What few fragments of the historic city that remain have become museum pieces, but virtually all their architectural context has been lost.

Sadly, Davies just can't seem to bring himself to give Lithuania its due. For him it is a rump state of the former Polish-Lithuanian Joint Kingdom, with heavy emphasis on Poland. In his epic history of Europe, he took the Polish stance in Vilnius, or Wilno as he preferred to call it, unwilling to even accept its name. Here too we see Lithuania Slavicized for his own convenience, not for that of history.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

An excellent compilation and recital of intentionally obscured European history!

By general grant

Historical events reoccur. Today's current and unsettling eastern European news was originally conceived and played out several centuries ago.

I was not surprised with Norman Davies's prowess in collecting the past millennia of historical facts, He is consistently a researcher/ author to respect, admire and follow. I was very pleased to see, for the first time in English, an accurate portrayal of an alternate and extinguished universe (Lithuania/Poland/Belarus/Ukraine) quite foreign to most Westerners and I am sure, quite blasphemous to two centuries of ethnic Russian propagandist and revisionist historians.

We are all familiar with the Teutonic knights. We are seldom familiar with the Northern Crusades and totally uneducated in who destroyed both through astute politics and prowess in self-defense. A collective, democratic "Who" that eventually built a great empire larger than France that lasted for many centuries. The "Who" also extinguished the last mongol/tartar empire in the Crimea and stopped the "last" Islamic invasion of Europe at Vienna?

Read and learn!

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Interesting

By R. Cartaxo

An interesting read on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that helps to understand the roots of Lithuania's existence as an independent country. From the Grand Duchy's history, and above all from its last years and demise, Russia emerges as the biggest threat for Lithuania's existence, as was later confirmed by the fifty years of soviet occupation. Many of today's Russians feel they are entitled to the Baltics and see soviet occupation as a simple return to a state of affairs warranted by the two hundred years of Russian domination starting with Peter the Great.

To keep their independence in the future, Baltic countries would be well advised to work together, specially in what concerns their infrastructures and energy policies, as well as their foreign affairs.

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