"Ob. Ost" Civilian Post Offices and Their Cancellations: 1916-1918

Making sense of a misunderstood philatelic "stepchild"

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Introduction

Twelve German stamps – the "Germania" design of 1905-1917 – were overprinted "*Postgebiet Ob. Ost*" (short for *Postgebiet Oberbefehlshaber Ost*, or: "Postal District of the Supreme Commander in the East") in black ink specifically for use by civilians (military personnel had access to free-franked Feldpost service) from January 1916 to December 1918 in occupied areas of the northwest Russian Empire during World War I. This issue has been exhaustively – but narrowly – covered by philatelic titans in separate Estonian-, Latvian- and Lithuanian-focused catalogs and articles in the philatelic press. German, US, and Belarusian catalogs and articles have added conflicting, and sometimes misinformed, categorizations and explanations, all leading to collector confusion.

That confusion was typified by recent eBay offerings in a single day that listed *Ob. Ost* stamps variously as "Germany Occupation Russia," "Poland German Occupation Wilna," and "Lithuania Occupation Ob. Ost." The confusion is not limited to online dealers and amateurs: in the September 2010 *German Postal Specialist* a member of the Germany Philatelic Society responded to another who had asked the country of origin of an *Ob. Ost* stamp cancelled "Libau." Scott Catalog categorization and commentary were quoted to provide a wrong answer: *"The illustrated stamp is Scott Lithuania 1N4. These were to be used in Lithuania (former Russian provinces of Suvalki, Vilnius, Kaunas, Kurland, Estland, and Lifland). Latvia #1N1-13 are the same vintage Latvian, German occupation stamps. They are overprinted "Libau."* Then the responder asked readers a new question: "Is the Latvian usage "Libau" unusual on the Lithuanian stamp?"

My answer, along with a map, was published in a subsequent issue, and directly led to my interest in clarifying this German occupation issue to a broader collector community.[1] This new survey hopes to bring both clarity and collector interest to this philatelic stepchild by means of a dispassionate, non-national, consolidated view, and by providing, for the very first time, images of all but one of the 83 recognized *Ob. Ost* post office cancels – provisionals included: ***Fig 5***, and

a spreadsheet of details on each post office, including conflicts in the literature: ***Table 4***.

Understanding how the *Ob. Ost* issue should be categorized, why so many of the towns in the occupied Russian Empire already had ancient German names, and why collecting all the cancels of this issue is so challenging, requires historical context going back centuries before WWI.

"Drang nach Osten"
Seven Centuries of German Influence in the Baltics

Adolph Hitler, in the midst of World War II, famously used the phrase "*Drang nach Osten*" in saying, "It is eastwards, only and always eastwards, that the veins of our race must expand. It is the direction which Nature herself has decreed for the expansion of the German peoples." While that phrase was first used to describe German intentions by a Polish journalist in 1849, and became a slogan for the German nationalist movement in the late 19th century, German merchants began pushing eastward to Baltic seaports and interior towns along Viking trade routes as far back as the 12th century. On the heels of those merchants, a German monk arrived in Riga, capital of today's Latvia, in 1180, on a mission to mass-convert pagan Livs, a Finnic tribe that had lived in the area since the 5th century. He promised them protection against Lithuanians on two conditions: 1. that the Livs pay the taxes necessary to pay both the workmen who would build a stone castle, and the bishop's mercenary troops, and, 2. that Livs undergo baptism. When the Livs reneged, he asked King Henry IV of Germany for help, and his request of Pope Celestine III led to a crusade against Baltic pagans. The forcible conversion of the Livs in 1206 inaugurated seven centuries of German influence over the northern Baltics.

By 1356 German trade with the Baltics had increased to the point that The Hanseatic League (membership restricted to Germans) was founded to compete with the Swedish merchants who then controlled all Baltic Sea trade. The League protected German traders from Baltic Sea pirates and provided diplomatic privileges to member merchants. Timber, furs, tar, flax, honey,

wheat, and rye flowed west to Germany and England, while cloth and manufactured goods flowed east. The League waged war via its own armies, had its own legal system, and spread the use of German in the northern Baltics as an administrative and legal language, a practice that lasted until 1880's Russification efforts.

The extent of Hanseatic "colonization" – and its similarity in geographic coverage to German Baltic occupations in WWI and WWII, is illustrated via *Fig 1*[2], which shows areas under Hanseatic influence in the 14th and 15th centuries. League cities in what became Estonia in the 20th century – and which later became *Ob. Ost* post offices – include (using the Germanic version of their names here and elsewhere in the body

of this article): Reval, Pernau, Dorpat, Fellin, Narwa, Hapsal, Wesenberg, and Weissenstein. 20th century Latvian cities included Riga (whose population as late as 1867 was 43% German), Wenden, Windau, Goldingen, Walk, Wolmar, and Lemsal. But only one post was established in what became 20th century Lithuania: Kowno. Wilno, while an important trading center for products destined for Hanseatic markets, never joined the League. Unlike the situation in what later became Latvia and Estonia, the League was never able to establish a monopoly over Lithuanian merchants: the Grand Duchy was hostile to the League because of centuries of failed Germanic attempts at subjugation. League merchants *were* tolerated within Lithuania if they paid the required fees.[3]

Fig 1. Areas under Hanseatic influence in the 14th and 15th centuries

Baltic Germans were, for centuries – and through the *Ob. Ost* period – the largest landowners in the northern Baltics. They were not just tolerated by whomever ruled the area, but were granted special privileges – especially by the Russian Empire. While the 1905 Russian Revolution led to the burning of "Baltic Baron" manors, and the killing and torture of members of the nobility, only post-WWI land reforms in newly-independent Estonia and Latvia finally broke up their estates, distributing the land to

the poor. In sum, while, as Vejas Gabriel Liulevičius says,[4] occupying German soldiers in 1914 "…had little direct experience of the lands just to their east," the Baltic peoples they occupied were quite familiar with Germans – either as historic enemies or as Baltic nobility. Invading German soldiers considered Baltic Germans traitors if their loyalty was to Russia, while Russians sometimes considered them the enemy. But what precipitated the 1914 German eastward invasion of the Russian Empire?

World War I Timeline and the Establishment of the *Ob. Ost* Territory

1914: On June 28 Archduke Francis Ferdinand (heir to Austria-Hungary's throne) and his wife were assassinated in Bosnia (annexed by A-H six years earlier from Turkey) by a Serbian student who had been supplied weapons by the "Black Hand," a Serbian nationalist society. A-H Emperor Franz Josef, seeing an opportunity to both crush the Serbian nationalist movement and strengthen his influence in the Balkans, blamed the Serbian government for the assassination. He promptly issued an ultimatum to Serbia knowing it would be rejected, but which provided an excuse for invasion. Meanwhile, A-H asked Germany to confirm it would come to her aid should Serbia's ally, Russia, adhere to its promise to protect Serbia. Germany agreed, and so A-H confidently declared war on Serbia July 28. Russia subsequently announced mobilization of its local army units. Germany, believing it faced "grave and imminent danger"[5] because of that mobilization, declared war on Russia on August 1, the "official" start of WWI. But it was Russia that drew first blood by invading East Prussia on August 17. Differences in the railway gauge between Russia and Prussia (Russia's was narrower) made it difficult for the Russians to get supplies through to their men. German General Paul von Hindenburg was brought out of retirement to take charge, and his army, on home ground, surrounded the Russian army at Tannenberg before its commander realized what was happening. The ensuing battle, August 26 – September 2, was a major defeat for the Russian army – thousands were killed and 125,000 taken prisoner. On November 1, von Hindenburg was made *Oberbefehlshaber der gesamten Deutschen Streitkräfte im Osten* (Supreme Commander of all German Forces in the East), a title, which, shortened to *Ober Ost or Ob. Ost*, also came to mean the underlined area commanded. "Tsarist authorities, becoming more and more suspicious of Baltic Germans, closed down German schools and societies, and prohibited the public use of the German language. Russian nationalism was not only directed at Germans, however, but also against all non-Russian nationalities."[6]

1915: By February, continued Russian army defeats led to their complete evacuation from East Prussia. During the first stages of the advance into the Russian Empire's Suwalki, Grodno, Kowno and Kurland guberniyas (using the Germanic versions of the names of Russian administrative provinces, here and elsewhere in this article), Germans met limited resistance,[7] and reached Libau, on the Baltic, by May 8. By mid-August, Germans occupied Kowno, and Wilno by mid-September. Meeting heavy Russian resistance at the Daugava River, just short of Riga and the border with Livland guberniya, the German army, and the front line, held relatively steady for the next two years. Meanwhile, in the *Ob. Ost* area, the southwestern portion was handed over, in October 1915, to a separate German puppet state: the *Kaiserliche Deutschen Generalgouvernement Warschau*. (Its overprinted stamps and cancels are covered by Michel as "*Deutsche Post in Polen.*") The remainder of *Ob. Ost*, still nearly 42,000 square miles, was divided into three administrative districts: the "Lithuania District": *Verwaltungberzik Litauen*; the "Bialystok-Grodno District": *Verwaltungberzik Bialystok-Grodno* to the south; and "Kurland District": *Verwaltungberzik Kurland* to the north, as depicted in **Fig 2**. (As the German-occupied area grew in 1917-18, the boundaries and names of districts would keep changing.)
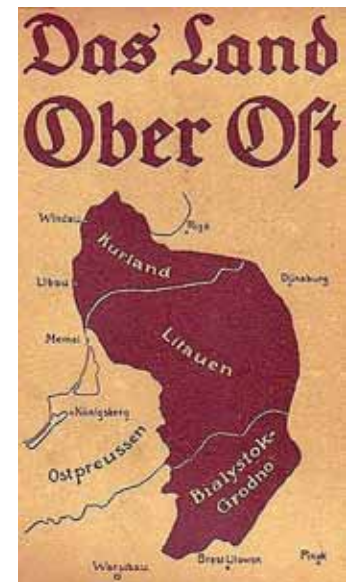
Fig 2. 1916 Districts of the *Ob. Ost* area

Table 1. 1916 Population by Occupied German District[8]

Verwaltungberzik	Area: km² / sq. miles	Residents, Late 1916	Residents per km² / sq. mile
Kurland	19,139 / 7,390	269,812	14 / 37
Litauen	63,275 / 24,431	1,928,123	30 / 79
Bialystok-Grodno	26,394 / 10,191	712,000	28 / 70
Totals:	108,808 / 42,011	2,909,935	27 / 69

1916: On January 14 the German government announced establishment of a network of post offices for use by administrators and civilians, in cooperation with (and often sharing the same quarters as) the military's existing *Feldpost* system – not the *German Reichspost*. (Harry v. Hofmann disagrees with other experts: "*The Post offices operating in the area of the Oberbefehlshaber Ost were establishments of the German Reichspost, and as such were equipped with postmarks of the German Type. The place-names used on them generally were the historical German ones, however there was a series of incorrectly manufactured postmarks, of which some were kept at the German postal headquarters in Kowno and were not issued; others were tacitly tolerated[25].*") In larger towns, a telegraph office might also have shared the same quarters, which sometimes led, along with delays in receiving proper cancellers, to use of the "provisional" cancels, seen on **Fig 5** (pages 20-21), to cancel *Ob. Ost* stamps. The area to be served, headquartered in Kowno, was to be called *Postgebiet Ob. Ost*. The next day, January 15, the first 15 *Ob. Ost* post offices opened for business: five in occupied Kurland, four each in occupied Grodno, Kowno and Suwalki guberniyas, and one in Wilna guberniya. Germania-design overprinted stamps – in denominations of 3, 10, 20 and 40 pfennig, and 1 mark – were available for use that day. On August 1, the first supplementary stamp issue added denominations of 2½ and 7½ pfennig[25]. By the end of 1916, 24 more offices opened (adding up to 47% of all *Ob. Ost* post offices that would eventually open), helping service 2.9 million occupied civilians.

1917: In January, headquarters for the *Ob. Ost* postal system moved to Bialystok, but it was a quiet year for new post offices – only two more were opened: Alt-Auz in Kurland, and the first in Livland: Riga, a month after its September capture by the German army. But it was a momentous year in history: in March, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia abdicated as a consequence of the February Russian Revolution; in September, Baltic Germans began forming their own provincial councils; in November Bolsheviks overthrew the Kerensky government and installed a Communist one led by Lenin; on December 12 a German-Russian armistice was signed by a new Russian government; and on December 22, Russia opened separate peace negotiations with Germany at Brest-Litovsk. A second (and last) supplementary stamp issue, in denominations of 15 and 25 pfennig, was made available in 1917 and 1918. All fees for postal services were as in the German Reich[25].

1918: Taking advantage of waning Communist interest in fighting the war, the German army quickly advanced (**Fig 3**), and the *Ob. Ost* postal area expanded along with it: in this last year of the war, 42 (51% of all) *Ob. Ost* post offices were opened, including the first in Estland, St. Petersburg and Pleskau guberniyas. At the same time, Baltic peoples seized the opportunity to rid themselves of Russian domination: on February 16, Lithuania declared its independence from Russia, and Estonia followed suit February 24 (Latvia declared on November 18, after the war ended). On March 3, the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty was signed by Soviet Russia and the Central Powers: Germany, Austria and Turkey, relinquishing Russian control over their former Baltic provinces. However, the treaty had no effect on the ground: "fighting did not cease[25]. But immediately thereafter, Baltic-German-dominated provincial councils declared themselves the independent states of the Duchy of Courland and Baltic State Duchy, proclaiming them to be in union with the Kingdom of Prussia. (See the 1920 British atlas **Fig 4** depicting a United Baltic Duchy and a reduced "Lithuania," which nevertheless included Wilna). Its appointed Regency Council of four Baltic Germans, three ethnic Estonians and three ethnic Latvians functioned until November 28, but never got international recognition apart from Germany. On June 4, 16 of 20 members (including Antanas Smetona, Lithuania's first president in April 1919, and, after a 1926 military coup d'état, also its last before WWII) of the Council of Lithuania voted to invite Duke Wilhelm of Urach, Württemberg, to become the king of a newly independent Lithuania on condition he live in Lithuania and speak its language. Wilhelm agreed, was elected July 11 and took the name Mindaugas II. But the German government didn't recognize Wilhelm's selection as king, and, as it became clear that Germany would lose the war,

Fig 3. Expanded *Ob. Ost* area, 1917-18

on November 2 the Council of Lithuania reversed its decision. On November 11, "Armistice Day," fighting theoretically ceased at 11 am, ending World War I. The last six *Ob. Ost* post offices (five in Kowno g. and one in Wilna g.) opened that same day. Alt-Auz

in Kurland g., which had been open from March to May in 1917, reopened four days later, on November 15, only to close again on December 26. By December 31, all *Ob. Ost* post offices (except for Libau, which remained open until January 4, 1919) were closed.

Fig 4. A 1920 British atlas depicting a United Baltic Duchy and a reduced "Lithuania," which nevertheless included Wilna

Collecting and Categorizing the *Ob. Ost* Issue

Relative Scarcity of Cancels

Only 17 *Ob. Ost* post offices were open for business a thousand days or more, while 15 were open for 100 days or less. Forty-four (53% of all) were open for less than a year – which contributes to the difficulty in achieving a "complete" collection of cancels (***Fig 6***, page 22, and ***Fig 5***, pp. 20-21). Writing in 1949, thirty years after the

closing of *Ob. Ost* post offices, Curt Noske[9] still had not seen cancellations on *Ob. Ost* stamps from Ellei, Janischki, Kiejdany and Radziwillischki, and had seen the Szczuczyn cancel only on a *Generalgouvernement* – Warschau stamp (the area to which the town belonged before reassignment to the *Ob. Ost* area) – and so doubted their existence. He also considered that only 82 of the 83 post offices had their own cancellation (see Pleskau listing in section on provisional cancellations).
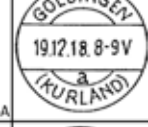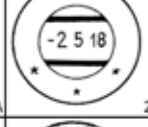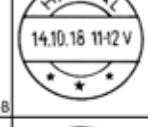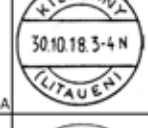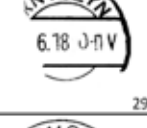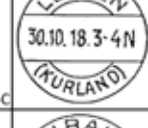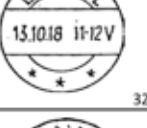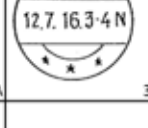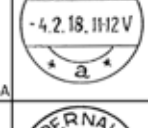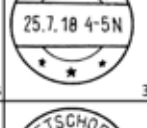
ALT-AUZ 13.4.17. 9-10 V **1-A**	ANNENBURG 24.11.18 9-10 N (KURLAND) **2-A**	Arensburg **3-A**	ARENSBURG -1.6 18 3-4 N (OESEL) **3-B**	AUGUSTOW 18.1. 16. 7-8 V **4-A**	Baltisch-Port **5-A**
BALTISCHPORT 22.5. 18.9-10 V **5-B**	BAUSK 14.9. 18.6-7 N **6-A**	BIALOWIES 16.7. 18. 2-3 N **7-A**	BIALYSTOK 11.10.17.5-6 N a **8-A**	BIELSK 28 3 16 11-12 V **9-A**	BRZOSTOWICA 14.8.17.11-12 V WIELKA **10-A**
DAUDSEWAS -5.11.18.12-1 N (KURLAND) **11-A**	DOBLEN 14.11.18. 3-4 N (KURLAND) **12-A**	DOMBROWO 28.5. 16 9-10 V **13-A**	DORPAT **14-A**	Dorpat. **14-B**	Dorpat **14-C**
Ob Ost Dorpat **14-D**	Dorpat **14-E**	22 3. 18 **14-F**	30318 Ҡ **14-G**	АКАЗНОЕ **14-H**	DORPAT -2.5. 18.10-11 V **14-I**
DORPAT 24.9. 18. 4-11 V a **14-J**	ELLEI -6.9.18.4-5 N (KURLAND) **15-A**	Fellin. **16-A**	FELLIN **16-B**	Fellin **16-C**	FELLIN -9.7. 18.4-5 N **16-D**
GEORGENBURG -8.11 18. 11-12 V (LITAUEN) **17-A**	GOLDINGEN -8.8. 18.8-9 V **18-A**	GOLDINGEN 19.12.18. 8-9 V a (KURLAND) **18-B**	GROBIN -8.12.18.9-10 V (KURLAND) **19-A**	GRODNO 19.1. 17. 11-12 V **20-A**	GRODNO 26.12.16. 11-12 V a **20-B**
Hapsal **21-A**	-2 5 18 **21-B**	HAPSAL 14.10.18 11-12 V **21-C**	HASENPOTH 24.12.16. 4-5 N **22-A**	JAKOBSTADT 11.10.18. 10-11 V **23-A**	24. Janischki Not Found
JANOW 24.6. 16 7-8 V **25-A**	KALWARIA 1.12.18 9-10 V **26-A**	KIEJDANY 30.10.18. 3-4 N (LITAUEN) **27-A**	KIELMY 18.2. 16. 10-11 V **28-A**	KNYSZYN 6.18 10-11 V **29-A**	Kowno **30-A**
KOWNO -2.1. 18.8-9 V **30-B**	KOWNO 31.12.16.8-9 V a **30-C**	LEEGEN 30.10. 18. 3-4 N (KURLAND) **31-A**	Lemsal. **32-A**	LEMSAL 13.10.18 11-12 V **32-B**	Libau **33-A**
LIBAU 21.6. 18.11-12 V **33-B**	LIBAU 20.3. 16. 11-12 V a **33-C**	LIBAU 20.11.18. 5-6 N b (KURLAND) **33-D**	LIDA 24.8. 16. 7-8 V **34-A**	LUNNO 20.5. 17. 2-3 M **35-A**	MAJORENHOF 17.9.18.9-10 V **36-A**
MARIAMPOL 25.3. 18 8-9 V **37-A**	MITAU 12.7. 16.3-4 N **38-A**	MITAU -4.2.18. 11-12 V a **38-B**	NARWA 25.7. 18 4-5 N **39-A**	NEUENBURG 30.11.18. 10-11 V (KURLAND) **40-A**	NIEDERBARTAU 20.12.18.9-10 V (KURLAND) **41-A**
OLITA 18.2. 16.2-3 N **42-A**	Pernau **43-A**	PERNAU 16.9.18. 8-9 N **43-B**	PETSCHORY 21.6. 18 6-12 V **44-A**	PILTEN 30.11.18.4-5 N (KURLAND) **45-A**	**46-A**

Fig 5a.
Ob. Ost post office cancels: Alt-Auz – Pleskau (46-A)

Fig 5b. *Ob. Ost* post office cancels: Pleskau (46-B) – Wolmar. Last two rows include outlier cancelations (see page 33 for details)
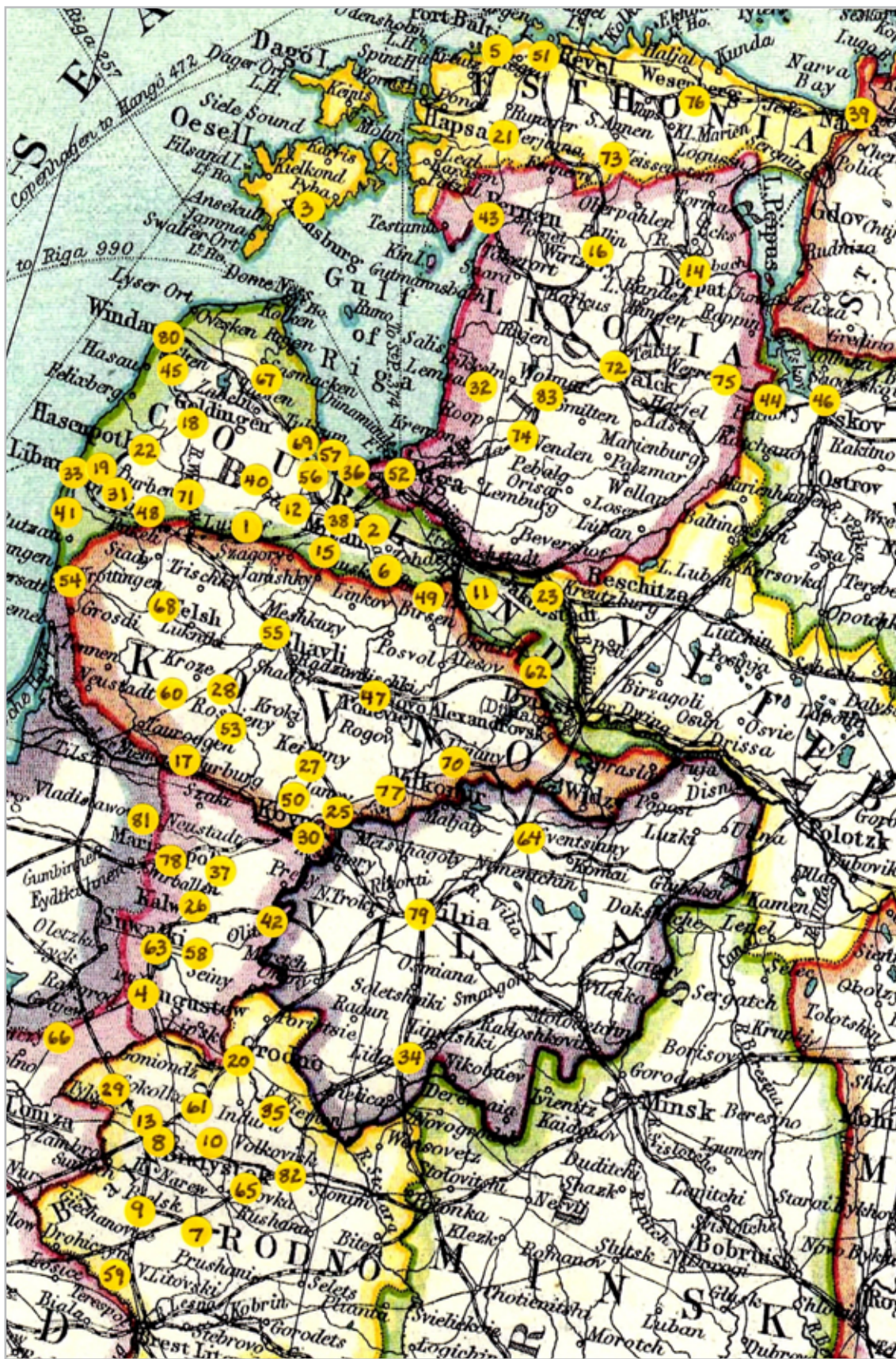
Fig 6. All 83 *Ob. Ost* post offices on a 1908 Harmsworth Atlas map of the Russian Empire

Today, the only *Ob. Ost* cancel whose image is still unrecorded is Janischki, whose post office was open for only 46 days. Dr. Vytautas Doniela[10], perhaps today's foremost Lithuanian philatelist, told me he believes "it has disappeared for good." But cancels are known – and illustrated in *Fig 5* – for five *Ob. Ost* post offices open an equally short or even shorter time: Rakischki, 29 days; Uzjany, 37 days; and three others open for 46 days: Kiejdany, Radziwillischki, and Szczuczyn, so other factors contribute to the scarcity of many *Ob. Ost* cancels:

1. <u>Collector interest</u>. There has not been, as far as I know, the kind of exhaustive survey of this issue's cancels published by the Belarusian and Polish philatelic community as there has been by Lithuanian-, Latvian- and Estonian-focused philatelists.

2. The <u>population</u> of many of the towns wherein the post offices were located were often quite small, which limited the number of pieces of civilian mail handled by those offices. See the 1897 Russian Empire Imperial Census numbers for larger towns on *Fig 5*, and the population per square mile or kilometer in *Table 1*.

3. <u>Difficulty of some towns in getting proper cancellers</u>: (See the section on provisional cancellations.)

4. <u>Restrictions on civilian mail</u>. While initially – and some say much later, too[9, 11] – civilian mail was handled by military Feldpost offices, just weeks after Wilna was occupied, a decree was issued October 12, 1915 forbidding the mailing of letters, cards, or any kind of printed matter, including newspapers. The penalty for a first infraction was either a fine of 5000 Marks (equivalent, at the time, to about $1,000), or a year in jail, or both – with double the punishment for a second offense[12]. When civilian mail was finally allowed in January 1916, it was not only censored, but all correspondence had to be in German[13]. There was no delivery – all mail had to be either deposited or picked up at the post office. By July 1, 1916, writing in Lithuanian, Russian and Polish was allowed as long as a German translation was attached, as was correspondence with relatives in the US.

5. <u>Some German civilians were allowed to use the free-franked Feldpost system</u>: "German civilians who were involved in businesses, and who were working for military authorities in the occupied area dealing in supplies, running railway station cafes, soldiers' clubs or similar establishments were allowed to send their postage-paid items via the Feldpost, whenever there was no civilian postal service in their areas of operation. In June 1916 the soldiers' clubs became purely military establishments and the German civilians working there were given the right to send mail post-free via the Feldpost; non-German civilians, however, had to continue paying postage[25].

The Philatelic Literature Gets Categorization *Partly* Right

There's a wealth of valuable information on the *Ob. Ost* issue in the Michel catalog, and in the national-oriented philatelic literature. But this article, rather than merely summarizing what has been said before in easily available commentary, focuses on the more obscure sources, on the conflicts between sources and on the misinformation which has crept into the literature.

Scott "2013 Classic Specialized Catalog": The brief commentary in the in the "Lithuania" section under "Occupation Stamps: Issued under German Occupation," is completely accurate in two – and only two – respects:

1. The stamps <u>were</u> the "Germania" issues of 1905 – 1917

2. They <u>were</u> overprinted in black "*Postgebiet Ob. Ost*"

But then they drop the ball: Scott says "These stamps were used in the former Russian provinces of Suvalki, Vilnius, Kaunas, Kurland, Estland and Lifland." Scott editors got this wrong in two important ways:

1. Assignment of the *Ob. Ost* issue to the "Lithuania" section of their catalog

2. The names and locations of where *Ob. Ost* stamps were used

On what basis should a stamp issue be ascribed to a particular country? The possibilities and their answers:

1. *The occupying entity:* that's Germany

2. *The legal entity originally occupied:* that's all or parts of nine Russian Empire guberniyas – not Scott's six (see *Fig 6*)

3. *The country, today, whose territory includes the area – or most of the area – wherein the issue was in use:* there is no one country, today, which easily fits that description

4. The only other rationales:

a) *Tradition* – the path I believe taken by Scott's editors

b) *Defining "Lithuania" according to its 17th century boundaries (**Fig 7**: Lithuania in 1634), when it was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and at its peak included, some as vassal states, territories that comprise today's Estonia, Latvia, Kaliningrad Oblast, eastern Poland, Belarus and western Ukraine.* That's actually what I do at my own map site: *http://www.lithuanianmaps.com/* What I don't do at my site is confuse political with cultural boundaries: the huge Grand Duchy of Lithuania was not a *cultural, or ethnographic*, entity, where everyone – or even a simple

majority – spoke Lithuanian: its conquered and negotiated territories included people of many different cultures and languages.
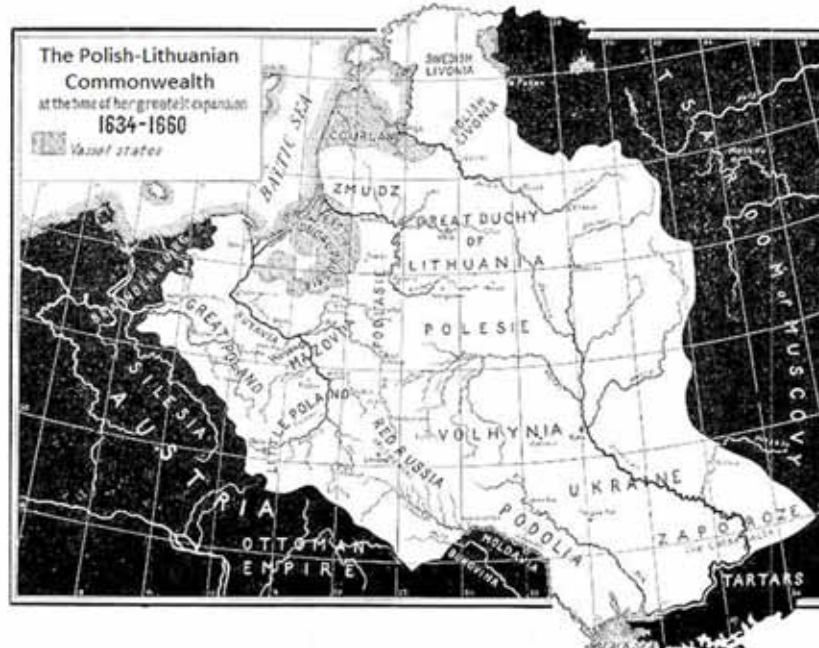
Fig 7. Lithuania in 1634

Scott's list of Russian province/guberniya names for the *Ob. Ost* area are either inconsistent in naming convention, wrong or missing (See *Table 1* for the valid names of all *Ob. Ost*-occupied guberniyas). Their only valid choices: the German, Russian, or even the Lithuanian version of the guberniya names. I'll stick to the German version.

• "Suvalki," (instead of Suwalki) might be a mistaken attempt to transliterate the Russian name for the capital city of the guberniya

• "Vilnius" and "Kaunas" (instead of Wilna and Kowno) are contemporary Lithuanian city names, in Lithuanian: neither were used by Germans or Russians to refer to the occupied guberniyas

• "Lifland" (instead of Livland) is a rarely-used variant German name

• "Kurland" and "Estland" <u>are</u> the correct German versions of the Russian guberniya names

• And, of course, Scott completely leaves out the guberniyas of Grodno, Pleskau and St. Petersburg, all of which had *Ob. Ost* post offices – as well as Vitebsk guberniya, which, while having no *Ob. Ost* post office of its own, was partially within, and serviced by, *Postgebiet Ob. Ost.*

<u>Michel "Deutschland-Spezial 2011" catalog</u>: correctly assigns the issue to German Occupations, but errs in describing the "biggest expansion [of the *Ob. Ost* area] in the fall of 1918, [encompassing] large ar-

eas of present-day Estonia, Latvia, Poland and North West Russia." That's only partially accurate – they forgot the six *Ob. Ost* post offices in present-day Belarus. Michel correctly lists Szczuczyn as both an *Ob. Ost* post office (qualifying it with the added info: *Litauen*), <u>and</u> as a "*Deutsche Post in Polen*" post office. That's because, prior to October, 1915, the area it was in was part of the *Ob. Ost* administrative district: afterwards, it was part of *Kaiserliche Deutsche Generalgouvernement Warschau*, which issued its own overprinted Germania-design stamps.

<u>Germany-focused literature:</u>

• **Carl Bohnert**, writing in 1918[11], while the *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* system was still functioning: "The Russian steamroller is smashed to pieces. In a tenacious struggle with very strong enemies, German and Austria-Hungarian troops have driven back the Russians and followed them into their own territory. Poland and Lithuania are occupied by German troops. In August 1917 the old City of Riga opened her gates for the long-awaited liberators, and by year-end the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was drafted…German troops cleared the Baltic of Russian criminals and brought German order. And, as part of that order, came the Post. The military Feldpost was established first – it was accessible to civilians, and provided a connection to Germany. But this arrangement could only be temporary, and, in the most important places, government post

offices were established as soon as possible…There was no *Ob. Ost* office in Pleskau – the Feldpost office handled both military and civilian post…On the isles of Oesel, Dagoe and Moon the Feldpost office in Arensburg delivers the civilian post, and also on the mainland in distant regions the Feldpost offices take civil correspondence for further sending, applying *Ob. Ost* postage stamps with Feldpost cancellations…"

• **Curt R. Noske**, writing in 1949[9], defined the *Ob. Ost* region as "embracing approximately the border states of Estland, Letland and Lithuania, and the Russian province of Grodno," mixing Russian guberniyas and later independent states in both the Germanic and English versions of their names (*or was it Noske's translator?*). Its mission: "…serving the occupational authorities as well as the civilian population of these former Russian territories." While most philatelic references treat Noske's opening and closing dates for *Ob. Ost* post offices as scripture, Carl Bohnert, writing in 1918[11], cites 14 different opening dates, and Estonian[14] and Latvian[7] references also sometimes disagree (see ***Table 4***, pp. 29-32, for a full list of conflicts).

• **Arnold Engel**, writing in March 1982[15], got both the geography and timeline wrong when he says "After German troops occupied city of Livonia (Lifland)… the occupied area was governed by the German-Military-Command 'Obert–Ost' in whose power the Ober – Ost postal system was entrusted." He meant the guberniya of Livonia, not the (non-existent) city, but Livonia was not occupied by Germans until 1917, while the *Ob. Ost* administrative area was established years before. He also errs in repeating the frequently stated "The *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* was primarily a military organization serving the military authorities, and, to a limited extent, the civilian population in occupied areas." When the *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* was established, military personnel already had access to the free-frank Feldpost, and needed neither stamps nor another postal facility alongside the Feldpost office to send or receive mail. *Ob. Ost* post offices served official non-military mail, as well as civilian mail. His list of "major" post offices (thus, perhaps, avoiding mention of offices whose existence he deemed in dispute) is categorized as being in either "Kurland, Livland, Poland or Lithuania," mixing later independent state names with the German version of two Russian guberniya names, and omitting offices in Estland, St. Petersburg, Kowno, Wilna, Grodno, Suwalki and Pleskau guberniyas.

Lithuania-focused literature:

• **Dr. Al Račkus**, writing in 1947[16], said that on December 26, 1918, the day the *Ob. Ost* post office in Vilnius closed, "Rumors were spreading in Vilnius that Jonas Strazdas [who began printing the first two Lithuanian stamps the day before], had intentions to overprint some of the German *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* stamps. Germans were infuriated and threatened to shoot all the 'Litauische Schweine' (pigs) if any of the overprinted stamps appeared anywhere…Strazdas was in hiding until the Germans evacuated Lithuania…on January 1, 1919."

• **Walter E. Norton**, in a 1953[13] recounting of first-person experiences in the *Ob. Ost* area during WWI, referred to a 1922 article by Curt Noske[17] in which Noske describes the *Ob. Ost* area as "the Upper Eastern Territories which comprised Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Central Lithuania and parts of White Russia and Poland attributable to ethnographic Lithuania during the World War years of 1916-18." Lithuania and Latvia, of course, existed neither as guberniyas at the start of the war, nor as 20th century independent countries until 1918. Central Lithuania, which existed only from 1920-22, may have been a useful geographic reference in 1922, but lost relevance thereafter. Norton also says "…students of this issue, including Curt Noske," question whether six post offices [my #'s 24, 27, 49, 50, 66, and 70] in "Lithuania" actually existed or functioned – a reasonable statement in 1953, but a doubt that has since been laid to rest. (*The reference by Noske to "Ethnographic Lithuania" repeats as fact a 20th century nationalist construct: that, for instance, even though a small minority of residents of Wilno guberniya claimed Lithuanian as their mother tongue – or were even able to speak it – they were all "really Lithuanians" who just needed re-educating as to their ethnic roots. In fact, while area residents might well have called themselves "Lithuanians" because of historic political boundaries, following Stalin's 1939 assignment of Vilnius to Lithuania rather than to Belarus or Poland, it was the removal of ethnic Poles: 100,000 left Vilnius for communist Poland in 1944-48, and Belarusians, on top of the extermination of some 63,000 Vilnius Jews during WWII, that led to the area of the former Wilno guberniya finally becoming ethnographically Lithuanian.*[18])

• **Vytautas Fugalevičius**, in his seminal 1990[19] treatise on Lithuanian cancellations, identified, as post offices "in Lithuania – but not in today's Lithuania:" (referring, perhaps, to 18th century Lithuania boundaries)

Augustow (*Suwalki g.; in today's Poland*)
Dombrowo (*Grodno g.; in today's Poland*)
Grodno (*Grodno g.; in today's Belarus*)
Lida (*Wilna g.; in today's Belarus*)
Sejny (*Suwalki g.; in today's Poland*)
Suwalki (*Suwalki g.; in today's Poland*)
Szczuczyn (*Wilna g.; in today's Poland*)

…laying down a Lithuanian claim to two of Grodno g.'s 11 *Ob. Ost* post offices; three of nine in Suwalki g.; five of 11 *Ob. Ost* post offices in today's Poland; and two of six *Ob. Ost* post offices in today's Belarus.

Belarus-focused literature:

• Not so fast, said **Bohdan Pauk** in 1996[20]. In his view, "Fourteen post offices were opened on *Belarusin* (using his spelling) territory." He identifies them as (*actual town names on the cancels, if different from Pauk's Belarusian versions, follow within parens*):

Auhustowa *(Augustow)*
Bialowezh *(Bialowies)*
Bialystok
Bielsk
Dombrowa *(Dombrowo)*
Grodno
Lida
Lunna *(Lunno)*
Sokolka
Suwalki
Swislocz
Szczuczyn
Vilnius *(Wilna)*
Wolkowysk

Latvia-focused literature:

• **Andrejs Petrevics**, writing in 1974[21], said Scott's classification of the *Ob. Ost* issue as a Lithuanian one "…is only partly correct inasmuch as these stamps were also used in Poland, Estonia and Latvia…"

• **Harry Steiss**, writing in 1975[22], said "…and now the armies occupied a part of the Russian Empire even further east and north, part of which later would be known as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia…Some catalogs list this issue under "Lithuania," which is misleading, for this issue served the entire northeastern area."

• **Nikolajs Jakimovs** and **Victor Marcilger**, writing in 1995[7] of the German invasion in WWI, said "The territory which later became the Republic of Latvia consisted at that time of the Russian guberniyas of Courland, the western part of the Witebsk and the southern part of Livonia…There were three categories of *Ob. Ost* post offices: 1. *'Postamt,'* main post offices; 2. *'Post-Agentur,'* auxiliary post offices; and 3. *'Geschäftsstelle,'* post offices attached to Army Feldpost offices." They claimed no post offices either Fugalevičius or Pauk considered "Lithuanian" or "Belarusian," but they did declare that Walk is "Latvian."

• **Harry v. Hofmann** (one of only two authors – the other being Noske – cited by Michel in its *Ob. Ost* section), writing in 2006[25], was always careful to describe the German occupation as that of Russian provinces, and focused on the territory that would later become the Republic of Latvia.

Estonia-focused literature:

• **Vambola Hurt** and **Elmar Ojaste**, writing in 1986[14], claimed Walk as "Estonian." But that's an old argument, finally settled the way the Bible's King Solomon suggested: on July 1, 1920 the town was divided between the newly-born states of Latvia (as Valka) and Estonia (as much larger Valga). Not having the street address of the Walk *Ob. Ost* post office, I give the assignment edge to pre-WWI Livland g.

Baltic-focused Dutch literature, online:

• **Jan Kaptein**[12] wrote that "Vilnius and the rest of Lithuania were no longer part of 'Russian-Polen,' so new overprintings were [made] on German postage stamps. The overprint for *'Postgebiet Ob. Ost'* had the same type as the stamps for 'Russian-Polen.'" But neither Vilnius nor the historic Grand Duchy of Lithuania was ever part of Russian-Polen, an 1815-1915 creation (as **Fig 8** makes clear) of the Congress of Vienna.

Fig 8. Russian/Congress-Polen 1815-1915

The Facts on assignment of the *Ob. Ost* issue

The numbered yellow dots on *Fig 6* correspond to the alphabetically-numbered post offices in *Fig 5*, which uses Michel-recognized/named *Ob. Ost* post offices as a guide. I used a combination of that map and chart to derive *Table 2*, below, which lists Russian guberniya names in German, Russian (in both Cyrillic and transliterated English), and Lithuanian versions.

Table 2. Russian guberniyas in descending order, based on the number of *Ob. Ost* post offices in each guberniya

# P.O's	%	German	Russian губерния (guberniya)	Transliterated Russian	Lithuanian	Guberniyas Existence
23	28%	Kurland	Курляндская г.	Kurlyandskaya g.	Kuršo g.	1795-1915
16	19%	Kowno	Ковенская г.	Kovenskaya g.	Kauno g.	1843-1915
12	14%	Livland	Лифляндская г.	Liflyandskaya g.	Lifliandijos g.	17961918
11	13%	Grodno	Гродненская г.	Grodnenskaya g.	Gardino g.	1795-1917
9	11%	Suwalki	Сувалкская г.	Suvalkskaya g.	Suvalkų g.	1867-1914
5	6%	Estland	Эстляндская г.	Estlyandskaya g.	Estlandijos g.	1796-1917
4	5%	Wilna	Виленская г.	Vilenskaya g.	Vilniaus g.	1795-1915
2	2%	Pleskau	Псковская г.	Pskovskaya g.	Pskovo g.	1796-1924
1	2%	St. Petersburg	Санкт-Петербургская г.	Sankt-Peterburgskaya g.	S. Peterburgo g.	1708-1927
83	100%					

Germany invaded and occupied part of the Russian Empire, and chose to administer one specific area as *Postgebiet Ob. Ost.* (Germany and Austria-Hungary also invaded and separately occupied parts of Russian Poland, as seen on *Fig 9.*) That area later became Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and parts of Belarus, Poland and Russia. I see no rational support for Scott's assignment of the issue to Lithuania (unless we're talking 17th century boundaries), which did not exist as an independent political entity at the time of the establishment of *Postgebiet Ob. Ost.* Lithuania disappeared as a political entity following the 1795 partition, and did not reappear until its formal declaration of independence, February 16, 1918, more than two years after the first *Ob. Ost* post offices opened.

Can a case be made for assignment of the issue to Lithuania based on a majority of those post offices being within its present boundaries? Here's where those post offices are today, in descending order:

# of P.O.'s		Today's Country
30	36%	Latvia
23	28%	Lithuania
11	13%	Estonia
11	13%	Poland
6	7%	Belarus
2	3%	Russia
83	100%	

Fig 9. In 1916, in this Polish map, occupying German forces in the north, and Austrian forces in the south, led to the creation of the puppet state "Kingdom of Poland", which lasted until late 1918

How about ethnographic, or cultural, boundaries – perhaps using the preponderance of spoken Lithuanian in the *Ob. Ost* area as a reason to assign it to Lithuania? ***Fig 10***, an 1876 German map showing where Lithuanian was spoken, might be assumed to be free of Baltic/Slavic bias: while it includes the part of East Prussia sometimes called "Lithuania Minor," it excludes most of the Suwalki and Grodno guberniyas, and without their inclusion as part of "Lithuania," Scott's assignment again falls apart.
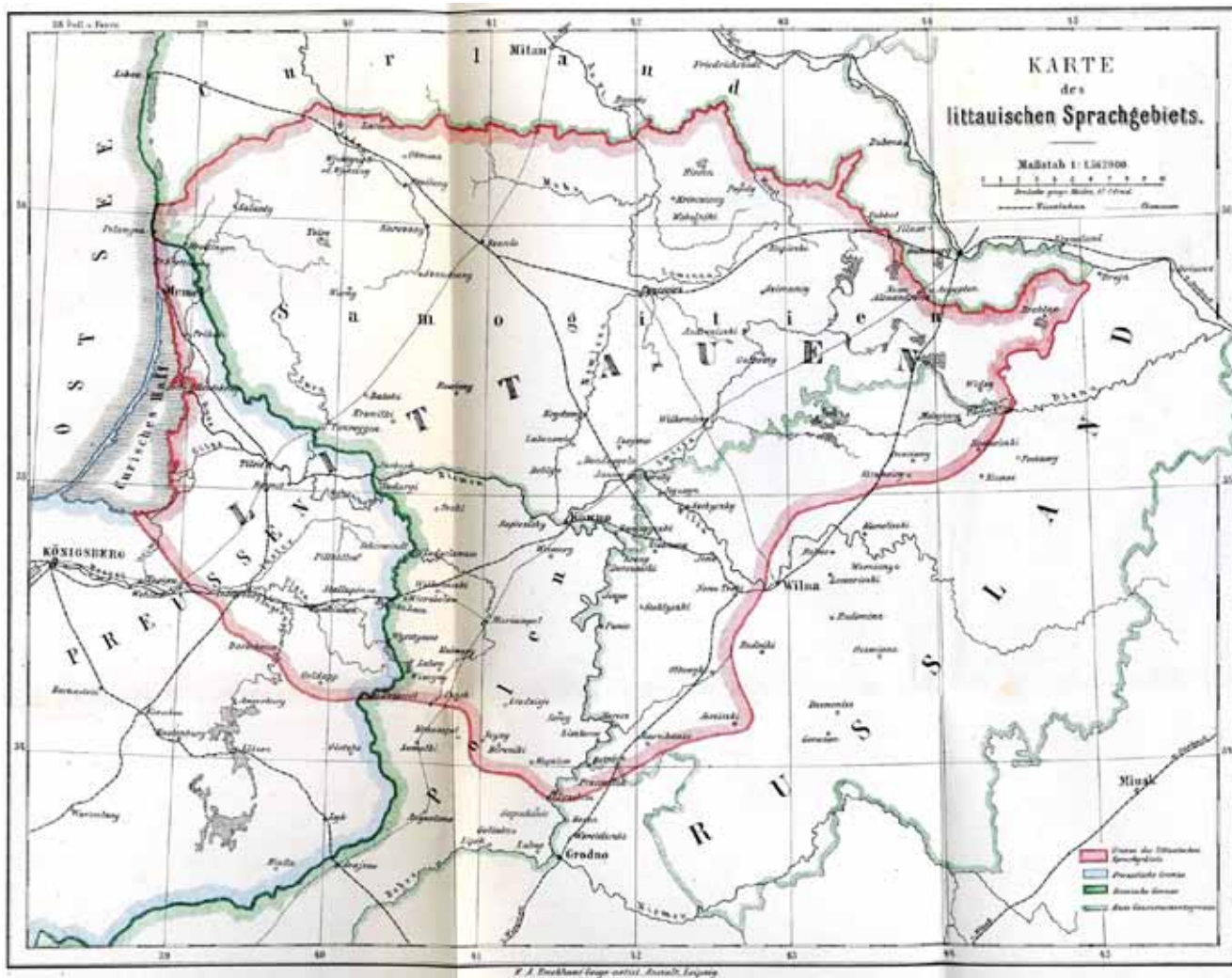
Fig 10. An 1876 German map showing the Lithuanian-speaking areas

Also, below is a summary of the 1897 Russian Empire Census (the only complete one ever conducted), by guberniya (leaving out St. Petersburg and Pleskau). "Nationality" was determined by declared "mother" language, and the results of this census are likely skewed towards the nationality preferred by the Russians, in order to inflate the numbers of population of Russian "ethnicity." Another influence on answers might be alleged 19th century Russification efforts banning the printing of books and newspapers in Lithuanian – but that's not the case: an 1864 Russian administrative order, lifted only April 24, 1904, made it illegal to print, import, distribute, or possess any publications in the Latin alphabet. Lithuanian-language publications that used Cyrillic instead of Latin characters were allowed and even encouraged[23], so the ban itself would not necessarily have influenced 1897 identification of Mother Tongue.

Table 3. 1897 Russian Empire Census, percent by language, by guberniya, in the *Ob. Ost* area[24]

"Mother" Language	Suwalki	Grodno	Wilna	Kowno	Kurland	Livland	Estland	% all seven guberniyas	all seven guberniyas
Russian[a]	9.1	71.2	61.1	7.3	5.7	5.4	5.1	32.5	2,407,400
Lithuanian[b]	52.2	0.2	17.6	66.0	2.7	0.5	0.0	17.9	1,327,706
Latvian	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	75.1	43.4	0.1	15.0	1,106,380
Estonian	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	39.9	88.7	12.0	885,291
Jewish[c]	10.1	17.4	12.7	13.7	5.6	1.8	0.3	11.0	814,759
Polish	23.0	10.1	8.2	9.0	2.9	1.2	0.2	8.1	601,397
German	5.2	0.6	0.2	1.4	7.6	7.6	3.9	3.1	232,031
Other	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.2	1.7	0.4	22,306
Overall	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	7,397,270

a: includes Great – or Moscow-focused – Russians, and two branches who had lived in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: White Russians (Belarusians), and Little Russians (Ukrainians); b: includes those identifying their mother tongue as Samogitian, a Lithuanian dialect – in Lithuanian: Žemaičių tarmė; c: Jewish is not a language, but a religion. Yiddish is a High German language of Ashkenazi Jewish origin, which developed as a fusion of Hebrew and Aramaic into German dialects, with the infusion of Slavic and traces of Romance languages. It is written in the Hebrew alphabet. Of the three major Eastern Yiddish dialects in Europe, Litvish was spoken by Jews in Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, Estonia and in the Suwałki region, while Poylish was spoken south and west, and Ukrainish south and east.

As of 1897, then, while self-identified Lithuanian-mother-tongue-speakers were the second overall only to Russians (more specifically, to White Russians or Belarusians, the overwhelming majority of "Russians" in the area) as the largest ethnicity in the seven primary guberniyas comprising the *Ob. Ost*, they held statistical majorities only in Suwalki g. areas bordering East Prussia, and in Kowno g. The ethnographic argument for assignment of the *Ob. Ost* issue to Lithuania is no stronger than that for assignment to Belarus or to Latvia. The rational

assignment is to Germany, as an occupation of northwest Russian Empire guberniyas.

Remaining factual conflicts in the philatelic literature are enumerated in *Table 4*: some differences are trivial, some are just embarrassing – and some beg for final resolution, like the undisputed opening and closing dates of some *Ob. Ost* post offices. Some conflicts are just the result of the lack of information which became available at a later date, like the denial of the existence of some now-recognized *Ob. Ost* post offices and their cancels.

Table 4. Remaining factual conflicts in the philatelic literature

Michel/Noske Ob. Ost Post Office Name	Original Russian Gubernia	1897 Russian Census	Today's City Name	Today's Country	Open Date Noske - Engel	Close Date Noske - Engel	Days Open[A]	Conflicts
1. Alt-Auz	Kurland		Auce *(formerly Vecauce)*	Latvia	(1) 18.3.17 (2) 15.11.18	(1) 14.5.17 (2) 26.12.18	(1) 58 (2) 42	**7:** First closed 4.5.17 **25:** German town and cancel spelled "Alt-Autz" (wrong) **25:** Current town is "Vecauce" (wrong)
2. Annenburg	Kurland		Emburga	Latvia	15.10.18	16.12.18	63	**15:** Does not list. **7:** Closed 26.12.18
3. Arensburg (Oesel)	Livland	4,603	Kuressaare (Saaremaa)	Estonia	1.5.18	2.12.18	216	
4. Augustow	Suwalki		Augustów	Poland	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,076	**15:** In "Lithuania"
5. Baltischport	Estland	900	Paldiski	Estonia	1.5.18	15.10.18	167	**15:** In "Kurland" **11:** Opened 17.5.18 **14:** Closed 15.11.18
6. Bausk	Kurland	6,544	Bauska	Latvia	15.1.16	15.12.18	1,066	**15, 21, 7:** Closed 23.12.18 **25.** Closed 23.12.18; Cancel was misspelled, should be "Bauske"

Table 4: continued

Michel/Noske Ob. Ost Post Office Name	Original Russian Gubernia	1897 Russian Census	Today's City Name	Today's Country	Open Date Noske - Engel	Close Date Noske - Engel	Days Open^A	Conflicts
7. Bialowies	Suwalki		Białowieska	Poland	1.7.16	15.12.18	898	**15**: In "Poland"
8. Białystok	Grodno	66,032	Białystok	Poland	15.1.16	22.12.18	1,073	**15**: In "Poland"
9. Bielsk	Grodno	7,464	Bielsk Podlaski	Poland	15.1.16	9.12.18	1,060	**15**: In "Poland"
10. Brzostowica Wielka	Grodno		Bierastavica Vialikaja	Belarus	1.7.16	20.12.18	903	**15**: In "Poland"
11. Daudsewas	Kurland		Daudzeva	Latvia	1.10.18	26.12.18	87	**7**: Opened 1.1.18
12. Doblen	Kurland		Dobele	Latvia	1.9.18	26.12.18	117	
13. Dombrowo	Grodno	1,988	Dąbrowa Białostocka	Poland	20.4.16	26.12.18	981	**15**: In "Poland"
14. Dorpat	Livland		Tartu	Estonia	1.5.18	29.12.18	243	**11**: Opened 29.4.18 **14**: Also was open 5.3.18 - 23.3.18, using cancel 14F
15. Ellei	Kurland		Eleja	Latvia	1.11.18	26.12.18	56	**4**: Cancel does not exist **5**: Opened 7.9.18 – but display cancel shows 6.9.18!
16. Fellin	Livland	7,736	Viljandi	Estonia	1.5.18	28.11.18	212	**11**: Opened 29.4.18
17. Georgenburg	Kowno		Jurbarkas	Lithuania	10.9.18	24.12.18	106	**15**: In "Lithuania"
18. Goldingen	Kurland	9,720	Kuldīga	Latvia	1.7.16	26.12.18	909	
19. Grobin	Kurland	1,490	Grobiņa	Latvia	1.9.18	27.12.18	118	**25**: Closed 26.12.18
20. Grodno	Grodno	46,919	Hrodna	Belarus	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,077	**15**: In "Poland"
21. Hapsal	Estland	3,212	Haapsalu	Estonia	1.5.18	17.11.18	201	**15**: In "Livland" **11**: Opened 17.5.18
22. Hasenpoth	Kurland	3,340	Aizpute	Latvia	15.1.16	14.12.18	1065	**25**: Latvian name is "Aispute" (wrong)
22. Hasenpoth	Kurland	3,340	Aizpute	Latvia	15.1.16	14.12.18	1065	**25**: Latvian name is "Aispute" (wrong)
23. Jakobstadt	Kurland	5,829	Jēkabpils	Latvia	1.10.18	26.12.18	87	
24. Janischki	Kowno		Joniškis	Lithuania	11.11.18	26.12.18	46	**15**: In "Lithuania"
25. Janow	Kowno	2,296	Jonava	Lithuania	1.7.16	26.12.18	909	**15**: In "Lithuania"
26. Kalwarja	Suwalki		Kalvarija	Lithuania	20.4.16	25.12.18	980	**15**: In "Lithuania"
27. Kiejdany	Kowno		Kėdainiai	Lithuania	11.11.18	26.12.18	46	**15**: In "Lithuania"
28. Kielmy	Kowno		Kelmė	Lithuania	15.1.16	19.10.16	279	**15**: In "Lithuania"
29. Knyszyn	Grodno	3,864	Knyszyn	Poland	20.4.16	30.11.18	955	**15**: In "Poland"
30. Kowno	Kowno	70,920	Kaunas	Lithuania	15.1.16	31.12.18	1,08	
31. Leegen	Kurland		Lieģi	Latvia	1.11.18	23.12.18	53	
32. Lemsal	Livland	2,412	Limbaži	Latvia	16.5.18	7.12.18	222	**11**: Opened 17.5.18
33. Libau	Kurland	64,489	Liepāja	Latvia	15.1.16	4.1.19	1,086	**7**: Closed 29.12.18 **25**: Closed 26.12.18, again 4.1.19
34. Lida	Wilna	9,323	Lida	Belarus	1.7.16	25.12.18	908	**15**: In "Poland"
35. Lunno	Grodno		Lunna	Belarus	1.7.16	31.10.18	853	**15**: In "Poland"
36. Majorenhof	Livland		Majori	Latvia	14.7.18	26.12.18	166	**25**: Misspelled "MAJOHRENHOF" cancel (MU-36) manuafactured, officially unused
37. Mariampol	Suwalki		Marijampolė	Lithuania	20.4.16	29.12.18	984	**15**: In "Lithuania"

Table 4: continued

Michel/Noske Ob. Ost **Post Office Name**	**Original Russian Gubernia**	**1897 Russian Census**	**Today's City Name**	**Today's Country**	**Open Date Noske - Engel**	**Close Date Noske - Engel**	**Days Open**[A]	**Conflicts**
38. Mitau	Kurland	35,131	Jelgava	Latvia	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,077	
39. Narwa	St. Petersburg		Narva	Estonia	21.5.18	16.11.18	180	**15**: In "Livland" **11**: Opened 17.5.18
40. Neuenburg	Kurland		Jaunpils	Latvia	1.10.18	26.12.18	87	**7**: Opened 1.1.18
41. Niederbartau	Kurland		Nīca	Latvia	1.9.18	21.12.18	112	
42. Olita	Suwalki		Alytus	Lithuania	15.1.16	21.12.18	1,072	**15**: In "Lithuania"
43. Pernau	Livland	12,898	Pärnu	Estonia	1.5.18	25.11.18	209	**11**: Opened 17.5.18
44. Petschory	Pleskau	30,478	Pechory	Russia	1.6.18	30.11.18	183	**15**: Unlisted **11**: Opened 17.5.18 **14**: Opened 1.5.18
45. Pilten	Kurland	1,509	Piltene	Latvia	5.9.18	8.12.18	95	
46. Pleskau	Pleskau		Pskov	Russia	27.7.18	25.11.18	122	**15**: Unlisted
47. Poniewiez	Kowno	12,968	Panevėžys	Lithuania	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,077	**15**: In "Lithuania" **17**: Spelled "Poniewicz"
48. Prekuln	Kurland		Priekule	Latvia	1.10.18	17.12.18	78	
49. Radziwilischki	Kowno		Radviliškis	Lithuania	11.11.18	26.12.18	46	**15**: In "Lithuania"
50. Rakischki	Kowno		Rokiškis	Lithuania	11.11.18	9.12.18	29	**15**: In "Lithuania"
51. Reval	Estland	64,572	Tallinn	Estonia	1.5.18	20.11.18	204	**15**: In "Livland" **11**: Opened 29.4.18
52. Riga	Livland	282,230	Riga	Latvia	22.10.17	26.12.18	431	**25**: Cancel with *** reported, not yet seen
53. Rossienie	Kowno	7,455	Raseiniai	Lithuania	1.7.16	31.12.18	914	**15**: In "Lithuania"
54. Russ.(ische) Krottingen	Kowno		Kretinga	Lithuania	1.7.16	26.12.18	909	**15**: In "Lithuania"
55. Schaulen	Kowno	16,128	Šiauliai	Lithuania	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,077	**15**: In "Lithuania"
56. Schiuxt	Kurland		Džūkste	Latvia	1.9.18	26.12.18	117	**15**: Name was "Siuxt" **25**: Correct German spelling: "Siuxt"
57. Schlock	Livland		1959: Sloka incorporated into Jūrmala	Latvia	17.7.18	26.12.18	163	**15**: In "Kurland"
58. Sejny	Suwalki		Sejny	Poland	20.4.16	1.12.18	956	**15**: In "Lithuania"
59. Siemiatycze	Grodno		Siemiatycze	Poland	20.4.16	31.10.18	925	**15**: In "Poland"
60. Skaudwile	Kowno		Skaudvilė	Lithuania	20.10.16	26.12.18	798	**15**: In "Lithuania"
61. Sokolka	Grodno	7,598	Sokółka	Poland	15.1.16	30.11.18	1,051	**15**: In "Poland"
62. Subat	Kurland		Subate	Latvia	1.8.18	6.12.18	128	**15**: In "Subat (Subbat)" **25 & Michel**: Correct German spelling: "Subbath" **25**: Latvian name is "Subata" (wrong)
63. Suwalki	Suwalki		Suwałki	Poland	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,077	**15**: In "Lithuania"
64. Swenzjany	Wilna		Švenčionys	Lithuania	1.8.18	20.12.18	142	**15**: In "Lithuania"
65. Swislocz	Grodno		Svislač	Belarus	1.7.16	31.10.18	853	**15**: In "Poland"
66. Szczuczyn	Wilna	5,043	Szczuczyn	Poland	11.11.18	26.12.18	46	**15**: In "Lithuania"
67. Talssen	Kurland	4,200	Talsi	Latvia	1.7.16	17.12.18	900	**25**: Correct German spelling: "Talsen" **25**: FC-67 is a "frivolous creation"
68. Telsze	Kowno	6,205	Telšiai	Lithuania	1.7.16	20.12.18	903	**15**: In "Lithuania"

Table 4: continued

Michel/Noske Ob. Ost Post Office Name	Original Russian Gubernia	1897 Russian Census	Today's City Name	Today's Country	Open Date	Close Date	Days Open[A]	Conflicts
69. Tuckum	Kurland	7,555	Tukums	Latvia	1.7.16	26.12.18	909	Display cancel is 28.6.16! **25**: Closed 17.3.17, reopened 13 or 15.5.17, closed again 26.12.18 **25**: Misspelled "TUKUM" cancel (MU-69) manuafactured, officially unused
70. Uzjany	Kowno		Utena	Lithuania	11.11.18	17.12.18	37	**15**: In "Lithuania"
71. Wainoden	Kurland		Vaiņode	Latvia	20.9.18	29.12.18	101	Display cancel is 29.12.19! **25**: Probably not issued before 26.12.18; used even later at Libau
72. Walk	Livland	10,922	Valka	Latvia	1.5.18	19.12.18	233	**11**: Opened 29.4.18 **25**: Latvian name is "Valka/Valga" (wrong: "Valka" is Latvia, "Valga" is Estonian)
73. Weissenstein	Estland	2,507	Paide	Estonia	1.5.18	16.11.18	200	**15**: In "Livland" **11**: Opened 17.5.18
74. Wenden	Livland	6,356	Cēsis	Latvia	1.5.18	20.12.18	234	**11**: Opened 29.4.18
75. Werro	Livland	4,152	Võru	Estonia	1.5.18	28.11.18	212	**11**: Opened 17.5.18
76. Wesenberg	Estland	5,890	Rakvere	Estonia	2.5.18	18.11.18	201	**15**: In "Livland" **11**: Opened 17.5.18
77. Wilkomierz	Kowno	13,532	Ukmergė	Lithuania	1.3.18	26.12.18	301	**15**: In "Lithuania"
78. Wilkowischki	Suwalki		Vilkaviškis	Lithuania	15.1.16	28.12.18	1,079	Alternate name spelling. **15**: In "Lithuania"
79. Wilna	Wilna	154,532	Vilnius	Lithuania	15.1.16	26.12.18	1,077	**15**: In "Lithuania"
80. Windau	Kurland	7,127	Ventspils	Latvia	15.1.16	17.12.18	1,068	
81. Wladislawow	Suwalki		Kudirkos Naumiestis	Lithuania	20.4.16	26.12.18	981	**15**: In "Lithuania"
82. Wolkowysk	Grodno	10,323	Vaŭkavysk	Belarus	20.4.16	15.12.18	970	**15**: In "Poland"
83. Wolmar	Livland	5,050	Valmiera	Latvia	1.5.18	17.12.18	231	**11**: Opened 29.4.18

[A] *"Days Open" = Gregorian calendar days (Noske-Engel open/close dates), counting opening date and closing date.*
Calculated by adding a closing day to the total at the interactive calendar at: http://cgi.cs.duke.edu/~des/datecalc/datecalc.cgi

The Philatelic Literature on <u>Provisional Cancels</u> on *Ob. Ost* stamps:

Bohnert, 1918[11]: "[Establishment of *Ob. Ost* Post offices] must have gone surprisingly quickly, for in most post offices there were no cancellers, and provisional postmarks had to be used…according to reports, not for more than 3 – 10 days…"

Noske said in 1949[9]: "Apparently it was very difficult for the places back of Riga, like Baltisch-Port, Dorpat, Fellin, Hapsal, Reval and Walk to immediately obtain the German bridge [cancellers]. Therefore, there came into existence during the early times of the short duration of this postal institution many varieties of provisional cancellations. Even old obsolete cancellers and old Russian cancellers were found from this period on the *Ob. Ost* stamps."

Hurt and **Ojaste**, writing in 1986[14]: "May 1, 1918, the postal area of *Ob. Ost* was extended to include Estonia. Thirteen P.O.'s were opened…The Imperial German invasion of the western Estonian islands commenced in October/November 1917. Only German Feldpost functioned – civil mail was

not admitted." Mainland "Estonian territory was occupied February/March 1918" and "civil mail was not admitted until the end of April." Meanwhile "Feldpost 219 accepted civil mail franked with *Ob. Ost* stamps and forwarded them to Riga." Also, "Some civil mail items from the end of April were cancelled with provisional cancellers."

v. Hofmann, writing in 2006[25]: "The number of rubber stamps used as provisional cancellations is small for the territory of the later Republic of Latvia. So far, four such postmarks have been recorded which are free from suspicion of being philatelic frivolities: "Lemsal" (32-A), "Walk," in both Gothic and Roman type (72-A, 72-B), and "Wenden" (74-A).

Details on provisional cancels:
• Dorpat 14-B: straight line in blue-lilac[11]
• Dorpat 14-D: two-line "Ober-Ost Dorpat cancel in black and violet[11]
• Dorpat 14-G: altered old Russian double-ring canceller[11]
• Fellin 16-A: straight line cancel in black[11]
• Hapsal 21-A: straight line in black[11]
• Hapsal 21-B: altered old Russian double-ring canceller[11]
• Lemsal 32-A: straight line in black[11]
• Pleskau 46-A: an old Russian mute cancel in black[11]
• Pleskau 46-B: straight-line in violet, where both 46-A and –B were used to show place of origin, and then sent for further handling to Walk[11]; "Pleskau...possessed only a long rubber stamp and forwarded its mail to Walk, where the stamps were cancelled[9]
• Reval 51-A: straight line in black[11]
• Walk 72-A, -B: of German origin[21]
• Wenden 74-A: straight line in red-violet[11]
• Windau 80-A: mute cancel used 14-06-17 on a postcard[7]
• Wolmar 83-A: an old Russian wood mute cancel from 1914, using first black, then blue ink[11]; used in April/May 1918[7]

Vytautas Doniela, writing online in 2010[10] regarding the transfer of German to Lithuanian management of the Vilnius post office in December 1918: "...the [departing] *Ob. Ost* postal authorities refused to donate or sell any remaining stamp stocks… German postmen declined to leave behind any such official equipment as postmarkers and the like, for the cancelling of stamps the incoming Lithuanians had to make do with a leftover – a plain Gothic one-liner "Wilna," [which] had been used by the *Ob. Ost* WILNA P.O. when in June – July 1918 it had run out of its own registration etiquettes and had to resort to obsolete Cyrillic etiquettes from the czarist "Kovna" P.O. and from a nearby quiescent Feldpost 3006. At that time this one-liner "Wilna" was used to delete and overprint the etiquettes so acquired… During the brief existence of the Lithuanian Vilnius P.O. this Gothic one-liner "Wilna" constituted the only method of cancelling Lithuanian stamps.

Outlier Cancellations

Fakes: Three fake *Ob. Ost* cancels (***Fig 5***, spaces C-1, C-2, C-3) are known, two for Riga, and one for Mitau:
• C-1: "Riga" with "Postgebiet Ob. Ost" in the cancel[14, 25]
• C-2: "Riga – b" as a receiving mark, with an indistinct date. "During dredging work on the Danube in Vienna in 1924, a package with a large number of forged and fantasy postmarks was found. The police established that the owner of the package was the stamp dealer Dörfinger, who had recently committed suicide. Among the postmarks found were two from the *Ob. Ost* postal area"[25].
• C-3: "Pressestelle Obost. II (Mitau)" (*Press Office*) Another Dörfinger creation, this time of a cachet of a military unit[25].

Misspelled cancels: Six *Ob. Ost* cancelers were created with misspellings of the correct German version of the town name – despite that, four were delivered to their intended post offices and used:
• 6: "Bausk" instead of the correct "Bauske"
• 56: "Schiuxt" instead of the correct "Siuxt"
• 62: "Subat" instead of the correct "Subbath"
• 67: "Talssen" instead of the correct "Talsen"

Two misspelled cancelers were not delivered to their intended post offices and were officially unused[25]:
• MU-36: "Majohrenhof" instead of "Majorenhof"
• MU-69: "Tukum" instead of "Tuckum"

Both cancelers "...remained at the Post and Telegraph administration headquarters in Kowno, where for archival and perhaps also for collectors' purposes some impressions were made on blank postcards"[25]. (However, the display cancel of "Majohrenhof" shows a date of July 1, 1918, and the same source[25] earlier noted that the administrative headquarters moved from Kowno to Bialystok in January 1917.) v. Hofmann[25] consistently refers to "Alt-Autz" as the spelling of Alt-Auz," but does not list the known and accepted "Alt-Auz" post office and cancel as a misspelling.

Inappropriate/"exception" cancels: As stated earlier, although Feldpost mail did not require a stamp, Feldpost cancels are known on *Ob. Ost* stamps. Such examples – and they are not rare – are either mistakes or favor cancels: Feldpost offices often shared the same quarters as the civilian offices, and both sets of employees worked for the military. As Noske[9] said: "Occasionally the '*Ob. Ost*' stamps were also cancelled by the German Feldpost, when, by way of exceptions, letters of the early civilian post offices were delivered through the Feldpost, often with hand cancellations." Also, "Railroad and steamship cancels do not occur on '*Ob. Ost*' postage stamps." The *Ob. Ost* cancels in your collection which you have not been able to sort are most likely evidence of inappropriate use: shown in **Fig 5** are examples with cancels from Germany. Also, German stamps

without the *Ob. Ost* overprint exist with Latvian-area *Ob. Ost* post office cancels[21]. Double-frankings – covers with both the cancel of a newly independent Baltic country's post office, and an *Ob. Ost* cancel – are known, but are not the subject of this article.

Redistricted post office cancels: because parts of occupied Russian Poland were originally considered part of the *Ob. Ost*, but were redistricted, as of October 1915, to *Kaiserliche Deutsche Generalgouvernement Warschau*, you may come across *Ob. Ost* stamps with what Michel considers *Deutsche Post in Polen* cancels – like the illustrated one cancelled "Grajewo."

I hope this study has piqued readers – and especially catalog editors' – interest in this issue, and I look forward to receiving corrections and comments that will further resolve remaining open items. Collectors are urged to read the valuable sources below for information on subjects I have chosen not to cover, i.e., Feldpost cancels, censorship and markings.

Sourcing for cancel images: Nikolajs Jakimovs and Victor Marcilger[7], Vambola Hurt and Elmar Ojaste[14], Vytautas Fugalevičius[19], and the collections of Audrius Brazdeikis, Dr. Vytautas Doniela, John Variakojis, and Andrew Kapochunas.

References:
1. *My answer didn't include the fact that the "Libau" overprint on Germania-design stamps was created by Feldpoststation 168 only after all Ob. Ost post offices had closed, to service local civilian mail – I suspect mostly from Baltic Germans – during the month of January 1919, although later cancels are known.*
2. Fig 1: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/maps/hanse.jpg
3. http://depts.washington.edu/baltic/papers/hansa.html
4. Vejas Gabriel Liulevičius: "War Land on the Eastern Front," 2000, Cambridge University Press
5. http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/germandeclarationofwar_russia.htm
6. Erin Gettman: "The Baltic Region During WWI," SCAND 344, Spring 2002
7. Nikolajs Jakimovs and Victor Marcilger: "Postal History of Imperial Russia in Pre-Independent Latvia," 1995, self-published
8. Herbert Becker: Adult version of the lecture in the Free University of Berlin /Department of History Sciences, 9 June 1988: http://www.brest-litowsk.libau-kurland-baltikum.de/
9. Dr. Curt R. Noske: "The Postal Region Ob. Ost," Bulletin of the Polonus Philatelic Society, May, 1949
10. Dr. Vytautas Doniela, writing online at: http://lithuanianphilately.com/
11. Carl Bohnert: "From the Baltic," (translated by Jan Kaptein), published in Illustriertes Briefmarken-Journal, 20/21, 1918: http://www.baltic-philately.com/N005_Mar11-v3.pdf
12. Jan Kaptein at www.lithuania.jkaptein.nl/ww1_02.htm
13. Walter E. Norton: Lithuania Philatelic Society Bulletin April, 1953; reprinted in the September 1953 SPA Journal
14. Vambola Hurt and Elmar Ojaste: "Estonia Philately & Postal History Handbook," 1986, co-published by the Estonian Philatelic Societies in Sweden and New York
15. Arnold Engel: "World War I…Ober-Ost," German Postal Specialist # 344, March, 1982
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17. Dr. Curt R. Noske: "Das Postgebiet Ob. Ost, seine Postanstalten und Entwertungen," 1922
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19. Vytautas Fugalevičius: "Pašto Antspaudai," (Post office Cancellations) 1990, self-published
20. Bohdan Pauk: "Belarus Catalog-Checklist of National and Local Postage Stamp Issues Including Foreign Administrative Issues of 1916-1920 and 1941-1944," 1996, Ukrainian Philatelic Resources
21. Andrejs Petrevics: "The Latvian Collector," # 4, July 1974
22. Harry W. Steiss: "Postal District of the Occupied East," Latvian Collector # 22, 1977, originally from Kaiserzeit, Vol. IV No. 4, 1975
23. "Lithuania 1863-1893: Tsarist Russification And The Beginnings Of The Modern Lithuanian National Movement," Lituanus, Fall 1996
24. Demoscope weekly: "1897 Russian Census": http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_lan_97_uezd_eng.php
25. Harry v. Hofmann: "The Postgebiet Ob. Ost in the territory of the later Latvian Republic, 1915 – 1920," 2006, Harry v. Hofmann Verlag