

*Intermarium: The Land between the Black and Baltic Seas*

by Marek Jan Chodakiewicz

(New Brunswick: Transaction, 2012), 568 pages

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In this bold combination of succinct history, a sweeping—though tendentious—contemporary survey, and a dubious geostrategic blueprint intended mainly for Washington foreign-policy eyes, Marek Jan Chodakiewicz presents Eastern Europe (to which some, as matter of principle, refer as “East Central Europe”) as a major new United States ally on the European map. Positioned geographically between the Baltic and Black Seas, the author dubs this part of the world “Intermarium,” though it seems doubtful that his name for it will ever really catch on. He also draws attention to the fact that it is positioned between mighty and often rapacious powers, namely, Germany and Russia.

Certainly the idea of a new federation that would “save” Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine from a Russian monster by putting them in a new grouping together with the former Soviet republics and satellites already firmly embedded in the EU and NATO, and a plan for this group to become a specifically American ally, sounds somewhat far-fetched.

Still, the format of past–present–future shoehorned into twenty-six usually brief chapters (with many pages of notes immediately following) succeeds in making this book attractively dual-purposed, for the interested general reader and the scholar alike. But shockingly—uncannily, as if preordained by a Higher Authority—the author has undermined his own opus with a lengthy final chapter, in effect on the Holocaust, that is of an altogether different ilk and caliber than the rest of the book.

To be sure, at one level, the author of this volume, a professor of history at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, is refreshingly honest about just where his sympathies lie. He is a Pole loyal to the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania-Poland-Ruthenia, and very proud to claim its multicultural legacy for the future. He believes that an evil, anti-democratic Russia (itself a direct successor of the major force that undid Poland in the late eighteenth century) is a major threat to US interests, if not *the* major threat. The author shifts his voice at will from that of the professional historian to the “we” and “our” of an American pundit.

Chodakiewicz is very worried by the prospect of these lands falling victim to a confluence of forces, including Russian mischief and Moscow’s desire to

reincorporate its “Near Abroad”; the many former Communists in positions of political and economic power he fears cannot be trusted (he supports ongoing attempts at “lustration” of the “post-Communists”); and, finally, an O’Reillyan lineup of leftist, permissive, progressive liberals from the West, including governments and NGOs, who could wreak havoc with the future with all their drivel about feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, and, above all, their gullibility in the face of Muscovite mischief. He is downright Rumsfeldian in explaining how the war in Iraq allegedly proved what feeble allies the West European countries are for America, but how loyal the New Europe is—a loyalty that must not be betrayed when (not if) the Russian bear, by hook or by crook, returns to claw its way back to its erstwhile possessions. One is sometimes left with the feeling that the only reciprocal gesture could be America’s initiating a World War III against Russia over the State of Intermarium.

Chodakiewicz is frank about his politics. He is a forceful advocate of a Republican Party-type platform, with ample specific references to the Reagan years. As would be expected, he is tough on the Soviets/Russians in foreign policy. Domestically (ergo universally), Chodakiewicz is socially conservative—that is to say pro-religion, anti-secularist, anti-gay, anti-left, and anti-liberal. However, the recurring dichotomization of good vs. evil extends also to Catholic vs. (Eastern/Russian) Orthodox; empirical vs. mushy postmodernist; nationalist vs. assimilation-prone to larger powers; and, of course, Noble Poland and Evil Russia without appropriate sensitivity to the fact that the Russian people were the primary victims of the abuses committed by Czarism, Communism, and Putinism alike. More ominously, there is an implicit call for the disenfranchisement of the Russian-speaking minorities in these lands (many of multiple personal backgrounds), who did not personally occupy anybody’s country and must be equal citizens in any truly tolerant version of the future. The author is also somewhat fixated with the purported dangers of “homosexual frolic” and “so-called ‘gay pride’ parades” (both p. 253), “gay liberation” (p. 378), “radical lifestyles” (p. 421), “gender, queer and other guises” (p. 468), “sexual politics (including feminism and gay rights)” (p. 528), all now rather far from the contemporary discourse of either major political party in the US.

However, it gets more convoluted than that. In the case of Baltic vs. Russian issues, any of the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) inherently trumps. If there is a Poland vs. Ukraine issue, well, as Facebook says, “it’s complicated.” If it is Lithuania, it is especially complicated: When it comes down to any confrontation between Russia and Lithuania, then the Lithuanians have to be right, but if it is between Lithuania and Poland (partners in the Grand Duchy, interwar foes, and current touchy neighbors within the EU and NATO), well, there is no contest: Poland is right, and Lithuania is scolded with the voice of a schoolteacher, “This just will not do” (p. 426).

In assessing recent years, there is enormous concern over the occasional victories of Social Democratic parties and personalities in free democratic elections in the region. The author is so certain of their inherent evil that one is left wondering whether elections should result in rightist nationalists winning each and every time, as opposed to the democratic pendulum that has (happily) taken root in various new EU member states. Could this utopia be a blueprint for a one-party state, like the Communism it would thereby end up mirroring, albeit from the opposite end of the regional political spectrum?

Turning to Jewish issues, it is no secret that Chodakiewicz comes to the table with a controversial record that has included disguising Polish nationalism and anti-Jewish sentiment on Poland-related issues as objective historical research. Notorious episodes include his vitriolic attacks on Jan Gross's pioneering scholarship and the omniscient search for Jews among the evil Communists. One can debate the degree to which the author himself might be part of an academic elite that speaks one way to Westerners in his adopted country and in quite a different way back in his native land and in his native tongue. In this book, the author generally exercises extreme caution in order to avoid some of the issues that have made him so controversial on Jewish history; surely, he can't let Polish nationalism stand in the way of his grand project for America. Or can he?

The book's treatment of Jewish issues is mostly well informed, and sensitive both to Jewish history and the political weight of Jewish views in the US and their impact on a future Intermarium. In East European terms, this means that overall, it is congruent with Jewish historiography on the medieval, Grand Duchy, and Czarist periods, but problematic when it comes to the interwar period. Chodakiewicz is guilty of less than full disclosure about antisemitism of the supposed "moderate nationalism" that he likes so much—and the much larger web of Holocaust-related problems. He is upset that the Holocaust survivors' memoirs that are reproduced in *Yizkor* books (*yizker bikber*) commemorating their destroyed families, homes, and civilization "frequently fail to consider any other views but those of their own ethno-religious group" (p. 491). Chodakiewicz seems not to understand that such literature does not have any scholarly or academic pretensions and cannot be evaluated through such a prism. Incidentally, he does bemoan that Israel is " beholden to the moribund socialist, welfarist, and etatist ways" (p. 278).

With the Jewish population of much of Eastern Europe now largely extinct, the outstanding Jewish issue happens to be part and parcel of what Chodakiewicz correctly recognizes as an outstanding issue for the entire region: collective memory and contemporary memory politics.

A number of East European governments have invested heavily in the narrative known in the 1990s as “Symmetry” and usually referred to today as “Double Genocide.” The movement is epitomized by its central document, the Prague Declaration of June 3, 2008, which insists that all Europeans view Nazism and Communism as basically the same (the declaration sports the word “same” five times). Those responsible for that interpretation would write the Holocaust out of history as a unique event of genocide in the region’s past and replace it with the model of two equal Holocausts—Stalin’s and Hitler’s—without denying a single death. This in turn opens the floodgates for attempts to construct revisionist models that, first, revert to antisemitic tropes of Jewish Bolshevism being at the heart of all the trouble, and, second, deny or play down the extensive actual Holocaust-era killing by local nationalists, particularly in the Baltics and western Ukraine.

Although he fails to seriously discuss these issues, he ritually dismisses a second opinion coming out of the West: “It is singularly unhelpful that the postmodernists dominating the historical discourse in the European Union refuse to equate Nazism and Communism ...” (p. 245).

Fellow scholars are taken to task in the notes for not treating Nazi and Soviet forces equally (e.g., p. 105). That is symptomatic of the author’s (and much of the Intermarium societies’) inability to acknowledge that for the crucial 1941–1945 period, the Americans, British, and Soviets *were* allies, and that without the Soviets, Hitler could well have prevailed in Europe. Had that been the case, and given the Nazi blueprint for the region and its “inferior races,” there would have been little or nothing left of Lithuania, Latvia, or even Poland—countries that eventually emerged to become free, proud members of NATO and the EU following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In dealing with the Holocaust, Chodakiewicz omits the fact that in Eastern Europe the Soviet Union was often the only escape route from certain death, both for Jews who fled eastward to escape Nazi rule, and for those who escaped ghettos to join up with the anti-Nazi partisans supported by the Soviets. (There were certainly no American or British forces to whom they could have fled.) The attempted erasure from history of the Anglo–American–Soviet-led alliance that brought down Hitler is one of the perversions of memory by East European nationalists that must not gain acceptance (no matter how grievous the behavior of the Soviet Union and Russia at various times and places).

The author inserts an important one-sentence corrective: “No one else but the Jews was slated for immediate and wholesale extermination. Denying this is a nationalist lie” (p. 527). But in sharp contrast to such rare and belated warnings to fellow nationalist travelers in the region, he winds up praising the Ukrainian

Nazi groups that actually helped perpetrate the Holocaust (pp. 428–429). This elevation of local collaborators to hero status invariably implies that the Holocaust cannot really be such a big deal; after all, virtually all its voluntary participants in this part of the world were reliably “anti-Soviet.” The idea that helping deliver their countries into the Nazi orbit and actively participating in the murder and despoliation of their Jewish neighbors constituted acts of heroism is the very claptrap that some will need to overcome before being taken seriously within that very Western moral fabric to which this book makes its grand appeal. That moral fabric makes it quite impossible to respect both the victim and the perpetrators of genocide in “different chapters of the same book.” The glorification of Nazi collaborators is unacceptable in Western democracies. It is the elephant in the room that would spoil Intermarium’s coming-out party. It is on this issue in particular that Chodakiewicz’s work can also be seen in the context of two recent books that call the same general area by other names: Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands* (2012) and Alexander V. Prusin’s *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992* (2010).

The final chapter, no. 26, almost seems to come from the pen of a different author. It is entitled “Koniuchy: A Case Study” (pp. 500–519). Koniuchy is the name of a village that the Germans manipulated and regularly used for violent attacks against local anti-Nazi partisans camped in nearby forests, and in which dozens perished during a Soviet partisan attack of January 29, 1944. Nobody disputes the idea that any potential war crime by any individual, group, or side in a conflict should be revealed and investigated, and any living perpetrators brought to justice. The issue here, however, is the responsibility of an author—especially a scholar—to at least inform his readers of the significance attached to the place he is depicting. Does he not have an obligation to explain the events that have transpired in recent years in the service of antisemitic and Holocaust-obfuscating state institutions in the country where the village, now called Kaniūkai, is presently situated?

In Lithuania, state-funded history and memory institutions and a politicized prosecution service have in concert used “Kaniūkai” (for them a Lithuanian, not a Polish village) toward a series of aims:

- as part of the effort to obfuscate the Holocaust by trying to shift attention from unpunished local war criminals to Soviet partisans;
- by launching press campaigns and prosecutorial “pre-trial investigations” into only Jewish survivors of Soviet partisan units (of which they were a minority); and
- by abusing the tragedy of the village to forge a desired “equivalence” with the German-orchestrated genocide of over 200,000 Jewish inhabitants of the country, carried out with great fervor by local volunteers—

something that led to the highest percentage of Holocaust-era murder of any nation's Jewish population (around 95 percent).

For the outside world, however, “Kaniūkai” has come to represent what is wrong when state resources in post-Communist Europe are poured into projects intended to revise history in the direction of far-right nationalists. Such actions turn victims into perpetrators, and promote antisemitic campaigns masquerading as history. The result is precisely the kind of postmodernist slush the author so rigorously detests on any other issue.

Some background information is necessary here. In 1998, high-ranking Lithuanian officials convinced Holocaust survivor and renowned Israeli scholar Yitzhak Arad (born in 1926 in a town then in Poland, today in Lithuania) to join the new, state-sponsored International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. Years later, in 2006, after EU and NATO accession and after Arad had separately researched Lithuanian Nazi war criminals' history in close cooperation with US authorities, the antisemitic Vilnius-based newspaper *Respublika* called him a war criminal based on misquoted passages from his own 1979 memoir, *The Partisan*. Later that year, Lithuanian prosecutors started an investigation, defaming him extensively in the media but never charging him with anything. In September 2008, under international pressure, the case was partly closed with an insulting announcement on the prosecutor's website. To this day, there has been no apology or public letter of regret for the defamation, and Arad continues to be defamed on the internet, in Wikipedia, and in East European (ultra)nationalistic circles.

In early 2008, an article in *Lietuvos aidas*, another antisemitic newspaper in Vilnius, called on prosecutors to bring to trial Vilnius Holocaust survivor Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky (born 1922) and Holocaust scholar Dr. Rachel Margolis (born 1921), known in World War II studies *inter alia* for her rediscovery and publication in 1999 of the lost diary of Kazimierz Sakowicz, a Polish Catholic eyewitness to the mass murders at Ponár (Polish Ponary, Lithuanian Paneriai). On May 5, 2008, two armed police turned up at the address of Dr. Margolis in Vilnius, looking for both women.

The Soviet-style abuse of prosecutorial powers—defaming and effectively harassing dissenters from official narratives and members of a minority without any charge—led to a first in post-Soviet Baltic history. An array of Western embassies, including those of Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, and the Intermarium's major proposed sponsor, the US, deigned to honor, with certificates of distinction or banquets and special events, a person trashed by the state: Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky, the only one of the three still in Lithuania.

Chodakiewicz's one reference to any of these extraordinary events is a single obtuse footnote in which former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is pilloried for having risen, in a 2011 article in the UK's *Independent*, to Margolis's defense: "Such ignorance, of course, informs politics. The United Kingdom's [former] Labor leader Gordon Brown himself opined in favor of one of the participants of the Koniuchy massacre without really researching anything much about the event" (no. 37, p. 518). In fact, Brown had been briefed in great detail by Holocaust historian Sir Martin Gilbert, and knew very well that Margolis was *not* a participant in any massacre. For the antisemitic campaign in Lithuania to rear its head in Polish guise in this book is most discouraging.

Another instance: "Yitzhak Arad, for example, who also fought with Soviet partisans in the area, speaks of 'punitive raids' against hostile villages" (p. 511). The author's use of the term "in the area" must mean generically "somewhere in the forests of Lithuania," since the prosecutorial "investigation" against Arad concerns a different location. But everything is simply lumped together here to turn Arad somehow into a part of the "greater Kaniūkai" that is under construction among East European ultranationalists.

The hatchet job against Jewish partisans in the final chapter of *Intermarium* resorts to a number of abuses of academic structure to mask the genre of nationalist polemic. Aside from failing to inform the reader of the existence of the Lithuanian state campaign centered on the same incident, the Jewish texts cited at length are a hodgepodge of personal memoirs (sometimes penned decades after the events), scholarly treatments, and openly *fictional* works by survivors' children, not meant to be academic research.

A final Reagan-era thought for the US foreign policy specialists for whom the book is intended: "Just say no."