

## The Academic Psychologists' Role in the Rise of Psychotechnics in Lithuania (1920s and 1930s)

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### INFORMACIÓN ART.

Recibido: 10-10-2025  
Aceptado: 30-1-2026

**Key words**  
Psychotechnics,  
Vocational Guidance,  
History of Psychology,  
Lithuania

**Palabras clave**  
Psicotecnía,  
orientación profesional,  
historia de la psicología,  
Lituania


### ABSTRACT

The Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance was an institution that was established in 1931. The university professor and researcher, Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis, who at the time was the head of the Institute for Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology, was a leading figure in psychological research and the main driving force behind the Society's foundation. In this article, I re-assess and reconstruct some underexplored aspects of the history of psychotechnics in Lithuania, such as the social and political context, the international connections, and the methods devised by the Lithuanian psychotechnicians. In particular, I analyse the role of Vabalas-Gudaitis in order to reveal how the staff of the University of Lithuania engaged in psychotechnical research. I conclude that the psychotechnical activities of the 1920s and 1930s facilitated the development of experimental psychology in Lithuania. Finally, the article wants to increase international awareness about the history of psychotechnical research and practice in this country.

### El papel de los psicólogos académicos en el auge de la psicotecnía en Lituania (1920s y 1930s)

### RESUMEN

La Sociedad Lituana de Psicotécnica y Orientación Vocacional fue una institución fundada en 1931. El profesor universitario e investigador Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis, entonces director del Instituto de Pedagogía Experimental y Psicología, fue una figura destacada en la investigación psicológica y el principal impulsor de la fundación de la Sociedad. En este artículo, reevalúo y reconstruyo algunos aspectos poco explorados de la historia de la psicotécnica en Lituania, entre otros presento el contexto social y político, las conexiones internacionales que esta institución lituana mantenía con el extranjero y los métodos ideados por los psicotécnicos. En particular, me centro en Vabalas-Gudaitis para analizar papel que jugó el personal de la Universidad de Lituania que participó en la investigación psicotécnica. Concluyo que las actividades psicotécnicas de las décadas de 1920 y 1930 facilitaron el desarrollo de la psicología experimental en el país. Finalmente, el artículo busca estimular el interés internacional acerca de la historia de la investigación científica y la práctica psicotécnica en Lituania.

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ISSN: 2445-0928 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5093/rhp2026a12>

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Para citar este artículo/ To cite this article:

Almonaitienė, J.S. (2026). The Academic Psychologists' Role in the Rise of Psychotechnics in Lithuania (1920s and 1930s). *Revista de Historia de la Psicología*, 47(2), 82–92.

Doi: [10.5093/rhp2026a12](https://doi.org/10.5093/rhp2026a12)

Vínculo al artículo/Link to this article:

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5093/rhp2026a12>

## Introduction

There is a consensus within the Lithuanian historiography of psychology that psychotechnics was an important field of study during the two decades of the country's independence (before the outbreak of the Second World War). The Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance was established in 1931 (see, e.g., Bagdonas, Lapė, and Valickas, 2008),<sup>1</sup> and, with it, notable progress was achieved in psychotechnics within a short time. One site of this expansion in psychotechnical research and practice was the Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology Institute at the University of Lithuania (Vytautas Magnus University since 1930), which was unique at the time in Lithuania.<sup>2</sup> Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis (1881–1955), a leading professor and the head of the Institute, was a founding member of the Society for Psychotechnics. He created methods and tools for psychological assessment to be employed in psychotechnical practice. In the Institute, he was assisted by privatdozent Vadas Lazersonas (who was also on the Society's board), specialized in organizational and applied work.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, a new generation of psychologists trained at the university supplemented the staff, most notably Alfonsas Gučas and Justinas Martynaitis (see, e.g., Rimkutė, 2007). In 1937, Gučas, who by then had become head of the Institute's psychotechnical counselling office and a lecturer at the university, released his popular booklet "Vocation and Work: The Features of Psychotechnics for Parents, Teachers, and Entrepreneurs" (Gučas, 1937).

The situation of psychotechnics changed radically during the 1940s, as the Republic of Lithuania was occupied by Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, in turn. The occupations had a devastating impact on Lithuanian higher education and research institutions, including Psychology. The building at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas where the psychotechnical laboratory was, ended up being severely damaged by bombs and was later demolished. Lazersonas died in the Dachau concentration camp. Vabalas-Gudaitis and Gučas were among the few representatives of the pre-war Lithuanian academia who were able to continue their careers under the Soviet occupation, as most others were persecuted or opted for exile (see, e.g., Anušauskas, 2005; Veilentienė, 2022).

These can be added to what Salgado, Anderson, and Hülsheger (2010) termed the "devastating panorama" psychotechnics was facing after the Second World War. Baumgarten's report delivered at the first postwar Congress of the International Association of Psychotechnics in 1949 in Bern, Switzerland explains the Second World War's devastating effect for the field of psychotechnics in numbers: "Out

of 27 members of the Director Committee of the IAP, 11 were dead and 2 had been expelled from the Director Committee for ideological reasons" (p. 932), and, she adds, that "contacts between researchers [from different countries] were understandably few, infrequent, and very difficult to maintain" (pp. 931–932). This applies fully to Lithuanian psychotechnicians. Still today, the legacy of Lithuanian pre-war psychotechnics remains unknown outside the country.

The brutal occupying regimes aimed to destroy local institutions or to subordinate them to their political interests. They also implemented policies that specifically impacted the field of psychotechnics. In recent decades, a number of works offering an overview and broadscale analysis of psychotechnics in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany have been published, such as Geuter (1992), Sirotkina and Smith (2012), Byford (2014, 2016, 2020), Carpintero (2019), and Morozova (2022). Within this literature, the fate of psychology in Lithuanian higher education institutions during the Second World War has been discussed by Rasickaitė (2022).

In the USSR, of which Lithuania was a part for nearly 50 years, a resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party entitled "On Pedagogical Perversions in the System of People's Commissariats of Education" was enacted in 1936.<sup>4</sup> It was soon accompanied by Stalinist purges. As a consequence, in 1936, psychotechnics was eradicated. The leading Russian psychotechnician, Isaak Spielrein, a professor at Moscow University who had hosted the international psychotechnical congress in Moscow in 1931, was arrested and died in 1937 in a forced labour camp for political prisoners, despite his deep devotion to the ideals of Marxism and the revolution (Carpintero, 2019; Ljunggren, 2001). Although the resolution contained no outright ban against psychology, testing and statistical inquiry disappeared almost completely from the psychological discipline and only gradually started to return in the second half of the 1960s, as Morozova (2022) has demonstrated.

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Vabalas-Gudaitis' legacy was promoted in articles written by his former students, including Gučas (1960), Martynaitis (1971)<sup>5</sup>, and Gučas and Jovaiša (1983), who emphasised his pioneering role in establishing experimental psychology in Lithuania. Yet, the authors had to be careful to limit themselves to politically "correct" interpretations of Vabalas-Gudaitis political and philosophical beliefs, often passing over the role of psychotechnics in his professional career. Thus, it is easy to see that within historical appraisals, there was a tendency to neglect his contributions in that field.

Another political reason for passing over psychotechnics was its connection to the pre-war independent Lithuania. For example, it would be a typical (and mandatory) tribute to Soviet ideology to label certain theories as "bourgeois," or to interpret Vabalas-Gudaitis' desire to educate teachers as a consequence of living in "Lithuania ruled by bourgeoisie [where the teachers] are insufficiently prepared, lack pedagogical system [...], [and] regress into mere artisans" (Gučas

<sup>1</sup> In this article I will use the abbreviated version of "Society for Psychotechnics" or "Society". Translation of this and all the following titles of organizations from Lithuanian have been made by the author and may differ from those provided in other English publications.

<sup>2</sup> There was no other Institute of this kind in the country. When the university's name was changed in 1930, it was the only university in independent Lithuania, as Vilnius and its university (founded in 1579) were under Polish occupation.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the Lithuanian form of his name is used. As his daughter Lazersonaitė-Rostovskaja (2014) related, a shortened form of his first name, Vadas, appeared in his Lithuanian passport. He was also called by the Russian Vladimir or the Jewish Volf or Zeev among his non-Lithuanian colleagues. For more information see Vladimiras Lazersonas, n. d.

<sup>4</sup> In Russian, "O pedagogicheskikh izvrazhcheniyakh v sisteme Narkomprosov." From 1917, Narkompros was the primary Soviet organization for the management of schools, universities, science, and so on (Morozova, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> This article was published in a Lithuanian academic journal edited by Gučas at the time, most probably at the latter's encouragement.

& Jovaiša, 1983, p. 20)<sup>6</sup>. Despite their shortcomings, to this date the articles Gučas (1960) and Gučas and Jovaiša (1983) provide a relative comprehensive overview of Vabalas-Gudaitis' works.

A more extensive investigation during the Soviet period was further impeded by the highly restricted availability of archival materials, scientific and popular periodicals, and books from the Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940). Finally, some studies of Vabalas-Gudaitis also glossed over psychotechnics simply because it was tangential to their purpose, for example in the cases of Kairaitis (2012) and Montvilaitė (2000). Rimkutė (2007), a biographer of Gučas, also set herself other tasks than delving into the history of psychotechnics.<sup>7</sup>

It was only in the late 2000s, when several articles appeared in Lithuanian and international academic journals, that the history of Lithuanian psychotechnics was started to become systematized by some leading psychologists from Vilnius University, namely, A. Bagdonas, J. Lapė, B. Pociūtė, E. Rimkutė, and G. Valickas (see Bagdonas, Lapė, and Valickas, 2008; Bagdonas et al., 2008; Rimkutė, 2007). Bagdonas and collaborators associated psychotechnics with the birth of applied psychology in Lithuania. In another article, entitled “Lithuanian Psychological Association: 50 Years of Development,” Bagdonas, Lapė, and Valickas (2008) asserted that the Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance was the precursor of the Lithuanian Psychological Association, now the major professional organization for psychologists in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the acknowledgement of the Society's historical role, it is quite surprising to see that, to date, no in-depth research on the rise and development of psychotechnics in Lithuania has been conducted. Details are missing and the contextualization is clearly insufficient. Some interpretations published before 1990 might even be considered to be tendentious. Thus, the original publications and archival materials related to psychotechnics in the times of the Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940) should be re-assessed in order to understand the role of psychotechnics, and the personalities involved in it, in the development of experimental psychology in Lithuania. To that end, in this article I attempt to partially reconstruct the history of psychotechnics and experimental psychology in the Republic of Lithuania between 1920 and 1940. My research builds upon earlier studies enriching them with further details, contextualizing and interrelating the facts, and providing interpretative insights. The academic and organizational work of Vabalas-Gudaitis serves as the basis for my inquiry.

The sources analysed in my research are mainly publications from the popular, professional, and the academic press of the period previous to the Second World War. A considerable number of these works have recently become accessible through digitization, which has aided my efforts to reconstruct this chapter in Lithuanian history through their meticulous analysis and comparative examination.

Additionally, a supplementary analysis of certain archival materials has been undertaken, as can be seen in the consulted archival documents listed below (right before the references).

### The Founding of the Society for Psychotechnics

In the 1920s, Lithuanian economy was mainly based on agriculture. Its fledgling industry worked primarily to satisfy the domestic market. Therefore, it suffered less from the economic crisis that began in 1929. Its growth continued between 1929 and 1934, and in the following five years it even accelerated (Bendikaitė et al., 2015, p. 294). Thus, the 1920s and 1930s represent a highly optimistic period in Lithuania's history: it had regained its independence from the Russian Empire, it went through an accelerated process of modernization and industrialization, and substantial resources were allocated by the government supporting all levels of education. Qualified employees were required in many fields, especially in the cities, where populations swelled. State institutions (such as the police, the army, the state security apparatus, and the railway board) were established, resulting in a large increase in available job positions. In this context, there was a considerable interest in professional guidance and personnel selection.

Especially in the late 1920s, numerous publications in the popular press introduced and discussed psychotechnics, sharing examples from several European countries and the United States. The authors were often staff working at the university, including some psychologists. Their common message was: “We are lagging behind”. It was a characteristic discourse of Central European societies where modernization was perceived as being slower than in Western Europe. Vabalas-Gudaitis (1928a, p. 205), for example, started his article “What is Psychotechnics” in *Culture*, a monthly magazine for the popularization of science, with the following statements:

In other countries, especially in America, psychotechnics has gained great importance: there we can find psychotechnical departments in higher education institutions, psychotechnical newspapers, societies, conferences, and various specialists of psychotechnics. This autumn, a large, international—already the fifth—Congress of Psychotechnicians will take place in Utrecht (Holland), where representatives of 50 countries will participate. In Lithuania, still, this word is almost unknown<sup>9</sup>.

The reason why Vabalas-Gudaitis (1928a, p. 207) considered psychotechnics of utmost importance for the development of the country can be seen in the following citation:

The 20th century gave us psychotechnics, which, relying on the findings and methods of empirical and experimental psychology, cares about helping people to use their mental powers for as great an economic benefit as possible, because even the simplest physical work is impossible without them.

<sup>6</sup> This and all the following citations from Lithuanian sources have been translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Eglė Rimkutė, a student and later colleague of Gučas, had the opportunity to study the documents in his personal archive and to verify many details personally. However, Rimkutė did not systematically delve into history of psychotechnics but only used it as context for Gučas' biography.

<sup>8</sup> In their article, the former organization is also referred to as the Lithuanian Fellowship of Psychotechnics and Professional Orientation (LFPPO).

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the Utrecht conference, see Vermeij's article in this monographic issue.

A similar call came from a more conservative corner, when Mečislovas Reinys (1928, p. 186), a Catholic bishop and head of psychology department in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Lithuania, echoed the same sentiment in his article “Psychograms and Profession”:

It is valuable to understand what a calling is and its significance for social life; however, it is no less important to pay attention to the methods with which one's calling can be examined and determined. In some countries, for example Germany, there are specific vocational guidance centres where individuals' suitability for various professions is assessed.

These are just two examples. The advantages of psychotechnics for both, individuals and society, were emphasized in many of papers published at that time. The economic benefits of psychotechnical assessment were stressed in an article published the same year by Jonas Šimkus (1928, p. 13), a professor and former rector at the university, who stated: Psychotechnics “(...) provide the opportunity to use human labour in the most appropriate way, which leads to a rational organization of the economy of society.” Similarly, Lazersonas (1932, p. 217) promoted psychotechnical assessment as a means for improving traffic safety:

Foreign practice has long proven the usefulness of psychotechnical advice in the fight against [traffic] accidents. For example, the Barcelona City Bus Association conducts a psychotechnical examination of all its drivers every two years, and the psychotechnical data are fully confirmed in practice. In 1926, it was found that drivers with a good psychotechnical certificate have an average of 1.3 accidents per person per year. Those with an average certificate have twice as many accidents, and those with a bad certificate have three times as many.

Similarly, the concern with youth and vocational guidance is clearly discernible in the promotion of psychotechnics. As the modern Lithuanian state was taking shape, one of its primary objectives was the establishment of an adequate educational system; consequently, various initiatives aiming at assessing and guiding youth were proposed and broadly discussed. Šimkus' article (1928, p. 35) is quite explicit about this, stating:

Many graduates of higher schools agonize over the question: which profession should I choose? The schools do not provide resources to answer this question; advice from relatives and acquaintances is usually random and lacks any serious basis. The establishment of a psychotechnical laboratory, where a psychologist together with specialists and teachers could give advice to young people, would significantly stimulate a positive solution to this difficult problem. Life requires that each person be in the right place, as the Englishmen rightly say.

To sum up, we can see that psychotechnics was introduced to Lithuania in the 1920s and early 1930s by academics as a feature of modernization, emphasizing its supposed social value. Expectations were actively shaped through promises about the benefits it would

bring to individuals (especially the youth), enabling them to realize their full potential. It was also assumed to benefit society's cohesion (“each person in the right place”), and to enhance the country's economic prosperity.

With these aims in mind, the Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance was established in 1931 at the initiative of a group of academics and a union of 23 Lithuanian women's organizations for fostering children and youth.<sup>10</sup> The Society was initially financed by the latter and by the municipality of Kaunas. Its first board of directors consisted of Jonas Šimkus (whose article is cited above) as chairman; two academics representing the Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology Institute, Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis and Vidas Lazersonas; a professor of neuropathology, Juozas Blažys; and the deputy mayor of Kaunas city, the lawyer Jonas Pikčilingis. Commissions for professionography and psychography (the latter headed by Vabalas-Gudaitis) were set up and quickly became active (Lazersonas, 1936).<sup>11</sup>

### **The Social Role of the University and the Staff's Involvement in Psychotechnics**

The political environment of the time offered significant support for academics to get involved in the field of psychotechnics, because this aligned with the government's expectations. As the historian D. Mačiulis (Bendikaitė et al., 2015, p. 39) commented:

All interwar [Lithuanian] governments formulated the same strategic goal for higher education: the university was expected to educate not only specialists but also a national intelligentsia. In an agrarian country (according to 1923 data, 85.1% of the population were engaged in agriculture), where the processes of modernization were delayed [...] the national intelligentsia was assigned a special mission. An intellectual was expected to be not only a highly educated professional but also an informal leader capable of uniting the community.

These expectations applied even more strongly to university professors. However, there is no evidence that the overall political circumstances, nor the local authorities pressured academics to develop psychotechnics (as was, for example, the case in Italy; see Romano and Foschi in this volume). The academics' “paternalistic attitude was an expression of the intelligentsia's own self-awareness”, Mačiulis continued (*ibid.*), noting that the ability of intellectuals to

<sup>10</sup> The aim of the union, according to Birutavičienė (1938, p. 244), was “not a charity, but to help parents to raise their children so that they take care of themselves independently and not be a burden to others”; in effect, organizing social care by influencing legislation, offering solutions to improve public health, and so on.

<sup>11</sup> According to Lazersonas (1936), psychography sought to provide a systematic description of a personality (relying on tests and questionnaires), while professionography aimed to examine professions from a psychological perspective—which tasks were performed and which internal factors affected work efficiency. In Lazersonas' other papers, the terms “characteristics” and “psychograms” were also used but were not always clearly defined. Based on a comparison with the writings of other psychotechnicians, I presume that “characteristic” referred to the results of other psychotechnicians, while “psychogram” referred to some kind of testing results.

inspire others was a much sought-after instrument for political and social movements as it could serve as a tool for disseminating ideas. Anyway, “[t]he initiatives of the academic community were [often] expressed outside the university walls” (Bendikaitė et al., 2015, p. 37).

The establishment of the University of Lithuania, a process in which Vabalas-Gudaitis actively participated, is as good example of how the efforts of academics to promote a scholarly mindset quickly yielded visible results in the rapidly developing country.<sup>12</sup> Although the Republic of Lithuania was restored in 1918, the university in Vilnius was lost when Poland occupied the capital in 1920. A temporary centre of government was established in Kaunas. There, several Lithuanian academics, Vabalas-Gudaitis among them, undertook a private initiative to organize higher-educational courses that adhered to established university curricula and standards. In 1922, this private program was reorganized and became the hardcore of the University of Lithuania (in 1930 the name was changed to Vytautas Magnus University), now a state-owned institution. According to Gučas (1960, p. 81):

At first, he [Vabalas-Gudaitis] served as the deputy head of the courses under Z. Žemaitis, and in 1921 he was elected as a head. In the higher courses, which were opened on 27 January 1920, J. Vabalas-Gudaitis taught pedagogy, history of pedagogy, and psychology, and in 1921 he established the first psychology laboratory in Lithuania. The laboratory worked intensively from the moment it was founded, although there were only two people in it: the head J. Vabalas-Gudaitis and his assistant V. Lazersonas.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Vabalas-Gudaitis is rightly considered as the leader in the institutionalization of psychology in Lithuania and, as one of the university's founders, heavily invested in rebuilding the country's higher education system. It is worth mentioning that, in 1921, the Republic of Lithuania's borders were not stable and the area was not yet recognized as an independent state by many European countries.

The chronology of Vabalas-Gudaitis' works shows that he was engaged with psychotechnics long before Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance was established in 1931. “Work capacity”<sup>14</sup> was one of Vabalas-Gudaitis' main interests since the early 1920s.<sup>15</sup> By that, he was interested in the “inner psychophysical force,” building on R. Eisler's formulation.<sup>16</sup> Vabalas-Gudaitis discussed the concept of work itself as a conscious and purposeful application of the “inner force,” that would be active in physical, intellectual, or any other human activity. The example he offered was manual work, as part of craftsmanship (Vabalas-Gudaitis, 1931a, pp. 7–11). “The

state itself is nothing more than a collective of organized labour, and its value depends entirely on how much it is able to produce cultural value for humanity,” Vabalas-Gudaitis wrote (1931a, p. 10). He (1928a, p. 207) also argued that psychotechnics can be beneficial in terms of social justice, to combat nepotism and politically biased employment (or blacklisting). I suggest that his political orientation may have been an additional motivation underlying his efforts to research work capacity and personality at work.

Vabalas-Gudaitis did not express his political views openly or actively, but a contextual analysis of his activities reveals his ideological leanings. Following the 1926 coup in Lithuania, President Antanas Smetona and his Nationalist Party consolidated their power, sidelining the Christian Democrats. The rivalry between both parties extended to the University of Lithuania, where the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy faced political pressure. The psychological Institute, in contrast, which was subordinate to the Faculty of Humanities, remained largely unaffected by these struggles. Gučas was involved in Social Democratic youth circles until they were prohibited in the mid-1930s, and Laužikas, with whom Vabalas-Gudaitis collaborated (see below), was likewise noted for his leftist political orientation. Despite these affiliations, the Institute's activities aligned with the Nationalist Party's broader goal of fostering a modern, secular, Western-oriented society.

Vabalas-Gudaitis' theoretical and experimental investigations into work capacity were intertwined with his central role in establishing the Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance, as well as with his active participation in psychotechnical conferences such as the ones in Utrecht (1928) and Moscow (1931). At these events, he encountered a very positive reception. “The conference participants in Moscow,” Vabalas-Gudaitis (1931b, p. 318) boasted, “were especially interested in the device, which had to be demonstrated to separate groups for about three hours.” The device was a “testometer” created by Vabalas-Gudaitis for accurate reaction-time testing. With the help of this method, mental functions could be evaluated on the basis of reaction times while performing different types of tasks.

Vabalas-Gudaitis' vision accorded with that of his fellow conference participants in many ways, including his emphasis on the holistic approach to individuals in applied psychology, which was prominent in the first half of the 1920s (see Mülberger in this volume). In the opening lines of an extensive (87-page) paper published in 1927, he claimed that “The motto of current empirical psychology is the knowledge of personality,” and advocated for the reaction method as applicable for the purpose. Vladimir Bekhterev, a leading figure in the Russian school of experimental psychology, influenced Vabalas-Gudaitis indirectly through his mentor A. Nechaev and A. Lazursky. After studying physiology at St Petersburg University, Vabalas-Gudaitis later adopted their methods and followed their intellectual legacy.

In 1928, Vabalas-Gudaitis published a booklet for teachers entitled “Assessment of the most important functions of the students' soul,” in which he presented to a lay audience his framework for personality assessment (Vabalas-Gudaitis, 1928b). It comprised a list of 36 features that he had deductively created, based on his original classification of mental functions, and their grouping. In the preface, the author

<sup>12</sup> Among many examples are the establishment of Kaunas Botanical Garden in 1923 and the Zoological Garden in 1938, both initiatives of the university's biologists.

<sup>13</sup> The laboratory was later reorganized into the University's Institute of Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology.

<sup>14</sup> In Lithuanian, *darbingumas*; the word generally means ability to perform a job (unspecified) effectively due to underlying physiological and psychological factors.

<sup>15</sup> E. g. his interest in working capacity expressed in the report presented in the 8th Biennial Congress of Experimental Psychology in Leipzig in 1923 (Bericht..., 1924, p. 168).

<sup>16</sup> In German, *Arbeitsfähigkeit ist potentielle Energie*. Vabalas-Gudaitis' reference: Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe, 1927, I Bd., p. 97.

invited teachers to help him collect data for his further research, and, in return, he would be eager to give them the opportunity to significantly expand their knowledge and understanding. Despite these efforts, and the time investment he had planned, only a few teachers answered the call, according to Gučas (1960). Teachers may have been discouraged, firstly, by the 36 features that needed to be completed for each student, which represented a large amount of work, and, secondly, by their lack of familiarity with the newly invented categories. Perhaps the goal itself was not convincing—that on completing the assessment, they would acquire an “objective” picture of a student that would be useful in their practice.

This short overview of Vabalas-Gudaitis' academic work in the 1920s demonstrates that his scientific output was consistently oriented towards the field of psychotechnics, specializing in psychologically assessing youth. The defining features of his professional activity was his clear vision for what he wanted to achieve, and his ability to follow that agenda, despite some setbacks. Reconciling theoretical and applied psychology was a central part of this vision.

According to Gučas (1960) and Rimkutė (2007), Vabalas-Gudaitis was the driving force behind the foundation of the Society for Psychotechnics. This statement is supported by a quote from Vabalas-Gudaitis' article (1928a, p. 208), where he claimed that there were dozen “psychotechnical apparatuses” in the university's laboratory and that he managed to “gather a swarm of psychologists from the university's professors who are interested in issues of applied psychology.” At the time, Vabalas-Gudaitis also was the head of the University's Institute of Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology.

Vabalas-Gudaitis' co-worker, Vladas Lazersonas (also called “Vladimir Lazerson”, 1889–1945), was born to a Jewish family in Moscow, where his parents, who were from Lithuania, were staying for a short time (Bukauskienė, 2014). Lazersonas studied medicine at Dorpat (now Tartu, Estonia), then pedagogy and psychology at the universities of Jena and Zurich. Lazersonas took on an increasingly amount of responsibilities at the Institute, as he conducted a considerable portion of its organizational work and applied research. According to Martynaitis (1971), Lazersonas developed psychotechnical assessment programs for job candidates and students and applied them together with his assistants. From 1931 Lazersonas also managed his own private hospital for nervous diseases in Kaunas and volunteered at the International Jewish Health Organization (OZE).<sup>17</sup>

Within the history of the Society for Psychotechnics, also the work of Jonas Šimkus (1873–1944), who was its first chairman, was key. He had pursued studies in chemistry in Moscow and pharmacy in Geneva. From 1906 to 1916 he held a professorship at Moscow University, as well as prominent positions as head of the Russian Chemists' Society and vice-chair of the Russian Society of Engineers. In 1922 he became the first rector of the University of Lithuania. Between 1918 and 1922, he served in senior government roles, including Minister of Trade and Industry and, for ten months, even as Minister for National Defence (as an independent member of a coalition government). He subsequently withdrew from politics and continued his academic career at the

university until 1940, teaching chemistry, the fundamentals of political economy, and principles of company organization. The last topic is connected to his participation as member of the International Society for the Rational Organization of Work (Tamošaitis, Bitautas, and Svarauskas, 2016).<sup>18</sup>

### **The Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology Institute as a Site for Psychotechnical Research in the 1930s**

The Institute's collaboration with the Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance was very close. This can be seen in their published works. The most informative of these include two articles by Lazersonas, published in 1932 and 1936, and a chapter in Gučas' (1937) booklet. The 1932 article was devoted to the “Psychological Institute” at the university, informing the readers about its activities and cooperation:

But this year, we are happy to note that the Institute has included in its scope all those purely practical questions of psychology that are of great importance to society and the state. The Institute, working together with the recently established Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance, has opened a psychotechnical division. (Lazersonas, 1932, p. 216).

Up to 400 expert reports were completed in 1933–1936 at the request of the Lithuanian Railway Board, the national Department of Security, and other organizations interested in the selection of employees (Lazersonas, 1936). However, as Lazersonas mentions, they also encountered difficulties. It was not until 1935 that the Society received permission from the Ministry of Education to conduct testing at the university's Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology Institute. It is not clear from the report, why it took so long to get this permission, and whether the regulation concerned schoolchildren's testing or the use the university's lab for testing “clients” from outside. Or maybe it could be related to relatively low appreciation for applied psychology and testing in particular. On the other hand, with the burgeoning interest in psychotechnics, Lazersonas admitted that they often lacked the resources to fulfil all the requests. Here, I would like to note that, in the eyes of general public, the Institute's psychotechnicians raised the scientific status of psychology and strengthened the discipline's position in the country. This was achieved by only a few psychologists, who were extremely active in laboratory research and in psychotechnical practice.

In his report, Lazersonas (1936, p. 91) listed the main methods of psychotechnical research employed by the Institute's staff: “1) Anamneses (information obtained from the candidate's life history), 2) testing, 3) experiments, 4) psychological observation, 5) the graphological method, 6) medical check-ups, where necessary.”

One example of an “anamnesis,” was the questionnaire (like the one presented in Figure 2) concerning children, which was filled out by their teachers or parents, or the students themselves at a teacher's

<sup>17</sup> OZE is the abbreviation of “Общество здравоохранения (i)евреев,” the Russian name of the organization.

<sup>18</sup> This is the translation from the Lithuanian source; the organization's original name may have been different.

request, and then interpreted by the Institute's staff. The templates for these forms were created by Lazersonas. Regarding graphology, Lazersonas (1936) mentions Klages' method<sup>19</sup> and the "detailed questionnaire-schema developed by the Institute for the collection of pertinent data" (p. 91). Aiming for a holistic personality assessment, the Institute's staff developed ideas on how to standardize observation during the testing (see also Vermeij's article in this special issue). Thus, the "psychological observation" was intended to assist in the identification of personality traits for which no assessment tests were available. Depending on the workplace, these included morality, diligence, tidiness, dedication, self-reliance, initiative, talkativeness, impatience, and scheming. Figure 1 displays a portion of Lazersonas' guidelines for "psychological observation" in a testing situation. The effectiveness of the employees' selection was estimated, based on the employers' feedback about the employees' workplace performance.

The sources provide inconsistent evidence on the extent to which the tests created by Vabalas-Gudaitis were included in the assessments. He elaborated nonverbal and verbal versions of the tests, and variations for laboratory use and for teachers.<sup>20</sup> "These tests were neither particularly popular nor of major significance," Martynaitis claimed (1971, p. 21). However, in the same article, he included sections of Vabalas-Gudaitis nonverbal test, which was a test designed to assess students' capacity to work, as an example of the tests used at the Institute. Furthermore, Gučas (1960, p. 91) clarifies that "From the very outset, in developing his system of tests, the author [Vabalas-Gudaitis] intended them to serve scientific research rather than to evaluate pupils' aptitude". Yet, on this point I would be careful. The political context in which Gučas comment was made, might have led him to such a negative evaluation of psychotechnical testing. Such tests—regardless of their format—were never rehabilitated in the Soviet Union.

Although Vabalas-Gudaitis joined the board of the Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance in 1931, from this moment on, he did no longer participate in psychotechnical conferences. Most probably, he prioritized his research on personality development<sup>21</sup>. However, his students would continue his work in psychotechnics, using the groundwork he had created. Around 1933, Alfonsas Gučas (1907–1988), whom I cited above, had started his career as an assistant psychometrician in the Institute's psychotechnical counselling office (Rimkutė, 2007). In the mid-1930s, the young psychologist Justinas Martynaitis joined as a laboratory technician (Martynaitis, 1971). The Institute also collaborated with university staff from other departments for scientific research, such as medical professor Vladas Lašas, Jonas Laužikas<sup>22</sup>, and others.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Klages (1872–1956) contributed to the psychology of expression, characterology, and graphology (Klages, 1917). For more information about Klages, see Britannica (2025).

<sup>20</sup> The verbal tests were not published and, most probably, not all the manuscripts survived. The source: Vilnius University Library, Manuscript Section, F142(575).

<sup>21</sup> The scope of this paper does not allow for a more nuanced analysis of this field of Vabalas-Gudaitis' research.

<sup>22</sup> Jonas Laužikas (1903–1980) had studied pedagogy, philosophy, and history at the University of Lithuania, then in Zurich, Vienna, and Hamburg. He founded the first school for intellectually disabled children in Lithuania in 1931. In 1928, Laužikas and Vabalas-Gudaitis' wife, Birutė Gudaitienė, assessed girls at the Aušra gym-

**Figure 1.** Part of the guidelines set up by Lazersonas and his team for "psychological observation" in a testing situation (source: Martynaitis, 1971, p. 23).\*

## VI. Pastebėtos ypatybės ir savybės

1. Energingas, ryžtingas, drąsus, griežtas, užsi-spyręs, išdidus, drausmingas, kantrus, patva-rus, tiesus, kuklus, švelnus, malonus, jautrus, linksmas, atviras, kalbus, vikrus, nuoširdus, solidarūs, draugiškas, taktiškas, rūpestingas, atsargus, save kontroliuojąs, įtakingas.
2. Be energijos, neryžtingas, nedrąsus, negriež-tas, nuolaidus, nerūpestingas, nekantrus, nepatvarus, lepus, plepus, vangus, tingus, per drąsus, mėgstąs ginčytis, stačiokas, užgaulus, nejautrus; nebojąs, užsidares, nekalbus, pa-niuręs, be nuotaikos; apsilėidęs, nešvarus, ne-mandagus, nepunktualus.

## VII. Temperamentas

Sangviniškas, choleriškas, flegmatiškas, melan-choliškas, mišrus, neiškus.

## VIII. Konstitucinis ir psichinis tipas

1. Pilvinis: akceptinis, imlinis.
2. Raumeninis: ergatinis, veiklinis.
3. Kvėpuojamasis: koordininis emocinis, jausmi-nis.
4. Smegeninis: koordininis intelektinis, protinis.
5. Mišrus.
6. Nenormalios konstitucijos.

## IX. Bendra sveikatos būklė

Gera, vidutinė, bloga. Kiti pastebėjimai apie sveikatą ir ligas.

## X. Įvairūs kiti pastebėjimai ir pastabos

### Stebėtojo parašas“

\*Explanation in English, summarizing the instructions given in the 6th to 10th parts: The observer was instructed to underline the traits they considered pertinent to the job under review. The sections include:

“VI. Observed Traits and Characteristics: Lists two groups of descriptors: 1. positive (e.g., energetic, determined, courageous, disciplined, patient, sincere, sociable) and 2. negative (e.g., indecisive, negligent, irritable, lazy, moody, im-polite).

VII. Temperament: The options include sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, melan-cholic, mixed, or unclear.

VIII. Constitutional and Psychological Type: Categories such as abdominal (ac-ceptive, receptive), muscular (ergatic, active), respiratory (emotional coordina-tion), cerebral (intellectual coordination), mixed, and abnormal constitution.

IX. General health condition: Good, average, poor; with space for additional health observations.

X. Other Observations and Notes.”

The form concludes with a line for the observer's signature.

nasium in Kaunas using tests created Vabalas-Gudaitis; the results were published in Gučas (1934). Laužikas' interests also included typology, which he connected to vocational guidance.

In 1938, Alena Landsbergytė-Žemkalnytė, then a 15-year-old student at Aušra girls' gymnasium in Kaunas, wrote in her diary (published in 2021, pp. 65, 79) about the assessment:

I visited Jo in the afternoon. Agreed with her sister about the flower for my dress. In the evening, we went with Nina to Laužikas for assessment. It seems we're done. Only if there are any special questions. We will definitely go again next Monday.

She continued in the Monday's entry:

[...] At half past six we went to the university to see Laužikas. He told me that I was a cyclothymic type. [...] I am fit to be a teacher, a journalist too. But I am not good at leading or organizing.

Her diary entries can be seen as confirmation that psychological assessment was conducted with students in the late 1930s, at least the ones linked to the gymnasium in the temporary capital.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it remains unsettled to what extent, and in what manner, the Society's stated goals were achieved in relation to vocational guidance for youths. Further research on archival documents is certainly needed to resolve this question.

Most publications released by the Institute's staff were related to vocational guidance, and they designed various tools to involve educators in the process. The most popular of these were questionnaires for the systemic collection of data on students' characteristics, which were disseminated in periodicals and booklets intended for teachers (e.g. Martynaitis, 1936, 1939; Figure 2).<sup>24</sup> Most of Vabalas-Gudaitis' tests were intended for testing schoolchildren and youth and mainly aimed to assess their work capacity. The information exposed above demonstrates that the vocational guidance of young people was a priority for the Institute.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the group of academic psychologists working at the Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology Institute were actively involved in the practice of psychotechnics. They designed tools of the assessment of school-children as well as candidates for job positions. Engagement with psychotechnics by the Institute and academic psychologists was a decisive factor explaining the high demands toward Lithuanian psychology and psychotechnics. The Institute, as a division of the university, had the obligation to comply with the standards of scientific work. Indeed, scientific expertise was an important aspiration for Vabalas-Gudaitis. At the same time, psychotechnical evaluation was expected to be mainly effective when put into practice. Thus, the prioritization of psychotechnics drew the Institute's staff towards applied psychology, and in particular to expand the array of quantitative-experimental methods.

Figure 2. The final page of a questionnaire assessing students' characteristics (Martynaitis, 1939)\*

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VII. Temperamentas ir psichinis tipas.			
1. Temperamentas.			
2. Psichinis tipas.			
VIII. Profes. orientac.			
1. Tėvų ir artimųjų užsiėmimas.			
2. Geriau pažintos profesijos ir darbai.			
3. Mėgstami ir nemėgstami darbai.			
4. Kolektyvinių žaidimų dažniausios rolės.			
5. Lengviausi ir sunkiausi mokslo dalykai.			
6. Dažniausiai skaitomų knygų rūšys.			
7. Kurių sričių žinių turi daugiausia, kurių mažiausia.			
8. Kuo vaikas nori būti?			
9. Kuo nori rengti tėvai?			
10. Pastebėti talentai.			
11. Tyrimų duomenys ir kitos žinios.			
12. Mokytojo sprendimas.			
Mokytojo parašas.	.....	.....	.....
Vertinimo data.	.....	.....	.....
Vieta.	.....	.....	.....

\* Explanation and translation: the questionnaire was intended to be completed by teachers, who would fill in the blank spaces. Part VIII of the table concerns vocational guidance and includes items such as: "Professions of family members; Professions and work familiar to the student; Liked and disliked occupations; Preferred roles in collective activities; Best and worst subjects in school; Preferred types of books to read; Areas of rich and poor knowledge; What the child wants to become; What the parents want the child to become; Demonstrated aptitudes; Assessment data and other information; Teacher's decision". Additional fields at the bottom include teacher's signature, evaluation date, and location. The three columns suggest that the form would be completed across multiple years.

<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, I found no clear evidence that similar assessments were conducted in other gymnasiums, such as men's or Jewish institutions.

<sup>24</sup> It is not clear whether some of the forms were approved or recommended for teachers by the Ministry of Education, or indeed if they were made mandatory. Further research is needed on these questions.

### The Psychological Institute's International Relationships in the Field of Psychotechnics

From Lazersonas's 1932 and 1936 reports, we can infer that the Institute and the Society both made efforts to establish international relationships. After securing its funding, the Society invited the Swiss psychotechnician Karl Koch to visit them. Koch "set the operating guidelines [for Lithuanian psychotechnicians] and started the [psychotechnical] work itself". He conducted "psychotechnical tests on various individuals" in Kaunas (Lazersonas, 1936, pp. 208–209).<sup>25</sup> During Koch's time in the capital, he also contributed to the popularization of psychotechnics, delivering presentations at conferences organized by Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Sciences (Koch, 1932, 1935).

Lazersonas (1936) further noted in his report, that "[t]he society maintains close ties with a Latvian institution pursuing similar goals: the Riga Municipal Youth and Vocational Suitability Research Institute<sup>26</sup>." The latter was established in 1925 through the merger of the "psychotechnology cabinet of the Ministry of Education and the Nerve Ambulance of Pupil of Riga city" (Austers, 2025, p. 41; see also Renġe & Dzenis, 2009). More than 64,000 individuals were tested by its staff prior to 1940. The head of the institute was Rūdofls Drillis, who fled the Soviet occupation and subsequently continued his academic work in the United States. Several of his works were published there, including his history of Latvian psychotechnics (Drillis, 1957; Drillis, Contini, and Bluestein, 1964).

This relationship with its counterpart in the neighbouring state of Latvia was likely the most significant international connection and support the Institute managed to organize during its existence. However, no cooperation was established with the other neighbouring state, Poland. From 1919, diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Poland were severed until the outbreak of the Second World War, and, therefore, academic institutions did not engage in any formal cooperation.

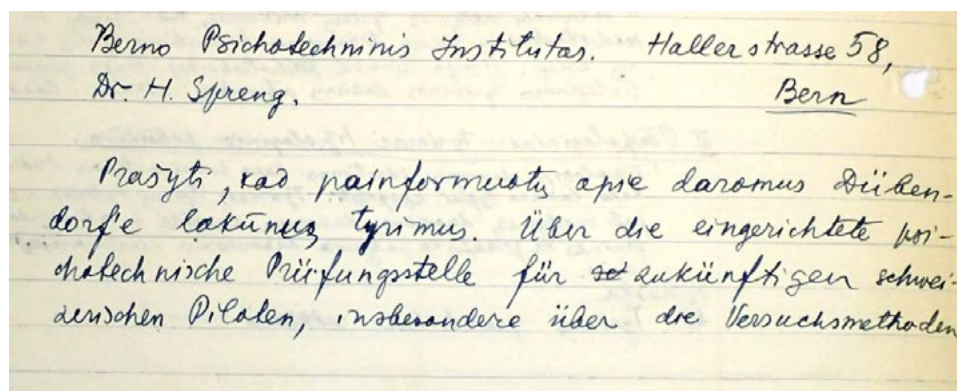
Beyond the immediate region, the staff of the Institute maintained close connections with foreign colleagues: they visited universities, participated in conferences abroad, and organized meetings in Kaunas (e.g. Koch, 1935; see above for Vabalas-Gudaitis' involvement in international conferences). Their ability to travel allowed them to develop academic skills and share practical expertise. Gučas (1937, p. 77) explained that "The Society also corresponded with such authorities in psychotechnics as prof. dr. J. Suter—Zürich, prof. dr. W. Moede—Berlin, prof. dr. Fr. Giese—Stuttgart, prof. dr. W. Blumenfeld, dr. Piorkowski—Berlin and others." This is further illustrated in his note, written around 1934 (see Figure 3).<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusions

The years between 1918 and 1940 represent a significant yet underexplored period in the history of psychotechnics—and psychology—in Lithuania. This neglect can be attributed to several factors. The negative view of psychotechnics in the USSR, its association with "bourgeois" interwar Lithuania, and the restricted, difficult access to archival sources likely prevented historians to study it in the Soviet period.

Psychologists from the University of Lithuania (since 1930 called Vytautas Magnus University) took a leading role in the development of psychotechnics in the country, collaborating with non-governmental organizations. They mainly focused on children and youth. The Experimental Pedagogy and Psychology Institute (established 1920) was a place where psychotechnical research was conducted and put into practice in the 1930s. Their priority was the psychological assessment of young people, primarily for the purpose of professional guidance. The activity reflected the Institute's aspiration to contribute to the creation of a modernized society by educating citizens and encouraging them to rely on scientific advancements.

**Figure 3.** A note from Gučas (ca. 1934) probably preparing a letter to the German professor, Hanns Spreng, asking a question. \*



\* Explanation and translation: The Lithuanian part reads: "To ask for information about the tests of pilots being conducted in Dübendorf." Then, the note continues in German: "About the psychotechnical testing centre set up for future Swiss pilots, especially about the assessment methods". [Source: Vilnius University Library, Manuscript Section, F142-91].

<sup>25</sup> It is possible that this is the same Karl Koch referred to by Baumgarten (1949).

<sup>26</sup> In Latvian, "Rīgas pilsētas Jaunatnes un arodu piemērotības pētīšanas institūts."

<sup>27</sup> The estimation of the date is based on the literature he referenced.

The head of the Institute, Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis, wrestled with the problem of the theoretical and experimental basis underpinning psychotechnical practice. His epistemological position followed that of Bekhterev's school, and most of the methods of assessment he created were rooted in "reactology". His hypotheses on work capacity types were based on his earlier classification of mental functions. The classification also served as a basis for his framework for personality assessments. However, I suggest that his standards for scientifically based assessment methods may have conflicted with the practical desire to obtain quickly useful results.

My analysis indicates that Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis' engagement with psychotechnics and his belief in viability of the field, determined the direction of the Institute's activities. By promoting scientifically based methods of psychotechnical assessment in their publications and lectures and engaging with the selection of employees and vocational guidance for high school students, the Lithuanian psychologists-psychotechnicians raised the scientific status of psychology in the eyes of general public and strengthened their position. This visibility was important in a country with few psychologists, both in research and in practice.

The Institute and the Lithuanian Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance made efforts to establish relationships with psychotechnical researchers and organizations in other countries. They conducted an active correspondence with notable figures in the field, such as W. Moede, Fr. Giese, W. Blumenfeld, and H. Spreng. From the sources I consulted, it seems that the institutional relationship they developed with a similar institution in neighbouring Latvia was crucial.

In sum, my findings indicate that the development of psychotechnics in Lithuania in the 1930s was centred around the Institute, with other institutions playing more peripheral roles. The process was productive and innovative. It built on the individual preferences of the psychologists involved, above all Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis. Their efforts laid the foundation for later developments in experimental, educational, and applied psychology in the country.

### Appendix: Archival Sources

Alfonas Gučas' handwritten notes on the psychological assessment of pilots. Probably written in 1934 or later. Vilnius University Library, Manuscript Section, F142-91.

Descriptions of the tests of Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis. Typewritten manuscript. Vilnius University Library, Manuscript Section, F142(575).

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