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LITHUANIAN POLITICS UNDER STRESS: IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS BEFORE THE SOVIET OCCUPATION

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Constitutional developments in modern Lithuania show much resemblance to the interwar pattern of change in other parts of central and eastern Europe. Thus, the new republic chose in 1918 the seemingly ascendant parliamentary democracy as its form of government. Its political texture in the postwar years consisted basically of three main forces which originated in pre-independent Lithuania. First, the clerical Christian Democratic Party, together with its allied organizations, united a considerable nationalist and Catholic following. Second, the Populists aimed to represent the interests of the nation's rural population, as well as to capitalize on the anti-clerical sentiments of the liberal voters. Third, the Social Democratic Party relied primarily on the urban workers and claimed a sizable labor following. (Throughout most of the interwar period the Communist Party was outlawed as inimical to independent Lithuania.)

For a number of years after the war the Catholics were in the ascendancy. However, by 1926 their political influence had declined, and in the elections held in May of that year the Catholics lost the majority of seats in the **Seimas** (Diet). Control of the government passed to the Populists and the Social Democrats. These changes produced a fluid political atmosphere.

Deep dissension existed in Lithuania even before the Leftist gains in 1926. The postwar years of social and political radicalism, replete with multipartite politics and influenced by the proximity of revolutionary Russia, had alienated a portion of the country's conservative and nationalist population. After the elections the situation deteriorated further, when the victorious Populists and Social Democrats began to carry out their domestic programs. These included relaxation of restriction on civil liberties, concessions to the national minorities, removal from public service of a number of Catholic officials, and dismissal of some high officers from the army. The unrest created by these reforms culminated in the military coup of December 17, 1926, an event that ended the democratic stage in the unfolding of the country's political life and inaugurated the authoritarian regime of Antanas Smetona. His all-Nationalist government continued, with minor modifications, until the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in June, 1940.

Political Philosophy of the Nationalist Union

The political movement which imparted substance to Lithuania's modern nationalism, i. e., the evolution of political ideas during Smetona's tenure of office, was essentially a comprehensive and a constructive reaction to the brief experiment with parliamentary democracy imported by the founders of the republic from the Western Allies. The first principle which defines Smetona's political endeavors, and which is central to that reaction, is his idea of national unity. Year after year this apostle of unity and his followers had counseled their fellow countrymen on every conceivable occasion that all individual views must submit to the demands of national unity, that a truly indivisible nation must be forged by uniting the people in the common cause, and that the Nationalist administration itself was but an instrument of national unity.[1] The unity which they had volunteered to restore was teleological. It was meant to facilitate the realization of distinctively national potentialities.

To perpetuate the contrast between the years of liberal democracy before 1926 and the new regime, the Nationalists countered vigorously and persistently all basic tenets of the old system. They were not content with the establishment of a new government but aspired instead to a thoroughgoing change in the structure of society. In theory, therefore, the Nationalist revolution promised to be total. Nationalist obsession with purely Lithuanian traits underscores their conviction

that the ways of their predecessors had been but imitations of the West whose ways were alien to Lithuanian soul. In their quest for individuality, the Nationalists would particularly value qualities innate in the land and the people. They felt that such cultural synthesis distinguished one nation from another.[2]

National consciousness initially originates imperceptibly and without organizational apparatus. To impart meaning and direction to it is the work of the educators. This is where Antanas Smetona comes in — to win eminence and to gain a place in the annals of the nation's political thought. The President was determined to give the nation both purpose and leadership. However, to afford the people with leadership proved to be easier than to draft a national ideology. The President never produced a definitive statement of purposes which could be regarded as the Nationalist creed. Instead, he articulated only a general orientation. The Nationalists were rather hesitant to identify and to define the essential qualities of their concepts and were somewhat puzzled as to just where this cultural autarchy would lead. Above all, their new man — no longer a citizen but a national — was interested in action, in vaguely reaching for the ultimate but never defining ideological aims.

Having discarded the liberal faith, Lithuania needed a new political basis. Authoritarianism had to answer that need. Despite the emphasis on and the extent of education and indoctrination, power — in the form of authoritarianism — was an instrument which the President wielded copiously. A conscious transformation of society such as the Nationalists had hoped to achieve is inconceivable without a monopoly of power. The Nationalists possessed that asset, as all opposition movements and their regional organizations were banned. Thus, authoritarianism was as essential to the Nationalist construction as means is to an end. Smetona had tried to distinguish between fascism and authoritarianism. But while the affinity between the two was readily perceptible, the differences were not. It cannot be said, although at times it has been so suggested, that the Nationalist establishment had developed into a fascist state. However, the doctrines which the Nationalists espoused were clearly grounded on fascist thought.

Aided by many Catholic intellectuals, the Nationalists had persistently assailed the liberal democrats for the latter's alleged failure to offset the ample individual rights with commensurate obligations. On their part, they vowed to restore the proper balance by inducing all citizens to esteem tradition, discipline, authority. In constantly recurring exhortations to every segment of population, by written and spoken word, President Smetona was indefatigable in his efforts to enhance order and discipline.[3]

Emphasis on action was another change wrought by the Nationalist regime. In the estimation of the new leaders, their liberal predecessors talked much and acted little. The reverse would now be the case. President Smetona had pointed out that members of a fascist society must always be on the move, for fascism is an organization of work. Lithuania must hasten onward, because dangers surround her — she is constrained to race against time. Frequent allusions to the ominous foreign threat had surrounded the Nationalist reforms with a barrack-like atmosphere and a sense of urgency.

Nationalist visionary projects are attainable only in an organized society. Implicit in such a proportion was the conversion of the pluralist society into a monolithic community. The President had said that the nation is not a loose mass of people but an "organic" whole. Only such a nation can convey a true impression of its will. Afflicted with internal contradictions, liberal institutions must surrender to the authority of a leader. He alone can bring domestic harmony, because only one person's will can claim ultimate unity. Life in such a community, the President continued, would go on not through particularistic organizations but through unified financial, economic, and cultural associations of a general and a "real" nature. And the association of associations would be the compact nation itself.[4]

The Lithuanian Nationalist Union functioned as the principal intermediary between the Nationalist government and the general public. It emerged in 1924 as a party relying on the well-to-do farm population and the nationalist intelligentsia. Unlike political parties in the West, the Union as such was not expected to formulate its platform and campaign for political support. Instead, it was instituted to radiate the ideas of its leader, the President.

The examination of Nationalist successes and failures is hampered by the difficulty in measuring and ascertaining the degree and depth of patriotism and nationalism. It is enough to say that the regime showed itself to have been obsessively concerned with both. In political theory authoritarianism had made far-reaching inroads and appeared triumphant. One of the more significant gains the Nationalists made in their deprecation of parliamentary democracy was the measure of theoretical support that their modern nationalist creed obtained from Catholics. The establishment of cordial relations between the two camps centered first on educational policies, which were grounded on peaceful coexistence between religious and national traditions. Equally reinforcing was the confluence of Catholic and Nationalist ideas on the "organic" structure of society. However, despite all these successes of the Smetona regime, it was undeniable that by the eve of World War II the Nationalists had bogged down. Universal public indifference and deep political discord on the eve of the Soviet assault suggest the chasm that severed Nationalist theories from the pulse of everyday life.

The Rise and Decline of Coalition Politics

The course of Lithuania's domestic politics was often susceptible to events abroad. The repercussions attendant upon the loss of Klaipeda (Memel) are symptomatic of that sensitivity. The Treaty of Versailles detached Klaipeda from Germany, and it was believed that eventually it would be awarded to Lithuania. When the cession failed to materialize, the

Lithuanians engineered a coup early in 1923 and annexed the city. However, in the years of Hitler's rule friction between Lithuanian and German residents in that territory increased, and the acquisition became a source of antagonism between the two countries. Finally, on March 22, 1939, the Berlin authorities demanded the Lithuanians to surrender the port town. Lithuania's submission to those demands precipitated a major political crisis in Kaunas.

Never in the brief political renascence of modern Lithuania had a blow by an enemy caused the citizens to demand in such resolute unanimity the realization of national unity and the defense of the nation's liberty. In the forefront of the general uproar, the Christian Democrats and the Populists, the formally nonexistent parties of opposition to the Nationalists, began to channel the mounting discontent in two directions. They urged the citizens to retain their confidence in the nation's future, and advocated the institution of a more representative government than the one which had presided over the country's destinies for over a decade.[5]

To the strain of animated remonstrations and a martial disposition among the general citizenry, the popular and influential commander of the army publicly joined the Catholic-Populist opposition by suggesting the need for re-organization of the government on a broader basis.[6] His admonition to the Nationalists was an intervention in civilian affairs that could not be disregarded. And so, in deference to his army chief's persistence, as well as public clamor, the President yielded and named General Jonas Černius to head the new Council of Ministers. This cabinet of joint action, as it was popularly known, came into being on March 27, and it made history when it unveiled for the first time in more than a decade the names of four eminent opposition leaders.

The admission into the Černius cabinet of Populists and Christian Democrats revealed an incogruous political situation. Formally, there was no such thing as a Christian Democratic or a Populist party, because all opposition movements were outlawed. Nevertheless, their curtailed existence was real. Formally, those two parties did not delegate their representatives to the new government, for there had not even been any appreciable talks between the Premier-designate and the opposition headquarters. However, their backing of it was evident to all. Both the Nationalists and their opponents attempted to rationalize this inconsistency by maintaining that opposition ministers had consented to enter Černius government not as party functionaries but as private citizens. Both sides were disinclined to call the Černius government a coalition government and instead resorted to ambiguous phrases to describe it. The interpretation which the Nationalists and the Catholic-Populist opposition adopted supplied a definition of the new power relationship that had resulted from the momentary triumph of public will over political realism. However, it failed to conceal the obvious, namely, that forces of the three major political movements in the country had come together to advance the common cause. The average citizen made no mistake about it.

The inclusion in the new administration of Catholic and Populist ministers was viewed by the Nationalists as a blow to their prodigious efforts to cement a monolithic commonwealth.[7] Publicly belittling the essential character of the change by claiming casually that it was the only natural thing to do in time of enemy pressure, the Nationalists simultaneously determined to restore **de facto** their monopoly of political control. In the forefront of the Nationalist counterdrive stood a group of young men associated with the weekly **Vairas** (The Helm). The spirited defense of the Nationalist method of government which these **vairininkai** (men of **Vairas**) directed against the recent liberal breakthroughs was grounded in the Nationalist appraisal of the place of authoritarianism in contemporary political theory. The Nationalists conceded that there are no eternal forms of government. Presumably, authoritarianism would disappear in due time, just as other doctrines and modes of organization have. However, they would soon make it clear that such time had not yet come. For the preservation of unity and order, the vairininkai vowed to carry on a vigorous campaign against all who refused to close ranks. Various aspects of that campaign are included in the next portion of this article.

The eruption of hostilities between Lithuania's next door neighbors on September 1, 1939, was a perilous interlude in domestic quarrels. Bent on a policy of neutrality, the government hoped to avoid, and did in fact avoid involvement in the German-Polish conflict. However, it could not escape some of its effects. Apart from the precautionary military considerations, the war had influenced in one way or another several major developments in Lithuania. Three such developments are presented: the Soviet pressure on Kaunas to admit into Lithuania Russian military bases, the increase in Communist activities, and the government crisis that was prejudical to the Catholic-Populist opposition.

Russia moves West. — The agreements between Germany and the Soviet Union, concluded on August 23 and September 28, 1939, consigned the three Baltic states to the Russian field of influence. The Russian diplomatic offensive against those states started almost at once.

Initially, the Lithuanian public was unsuspecting. The news which the Lithuanian Minister in Moscow brought home on Sept. 30 were received in Kaunas with a cautious optimism.[8] The envoy presented his Foreign Minister with an invitation from the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars to visit the Kremlin and to discuss matters of mutual interest that had arisen as a result of the recent changes in Eastern Europe. The government complied and by October 3 the Foreign Minister was on his way to Moscow. In brief, the Soviet position was this: (1) They were willing to hand over to Lithuania a portion of the Vilnius (Vilna) [A reference to a city and a territory held in interwar years by Poland, but claimed by both Poland and Lithuania.] territory outlined by the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty of July 12, 1920; and (2) they demanded that the Kaunas government conclude with Moscow a treaty of mutual assistance, which would authorize the stationing on Lithuanian soil of Soviet troops.[9] Irrespective of the several alternatives they had suggested, the Lithuanians

failed to dissuade Soviet authorities from their insistence on stationing military garrisons in the Baltic republic. The treaty, with a secret supplement concerning the bases, was signed on October 10.

Kaunas radio broadcast the news of the return of Vilnius on October 11. The instantaneous outburst of enthusiasm which attendend the announcement defies description. Any foreboding the government had had about the admission of foreign troops was buried beneath public rejoicing. The impending arrival of the Red Army was discussed in a cursory manner as a footnote to the acquisition of the eastern territory.[10] The prestige of the Soviet Union soared. This is not to say that sober appraisal of the situation escaped the Lithuanians entirely.[11] However, one ineradicable by-product of the October days was that the military incursion failed to nettle Soviet-Lithuanian amity. On the contrary, the restoration of the ancient city had added new strength to it. This obscured the fact that Lithuania's independence was seriously impaired, that it in fact had become a Soviet satellite.

The Communists emerge. — The history of the Lithuanian revolutionary movement is a perplexing topic. There is little reliable or verifiable information about it. The Nationalist seizure of power late in 1926 augured a precarious future for the Communists. They themselves referred to the next five years as a time of crisis. The illegal Communist publications, which were a registry of failures, confirm that dismal prospect.[12]

An event of considerable importance to the local Communists was the fourth party conference which they held in Moscow from September 10 to October 1, 1927. Empowered to act as a congress, the conference entered into a critical examination of its past operation. It also established the general direction to which the party would adhere in the years of Nationalist supremacy. (The next comparable congress would be convened only in 1941.) The Moscow theses[13] spurned any sporadic conspiracies against the Kaunas authorities and asserted that the regime can be overthrown only by a well-planned mass uprising of workers and peasants led by the Communists. Consequently, the revolutionaries were urged to win the support of the workers and to align them with the peasantry.

The fifth party conference, in session from September 8 to 17, 1933, was able to report that the organization had outlived the crisis. However, it was not at all satisfied with the Party's over-all achievements. The delegates conceded that the failure to become a mass party was a major failure.[14]

The closing months of 1939 have to some extent substantiated Communist allegations that a "revolutionary situation" in Lithuania was ripening. The probable explanation of this development was the encampment in Lithuanian territory of the Red Army and the deteriorating social and economic conditions as a result of the loss of Klaipėda, the affliction of European war, and the acquisition of the heterogeneous Vilnius population. Irrespective of police measures, Communist agitation heightened.[15] Previously the Communists demanded political rights for the workers, freedom for political prisoners, and legalization of their party. But now they also arraigned the Lithuanian government for bad faith in executing the terms of the October treaty with the Soviet Union.

It is rather difficult to determine the precise membership in the Communist Party. But some estimates, if incomplete, are possible. It appears that from 1936 to the Soviet occupation in mid-1940, despite police repressions, the party managed to keep its membership at approximately 1500.[16]

In concluding this compendium of the Lithuanian Communist movement, one might also note that the underground had brought forth a number of people seeking radical social, economic, and political reforms. More than that, it produced a group of professional revolutionaries committed to such association with a foreign Power as to efface the very idea of independent Lithuania. However, standing alone the local Communists did not constitute any appreciable threat. A highly developed sense of national consciousness among Lithuanians made the chances of Communist victory virtually nil.

Joint action dissipated. — No sooner had the popular uproar over the Klaipėda debacle waned than indications of political strife reappeared. The underlying cause of incipient dissension was none other than the very nature of political realities at the end of March. In truth, the Nationalists had never seriously considered even a partial return to democracy. On the other hand, the opposition had not intended to surrender to the will of the Nationalist leader. This innate incompatibility presaged a government crisis.

The divergence of opinion between the Nationalist President and the leading opposition ministers encompassed two major domestic issues. First, the Catholic Minister of Education took exception to Smetona's educational policies. Second, the Populist Minister of Agriculture questioned his social and economic course, which became more complicated by the acquisition of the less developed Vilnius districts. Disagreement did not abate, and by mid-November, 1939, the Černius cabinet was out of office. Thereupon the President designated Antanas Merkys to shape the last cabinet of independent Lithuania, hoping that the latter would succeed in strengthening the Nationalist regime. The new government was to consist solely of Nationalist supporters, with Merkys serving also as the Minister of Defense. However, Nationalist plans failed to materialize thanks largely to the well-timed intervention of the army commander. After tense talks first with the President and then with the opposition leaders, this military officer induced Smetona to shelve the idea of an administration congenial only to the Nationalists and persuaded the Catholics and the Populists to enter the government under the leadership of Merkys.[17]

In the new cabinet, which was formed on November 21, the Nationalists held all key ministries and opposition influence had waned considerably. The new rearrangement, however, was more commensurate with political realities than the old. For eight months after the loss of Klaipėda, many a citizen entertained the illusion that the three-power collaboration in the administrative branch of government implied a trend to representative government. Now all such impressions vanished.

The first half of 1940 witnessed several moves by the Nationalists intended to consummate their recovery and to quell any resistance. These attempts justify the conclusion that in the final months of the republic the political cycle was complete. Before the German-made crisis in 1939 the Nationalists were supreme. The unconditional consent of the Catholic and Populist leaders to participate in what was tantamount to a coalition government shortly after that crisis proved to be their capitulation to mass psychology. A result of fortuitous circumstances and not of any genuine restructuring of internal political and social forces, the fragile alliance (meaning the Černius cabinet) barely survived the crisis-psychosis which had originated it. Once the memories of March 1939 receded and no comparable perils perplexed either the leaders or the led, the professions of united action dwindled. And before the eruption of the Russian-made final crisis in 1940, Lithuanian politics had reverted to its habitual vogue — the Nationalists rallied to shape an "organic nation", while the opposition arrayed to block them. Nothing essential had changed during the year.

Notes:

1 See A(ntanas) Smetona, *Pasakyta, parašyta, 1927-1934* (Kaunas: Pažanga, 1935), pp. 28-29, 65-66, 101, 280, and 323; Jonas Aleksa, *Lietuviškų gyvenimo kelių beieškant* (Kaunas: Privately printed, 1933), p. 415; Vyt(autas) Alantas, "Politinė tautos vienybė," *Vairas*, December 14, 1939, p. 930.

2 See *Tautos Mokykla*, April 15, 1939, p. 166.

3 See Smetona, *op. cit.*, pp. 35, 117, and 304; *Karys*, September 7, 1939, p. 1045.

4 See Smetona, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66, 154, 323, 326, and 328-329.

5 See XX Amžius, March 22, 1939, p. 1; *Lietuvos Žinios*, March 24, 1939, quoted in *Pasaulio Lietuvis*, April 15, 1939, p. 126; Juozas Audėnas, Unpublished Memoirs, p. 99.

6 See *Karys*, March 23, 1939, p. 378; *Lietuvos Aidas*, March 24, 1939, p. 4; Stasys Raštikis, *Kovose dėl Lietuvos* (Los Angeles: Lietuvių Dienos, 1956), I, 552-554.

7 See D(omas) Cesevičius, "Tautiškumo perspektyvos," *Vairas*, November 30, 1939, p. 895; D(omas) Cesevičius, "Mūsų politinės sąmonės evoliucija," Vairas, June 8, 1939, p. 409; Antanas Smetona, Unpublished Pro Memoria, p. 2; *Vairas*, November 30, 1939, p. 893.

8 See *Lietuvos Aidas*, October 3, 1939, p. 1; XX Amžius, October 7, 1939, p. 12; *Lietuvos Ūkininkas*, October 5, 1939, p. 3.

9 See Raštikis, *op. cit.*, I, 605-618; an unpublished statement by Vincas Mašalaitis, Former Secretary-General of the Lithuanian Council of Ministers, Bryn Mawr, Pa., October 25, 1953.

10 For effusive editorials, see *Lietuvos Aidas*, October 16, 1939, p. 1; *Lietuvos Žinios*, October 10, 1939, p. 1; *Vairas*, October 12, 1939, p. 758; J(uozas) Gobis, "Vilnius, Lietuva ir SSSR," *Draugija*, December 21, 1939, p. 1225; *Panevėžio Garsas*, November 11, 1939, p. 1.

11 See *XX Amžius*, October 11, 1939, p. 12; *Lietuvos Ūkininkas*, October 12, 1939, p. 3.

12 See *Balsas*, August 25, 1928, p. 428; *ibid*., September 25, 1929, p. 845; J(uozas) Žiugžda (ed.), *Lietuvos TSR Istorijos Šaltiniai* (Vilnius: Lietuvos TSR Mokslų Akademija Istorijos Institutas, 1961), IV, 413.

13 See K(onstantinas) Jablonskis and others, *Lietuvos TSR Istorija* (Vilnius: Lietuvos TSR Mokslų Akademija, 1958), p. 364; Žiugžda (ed.), *op. cit.*, IV, 354; R. šarmaitis (ed.), *Revoliucinis judėjimas Lietuvoje* (Vilnius: Partijos Istorijos institutas prie LKP CK, 1957), pp. 388-389.

14 See Žiugžda (ed.), *op. cit.*, IV, 475-480.

15 The political commissars, unlike the ordinary Russian soldiers, failed to comply with their treaty obligations not to meddle in Lithuanian affairs. Under orders to assist local Communist activities, they attended party meetings, tried to establish contacts with workers in Vilnius, and, for purposes of military construction, employed Lithuanians of Russian descent, who were susceptible to revolutionary propaganda. These employees, goaded by the Communists, would cause labor problems that tended to delay the work, an outcome which in turn served as a pretext for Soviet charges that Lithuanians were guilty of sabotage. See Jonas Audrūnas (Vincas Rastenis) and Petras Svyrius (Bronius Dirmeikis), *Lietuva tironų pančiuose* (Cleveland: Lietuvai vaduoti sąjunga, 1946), I, 39; Raštikis, *op. cit.*, I, 629 and 692; U. S., Congress, House, Select Committee to Investigate the Incorporation of the Baltic States into the U.S.S.R., *Hearings, Baltic States Investigation*, Part 1, 83rd Cong., 1st Sess., 1953, p. 44; Andrius Valuckas, Kolektyvinė tironija (Kaunas: Valstybinė leidykla, 1943), p. 19; Audėnas, Unpublished Memoirs, pp. 106-107.

16 See report by Antanas Sniečkus quoted in A. Butkutė-Ramelienė, *Lietuvos komunistu partijos kova už tarybų valdžios įtvirtinimą respublikoje*, *1940-1941 m*. (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1958), pp. 166-167. This total, quoted in Communist sources, appears to be reliable. Non-Communist writers vary considerably in their estimates, ranging from 600 to 1700. See Jurgis Mantas, *Lietuva bolševikų okupacijoj* (Buenos Aires: Liet. Inform. Centras P. Amerikoje, 1948),p. 20; *Hearings, Baltic States Investigation, op. cit.*, Part 1, p. 288.

17 For an account of the formation of the Merkys cabinet, see Raštikis, *op. cit.*, I, 632-636.