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PRELUDE TO INDEPENDENCE The Great Conference of Vilnius, 1905

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The Lithuanian national movement of the second half of the 19th century began to express itself politically in the organization of political parties, which began to formulate the immediate and long-range political program for Tsarist ruled Lithuania. One of the first to organize and declare a program of autonomy for Lithuania was the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, formed in 1896. (** All dates are according to new style.) Within the next decade other political parties — The Christian Democratic Party, the Populist Party, and the Democratic Party appeared on the scene. The Lithuanian nation was thus preparing itself for a struggle for independence.

Among the events leading to the Declaration of Independence of Lithuania on February 16, 1918, the Great Lithuanian Conference, meeting in Vilnius in 1905, is certainly the first major landmark. The Vilnius Conference crystalized a political program, supported by the entire nation, which as a minimum demand autonomy for the country.

The Soviet historians have minimized the significance of this event for certain political reasons. First, the Great Conference of Vilnius was a culmination of the Lithuanian national movement. Second, the rising political nationalism of the Lithuanian nation certainly implied and even expressed opposition to Russian subjugation and a desire for self government. These aspects of the national movement, and of the Great Conference of Vilnius, are contrary to Soviet interpretation of Lithuanian history, which attempts to minimize the national factor and emphasize class conflict. Accordingly, the significance of the Great Conference of Vilnius is minimized in Soviet historiography. Sixty years since the event provide us a perspective for a better evaluation of the Conference, as well as give us an opportunity to correct some of the distortions of Soviet historiography.

Political Situation in the Russian Empire and Lithuania

As the Russo-Japanese war, which had begun in January of 1904, expanded it became increasingly difficult for the Tsar. The discontent of the people with the oppression and exploitation by the Tsarist regime grew throughout the Russian Empire. The peasants and farm workers wanted the question of land ownership decided as quickly as possible, while the urban poor and the industrial laborers anxiously waited for an improvement of their wretched lot. Russia's intelligentsia yearned for civil rights, freedom, and progress for their country, while the nations enslaved by the Russian Empire were biding their time, waiting for an opportunity to shake off the Tsarist yoke. Following the Bloody Sunday of January 9, 1905, when the Tsar's troops fired upon a peaceful demonstration in St. Petersburg, killing and wounding several thousand demonstrators, protests, demonstrations, strikes and riots erupted all over the Russian Empire, soon becoming the first Russian revolution.

The especially harsh and despotic restrictions in effect in Lithuania as a result of the unsuccessful revolt of 1863 began easing somewhat. By circular letter to local censor committees and individual censors the Central Committee for Press Affairs announced that the ban on the Lithuanian press was abolished, and that the Lithuanians could use the Latin or other preferred alphabet in their publications, and no longer forced to use only the Cyrillic. Fearful of the spreading revolution, the Tsarist government announced various semi-concessions. By a manifest of May 2, 1905, the Tsar proclaimed a greater freedom of religion. Immediately a great number of people, who for some reason were registered with the Orthodox Church or who had been born of religiously mixed marriages, but were innately Catholics, hurried to

reconvert to the Catholic faith. Under the same decree the teaching of religion in the native language was permitted in all schools. On this basis, Lithuanian was introduced as the official language for teaching religion in the schools in Lithuania. This was the first opening by which the Lithuanian language was returned to Lithuania's schools. By the decree of May 15, 1905, the restrictions forbidding the purchase of land in Lithuania by Lithuanian Catholics was abolished. Until that time the Catholic farmers of Lithuania who wanted to buy land had to obtain special permits from the local governor, and these were only for limited size plots.

The real period of freedom began after the decree of November 2, 1905, by which the Tsar, frightened by the October strike which had spread through almost the entire Russian Empire, promised to introduce constitutional government and to grant civil and personal liberties and freedom of the press and assembly. In practice, however, many of these promises remained merely promises which the Tsarist regime tried to forget even as it was quelling the revolution.

The Lithuanians first utilized the promise of freedom of the press, and newspapers in the Lithuanian language began appearing in Lithuania. Until that time newspapers in the Lithuanian language were printed in East Prussia and the United States and illegally smuggled into Lithuania. The first legally published newspaper, active in the struggle for the rebirth of Lithuanian nationalism and Lithuania's self-government, was *Vilniaus Žinios* (Vilnius News). The first edition appeared just before Christmas of 1904, under the editorship of Jonas Kriaučiūnas (d. 1941). Understandably, the first editions of even this newspaper, particularly because of the cautious nature of the publisher Petras Vileišis, touched only lightly upon politics. It was feared that articles against the improper conduct of the Tsar's regime could only lead to conflict with government censorship and the possible closing of the paper. Even when, in the course of events, the needs to call a broader conference of Lithuanian people was publicly maturing, especially among the Lithuanian activists in Vilnius, there was barely any mention of the idea in the press. It was only after the general revolutionary strike throughout the Russian Empire and the Tsar's decree granting freedoms that *Vilniaus Žinios* was able not only to write more freely about events in Lithuania proper, but itself took a more active role in arrangements for a convention of Lithuanian representatives and activists — the Great Vilnius Conference — by raising truly revolutionary demands which the Lithuanian people thereafter grimly carried out. Thus, on October 8, 1905, *Vilniaus Žinios* wrote: "At last we begin to live . . . until now we did not live, but merely existed in misery and suffered. Together with Russia itself, Lithuania and the other Russian-enslaved lands until now were a horrible prison where millions of people gasped for breath..." These were unequivocally revolutionary words, proving that together with the other nations within the Russian Empire the Lithuanians were determined to throw off the old Tsarist order and on its ruins create a new system.

The plan was to call a national convention of Lithuanians to deliberate upon Lithuania's situation and to set the guidelines for future action^ The initiator of such a convention was the editor of *Vilniaus Žinios* Jonas Kriaučiūnas. The idea came to him and his like-minded colleagues while following the progress of the general strike in Vilnius and reading the famous October Manifesto by the Tsar, promising constitutional government and civil liberties. The Manifesto was printed in *Vilniaus Žinios* on November 7, 1905.

The Manifesto sounds particularly interesting in comparison with the Tsar's statement made the same year (1905), when he was informed of the moods of the Russian press after the catastrophe at Tsushima where the Japanese virtually destroyed the Russian navy. The Tsar then said: "What do those ragamuffins (i.e., the press) want and where are they snooping? It is my navy ..." Between this statement and the cited fiat there was a mass strike, riots, and serious uprisings in many places. The Manifesto was a consequence of the Tsar's great fear which, later, he tried to cover up by the cruelest repressions in quelling the revolution. In November of 1905, however, even as the strike was in progress, Jonas Kriaučiūnas correctly evaluated the significance of that Manifesto and its short-comings, and the possibility of convening a Lithuanian conference under its terms.

On November 1, 1905, a meeting of Vilnius' Lithuanian activists was held in the offices of *Vilniaus Žinios*, at which it was decided to organize a committee for the convening of such a Lithuanian conference. After negotiations and arguments a committee was formed, with Dr. Jonas Basanavičius as chairman and Jonas Kriaučiūnas as secretary.

Preparation For a National Conference

The central figure in the Vilnius Lithuanian movement of that time was Dr. Jonas Basanavičius (1851-1927), who later was called the Patriarch of the Lithuanian nation. After living 25 years abroad, most of that time in Bulgaria, Dr. Basanavičius returned to Lithuania in the summer of 1905 and the same year established residence in Vilnius. Until 1905 he was known in Lithuania as the founder of the first Lithuanian language newspaper *Aušra* (The Dawn), which was published abroad and smuggled illegally into the Tsarist ruled country. The first issue of *Aušra* appeared in 1883 and subsequently played an important role in the Lithuanian struggle for national freedom. Dr. Basanavičius was inclined to emphasize and encourage the cultural element in the national movement. In fact, he was devoted to research in the ethnology and history of his nation. He organized and presided over the Lithuanian Scientific Society. Seven volumes of Lithuanian tales and two volumes of folk songs, collected by him, were published in the United States. When it became apparent that changes were taking place in the Russian Empire he returned to Lithuania, trusting that improving conditions for Lithuanian activity would not only permit him to spend his old age peacefully in Lithuania, but also to carry on scientific and literary work for his nation. Confident in the popularity of his name and his age, and feeling more knowledgeable than other Lithuanian activists by reason of his education and knowledge of European culture, at least as far as relations with Germany, Austria, the

Czechs, and Bulgaria were concerned, Dr. Basanavičius had reason to expect that he would play an important role in the future history of Lithuania.

In Vilnius Dr. Basanavičius met first his old acquaintance, engineer Petras Vileišis, and his closest friends — Donatas Malinauskas, Dr. Antanas Vileišis, Mečislovas Davainis-Silvestravičius, with the editors of *Vilniaus Žinios*, with the Democrats Antanas Smetona, Jonas Vileišis, Povilas Višinskis, and others. Having returned to Lithuania at the height of the revolutionary fever and as new parties (Populist and Christian Democrat) were being formed and old parties (Socialdemocrats in particular) were reorganizing for the struggle with the faltering Russian government, Dr. Basanavičius took part in Lithuanian discussions. Under consideration then were plans as to what the Lithuanians were to do as Russia's revolution accelerated and with the revolutionary organizations within Lithuania making preparations for armed battle; yet he remained above any group or political association, avoiding their internal dissensions, always proclaiming the slogan of national unity as the most important aim.

As Dr. Basanavičius' authority grew in Vilnius, his name assumed significance and became influential in many places. Neither the radical Russian movements, aiming to engulf Lithuania, nor the western socialist theories were able to divert him from his avowed national purpose: to elevate the Lithuanian people to a high degree of national consciousness by relating the present to the nation's past. That was why, when the idea of an assembly of representatives of all Lithuanians was brought up, his person was the most acceptable as chairman of the preparatory committee, and that was why his name was signed under the public announcement, calling a national conference. The announcement was prepared by Dr. Basanavičius and published in *Vilniaus Žinios* on November 11, 1905.

The call for a meeting met with wide acclaim among the public, caught up as it was in the waves of revolution emanating from Russia. The Lithuanians in great numbers elected their representatives to the conference since, to their way of thinking, they were to make momentous decisions affecting their very way of life. In many places the representatives received valid suggestions from their constituents, with political, economic, and other essential demands. Priests, for example, the noted publicist and writer Rev. J. Tumas (d. 1935), traveled the length and width of their parishes and the surrounding districts and urged the people to send representatives to the conference in Vilnius. The intellectuals were invited to attend the conference of their own accord. In addition, manor-owners and their hired hands called separate meetings, as did the independent farmers. They closed the state-operated liquor monopoly stores, divested the Russian police officials of their uniforms, and forced out of the schools Russian teachers who had been sent in from the depths of Russia. The mood of the people was uplifted throughout the country, but there were no gross excesses. In a word, the Lithuanian village, until then oppressed by the Tsar's gendarmes and Polonized manor-own-ers, began expressing its own will aloud and in all earnestness.

In addition, the Lithuanian clergy became especially active. This same Reverend Tumas, having visited Kaunas, Vilnius, Suvalkai and Seinai, went to St. Petersburg to see the Lithuanian professors at the Catholic Priests Seminary there. Among other things under discussion at this meeting was the subject of the future — this time organized — activity by the Lithuanian clergy. Father Tumas went from St. Petersburg to the Vilnius Conference with the Rev. Prof. Pranas Bucys (who later became Superior General of the Marian Fathers and an Archbishop), to whom he later surrendered his place as the Christian Democratic representative on the presidium of the Vilnius Conference.

Proceedings and Decisions of the Great Vilnius Conference

The Great Vilnius Conference met on December 4 and 5, 1905, in the Town Hall of Vilnius. About 2,000 people came to the meeting as elected representatives or voluntary participants from all parts of Lithuania and from the Lithuanian communities in East Prussia, Latvia, Poland, the Ukraine, and Russia. At first the Socialdemocrats did not concur with the idea of the meeting and did not appoint a representative on the organizing committee. However, when the Vilnius Conference convened, the Socialdemocrats began taking part in the proceedings. Indeed, every Lithuanian was welcome at this meeting, which was truly an all-Lithuanian assembly.

Dr. Basanavičius, forseen as chairman of the Conference, opened the meeting in the morning of December 4 and proposed an agenda, which was prepared by the organizing committee. The program called for reports by Dr. Basanavičius, Meč. Davainis-Silvestravičius, J. Kriaučiūnas and others, with a review of Lithuanian history, the question of Lithuanian-Latvian relationship, and related themes. Such a pre-arranged program for an almost spontaneously-originated meeting, with peaceful and almost academic historic and ethnic discourses, and presenting in the forefront an isolated person who had been and still stood outside the internal Lithuanian struggles, one who had spent a quarter of his life outside of Lithuania, could not possibly satisfy the needs of a majority of those participants who had come fired up by the fever of the revolutionary events. Most dissatisfied were the Socialdemocrats and the just-organized peasant Populist activists. They raised heated discussions which lasted for hours over the matter of business before the Conference, during which the better-known leaders and spokesmen of all the parties and groups spoke their minds: for the Christian Democrats — Rev. Pr. Bučys and the Rev. J. Tumas; for the Democrats — A. Smetona, P. Višinskis, and others; for the Socialdemocrats — St. Kairys, Vl. Siruta-vičius; for the Populists — J. Gabrys, M. Šleževičius, and others. The most militant were the Socialdemocrats who wanted to take charge of the Conference, even though they were only a small minority. Through the efforts of the serious participants, particularly Kairys, Smetona, Tumas, and Višinskis, the wrangles were toned down and they were able to get on with the creation of a presidium of five "party" representatives: independent

J. Basanavičius, Christian Democrat Rev. Pr. Bučys, Socialdemocrat St. Kairys, Democrat A. Smetona, and the Populist J. Stankūnas. The members of the presidium chaired the sessions in rotation. J. Gabrys, L. Gira, and Pr. Klimaitis were elected as secretaries. Probably the most active participant at the congress, and the most sensible speaker, was the Rev. J. Tumas.

Participating in the Great Vilnius Conference were people from all walks of life, parties and groups, with differing views about the welfare of Lithuania and visions of her future. It was not easy, therefore, to create a general consensus and to make realistic decisions. Most of the speeches and arguments were about autonomy for Lithuania, with a diet in Vilnius. Although the concept of autonomy was not understood in the same way by all, nevertheless the matter was more or less clear to everyone. The most intense arguments were about the means for obtaining autonomy. One thing was clear to everyone — the Tsarist regime would not grant autonomy in good grace. Some demanded a strictly revolutionary course and even advocated armed uprising; others supported the idea of a bloodless struggle because without preparation to raise weapons against a much more powerful adversary would mean only harsher repression in retaliation and consequently entire question of autonomy would be scuttled. Father Tumas particularly urged the Lithuanians to take part in the revolution not by bloody means, but by peaceful means, as the Finns had done.

With such an atmosphere prevailing, it was evident that the scholarly lectures planned by Dr. Basanavičius and the others should be eliminated from the agenda. The presidium of the Conference decided to discuss first of all the most pressing questions of the day — reports of what is taking place and being done in Lithuania — and then to try to set guidelines for the nation's future struggle for liberty.

It was inevitable for the reports of events in localities to be often repetitive; they irritated the delegates with their monotonous sameness, yet they were unavoidable. It was essential that at least a portion of the county representatives be heard, not just the leaders of various parties. The presidium succeeded in concluding the first day's session with reports from the counties without permitting the meeting to stray afield. Most important — almost all of the county representatives were given an opportunity to speak.

The following day, December 5, was marked with even more heated arguments in discussing the overall program for the upcoming struggle of the Lithuanian nation. At this session there were many repetitious statements and demands in the discussions about the agenda and the make-up of the presidium. The resolutions committee succeeded in combining the demands of the various fractions and parties in a common declaration, which was enthusiastically approved by the participants of the Conference.

Vilniaus Žinios published the decisions of the Conference on Dec. 7, 1905. The entire text follows:

I. The Present Situation in Russia and Lithuania

Recognizing that the present Tsarist government is our worst enemy, that all of the lands of the Russian state are now in revolt against that regime, and that a happier life can be had only by winning the struggle against the old order, the Lithuanians participating in the meeting decided: To become educated, to be united, and to join in battle with the people revolting in all the Russian nations.

II. Lithuanian Autonomy

Since the needs of the inhabitants of Lithuania can be fully satisfied only by genuine self-rule of our territory, and because it is desired so that the other nationalities still living in Lithuania could enjoy full freedom, the conference of Lithuanians decided: To demand autonomy for Lithuania with a diet, situated in Vilnius, elected by universal, equal, honest and secret elections without exception as to sex, nationality or religion. This autonomous Lithuania must be composed of present ethnographic Lithuania as a nucleus, and of those borderlands which for economic, cultural, national or other reasons are attracted to this center and whose inhabitants will want to belong to it. Inasmuch as the Lithuanians of Suvalkai governorship present at the convention of Lithuanians at Vilnius unanimously acknowledged the necessity of fighting together with the Lithuanians of the other governorships for the autonomy of Lithuania, the convention decided that the Lithuanians of the Suvalkai governorship must be joined to autonomous Lithuania. The relationship with the neighboring Russian lands must be based on federal foundation.

III. Means for Winning Autonomy

To achieve autonomy, it is first necessary to put an end to the present oppressive system. For this purpose all of the forces of Lithuania's political parties and individuals must be united. Having become united at home, we should join with all the other nationalities of Russia which aid in putting down that system, meanwhile we should refuse to pay any taxes, close the monopolies, not permit our children to attend Russian primary schools, stay out of the county courts and all other agencies of the present government in Kaunas, Vilnius and Gardinas governorships, keep our brothers out of the army, and in case of necessity, for all workers to strike in the cities and in the countryside.

IV. Counties, Schools and Churches

The native language of the people must be used in all transactions in all the Lithuanian counties. Since the present school is only a tool for denationalization and corruption, all such schools must be converted to purely national schools, where the schooling is conducted in the native language, and the people of the land choose their own teachers. Since in services in the Lithuanian churches in the Vilnius diocese the Polish language is used for political ends, the Lithuanian conference decided to unanimously express best wishes to the Lithuanians residing and struggling within the Vilnius diocese for their success in the struggle with the Polish clergy for the right to use the Lithuanian language in the Lithuanian churches and to censure the order of today's church in the Vilnius bishopric.

The adopted decisions were revolutionary in tone, but nowhere near as harsh as the speeches by the individual speakers. Which is understandable because no one actually knew the fundamental purpose for which the assembly, the Great Conference of Vilnius, was called. No one knew exactly what to demand, or why, or what hope there was to win their points. The counties registered their own local demands, the leftist intelligentsia prattled about organizing all the farmers. The extremists made faces and prepared, as though with a cudgel, to club the Russian government over the head — to demand autonomy for Lithuania. For the priests and Catholics in general autonomy would be a clear position, but things would have to be directed in such a way that the entire reform would be Catholic, not socialist.

No one even mentioned the synchronization of tasks; each profession and class was concerned only with formulating its own plans. In addition, there is no doubt that the idea of calling the Conference and the gathering of the participants occurred spontaneously, without full preparation or planning. That was why the general and important matters sprang up out of the clear only on the second day, almost at the very end, when most of the delegates had cooled off in their local demands and realized that this Conference was not yet empowered to satisfy everything since it had convened almost spontaneously, without anyone's sanction and lacking any legislative power.

Toward a Realization of the Decisions

Following the Conference, 36,000 copies of its decisions were printed at Petras Vileišis' press (where *Vilniaus Žinios* was being published) and widely distributed throughout Lithuania. Upon returning to their homes, the delegates began carrying out the Conference decisions, in some places organizing what could be called almost self-governing district republics, in many places liquidating the old Tsarist order and installing a new, Lithuanian system in a disciplined and orderly fashion. In many localities Russian teachers, officials, and police were eliminated, taxes were no longer paid, liquor monopoly stores were smashed, etc. At the same time a stronger Latvian revolutionary movement more than once showed up more effectively in mass participation in Latvia's streets, while in the countryside the Latvians poured out the centuries-old pent-up hatred against the barons by burning their manors and shooting the owners. In Lithuania, on the other hand, violence was minimal, regardless of the strikes by the workers of the manor farms and in spite of the terrible memories of the times of serfdom and the unfriendly relations of manor owners with their workers, hired hands, and neighboring farmers. The "revolutionaries" also avoided any rough handling of the Tsar's administrative personnel, peacefully carting them out of their counties and replacing them with their own elected officials. True, the Russian officials did not understand the Lithuanian spirit nor the revolutionary manifestations in Lithuania. The Lithuanian was inclined to fight for his rights in an honorable manner. On the whole, however, the sensible and determined action of the people impressed even the Russians. For example, the discharged Russian teachers, having congregated in Kaunas, announced that they were in sympathy with the Lithuanian demands to have their own schools and asked the government to transport them from Lithuania.

With the revolutionary movement spreading in Lithuania, the local Russian government, and even Governor General Freze, were disoriented and at a loss as to what to do. The latter, on December 6, the day following the Conference, announced his order, granting the Lithuanians the right to teach in their own language in grammar schools, to appoint Lithuanian Catholic teachers in primary schools, to elect county secretaries in county meetings on the condition that they be approved subsequently by the government, and to use the Lithuanian language in internal county correspondence. Many Lithuanian teachers and county secretaries then obtained positions in Lithuania. On December 8, interim press regulations were announced, under which the founding of newspapers was considerably eased: it was no longer necessary to petition the government for permission to start a newspaper; it was sufficient to notify the local governor and obtain a permit from him.

As 1905 was ending, a deputy of the Governor General for police affairs in Warsaw reported to his government on December 30: "The Lithuanians openly say that they do not recognize the Government-appointed officials, and for this reason elect their own elders, county secretaries, establish their own police, and at the county meetings, to which they don't admit the police, questions of the new government system are discussed — ways and means by which autonomy could be obtained and the like. Indeed, none of the county agencies function any longer. The gendarmes, for the most part, are transferred to the cities. ." ("Materiy do dziejow ziemi Sej-nenskiej", *Bialystok*, 1963, p.341).

In the decisions made at the Great Vilnius Conference much attention was given to the education of Lithuanians; in practice, however, only a small part of them were put into effect: not only because of the quick reaction and repressions by the Russian government, but even more because of Lithuanian unpreparedness to carry them out. At that time many Lithuanian activists, especially the leftists, were led in their decisions more by the revolutionary moods emanating from Russia, than by bold deliberations of their own vital matters. Thus they were reaching for far more than they were able to get, and many efforts went to waste.

At the moment it was as yet impossible to dream about the Lithuanization of all the schools. Even if the Tsar's regime had transferred the schools to the Lithuanians, there were not enough teachers to take them over. At the first convention of the Lithuanian Teachers Association, held on August 21, 1905, the discussion was about the necessity of reorganizing the entire educational system of Lithuania and making all the schools Lithuanian. It is worth mentioning here that at this meeting a demand was made to revive the banned Vilnius University and to make it Lithuanian! The Convention, however, said nothing about the preparation of teachers. That was why at their second convention, held at the end of 1905, it was decided to send letters to the Lithuanian teachers in other governorships, requesting them to return to Lithuania. Much time was needed for preparing Lithuanian teachers for Lithuanian schools, let alone overcoming superficial obstacles.

A Prelude to Independence

Although the decisions of the Great Vilnius Conference were not realized, the Conference itself was of great significance for the Lithuanian nation on its march to freedom. It proved that the Lithuanians were beginning to mature not only culturally, but politically as well, that they are alert, and that they have a concept political freedom. The most important demand — autonomy for Lithuania with a diet in Vilnius — was a step toward the reestablishment of an independent Lithuanian State. This was the great prelude to the independence of Lithuania.

The Conference of Vilnius compelled the Lithuanian leaders to formulate a definite political program for the nation. During the time of the press ban, the struggle for the Lithuanian press, language, and schools constituted a broad program of action, but without precise requirements, without directly-stated political demands. It was at the Vilnius Conference that political matters became paramount and political aims were formulated and became clear, thus leading toward the restoration of Lithuanian statehood.