

REVIEW AND COMMENTARY ON LITHUANIAN–U.S. RELATIONS IN 1918–1940

Juozas Skirius

Since the mid-1800's the history of Lithuania has recorded close relations between our nation and the United States of America. This is primarily related to Lithuanian emigration. It was maintained in the early 1900's that one third of all Lithuanians lived outside Lithuania, with some sources stating that 500,000 to 1,000,000 of our compatriots lived in the USA. There were really no families in Lithuania that bore no connection to emigration. Emigration had an economical, cultural and political effect on the nation and embedded the name of *America* in Lithuanian society. Over time, this word acquired plenty of meanings in the mind of a simple Lithuanian. This remote and mysterious country became a symbol of freedom, wealth, and later on, a powerful intercessor and ally.

Established in 1918, the Lithuanian state had a natural striving for prompt international recognition, especially from the great powers. The international recognition *de facto* and *de jure* is an act of quite complicated political and diplomatic process describing, in concentrated legal form, the attitude of a state towards its new partners.

The first still not official contacts between the State of Lithuania and the USA were detected precisely at a time when Lithuanian politicians were striving for recognition. At this point it should be noted that research shows that representatives of the newly established Lithuanian state focused a great deal of their attention on the United States and expressed deep sentiments towards the country. Moreover, many Lithuanian people had set their hopes on the "mysterious and wealthy America" that emigrants were so fond of. Why?

On closer analysis of the international situation after World War I (1914-1918) we will take note of many reasons, most of which are related to the advantages of the U.S. over Great Britain, France, Germany and other great powers. Firstly, after the war the U.S. emerged on the international stage as the greatest economic power (over 40 per cent of the world's production). Secondly, Europe was under American financial control (20 countries, including the major U.S. allies, were its debtors). Consequently, the immense economical and financial potential necessary for Europeans was concentrated across the Atlantic Ocean. Thirdly, the famous *Fourteen-Article Programme*, the peace and post-war world arrangement programme, declared by U.S. President W. Wilson's Administration on January 8th, 1918, gave the hope of self-determination to all dependent and liberated nations. This objectively caused the U.S. to be regarded as the international leader and protector of small nations. Fourthly, the U.S. was also very important to Lithuania because of the numerous Lithuanian emigrants united into quite strong political and social organisations. The American Lithuanians supported the motherland by means of active propaganda and financial support, sending their representatives to work in the state institutions of Lithuania. Moreover, many emigrants were determined to come back to Lithuania, and later on a part of them did, bringing their capital and professional experience to the country.

THE ISSUE OF THE RECOGNITION OF LITHUANIA BY THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA FROM 1919-1922

It is reasonably understandable that political leaders of the young Lithuanian state were highly interested in gaining the patronage of such a political and economical giant, along with its approval on decisions aimed at solving national and economic problems in Lithuania as well as border determination. Therefore, it was not by coincidence that on October 31, 1919, Prime Minister Ernestas Galvanauskas signed a mandate for a mission to be sent to the U.S. On the 3rd of October, former Minister of Finance Jonas Vileišis, major Povilas Žadeikis and the American Lithuanian priest Jonas Žilius left Kaunas. However, for a long while they could not obtain

permission from U.S. ambassadors in Paris to leave for America. Permission with certain restrictions was issued only on the 6th of December. The U.S. Consul had not granted visas explaining that the U.S. Government did not recognise Lithuania. Still it did not object to the activities of the mission by the American Lithuanians.

The road to recognition by the U.S. Government was long, extending to 1922. Moreover, the very process of recognition appeared to be amply complicated. So, what caused the Americans to sit on the fence, bringing disappointment to the Lithuanian society, particularly politicians, and breaking their faith in the principles of peace, democracy and self-determination advocated by America? Martynas Yčas, a member of Lithuania's delegation to the Paris Conference in 1919, in his published review of U.S. policy towards Lithuania in 1920, ventured an opinion that "in Paris the American politicians failed to support the cause of Lithuania even though it was the United States from which the Lithuanian Government had expected the most support". In order to find out why this happened it is necessary to discuss the position of the then U.S. Government in regard to the Baltic States, and Lithuania in particular. It should be noted here that the stated position was not unanimous because several political opinions prevailed.

It became clear from the meetings of Lithuanian political leaders with their counterparts from the USA in 1918 – 1919 that the latter still held Lithuania as a part of Russia. American President Wilson and Secretary of State R. Lansing followed the so-called *principle of undivided Russia* in official foreign policy (with the exception of the former parts of the Russian Empire – Poland and Finland). When on April 6, 1917, the U.S. entered the war on the side of the Entente it became Russia's ally. After the revolution in February 1917, Russia was in the hands of new Provisional Government. After the Bolshevik coup d'état in October, the U.S. Government held the position that the rightful successors of A. Kerenskiy's government in Russia were the governments of the major anti-Bolshevist forces (A. Kolchak, A. Denikin). This is well-illustrated by the relations of Americans with the envoys of A. Kolchak during the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919. There exists a letter to Kolchak dated May 26, 1919, and signed by the leaders of the major countries of the Entente (Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan) and the American president. In the letter, Kolchak was in fact recognised as the head of the would-be democratic Russia on condition that the national minorities on the peripheries, including the Lithuanians, were granted wide autonomy. Therefore, the American officials regarded the envoys of Lithuania (likewise Latvia and Estonia) as representatives of an autonomous Lithuania within Russia. In addition, the ambassador of the anti-Bolshevist forces in Washington, B. Bakhmetyev, attempted to officially represent Lithuania in America from 1917-1922.

On the other hand, Americans had another point of view – to unite Lithuania and Poland. This idea found support not only among some American businessmen interested in trade with a country as big as Poland (in compensation for lost markets in Russia) but also some politicians connected to the Embassy of Poland in Washington and activities of the 4 million American Poles. The legal grounds for such a position were provided for in Article 13 of the Fourteen-Article Programme on the Polish Issue. The article, in its abstract form, points out that the territories indisputably populated by Poles are to be incorporated into Poland, and that Poland should have a free and reliable gateway to the sea. A provision like that provided the Polish Government with the opportunity to lay claim to the Vilnius region and to Klaipėda, the nearest port to Poland, since Danzig (or Gdansk) was established as a *free city* under control of the *League of Nations Union*. It is understandable that Lithuanian politicians resisted such plans of a union with Poland and unexpectedly received support from the White Russians. On June 1st, 1921, Ambassador B. Bakhmetjev delivered an official memorandum on the status of the Baltic States to the U.S. State Department. The document offered a so-called 'conditional', i.e. provisional recognition. The ambassador's position could be explained as follows: should Lithuania be incorporated into Poland, it would be more difficult to 'recapture' Lithuania after the overturn of Bolshevik rule. The memorandum provided the Washington administration with new legal grounds for amending the 'Russian Issue'. Hence, officially on the U.S. Government level, there emerged a third viewpoint – the possibility of a provisional recognition of Lithuania. America, however, delayed this recognition. Why?

Firstly, American diplomats were making preparations for an international conference in Washington (Nov.1921 – Feb.1922) where they intended to use the principle of an *undivided Russia* against the plans of Japan in the Far East. Before the conference, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Flecher gave a straight answer to the analogous question of Senator V. King: ‘at the moment it is not beneficial to the United States to recognise the Baltic States’. It is known that the opinion of American officials that Bolshevism would not be liquidated was growing stronger in 1921-1922. American businessmen were more and more interested in economic relations with Soviet Russia. It can be proven by the statement of U.S. Trade Department officer H. Grove in 1922 saying that the Baltic States were the best American–Russian trade base.

Secondly, delay of the recognition of the Baltic States until 1922 was also caused by territorial disputes between Poland and Lithuania, which resulted in the incorporation of the Vilnius region into Poland on January 8, 1922, in violation of the interests of Lithuania. Thus, with approval of the Entente countries, the dispute was solved in favour of the larger country – Poland. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that by satisfying Poland’s minor claim to the territory of Lithuania, a more acute political and military conflict between the two states was avoided. The interests of Lithuania were in fact bargained away for the benefit of the great Western powers and their political purposes in Eastern Europe. In addition, such a situation in the Eastern European region satisfied the Americans, as their primary priority had always been *peace...at any price*. It was now possible to decide the question of international recognition of the Baltic States. However, the administration in Washington was still waiting for some “pretext” that could completely justify the actions of the U.S. Government to Russian emigrants in America (not only the leaders but the society as well). Such a pretext occurred on June 30, 1922, when the *Conference of Ambassadors* (an international organisation of the ambassadors of Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan) passed a resolution on the intended recognition *de jure* of Lithuania. Upon complete examination of the issue of official recognition of the Baltic States, the U.S. State Department, before the Conference of Ambassadors on July 28, 1922 ‘recognised the governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania’ *de facto* and *de jure*. Attention should be given to the fact that the governments were recognised instead of the states. In other words, America recognised the autonomous governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania within Russia, but which at that time (of course, temporarily) were not within Russia. It was obviously a limited and uncommon recognition. Why? Because the recognition was provisional, i.e. until the Soviet-Bolshevist power ceased to exist. When the regime collapsed, the Baltic States would have to return to democratic Russia, and only then their future would be decided democratically: whether to grant independence or not. Yet, it did not happen that way because after the collapse of the USSR, the scenario of the rebirth of Russia was different.

It should be noted that the above status of the recognition of the Baltic States in 1922 was not given publicity, nor did politicians speak about it. One can imagine that they did not go deeply into it or possibly even did not know about it. The politicians and press in Lithuania simply used to maintain that the U.S. Government recognised Lithuania, and that was enough.

Such limited recognition at the time embedded some positive factors. Firstly, the Lithuanian Government was granted recognition at a time when it had already lost the Vilnius region, and when the Klaipėda region had not yet been legally incorporated into Lithuania on an international level. The recognition of the State of Lithuania by America would have made difficult the return of the mentioned territories. Secondly, the United States was still the first Western power to recognise Lithuania on such a high level, which added to Lithuania’s international self-confidence and moral strength when fighting for its national rights. Evidence of that was the Lithuanian Government’s refusal in 1922 to accept the proposal of the *Conference of Ambassadors* concerning internationalisation of the Nemunas.

THE KLAIPĖDA AND VILNIUS ISSUE IN AMERICA

The Lithuanian Government really anchored its hopes in the USA when dealing with the territorial problems of Lithuania because it knew that in 1922 the American Government was inclined to attribute the Klaipėda region to Lithuania. Therefore, it was not a coincidence that in

1923, when this issue became a topic in international relations, Lithuania requested U.S. mediation. The American position represented by Norman Davis, Chairman of the *Nations Union* Commission on the Klaipėda issue constituted in 1924, was clear – to give Klaipėda to Lithuania in exchange for the Vilnius region, which was occupied by Poland. The American decisions and proposals concerning Lithuania were more favourable than those of other Western countries. The Polish representatives were against Davis' proposal because they wanted more rights to the Nemunas and Klaipėda seaport. Nevertheless, when on March 23, 1939, Hitlerian Germany forced the Lithuanian Government to surrender the Klaipėda region, American Government officials accepted that fact in silence and thus approved the occupation of Klaipėda by Germany. It was conditioned by U.S. neutrality in European policy, as well as through fear of heightened tension. This could be proven by the circulation of the American media of the day making mention of the possibility of the outbreak of war in Europe in the context of events related to Klaipėda.

The American Government tried to settle relations between Lithuania and Poland but it did not demand the return of the city and region of Vilnius to Lithuania. America tried to neutralize the tension in relations between the two countries by involving them both in various conventions and agreements. The American Government invited both Poland and Lithuania to sign the well-known *Briand-Kellogg pact*, but the Lithuanian Government took this invitation coolly since it knew that signing thereof could prevent it from regaining Vilnius.

In order to tilt the balance of the U.S. Government's position more in Lithuania's favour, Lithuanian politicians had to seek out different and more effective forms of action. Beginning in September 1924, the *Vilnius Liberation Committees of American Lithuanians* were organised in Chicago and then in other colonies of Lithuanian emigrants. They started active anti-Polish publicity campaigns with a view to turning the U.S. Government's attention to the most agonising problem for Lithuania. Beginning in the year 1930, representatives of the *Vilnius Liberation Union (VVS)* organisation in Kaunas (Prof M. Biržiška, Prof F. Kemėšis, V. Uždavinys and others) regularly went to visit American Lithuanians. Their aim was to invite the emigrants to organise and join the branches of the *Vilnius Liberation Union* in Lithuanian colonies in America, to collect money for cultural and educational institutions in Vilnius and thereby try to unite the emigrants in joint activities for the benefit of Lithuania. Every year, on February 16th and October 9th (the day Vilnius was surrendered to Poland in 1920), there were mass meetings organised in Lithuanian colonies in America, with speeches, the collection of donations, various newspaper articles, resolutions addressed to the U.S. Government and *the Nations Union* and protests addressed to the Embassy of Poland in Washington demanding restoration of the rights of Lithuania to its capital Vilnius. The Government of Lithuania through its envoys in Washington – Kazys Bizauskas (1923-1928), Bronius K. Balutis (1928-1933) and Povilas Šadeikis (1935-1957) – supported the movement of American Lithuanians because it was of great political importance for Lithuania and particularly for emigration. In general, as far as the interwar Lithuanian-U.S. relations were concerned, the Lithuanian Government focused its attention on emigration.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Economic cooperation contributed to the consolidation of international relations between Lithuanian producers and the American Lithuanians. Trade relations started with the signing of economic agreements in Paris in 1919. It should be noted that the Americans were first among the Western nations, granting six million dollars worth of economic support to Lithuania. It was a loan granted according to the agreements signed on April 10, May 7, and June 30, 1919. Lithuania received train engines and cars, munitions, medicaments, food, etc. Some goods, however, were of low quality, and Lithuania had to pay high interest according to the Lithuanian-American agreement dated September 22, 1924. Like major debtors of the USA (Great Britain, France and others), the Lithuanian Government duly executed payments until 1933, when these payments were completely suspended. Negotiations continued until 1940 as the parties tried to find a mutually acceptable outcome.

By the year 1921, the *American Relief Administration* under the leadership of H. Hoover had shipped food products to Lithuania valued at over 1 million dollars, and the *American Red Cross* (ARC) had sent medicaments, munitions and other goods purchased with 130 thousand dollars donated by American Lithuanians.

As far back as before Lithuanian independence was recognised in 1922, the first Lithuanian ambassador in Washington Jonas Vileišis (1919-1921) and the second one Voldemaras Čarneckis (1921-1923) had done much for the benefit of Lithuania: motherland. The American Lithuanians granted a 1.8 million dollar.

U.S. statistics started recording data on trade turnover with Lithuania only in 1921. Since trade statistics were low, America opened its consulate in Kaunas with a view of trade development and dealing with the problems faced by migrants. Beginning in 1923, trade relations between Lithuania and America became increasingly stable. This resulted not only from recognition of the Lithuanian Government but also from the opening of Lithuanian consulates in New York (1923) and Chicago (1924), as well as the signing of a trade agreement in Washington on December 23, 1925. America's share in the total trade turnover of Lithuania was not significant, but more critical was that Lithuania had an inactive balance of trade. Lithuania exported timber, leather, fur, cellulose, small amounts of butter, sweets, amber, folk art articles, etc. It was difficult for Lithuanian goods to win their way into the American market. Lithuanian merchants were exposed to impediments such as high requirements, legal profits, the absence of means of transport and enormous distances. From 1929, Lithuania started exporting the most important commodity – meat and meat products. In 1937, Lithuanian companies *Maistas*, *Lietūkis* and *Pienocentras* opened their trade mission in New York and started the direct export of their goods to the U.S.

With the intention of boosting sales of Lithuanian goods in America, the Lithuanian Government tried to involve American Lithuanians. In 1930, the *Economics Centre of American Lithuanians* was established (initiator – P.Žadeikis, Consul General in New York) with a view of uniting American Lithuanians engaged in business who could be mediators between Lithuanian and American societies (including the American Lithuanians) in their economic relations. Unfortunately, the disunity of the Lithuanians and ravages of the economic crisis (1929-1933) to the U.S. economy hindered prompt achievement of the desired results. Moreover, when in 1939 Lithuania lost Klaipėda, Lithuanian exports to the U.S. shrunk because of the termination of production of the major exported good – cellulose. America exported agricultural equipment, cars, petrol, lubricants, chemicals and luxury goods to Lithuania, and since these goods were more expensive than the Lithuanian goods being exported to the U.S., the result was a negative trade balance for Lithuania. All in all, it was the economic connection that the U.S. was mainly interested in. In his interview with the American Lithuanian newspaper *Vienybė* in 1937, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Lithuania O. Norem said that one of his primary duties was the consolidation of U.S.–Lithuanian trade relations. Lithuania, though, expected more from the United States – protection and support in European policy issues.

LITHUANIA AND THE USA IN 1939-1940

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Lithuania and the USA officially followed a policy of neutrality. Contrary to the U.S., however, Lithuania had two aggressive neighbours – Germany and the USSR. In their secret agreements, these countries had already divided the territory of Lithuania and were waiting for the right moment to realise their plans. The Lithuanian Government did not expect either political or military support from Washington. Therefore, Lithuania centred its hopes on the American Lithuanians, and their economic support, particularly for reconstruction of the Vilnius region. Meanwhile, Lithuanian diplomats residing in America (P. Žadeikis, J. Budrys) felt that U.S. neutrality was temporary and took every occasion to remind the American Government about Lithuania and its national interests.

As far as the Vilnius issue was concerned, the U.S. Government steered a neutral course. On October 2, 1939, Žadeikis made inquiries at the U.S. State Department about the U.S. position in the case that Lithuania accepted an offer by the USSR to return the Vilnius region, which the Red Army had occupied at the beginning of the war after its attack on Poland. On the 4th of October,

the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State A. Berle said the following: the U.S. Government does not recognise any occupation by force, nevertheless, it is completely aware of the unusual circumstances related to the present situation concerning the Vilnius region. Further, Berle added that the United States had always felt the “deepest fellowship” with the Baltic republics. Hence, he spoke with a benevolent strain. However, in the eyes of Americans, the establishment of Red Army military posts in the Baltic States (following involuntary agreements between the USSR and the Baltics) was evidence of the helplessness of the small states, and even of their voluntary submission to the influence of the USSR. Moreover, the American Italian press coined a pointed phrase: “*Vilnius – for Lithuania, Lithuania – for the Soviets*”. Lithuanian diplomats in America asked their government to officially express dissatisfaction – including protests - with the Russian military posts and thereby attract the attention of the U.S. Government and American society. It did not happen, though – the Lithuanian Government could not, or to be precise, did not dare to protest. Only Juozas Urbšys, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in his secret telegram, instructed Ambassador Žadeikis to unite the American Lithuanians into a political organisation and collect funds in case of a sudden collapse of the statehood of Lithuania. Unfortunately, it was too late. Lithuanian officials should have earlier – before the war had started - used the U.S. factor as a base in the struggle for the independence of their country, making every effort to prepare such a foundation. The importance of the existence of such an American political base is well-illustrated by the struggle of Lithuanians for the restoration of independence after World War II. If preparations had been made beforehand, many organisational and financial problems would have been settled.

When on June 15, 1940, the USSR deployed an additional military contingent (in fact starting the country’s occupation), the American Lithuanians held huge protests against occupation and promised every kind of support for the Lithuanian Government. In the end, after many years, various ideological groups of Lithuanian emigrants stepped into the path of consolidation and established a united political organ, *the Council of Lithuanian Americans*, which provided political, material and propaganda support to Lithuanians in Europe. In addition, the U.S. Government reacted to the Sovietisation processes that had begun in Lithuania. On July 23, 1940, U.S. Secretary of State S. Welles in an official statement did not recognise annexation of the Baltic States by declaring, in no uncertain terms, that: “Everybody is aware of the U.S. Government’s position. The American people protest against invasive acts regardless of the fact of whether they are carried out by violence or threats. We also are against interference of a foreign state, though very powerful, into the internal affairs of another state, though very weak... The U.S. will never forsake those principles...”. The U.S. Embassy in Lithuania worked until September 5, 1940, when all of its staff, archives and other property were moved to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian Embassy in Washington D.C., the Consulates in New York, Chicago and the Honourary Consuls in Boston and Los Angeles continued their activities and represented the interests of Lithuania not only during the war but also within the post-war period up to the restoration of independence. By assent of the U.S. Government, the mentioned institutions of Lithuania were, for emigration, a symbol of the continuity of independence and hope of freedom for 50 years.