

SHARED DESTINY: THE LITHUANIAN STATE AND DIPLOMACY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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I.

If we accept the premise that the aim of the science of history is to propel the national collective consciousness and provide opportunities for individuals and societies to learn from their past, then, seemingly, we will be able to arrive at the conclusion that various historical anniversaries may be doubly useful. On the one side – socially, because the remarks or criticisms made by historians with regard to historical past achieve a wider resonance in the society in the context of commemoration of “significant dates”, and thus the social function of history acquires more space for expression. On the other side – historiographically, because the discourse of a particular historical celebration provides a fair chance to test the durability of the already existing historiographic concepts and myths or to unearth from the labyrinths of collective memory to the public not only the noble feats and wise actions but also the much darker pages of history.

II.

The political development of Europe between the two world wars was essentially conditioned by several key factors. First – the political system, which formed as the result of the decisions of the Versailles Peace Treaty, with the League of Nations at the front. Second – the geopolitical-economic interests and the cultural-ideological priorities of the large states. Third – the ability or inability of the medium or small European states to assist the League of Nations and the large states in maintaining stability and peace. It seems that, looking at the political history of inter-war Europe retrospectively, all three factors of international development mentioned above were far from unambiguously positive and oriented towards the preservation of the *status quo* in the old continent. Therefore, for two decades on end, Europe lived as

if on top of a political volcano – haunted by the global international crisis or even the foreboding of a new war¹.

The noble and publicly declared goals of the League of Nations to preserve peace in Europe and in the world in many cases, unfortunately, lacked effective means and could not be successfully realised. Therefore, the political superiority of the League of Nations in international affairs became nominal, rather than real, from the very first year of its existence. It is not a secret that the decisions of this international institution, which was the most influential and authoritative at that time, usually depended not on the considerations of law or justice but on the interests of the large states that dominated it at one time or another or on their mutual balance of power.² Therefore, it is not surprising that, as the years passed, the international authority of the League of Nations was noticeably and uncontrollably declining. The first to become disenchanted with the League of Nations were the small and medium states which had some international problems and experienced the partiality of this international institution. Lithuania was also among the first in this regard, when, as a result of unsuccessful arbitration by the League of Nations in the territorial dispute between Lithuania and Poland, the historical capital of the Lithuanians – Vilnius – went to the latter.

On the other hand, it must be emphasised that the creation of a stable and peaceful Europe was also impeded by the divergent interests of the large states, their mutual disagreements and differing views of the political future. From the days of the Paris Peace Conference to the mid-thirties France was relentlessly seeking the ways and the means to guarantee the stability of the Versailles system, and thereby consolidate its security and political domination in the continental Europe. At the same time, Great Britain was acting in essentially the opposite direction. The British were convinced that the conservation of the Treaty of Versailles and the preservation of peace in Europe were two irreconcilable things. Therefore, London was consistently

¹ Ivan T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis. Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2001).

² Robert Dell, *The Geneva Racket, 1920 – 1939* (London: Robert Hale Limited, WC).

seeking ways how to reform the Versailles system peacefully and to create a more advantageous environment in Europe for its interests and the preservation of peace.³ The other two physically largest European states – Weimar Germany and Bolshevik Russia (later – the Soviet Union), which became political outsiders in the aftermath of the Great War, essentially sought to demolish the Versailles peace system, which was unfavourable to them, and laboured at this task persistently, often even concordantly.⁴ Berlin and Moscow were unwilling to put up with the role of secondary states in Europe imposed on them after the Great War and harboured revanchist or imperialist plans. Weimar Germany planned to free itself from the military-political sanctions imposed on it by the Versailles treaty, dreamed about the *Anschluss* of Austria, and had large territorial claims against Poland and Czechoslovakia, and somewhat smaller against Lithuania and Denmark.⁵

The Soviet Union, the fictitious successor to the rights of the Russian Empire, also schemed to reclaim or even expand the lands ruled by the tsarist empire. The Kremlin had territorial claims against Poland and Romania, and treated the establishment of independent Baltic States as a misunderstanding and a symptom of its temporary political and economic weakness. The dictator of Bolshevik Russia Joseph Stalin, who was almost impeccably geopolitically trailing in the footsteps of tsarist Russia, fostered plans for “reclaiming” the boundaries of tsarist Russia long before the beginning of the Second World War. In other words, he planned to “recover” Finland, the Baltic States,

³ Arthur H. Furnia, *The Diplomacy of Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations and the Prelude to World War II, 1931 – 1938* (The University Press of Washington, D.C., 1960); Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler. British Politics and British Policy, 1933 – 1940* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: A Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1995).

⁴ Kurt Rosenbaum, *Community of Fate. German – Soviet Diplomatic Relations, 1922 – 1928* (Syracuse University Press), 220 – 241.

⁵ G. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany. A diplomatic revolution in Europe, 1933 – 1936* (New Jersey, 1994), 14 – 15; K. Hindebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismark bis Hitler, 1871 – 1945* (Stuttgart, 1996), 460.

Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia.⁶ The declaration of the people's commissioner for foreign affairs of the USSR Viacheslav Molotov to the Estonian delegation in Moscow on September 25, 1939 also partially confirms the hatching of the imperial designs of the rulers of the Bolshevik Russia. As soon as the Estonian-Soviet negotiations on the formation of a mutual assistance pact began, Molotov immediately demanded the creation of military stations of the USSR in Estonia and lashed out at the Estonian delegation: "Twenty years ago we were plunged into that Finnish slough, and for a long time, the USSR was confined to a small part of the Finnish gulf. Do you really believe that it can remain this way forever? At that time, the Soviet Union was powerless, and now it has grown economically, militarily and culturally. The Soviet Union is a great power now whose interests must be reckoned. I'll tell you, the Soviet Union needs to expand its security system and needs access to the Baltic Sea for this. [...] I beseech you, do not make us use force against Estonia."⁷ We will run ahead slightly in noting that this cynical sincerity of Molotov "persuaded" the Estonian delegation, and at the end of September 1939 Estonia accepted the Soviet protectorate, the first among the three Baltic States. In this manner, the Soviets did not have to use force in breaking down the collective neutrality front of the Baltic States and in opening the way for the creation of Red Army bases in the region.

It is interesting to observe that the Bolsheviks of Russia were apparently not lonely in fostering annexation plans against the Baltic States. Examinations of certain historical documents provide grounds for suspecting that the white Russian emigration virtually encouraged or even morally supported the Soviets to annex the Baltic States. For example, in spring 1939 Estonian envoy in France Otto Strandman found out through diplomatic channels that "<...> the old Russians [the emigrants], even such democrats as Kerensky*, support the agreement between Russia and Germany and consider the Baltic States as only a transient phenomenon. They must necessarily be incorporated into

⁶ George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925 – 1950* (Boston, 1967), 519 – 520.

⁷ От пакта Молотова–Риббентропа до договора о базах. Документы и матерялы, т. 2 (Таллин, 1990), 137 – 138.

* Reference is made to Aleksandr Kerensky.

Russia”⁸. Thus, it may not be excluded that this or the similar attitude of the white Russian emigration was also in a way stimulating Soviet ambitions to realise the “geopolitical testament” of their ideological enemies and re-establish the borders of the former empire.

On the other hand, the third factor of European international politics, i.e. small and medium states which, had they united their forces, could have eventually become rather considerable and influential designers and participants of international politics, did not demonstrate enough political maturity or moral politics in the interwar period either.

The exaggerated nationalistic ideology and rhetoric, the radically interpreted right of self-determination and the striving for the maximum realisation of their interests determined that the states which were newly established after the Great War entered into conflicts with each other, in some cases, more fiercely than the old players of Europe – the large countries. One of the main architects of the Treaty of Versailles and the advocate of small nations, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, noticing the increasing outbursts of irrational conflicts between the new states, once remarked that these small countries are quickly becoming more vicious and more veritable “imperialists” than the great powers. Another British politician, Conservative leader Winston Churchill, gave an even more vivid characterisation of the situation after the Great War. According to Churchill, after the giants retired from the European political scene, the times and the quarrels of political pygmies began.⁹ Of course, the British conservative’s description may have been rhetorically exaggerated but it did not stray too far from the essence of the problem. During the entire interwar period, from June 28, 1919 when the Treaty of Versailles was signed, until August 31, 1939 – the last day of peace, Europe was almost constantly plagued by discords or conflicts. Perhaps the most characteristic example of this political destructiveness is the territorial conflict between Lithuania and Poland over Vilnius, which

⁸ Confidential report of 8 May 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P. Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Juozas Urbšys// Lithuanian Central State Archives (hereinafter – LCSA), f. 648, ap. 1, b. 30, l. 67.

⁹ Винстон Черчилль, *Мировой кризис* (Москва, 1932), 10.

was smouldering incessantly for the entire period and ultimately made a substantial contribution to the ruin of these states at the very beginning of the Second World War.

III.

The noticeably unbalanced political discourse in interwar Europe exerted a negative influence on Lithuania as well. It shaped the problematic geopolitical reasoning and faulty diplomatic practices. During the entire interwar period Lithuania was constantly feeling the destructive policies of Germany in Klaipėda, and because of Soviet Russia's "assistance" to Lithuania the problem of Vilnius and the conflict between Lithuania and Poland essentially became almost insoluble politically, nonetheless, Lithuanian foreign policy was for a long time oriented precisely towards these two states – professed allies. Seeking a successful resolution of the territorial conflict with Poland and to recover the historical capital, Lithuanian politicians and diplomats were vesting high hopes in their eastern neighbour. There was the belief in Kaunas during the whole interwar period that the historical capital could not be regained unless Russia was favourably disposed to Lithuania. For example, Lithuania's envoy to Moscow poet Jurgis Baltrušaitis was trying to persuade the government in early 1921 that direct negotiations and the search for a compromise with Poland were not necessary because the Polish state would be simply wiped out by Bolshevik Russia in the nearest future. As these forecasts proved to be wrong, the diplomat did not grow dispirited, and, at the end of the same year, further admonished the steersmen of the country's foreign policy "to avoid even the most distant co-operation and <...> not to consort with the Poles in any way" because this would have simply catastrophic consequences to Lithuanian statehood.¹⁰ According to the diplomat, the best policy for Lithuania was to stay outside the political processes and wait. "I believe and hope that the near future will show that self-isolation is the only fit political stance. The Lithuanian issue is an integral part of the common European issue and the confrontation between the Lithuanians and the Poles

¹⁰ Confidential report of 27 November 1921 of the *Chargé d'Affaires* of Lithuania in RSFSR J. Baltrušaitis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr J. Purickis// LCSA, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 108, l. 31.

is just a tiny part of the great confrontation between the East and the West. <...> The most important thing now is to show an unfaltering resolve and a firm position,” wrote Baltrušaitis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, priest Dr Vladas Jurgutis.

The content of Baltrušaitis' reports to Kaunas shows that the diplomat was tending to substantially exaggerate the geopolitical factor of the eastern neighbour. For example, in January 1922, he regularly lectured the Director of the East Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andrius Lisauskis: “The Russians have become an important factor in Europe. Many things depend on them. They are conducting secret negotiations with the English and the Germans. They are watching who their friend is and who isn't. What we do for their benefit will not be a concession but a gain because they are on our side and the future will show that they are very important for us.”¹¹ To achieve friendly relations with Russia, this diplomat from Kaunas was even prepared to sacrifice Lithuania's geopolitical partnership with its northern neighbours. In Baltrušaitis' eyes, the political future of Latvia and Estonia was certainly “short and constricted”, *a priori* determined by Russia's geopolitical interest in repossessing the strategic ports in the Baltic Sea. Therefore, any closer political co-operation with its northern neighbours was a geopolitically risky matter for Lithuania.¹²

It would be a mistake to think that the geopolitical thinking of poet-diplomat Baltrušaitis was peculiar or at great odds with the predominant moods of the contemporaneous Lithuanian establishment. As becomes evident from diplomatic documents, the position of the envoy was more or less endorsed by some other famous Lithuanian figures as well. For example, in spring 1921, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Juozas Purickis assigned Baltrušaitis to ram the strategic partnership of the Baltic States, Finland and

¹¹ Confidential report of 12 January 1922 of the *Chargé d'Affaires* of Lithuania in RSFSR J. Baltrušaitis to the Director of the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs A. Lisauskis// *Ibid.*, b. 300, l. 151.

¹² Confidential report of 27 March 1921 of the *Chargé d'Affaires* of Lithuania in RSFSR J. Baltrušaitis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr V. Jurgutis// *Ibid.*, l. 113.

Poland by the Russian political factor. The minister wrote in a confidential instruction to the envoy in Moscow: “<...> could not Chicherin* issue a note for the Baltic States – Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – which would declare that Russia will consider an alliance of these states as a hostile act which would prompt corresponding actions on its part. This note would prevent the union of the Baltic States with Poland which is presently being much promoted and which is directed against Russia. <...> The Russians must help us obstruct the union of the Baltic States with Poland.”¹³ Christian Democrat Jurgutis, who replaced Purickis as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, non-partisan Prime Minister Ernestas Galvanauskas, the leaders of the Populists Mykolas Sleževičius and Dr Kazys Grinius, as well as the leaders of the Nationalists Antanas Smetona and Prof. Augustinas Voldemaras all tended to resort to the geopolitical factor of Russia in 1921-1923 – years that were crucial to the development of relations between Lithuania and Poland and the dilemma of Vilnius.¹⁴

Despite all of Lithuania's efforts, there was no success in obtaining political benefits from Bolshevik Russia (from 1922 – the USSR). A noticeable disillusionment with the political co-operation with Russia first took place in the spring of 1923, when the conference of ambassadors adopted the well-known resolution regarding the eastern borders of Poland. After the decision of the Conference of ambassadors of March 15, 1923 to hand Vilnius to Poland, the Director of the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bronius Kazys Balutis described the moods in the temporary capital as dismal: “Russia offered no assistance to us in this critical moment. <...> Those who were expecting support from Russia on the Polish-Lithuanian border issue must be very disappointed, especially since the Russians were

* Reference is made to the then People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Russia Georgy Chicherin.

¹³ Confidential instruction of 2 May 1921 of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr J. Purickis to the *Chargé d'Affaires* of Lithuania in RSFSR J. Baltrušaitis// *Ibid.*, b. 110, l. 88.

¹⁴ A. Kasparavičius, “Don Kichotas prieš Prometeją. Tarpukario lietuvių – lenkų iracionalioji diplomatija”// *Darbai ir Dienos*, Vol. 30 (2002), 52-55.

inveigling us to resort to stern tactics. The liking for the Russians has now appreciably diminished in Lithuania.”¹⁵

However, Lithuania’s disenchantment with its eastern neighbour did not last long. At the end of 1925, the minutes of the country’s foreign policy programme, prepared by the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and sanctioned by the government, stated that the main foreign policy goal was to regain Vilnius and “<...> the centre of gravity for the action in liberating Vilnius rests not in the Concord group but in the Russian-German block.”¹⁶ Thus, the unresolved problem of Vilnius once again determined the continuation of political orientation to Russia (the USSR) and Germany. At the end of September 1926, a non-aggression pact was signed in Moscow between Lithuania and the USSR under rather controversial circumstances. This move by Lithuania was significantly at odds with the policies of the great Western democracies and provoked substantial discontent on their part. The foreign policy of Lithuania would have certainly received more reproofs by the Western democracies in the autumn of 1926 had they also had knowledge about the secret agreement between Lithuania and the USSR – the so-called *Gentlemen’s Agreement* – which was essentially directed against Poland and the Baltic States, as well as eventually against the British-French efforts to isolate Bolshevik Russia from Germany and Western Europe.¹⁷

To forbear from going into more detail and the long-term historical peripeteia, the quintessence of the political relations between Lithuania and the Soviet Union could perhaps best be conveyed by the summing-up

¹⁵ Confidential report of 24 March 1923 of the Director of the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs B.K.Balutis to the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the USSR J.Baltrušaitis// LCSA, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 374, l. 296.

¹⁶ Action Programme prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania “General Principles for the Resolution of the Problem of Vilnius”// *Ibid.*, b. 711, l. 257.

¹⁷ Confidential report of 3 March 1923 of the Director of the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs B.K.Balutis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Valdemaras Čarneckis about the conversation with the official of the Great Britain’s *Foreign Office* R.W Leeper// *Ibid.*, b. 582, l. 8.

offered by the Lithuanian diplomats themselves. For example, in late 1939, one of the most experienced and gifted interwar diplomats Balutis “sincerely” admitted to the USSR envoy in London Ivan Maisky that Lithuania trusted Russia during the entire interwar period and essentially conducted politics favourable to it: “We may recall, say, the years of 1919 and 1920, when you were going through your worst, and the subsequent years. Remember, when the intention was to cut you off from the world by surrounding you with the famous Clemenceau** ‘sanitary cordon’. You know very well that everyone from the Arctic to the Black Sea favoured such a plan. If the plan did not actually succeed it is only because it lacked in the most important place in the chain *tolko odnogo zvena* [only one link – in Russian]. Lithuania disagreed even under pressure. Later, the Treaty of Rapallo came, when it was again attempted to tighten the frontier of that ‘sanitary cordon’, so as to cut off the Soviets from Germany. Again we disagreed. You are very well aware that in those times the USSR was not in high fashion and Lithuania had to suffer a lot for its position. We were decried as Bolsheviks everywhere, Moscow’s servants and stooges, and everywhere on the international stage we were regarded as a kind of outpost of the USSR, from which we also suffered more than once. The same Vilnius issue could have perhaps been disentangled slightly differently at that time... We disregarded all of this and maintained our sincerely favourable policy line throughout.”¹⁸

True, it must be emphasised that the political “merits” of Lithuania to Russia were listed at that time by Balutis without any pride but in considerable distress and disappointment, reproaching Moscow for its aggressive and cynical position towards Lithuania in the autumn of 1939. The Lithuanian diplomat ended the dialogue with the Soviet envoy by concluding sadly that in return for its long year of friendliness Russia “rewarded” Lithuania by giving back only a third of the severely ravaged Vilnius region and simultaneously imposing the bases of the Red Army, which *de facto* placed the independent

** Reference is made to the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau.

¹⁸ Confidential report No.136 “Conversation with Maisky” of 30 November 1939 of the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Great Britain B.K.Balutis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys // *Ibid.*, f. 648, ap. 1, b. 9, l. 268.

state under the Soviet protectorate. As if summing up the unfulfilled hopes of the country and the political-diplomatic defeat suffered, the Lithuanian diplomat declared to the representative of the Kremlin: “The stationing of garrisons <...> violates the sovereignty of our country and <...> is dangerous for us. <...> By stationing garrisons you treated us even more fiercely than our Latvian and Estonian neighbours because they have their bases in the periphery of their countries, whereas in our case you situated garrisons all around the country. Most Lithuanians expected that Lithuania would be treated better than Latvia and Estonia and no one believed that it would be treated more fiercely.”¹⁹

Two moments must be noted in retrospective assessment of this “sincere” statement of Balutis to Maisky. On one hand, there is little doubt that the reprimands by the Kaunas’ envoy for the Kremlin’s policies were well-founded. On the other hand, it is obvious that the “awakening” of Lithuanian diplomacy with regard to relations with the big eastern neighbour came much too late. The Kremlin’s politics were actually never favourable to Lithuania. The Soviets were usually merely simulating “assistance” to Lithuania. At a time when Lithuania was constantly expecting Moscow’s diplomatic support in fighting for Vilnius on the international stage, and when, in order to reclaim the historical capital, it was making risky adjustments in its foreign policy in Russia’s favour, Moscow was resolved on what to do with Vilnius: to “concede to Poland” for a certain political price or to keep it by declaring Vilnius a Belarusian city. Soviet diplomacy was not even actually considering “returning” Vilnius to the Republic of Lithuania.²⁰ The USSR’s position on this issue was particularly clearly stated in the mid-twenties by the plenipotentiary of the USSR in Lithuania Ivan Lorenz. He wrote: “As concerns the issue of Vilnius, we have taken note of two things: a) our final course and aims; b) our tactical line at the present moment. Our final aims,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I. 268-269.

²⁰ Confidential report No.75 of 3 September 1924 of the Plenipotentiary of the USSR in Lithuania I. Lorenz to the Board Member of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (hereinafter – PCFA) of the USSR Viktor Kopp// The Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (hereinafter – FPARF), f. 04 ap. 27, apl. 183, b. 67, l. 14.

of course, were always clear but only during the last one and a half years did we manage to make progress towards their fulfilment <...>, when the final events and shows turned the BSSR into an even more powerful magnet influencing the neighbouring territories. <...> Despite the fact that I raised the issue of Vilnius as a Belarusian issue in April 1923 <...> and despite the immense work that we have done through our national politics in the past years in preparing for bringing up the issue of Vilnius in the future, I still think that it would be too risky to raise the issue of Vilnius as a Belarusian issue in the negotiations with Poland at this moment. Poland will not enter such discussions at this point. Lithuania is also viewing the Belarusian movement in the Vilnius region with suspicion. Therefore, I believe that the right course would be to continue the anti-Polish policies in the Vilnius region, without committing ourselves too much to Lithuania but in such a way so that we do not create untimely suspicions on behalf of Lithuania.”²¹

These Machiavellian politics and diplomatic tactics of the USSR towards Vilnius and Lithuania were essentially continued without more significant adjustments until the very end of the thirties.²² Therefore, it would seem that the statements which occasionally make an appearance in Lithuanian historiography, to the effect that Lithuania’s pro-Russian “<...> foreign policy orientation was not a historical mistake because the nation achieved its supreme goal of regaining Vilnius,”²³ are ill-founded, historically incorrect and create a rather distorted historical image in the society. That the USSR “returned” Vilnius to Lithuania in October 1939 was not determined so much by the pro-Russian foreign policy orientation of Lithuania in the preceding years but by the specific configuration of the international situation in the wake of the Second World War, which opened an opportunity for the Kremlin to incorporate the

²¹ Confidential report No. 84 of 24 September 1924 of the Plenipotentiary of the USSR in Lithuania I. Lorenz to the Board Member of the PCFA V.Kopp// *Ibid.*, l. 59 – 62.

²² С.З. Случ, Польша в политике Советского Союза, 1938 – 1939// *Советско–Польские отношения в политических условиях Европы 30–х годов XX столетия* (Москва: «Наука», 2001), 160.

²³ Liudas Truska, “Kas traukė į Rusijos glėbį? Geopolitinė Lietuvos orientacija 1918 – 1940 metais”// *Darbai ir Dienos*, Vol.30 (2002), 45.

whole of Lithuania to the empire, and not just the historical capital of the Lithuanians. The “merits” of the Lithuanian foreign policy of the preceding years did not have any role here for Moscow and the leadership of the Kremlin did not cherish any political sympathies for the Lithuanians on account of this.²⁴ As the analysis of historical documents reveals, in the negotiations with Lithuania in October 1939 the Kremlin’s diplomacy considered the “returning of Vilnius” not as the fulfilment of its previous juridical-political obligations but only as a certain instrument for moral blackmailing aimed at breaking down the political will of the Lithuanians and imposing the Soviet protectorate on Lithuania.²⁵ Unfortunately, the Lithuanian diplomats accepted such rules of the game. Juridical arguments were almost not used in the negotiations. The negotiations with the Soviets regarding the “returning” of Vilnius essentially proceeded as if there had never been the Peace Treaty of 12 July 1920 between Lithuania and Russia. In the entire course of negotiations, the Lithuanian delegation did not even dare to tell their negotiation partners that Vilnius already legally belonged to Lithuania under the above-mentioned treaty and that any new, additional negotiations regarding the transfer of the historical Lithuanian capital to Lithuania were in principle not needed if the Kremlin observed its international obligations. Correspondingly, if the territorial provisions of the peace treaty between Lithuania and Russia were no longer valid for some reason, then the Lithuanian diplomats should have encountered a rather logical question as to the extent and duration of the validity of the new agreement with Bolshevik Russia.

VI.

On the other hand, it is interesting and paradoxical that the political-diplomatic friendship between Kaunas and Moscow during the preceding years and the certain desperation of Lithuanian diplomats notwithstanding, Lithuania was the most energetic among the three Baltic States in its efforts to

²⁴ Confidential *Pro Memoria* on “The Negotiations of Lithuania with the Soviet Union Regarding Vilnius and the Mutual Assistance Pact” of 4 December 1939 of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania J. Urbšys // LCSA, f. 648, ap. 1, b. 54, l. 251-260

²⁵ *Ibid*, l. 258.

resist the Soviet protectorate in the autumn of 1939. In summing up Kaunas' position in the negotiations with the Soviets, the *Chargé d'Affaires* of the USSR in Lithuania V.Semionov wrote: "As is well known, Lithuania was the last among the Baltic States to sign the mutual assistance agreement with the Soviet Union, and that with greatest difficulties. Its government quarters were prepared to as much as surrender Vilnius so as to avoid allowing the Soviet military bases into Lithuania."²⁶ Although Lithuanian diplomacy showed its character in the negotiations with the Soviets in October 1939, it nonetheless failed to protect the vital interests of the country. The Kremlin imposed its dictation on Lithuania. On the basis of some historical sources, one possible version would be that this happened mostly because of the inveterate problems of the country's foreign policy, as well as the excessively "pragmatic" approach of the diplomats to the affairs and the relativist treatment of the democratic values.

The unresolved territorial conflict with Poland and the pro-Russian foreign policy orientation developed over the years determined that Russia (the USSR) was viewed in the Lithuanian society, and especially among the intellectuals, as an ally of Lithuania rather than a potential enemy. The anti-Polish moods and the positive image of Russia (the USSR) were psychologically strong enough to obscure even the obvious things from the Lithuanian diplomats. For example, the destruction of Polish statehood in the autumn of 1939 was met with almost Olympian calm by Lithuanian diplomacy. Absent were any greater concerns in Kaunas that the obliteration of the Polish state from the political map of Europe geopolitically implies simply catastrophic consequences for Lithuania and other Baltic States. On the contrary, Lithuanian diplomacy made efforts to persuade the Western politicians and media that Poland had never been geopolitically important and significant for the existence of the Baltic States.²⁷

²⁶ Confidential report No. 220 "On the foreign Policy of Lithuania" of 3 June 1940 of the *Chargé d'Affaires* of the USSR in Lithuania V. Semionov to the People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of the USSR V. Molotov// FPARE, f. 0151, ap. 31, apl. 57, b. 1, l. 122.

²⁷ Confidential report of 1 April 1940 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// LCSA, f. 648, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 166.

It is characteristic that the trust of the Lithuanian diplomats in Russia did not falter too much even when the Red Army invaded Poland and the Soviet threat to Lithuania became almost physically tangible. The invasion of the Red Army into Poland, which began on September 17, 1939, was essentially interpreted by Lithuanian diplomacy as a favourable factor for Lithuanian affairs. For example, envoy Petras Klimas in Paris, visiting the Quai d'Orsay Palace on the same day in 1939, calmly explained to the rather unbalanced and nonplussed French diplomats that perhaps the Russian invasion into Poland should not be viewed "as an act of aggression" because just as Lithuania had never renounced its rights to Vilnius, so Russia had never abnegated from Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, and thus it was merely reclaiming what belonged to it by outstripping the Germans.²⁸ Klimas had no doubts that the Red Army would not march past the so-called Curzon line and lectured the Deputy Director of the Policy Department of the Quai d'Orsay Charles Rochat that "<...> if Russia now uses the opportunity to overtake the Germans, then this fact, provided that it is duly interpreted, could only be useful for the Western allies in eliciting Russia's neutrality or even effective support in the fight for the liberation of the ethnographic Poland beyond the Curzon line" from the German occupation.²⁹ On September 19, Klimas enunciated essentially analogous ideas to the Chief of Edouard Daladier's Cabinet Robert Coulondre as well. The Lithuanian diplomat was intimating to the French politician that by establishing the eastern borders of Poland on March 15, 1923, the Western allies not only wronged Lithuania but also committed a "great sin" against Russia, and that therefore the best policy of the West would be if "la guerre continue sans rompre avec la Russie."³⁰

²⁸ Confidential report of 17 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, b. 30, l. 159 – 160.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 160.

* continue the war [with the Third Reich] without conflict with Russia (*Fr.*)

³⁰ Confidential report of 20 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, l. 164 – 165.

Visiting the Quai d'Orsay Palace again on September 22, the Lithuanian envoy stated somewhat derisively that the French are nonplussed and that "Russia's action still produces an impression of some mystery here."³¹ Judging from the envoy's report to Kaunas, he himself was feeling very well. According to Klimas, "I explained to Mr Rochat that for 20 years we protested the presence of the Poles in Vilnius because we did not recognise its legitimacy. Last year, after Beck's ultimatum, we were forced to establish diplomatic relations but we never subsequently legalised the sovereignty and the administration of Poland in the Vilnius region. The relations did not change our main position. Therefore, while the Poles were on that territory, we reckoned with this fact. But as this fact is no longer, it is clear that the old legal base has "opened up", namely, the 12 July 1920 Treaty with Russia, which was never abrogated – neither by us nor by the Russians."³² Moreover, building the foundations for the repossession of Vilnius, Klimas dispensed some advice for the French diplomats. He informed the Minister of Foreign Affairs about this initiative of his: "So that no sudden alarm is raised by the press should Moscow and Lithuania seek some resolution to the problem of Vilnius, I requested Mr Rochat to issue instructions to the newspapermen in the light of my account of the issue, or to forbid the journalists altogether from writing about it needlessly before there is something concrete and decided."³³

The official of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not object too much to the expositions of the Lithuanian diplomat but only advised not to rely on the Kremlin unduly because the Russians may declare themselves "successeurs des Polonais"* and settle in the occupied territories for a long time, which would make the situation of the Baltic States unforeseeable. The Head of the Press Department of Quai d'Orsay Jean Paul Boncour also alerted Klimas at that time to the obscure, suspicious plans of the Soviet Union in Eastern and Central Europe and the precarious drifting of Lithuania towards

³¹ Confidential report of 22 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, 1. 168.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

* successors to Poland (*Fr.*)

regaining Vilnius, but in reality – to the clasp of the USSR.³⁴

The Lithuanian envoy in London Bronius Kazys Balutis was also more reserved in showing enthusiasm for the unfolding international situation. In the second part of September, he wrote in a personal letter to his colleague and friend Lithuanian Envoy in the United States of America Povilas Žadeikis: “So, finally, we could not avoid what we were afraid of *and we are in it* [in English in the original]. Our situation under the current circumstances is the best in comparison to what could have been expected in all of this mess. Provided, of course, that we can preserve our neutrality until the end. There are chances, although the longer the war continues the more various unpredicted complications may arise. <...> We already have one such unpredicted complication. It emerged when the Soviets suddenly interfered in the fortunes of Poland and subsequently occupied Vilnius. <...> without surrendering the claims to Vilnius, we must resolve this issue peacefully.”³⁵ During a visit to the Foreign Office on September 18, Balutis was reservedly but patiently persuading the Head of the North Department Laurence Collier that after the Red Army’s invasion in Poland real opportunity opened for Lithuania to regain its historical capital because the Soviets may on their own initiative offer “<...> us to take the territory of Vilnius.”³⁶ And, purportedly, Lithuania could not reject such an offer from Moscow because it would then lose legal (*sic!*) rights to Vilnius. However, the arguments and the approach to the issue presented by Balutis did not appear very reasonable to the British diplomat and did not leave any impression. The Lithuanian envoy was assured that “his Majesty’s government shall not conspire” behind the back of its ally

³⁴ Confidential report of 25 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, f. 648, ap. 1, b. 30, l. 178.

³⁵ Letter of 25 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Great Britain B.K.Balutis to the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the USA P.Žadeikis// *Ibid.*, b. 9., l. 222 – 223.

³⁶ Confidential report of 29 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the Great Britain B.K.Balutis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, b. 9, l. 224 – 225.

Poland regarding the division of its territories and warned that the greatest threat to Lithuania “comes <...> from the Russian side.”³⁷ Nevertheless, as is evident from the subsequent diplomatic activities of Balutis in London, Collier’s admonishments did not frighten him and he continued the efforts to “regain” Vilnius by way of a bilateral agreement with Russia.³⁸

Similar diplomatic tactics were suggested to the Government in September 1939 by the Lithuanian envoy in Berlin Col. Kazys Škirpa. Immediately after the agreement on the *Borders and Friendship*, signed by Germany and the Soviet Union in Moscow on September 28, 1939, this diplomat unhesitatingly proposed to the government to use the new geopolitical situation and consider reclaiming Vilnius. The envoy wrote on this subject to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Kaunas: “The Russo-German agreement of September 28, which records the *de facto* division of Poland, is the reality of such nature which would hardly be changed by anyone. To change it, there should emerge a power which would not only defeat Germany but also force Soviet Russia to withdraw from Poland. Unfortunately, such a power <...> does not exist in Europe.”³⁹ Conclusion: Lithuania should heed not the political interests of Great Britain or France but rather adjust its policies to those of its nearest neighbours – Russia and Germany.

The ostensibly pragmatic but, in reality, devoid of principles and therefore vicious diplomatic practice was also continued later, after the repossession of Vilnius and the establishment of the Red Army military bases in Lithuania. Although after this event most Lithuania diplomats gave a longer pause to

³⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 225.

³⁸ Confidential report No.108 “The Russians and the War” of 19 September 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the Great Britain B.K.Balutis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, l. 213.; Confidential report No.119 “The Prospects of Vilnius Region” of 23 October 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the Great Britain B.K.Balutis to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, l. 234 – 235.

³⁹ Extra-confidential report of 2 October 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Germany Col. K.Škirpa to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys // *Ibid.*, b. 40, l. 100.

the nature of the relations with Russia or even began to worry about the unpredictable behaviour of the big eastern neighbour, they nevertheless hesitated to radically change their attitude. As can be seen from the remaining documents, at the end of 1939 and in the first half of 1940, Lithuanian envoys in the European capitals almost unanimously maintained that the political agreement of 10 October 1939 with the USSR did not limit the sovereignty of Lithuania and the military garrisons of the Red Army did not pose any threat to the independence of the country. On occasion, Lithuanian diplomacy repeated the Kremlin's "arguments" in denying the aggressive nature of the USSR's politics. For example, Klimas cheerfully maintained to the newly appointed ambassador of Great Britain Sir R.Campbell, who arrived in Paris from London in January 1940, that in the Baltic States "the Russians want to keep their garrisons as a symbol only", which would show that the invasion of any third states and, primarily England, (*sic!*) into Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia would encounter resolute opposition from Russia.⁴⁰ And although the Lithuanian diplomat mentioned these Moscow "arguments" to Sir Campbell with an open grin, the British ambassador was not amused. After a lengthy pause he declared to Klimas that such a "trés rusé et pas bête"* man as J.Stalin was certainly "<...> not concerned about such nonsense" as the British invasion of the Baltic States but apparently has certain intentions in the region, which means that the international situation of the Baltic States, diplomatically speaking, has become "trés curieuse"**⁴¹.

It may be noted here that the Lithuanians were more or less echoed on this issue by the Estonian and Latvian diplomats resident in the West.⁴²

⁴⁰ Confidential report of 6 January 1940 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Director of the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs E.Turauskas// *Ibid.*, b. 31, l. 9.

* very cunning and smart (*Fr.*)

** very curiously (*Fr.*)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, l. 10.

⁴² Confidential report of 29 February 1940 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P.Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, l. 106.

Naturally, such statements by the Baltic diplomats usually inspired certain astonishment or half-veiled smiles on the part of the Westerners, since from October 1939 all three Baltic States were rather unequivocally considered in Western diplomatic spheres as “Russian satellites”, bereft of their sovereignty, or as “the vassals of Russia <...> fallen into the Russian basket.”⁴³ Western media such as *The Daily Herald*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *L'Oeuvre*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Star*, etc. gave a similar assessment of the situation as well. For example, on October 5, 1939 *The Washington Star* published a characteristic political cartoon: Stalin, garbed in a white doctor's gown and armed with a scalpel, stands at an operating table, on which lies and wails Estonia and Latvia which have already been operated on, whereas Lithuania and Finland are standing fretfully behind the door in the corridor, awaiting their turn...⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the critical responses of the Western diplomats, politicians or media about the international situation of the Baltic States, as well as admonishments about the mounting threats to them, apparently had difficulties in reaching the addressees. Even during the last months of independence, Lithuanian diplomacy was rather inert in its actions and stereotypically favoured the somewhat grievous experiences of the previous years. Many typical facts could be provided to illustrate how Lithuanian diplomacy reflected the international discourse and differentiated between the threats to the state on the eve of the destruction of Lithuanian independence. However, perhaps the most eloquent example is the proposal made to the government by Klimas, the Lithuanian envoy in France, at the beginning of

⁴³ Confidential report of 27 February 1940 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France PKlimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J.Urbšys// *Ibid.*, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 2226, l. 43.

⁴⁴ Confidential report of 6 October 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the USA Povilas Žadeikis to the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs// *Ibid.*, f. 656, ap. 1, b. 133, l. 425.; Confidential report of 23 October 1939 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the USA Povilas Žadeikis to the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs// *Ibid.*, b. 134, l. 79.

1940 concerning the construction of the Lithuanian defences in the south of the country (in Suvalkija). The fortifications would be analogous to the Finnish Mannerheim line and would protect Lithuania against ... the eventual attack by Poland. The envoy urged the government not to procrastinate or spare money and commence the works immediately after hiring the required specialists from abroad. In January 1940, the diplomat wrote from Paris to the Minister of Foreign affairs in Kaunas: “<...> whatever it takes must be done not to end up in the situation in which we were in in 1920 when Zeligowski found an almost empty space around Vilnius. We must immediately begin the forced construction of our own Gediminas or Mindaugas line against the invasion from the likely side of the Polish invasion exclusively. <...>. Since we don't have the resources for the construction of defences on all sides, neither the Russian nor the German side, we must concentrate all our efforts in the south because the threat of attack is possible only from there. <...> I believe that our military leadership should invite specialists for earth and concrete works, as was done by the Finnish when they invited the Belgian general Emile Badoux. If the resources for large concrete structures are lacking, then we should at least construct appropriate land fortifications out of wood without any delay. The world would laugh at us if we were caught unprepared.”⁴⁵ Considering that the Polish state had already been *de facto* destroyed by the Nazi-Soviet aggression by the end of September 1939, these recommendations of Klimas to the government do not apparently require wider historical commentaries. Only, perhaps that Klimas was one of the most notable and experienced diplomats of interwar Lithuania, who had spent the entire two decades of independence in diplomatic service.

V. Instead of an epilogue

In mid-June of 1940, the accelerated war machine of Fascist Germany was rapidly advancing towards Paris, crushing the united French-British forces on the way. The approach of the *Vermacht* to the capital of France produced a veritable political shock in Europe. However, the population of France

⁴⁵ Confidential report of 12 January 1940 of the Lithuanian Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in France P. Klimas to the Minister of Foreign Affairs J. Urbšys // *Ibid.*, f. 648, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 17 – 18.

itself was, of course, shattered most by the tragic course of events. Counsellor of the Lithuanian Embassy in France Dr Stasys Antanas Bačkis reported to Kaunas about the predominant moods and the desperate behaviour of Parisians during those days:

“On June 10, when the news spread about Italy entering the war on the German side, the inhabitants of Paris were struck by panic and the flight from the city between June 10 and 14 created a gruesome view. People of various ages and social positions were fleeing. The urge to flee was so great and all-embracing that it seemed that the fugitives were guided by only the motive of self-preservation. <...>. Most fled without even knowing their destination. <...>. As a result of the panic flight, there were no buses, taxis or cars left in Paris, and as of June 11 the trains stopped as well. Shops, kiosks and offices closed down, banks did not service clients. Approximately eighty per cent of the shops closed down. <...>. The view of fugitives grew increasingly dismal since the poorest part of the society fled on their bleeding feet; with small children, having piled their property on bicycles, in buckets, prams and barrows. <...>. Although by the evening of June 12 it became apparent that the battles were taking place in the vicinity of the city, the French were still waiting for a miracle, as in 1924 at Marné, and dismissed any thought that the Germans would capture Paris. <...>. On June 13, the movement in the city further abated; the fugitives went on foot and rode bicycles. Only the metro was operating, as well as some shops, cafes and restaurants. The power supply began breaking in the evening. In the afternoon, huge explosions began resounding from the suburbs – weapon and ammunition storages, oil repositories, bridges and factories were being blown up. The society was overwhelmed by depression. The French realised that their situation was hopeless.”⁴⁶

Only a day had passed after the fall of Paris when the Lithuanian society was struck by similar depression. The military-political catastrophe of the French Republic at the beginning of summer 1940 and the subsequent political turmoil in Europe appeared to the Kremlin as the most suitable opportunity for the realisation of its geopolitical goals. The Soviet leadership did not miss this opportunity – on June 15, 1940, the Red Army occupied Lithuania. A month later, Lithuania was annexed. The long years of captivity

began for the Lithuanian nation and state. Thus, contrary to the fears and forecasts of Lithuanian diplomacy, the greatest threat to the Lithuanian state in the twentieth century did not come from the south but from the east.... The patriarch of

French diplomacy in the first half of the twentieth century Jules Cambon, reflecting during one diplomatic party on the everlasting international conflicts in the old continent, provided approximately the following definition of successful diplomatic activity to the younger colleagues. It is not necessary to be preoccupied with external image, especially if the financial resources of the represented country are limited. It is much more important to act in such a way as to convey the position of one's government on one issue or another to foreign opponents in such a way as if it had always been useful and acceptable to them, and to inform the leadership of one's country about the stance of the opponents in such a way as if the opponents were only awaiting an opportunity to extract concession and compromises.⁴⁷ Could we unequivocally state today that Lithuanian diplomacy in the interwar period had sufficiently mastered the art of compromise in all cases?

⁴⁶ Confidential report of 17 June 1940 of the Counsellor of the Lithuanian Embassy in France Dr. S.A. Bačkis to the Director of the Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Dr E. Turauskas// The Centre for Storage and Research of the Documents of the Modern History of Russia, f. 597, ap. 3, b. 4, l. 66 – 68. [The reader might have noticed that this report of the Lithuanian diplomat was discovered not in the Lithuanian archives but in the document repositories of the Russian Federation in Moscow. This fact could be explained by the fact that a large part of the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania which were seized in autumn 1940 and transferred to Moscow have not yet been returned to the Republic of Lithuania.]

⁴⁷ Confidential diplomatic diaries of 10 April 1935 of the *Chargé d'Affaires* of the USSR in France Vladimir Sokolin// FPARF, f. 082, ap. 18, apl. 82, b. 28, l. 42.