

### **GERMANY AND LITHUANIA, 1917–1939**

The modern times bear witness to the fact that the fate of Central and Eastern European nations was defined by two factors: internal, i.e. the will of those nations, or their determination about statehood; and external – the geopolitical field surrounding those nations.

The interrelation of these factors took extremely varied forms of expression within separate periods of the epoch. Nevertheless, at least from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nationalism of the small nations in that region urged the empires to look for new ways of ensuring smooth functioning of a legitimistic system. As one of these it turned to be the national principle evoked to protect the ethnographic specifics of dependent communities. Thus, the recognition of the ethnic nation status resulted in the diminishing of tension between nationalism and legitimism. The former acquired the right to open (legitimate) expression while the latter felt secure about its legal monopoly, as ethnicity, in the view of the law of that time, did not provoke state recession. On the basis of this circumstance, the heads of empires were able, depending on concrete circumstances, either to encourage humanisation of regimes or pave the way for the imperialistic aspirations of the regimes or, as it was demonstrated by the course of the First World War, to support both of these tendencies.

Concentrating on the specific Lithuanian case, it is necessary to emphasise that the initiative of statehood evolved from Lithuanians themselves. Their political potential was sufficient to seriously model various future prospects for Lithuania: from ethnographic autonomy of Lithuania and independence to unitary or confederate independence of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This cannot be left unnoticed, while it should not be overestimated either. The problem was created by the historical-legal relations with Poland and their consequences for Lithuania.

The real situation was such that a revival of those relations no longer guaranteed sovereignty for Lithuania. Thus Lithuanians were obliged to turn to the route of Russian-German speculations in quest of a compensation possibility for the Lithuanian-Polish relationship. On the other hand, it should be noted that it is just a general characteristic of the Lithuanian political trend. Separate groups – the right

(Nationalists, Christian Democrats) and the left (Social-Democrats and Democrats) – held their own views. The principal difference between these groups was that the right, in their programme based on the relationship between imperial legitimism and the national principle, did not leave any place for the historical and legal unitary tradition. While the left by their programme of abstract democratism softened the relationship with this tradition. It was within this particular environment that the Lithuanian political world “met” the First World War.

Despite the hostilities of war, German and Russian diplomats and politicians repeatedly tried to revive the Berlin-Petrograd axis. This was complemented with Germany and Russia trying to play the Polish card in 1914-1917. When the Panslavistic doctrine applied by Russia in respect to Poland was counterbalanced by Germany with the idea of Polish restitution, this created a theoretical possibility for separatist peace between the empires of the Hohenzollerns and the Romanovs. Its implementation depended on the situation at the frontlines, balance of political powers in the governing layers, and relations with the allies. Consequently, this created various direct implications on Lithuania.

In the autumn of 1915, Germany occupied the Northwest Provinces of Russia and formed a separate occupational *Oberost* region, which in essence corresponded to the boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of 1795. A “liberal” national policy pursued within that territory was paralleled with the efforts to turn the region into an instrument of provocation against Russia, which enabled Germans to speculate with the rights of the ravaged Polish-Lithuanian state and at the same time disguise annexation plans.

That period revealed not only susceptibility of the Lithuanian politics to external factors but also a lack of immunity towards external influence. By means of projects-proclamations Lithuanians raised the issue of succession to the rights of the former Lithuanian State. Though these were independent actions, they objectively conformed to the interests of Germany and sometimes even openly appealed to them.

The further development of the Lithuanian position was also connected with the transformations of the German politics in Lithuania. When Russia failed to respond to the probe for separatist negotiations in the spring of 1916, in Germany this triggered disagreement over the methods applicable in the occupied territories. The pro-Polish Warsaw-Vilnius formula of Berlin was opposed to by the High Military Command in the East, which by means of territorial changes and ethnic purification

policy tried to reinforce the weight of Lithuanians and Belarussians in the *Oberost* region by eliminating the Polish element supported by Warsaw (Berlin). Thus, in the Lithuanian politics of that time there was a noticeable converge with Belarussian activists, with whom regular relations were maintained until 1917, as well as appearance of projects for independent or autonomous Lithuania within its ethnographic territories.

It should be noted that collisions in the German governing layers encouraged political struggle for dominance in Lithuania, as well as increased the Lithuanian-Polish antagonism.

In the period between the autumn of 1916 and spring of 1917, Germany again tried to make Russia sit down at the table of negotiation. The attempts were reinforced with a declaration of a non-limited Polish Kingdom, as well as new speculations with the Lithuanian-Curonian statehood. To support the latter case, a project for the restitution of the State of Lithuania, prepared by the Lithuanians in Switzerland, was employed. Neither the tsar nor the provisional governments responded to the German efforts. Nevertheless, their pressure left a significant mark in the politics of Russia, as well as in the political activity of the Lithuanians in Russia. The provisional governments did not include Lithuanians into the process of constitutional decentralisation of the state.

The Russian deafness triggered annexationist tendencies in Germany in regard to the *Oberost*. International events in the spring of 1917 forced Berlin to choose the tactics of incorporation based on the national principle and aimed at implementing a partial annexation of Lithuania and the Curonian lands. In the framework of its execution, a Council was formed in Vilnius that represented the ethnic Lithuanian nation. By questioning the prospects of statehood for a nation of such status, Germans hoped to influence the self-determination of Lithuanians and force them to accede to Germany. Nevertheless, the Council succeeded in successfully taking advantage of the dissent at the German ruling top, as well the changes in the international environment, and managed to quite definitely launch a formula of independent Lithuania with Vilnius (16 February 1918 Act), to legitimise the issue of Lithuanian statehood (inter alia, by acquiring an act of recognition from Germans on 23 March 1918), and, from April 1918, to commence a diplomatic struggle over the powers of state authority.

The activity of the Council paved the way for the search of concrete forms of Lithuanian sovereignty: a constitution of a monarchic state was prepared; an agreement with the Polish Regent Council was signed; efforts were made to find contacts with the Polish part of the society. These moves ought to be regarded as prerequisites for Lithuanian civil consolidation. On the other hand, it is necessary to note that the abovementioned acts of the Council were inspired also by the German imperial authorities and the Reichstag, who in the first half of 1918 were pursuing the so-called stabilisation programme in the Eastern Europe. When in August Germans started implementing the concept of conflict, the Council failed to maintain the necessary balance between the political worlds of the Lithuanians and Lithuania.

When the First World War was over, the relations between Germany and Lithuania were continued to be shaped by geopolitical factors, though there occurred cardinal change in the balance of powers. Already in 1918, Germany realised that it would no longer be able to exercise unconstrained control over Lithuania and permitted the Council to form a government and start preparing for the takeover of power in the country. At the same time Lithuanians were made to understand that Germany would not guarantee the frontiers of the future Lithuania, which suggested that Lithuanians would be left on their own to face the prospects of Polish and Russian (Soviet) expansion. The 11 November 1918 Compiègne Armistice Agreement abrogated the 1918 Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk according to which Russia had given up its Baltic Provinces, including Lithuania. As it is known, namely in the context of the Brest-Litovsk peace, Kaiser Wilhelm II signed an act for the recognition of Lithuania. Thus, the Compiègne Armistice as if also invalidated all the legitimisation of the Lithuanian statehood previously accomplished by Germany. The fate of Lithuanians seemed to resemble that of people clinging to a raft in stormy seas.

Though, indeed, that was also the time when new ideas started spreading – ideas of popular self-determination, the League of Nations, and collective security – however, the reality in the Eastern Baltic region was such that those ideas meant little against force.

Meanwhile, a new specific balance of powers was starting to take shape around Lithuania, which enabled the State of Lithuania to survive, albeit with quite a considerable inclination from the civil society and quite uncertain international prospects.

The Western Allies – the Entente and the United States of America – being the winners of the war and masters of the new order on the international arena, seemed inclined to support the newly established national states, including Lithuania, between the former Russian and German empires. On the other hand, the Allies respected the legitimate rights of their former partner – Russia. And the so-called legitimate Russia treated the Baltic region as its indivisible property. However, the situation became complicated as Russia was at that time engulfed by the Bolshevik anarchy.

Within this situation, the Western Allies chose to act in the Eastern Baltic region not so much ourselves, but through intermediaries, i.e. indirectly. Namely then the role of an intermediary was assigned to Germany. Its military forces were commissioned by the Western Allies to stop the advance of the Red Army, as the Allies believed that these forces, after they had accomplished their mission, could be without much difficulty returned to Germany.

It is necessary to note, though, that the reborn Poland was nurturing very strong claims in respect of Lithuania. Warsaw was underpinning its pretensions with historic rights, the prevailing Polish-speaking population in Vilnius region, and, finally, not of the least importance were the sentiments of the Polish leader Jozef Pilsudski for his native land. Nevertheless, this foreign policy direction of Poland was obstructed because the West recognised the rights of Russia to Lithuania. Though, notwithstanding the efforts of the civilised world, a legitimate Russia was never reborn.

Germany took advantage of the situation in a very peculiar way. At the very end of 1918, it gave the Lithuanian government a 100-million-mark credit, and a gradual formation of the Lithuanian army, as well as that the Lithuanian State itself, was made possible under the auspices of the German army. Though, Germany needed Lithuania not for some idealistic obligations, but rather as a bridge for expansion in the Eastern Baltic region and as a tool against Poland.

The German army – after long discussions in Berlin – did not risk liberating Vilnius from the Bolsheviks, leaving this mission to Poland, while itself made a move to the north-east, towards the historic Livonian lands. It could be said that these circumstances left a fatal mark on the entire subsequent development of events in the region. The links between the German army and the so-called Baltic Germans effectuated the strive to expand the German influence in Russia via the Eastern Baltic region, which provoked countervailing response not only on the part of Latvian and

Estonian nations but likewise from the Western Allies. In the outcome, the German troops, defeated in 1919 and returned to the East Prussia, became the breeding ground for the future Nazi revisionism directed against the entire Versailles peace system. Prerequisites were created for Polish expansion within the former territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, with Vilnius included, which instigated fatal dissention between Lithuanians and Poles and produced another source for revisionism in the East. Thus, the famous Berlin-Moscow axis started evolving, with the Lithuanian Kaunas turning into its main point of transit.

For a while, the order of Versailles had a taming effect on the German military expansion, which, however, transformed into a development of economic and political power. By fanning the conflict between Lithuanians and Poles over Vilnius, Germany was undermining the barrier in the Eastern Baltic region designed by France, and also, by economically attracting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, Germany upset the plans of Great Britain to build via the Eastern Baltic region a trading route to Russia and divert the latter from the revisionist orientation. In January 1923, Germany managed to deal a significant blow to the Western Allies' posture in the Eastern Baltic region by managing to instigate Lithuanians to occupy Klaipėda region which was under the sovereignty of the Allies. Even though Lithuania, having accomplished the military offensive, seemed to lose courage and allowed the Allies to formally reclaim their rights, nevertheless, after the conflict was settled and Klaipėda region legitimately ceded to Lithuania on autonomous rights, the Allies' positions in the Eastern Baltic region were actually reduced even further. Thus, it was hardly unintentional that precisely in the summer of 1923, the British government decided not to interfere in the eventuality of an aggression against the Baltic states.

By encouraging Lithuania to occupy the Klaipėda region, Germany was seeking not only to weaken the positions of the Allies in that area, but likewise to create more favourable prerequisites for reclaiming the region by referring to the powerless Lithuania as simply a depository of those lands. Meanwhile, with the germanised Klaipėda region coming under the authority of Lithuania, there emerged a serious problem between Germany and Lithuania. With Germany seeking to preserve the existing structures as well as their own influence in the area, Lithuania at the same time was trying to speed up the effort at "re-lithuanising" the region, sometimes at criss-cross with the attitudes of autonomy. This continuously produced crises with the

resultant cases several times being brought before the League of Nations and once – in 1932 – even before the Hague Tribunal.

During the period of validity of the Weimar Constitution, the crises over the Klaipėda region were usually resolved by means of compromise. There also exists an attitude to regard the so-called *Ostpolitik* of the Weimar Republic as generally positive in respect of both Lithuania and the other two Baltic States. In addition to the undeniably positive German economic impact on the Baltic States, it is likewise impossible to ignore other dimensions, especially the geopolitical aspect. The German assistance, extended to Lithuania, as well as to Latvia and Estonia, was conditioned by the essential political interest – to prevent Western states, especially Poland, from reinforcing their influence in the region. Thus, the support, or even encouragement of the Lithuanian-Polish conflict rendered the tiny Baltic states geopolitically isolated and essentially vulnerable. The fact that the Weimar Republic also blocked the granting of guaranties to the Baltic States raises suspicions that not only the region of Klaipėda but all three Baltic states were relegated to the role of depository in the strategy of Berlin.

Still, it must be acknowledged that Germany's support of Lithuania against Poland helped the modern Lithuanian State to survive and enabled it to mature and balance between the superior neighbours – Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union. Though the main problem was that Lithuania, by adopting a destructive state-of-war posture with Poland on the one hand, while relying on the revisionism of Germany and the Soviet Union on the other hand, was shaping its own corresponding international image – not as much as that of a pacifistic entity among powerful neighbours, but more likely as a transient seasonal object.

With the Nazis coming to power, the German-Lithuanian relations were dealt a blow, though in perspective this disturbance only managed to reveal and accelerate the previously formed tendencies. Initially Lithuania launched quite a determined action against the Nazis in the Klaipėda region, even to the extent of open court processes against them in 1934. Nevertheless, the determination of Lithuania lasted only as long as there were any prospects for the so-called Eastern Pact formed by the USSR and France, which embraced Lithuania as well as the other two Baltic states. With the collapse of the system of the collective encirclement of Germany and with the so-called appeasement tendency gradually becoming prevalent, the determination of Lithuania melted (the convicted Nazis were being amnestied, and the fate of the

Klaipėda region was actually left at the disposal of Germany) and Lithuania, as well as the other two Baltic states, started drifting towards the policy of neutrality indicated by Berlin. This policy on the one hand provided Berlin with a certain cover for its aggressive aims and, on the other hand, isolated the Baltic states from all the remaining ties of collective assistance and turned them into a insignificant object for Hitler to dispose with as he wished – in 1939 he simply awarded them to Stalin.

Though indeed, the situation of Lithuania was to some extent different from its small neighbours. In respect to Lithuania, Germany had two versions in store: “the maximum solution”, i.e. incorporation of the whole of Lithuania, and “the minimum solution” – tear-away of the Klaipėda region. When on 22 March 1939 the “minimum solution” was implemented, the Lithuanian State again acquired a certain possibility of balancing among its powerful neighbours. The influence of Germany was counterbalanced by that of Poland being backed by Western states. Lithuania was included into the sphere of guaranties extended by Great Britain to Poland, and the name of Lithuania hardly featured in the negotiations between the Western states and the Soviets in the summer of 1939.

In accordance with the 23 August 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Protocol, Germany kept Lithuania for itself, probably expecting Lithuanians to take the first opportunity to make a move towards Vilnius. However, when Germany attacked Poland, Lithuania (under the influence of the Western states) withstood Berlin’s temptations and did not start a war against Poland. Lithuania without Vilnius did not satisfy Germany at that time – unlike in 1919 – and pursuant to the 28 September 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Protocol, Lithuania was transferred under the influence of the Soviets, with the exception of a part of Suvalkija which Ribbentrop managed to obtain from Stalin allegedly for “straightening out the frontier”. It could be presumed that it was done by the Nazis with an intention to provoke Stalin to do away with the State of Lithuania as soon as possible by cutting its territory in pieces. Stalin, however, took a different course. During the negotiations, which started in Moscow on 3 October 1939, he not only refrained from a threat by force (as he had previously done in respect to Estonia and Latvia), but even offered a deal: promised Vilnius in exchange for letting the Soviet Army enter Lithuania. In addition, Stalin straightforwardly revealed the essence (!) of the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop agreements to the Lithuanian delegation and suggested Lithuania itself (!) to cede upon agreement the relevant part of Suvalkija to Germany. Thus Stalin, aiming to

undermine the determination of Lithuanians, not only promised Vilnius but was also trying to discredit Germany in the eyes of Lithuania – perhaps before the international community as well – by presenting the former as a country that “was taking away from Lithuania” a part of its territory.

On having learned about the plans of the Soviets to reveal to Lithuanians the details of the secret agreements, Ribbentrop personally approached Molotov with a request not to do that, and when the Soviets disregarded his request, on 5 October, he ordered the German envoy in Kaunas to convey the following message to the Lithuanian government: in the negotiations with the Soviets he personally demanded that Vilnius was transferred to Lithuania, and that Germany had no interest in the issue of the annexation of Suvalkija. Nevertheless, the envoy was not instructed to inform Lithuania that it had been ceded to the Soviet Union.

Thus, it could be stated that Germany and the USSR found themselves in an adversary position over Lithuania. Theoretically it is possible to presume that Ribbentrop was trying to encourage Lithuanians to assume a more resolute stance in the negotiations with the Soviets and reject their demand over the establishment of Soviet military bases in Lithuania. It is clear that the Lithuanian delegation in Moscow failed to demonstrate any determination mostly because of inadequate statehood experience, but the abovementioned ploy of Ribbentrop remains one of the more interesting episodes in Germany’s geopolitical game with Lithuania in the period between the wars.

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