THE *RADA* OF VILNIUS BELARUSIANS AND THE COUNCIL OF LITHUANIA: ALLIES OR ADVERSARIES?

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ABSTRACT. This text analyzes the relation between independent movements of Lithuanians and Belarusians in the period of the First World War. Lithuanians stood firmly for the ethnographic model of their future state, whereas Belarusians, whose national movement was weak, declared loyalty to the formula of the restoration of the historical GDL. Since the projected ethnographic Lithuania actually coincided with historical 'Lithuania Proper' and the boundaries of the territory occupied by Germans, the latter exploiting the national factor tolerated and promoted a certain political activity of Lithuanians and Belarusians maintaining a quite constructive dialogue between the two. The events of 1918 proved that Lithuanians objectively pursued interests of their developed ethnocentric nation and in politics attributed only an auxiliary role to Belarusians. Simultaneously, Belarusians received a strong impulse towards their independence.

At the outset of the First World War the Germans managed to occupy nearly all the territory of Lithuania and a part of the Belarusian lands. The new masters of the situation immediately faced a dilemma how to solve the problem of the GDL liquidated by Russia. After all, in accordance with the principles of the historical law where a state had been eliminated, if the heritage of its civilization was still alive in the people's minds, it provided grounds for restoration of the state. Furthermore, the issue was closely related to the restoration problem of the statehood of Poland, especially considering the former relationship between the GDL and Poland.

In 1915 the front line stabilized at a boundary which apparently prompted some historical associations. It was obvious that the territory occupied by Germans with its shape extended to the south and its outline was very similar to that of the GDL after the Second Partition in 1793.¹

¹ R. Lopata, 'Lietuvos valstybingumo raida 1914–1918 metais', *Lietuvių atgimimo istorijos studijos* (hereafter – *LAIS*), vol. 9 (Vilnius, 1996), p. 65

Germany did not have a uniform preconceived notion as to what it should do with the recently occupied territories in the long-term. Proposals varied from a total annexation to giving them back to Russia in exchange for a favourable peace.² The Germans strictly rejected the idea of restoring the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth desired by the Polish. The practical politics of Germany turned towards the so-called 'national factor'. In this context unlike in the sphere of the historical law, a nation was defined by ethnographic criteria and it did not imply independence of the state, yet the natural law of its autonomous cultural development could be fully guaranteed by an existing state, e.g. Germany itself. Therefore, the latter felt secure in choosing the road of a globally emerging and intensifying national factor, because the principles of legitimacy remained untouched. The Germans had reasonable expectations that in the area of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth this was the suitable way to control all the other nations confronting the Poles seeking domination in the region. To exploit the idea of the independent GDL was more convenient for the Germans because on the one hand, it clashed with objectives of the Poles and on the other hand, it allowed for integrating a special kingdom created by militarists, i.e. the Ober Ost (a territorial unit established in the autumn of 1915 by the German administration in the said area of the GDL after the Second Partition and extensively used for the economy).

With respect to the Lithuanians and Belarusians the Germans undertook to support an illusion of Lithuania consisting of the Suwalki, Vilna, Grodno and Courland gubernias. Although they officially prohibited any political activities in the occupied lands, when the belligerent countries got involved in the competition for the most efficient use of the national factor, that prohibition was applied in a highly discriminating manner considering the setting of the political moment. It allowed Anton Lutskevich, a Belarusian public figure, to claim that the political situation of the Belarusians under the German occupation in comparison with the conditions under the Russian authorities was even better.³

The Lithuanian intellectuals perceived the land occupied by the Germans not only as the GDL of the Second Partition but as

² Ibid., pp. 17–18.

³ A. Novina (A. Lutskevich), 'Palytychnya lyezungi belaruskava rukhu', *Nasha Niva* (Vilnius, 1920), p. 6.

a historical 'Lithuania Proper',⁴ divided by Russians into the so-called 'territory of four gubernias'. The intellectuals, primarily the conservatives and to some extent the radicals, imagined that the four gubernias were united by some special Lithuanian culture and the Lithuanians there had a certain priority over other nations.⁵ In terms of the future statehood of Lithuania, the Lithuanians pictured their state exactly in the area of the four gubernias.

The situation of the Belarusians was different. Their national movement was still in the budding stage. Its first manifestations became apparent only in 1905 during the Russian Revolution. At that time the first Belarusian political party, namely the Socialist Hromada,⁶ was established. In fact at the beginning of the war the Belarusian national movement in comparison with the Lithuanian one was rather weak and the problem of Belarusian national statehood was clearly too complicated since it did not receive the support of the broad public. The mass of the Belarusian ethnoses, with minor exceptions, did not have relations with its scarce intellectuals and were still under a strong Polish and Russian influence. Meanwhile the new circumstances of the war urged solving the statehood problem. In their situation the Belarusians viewed the idea of recreating the GDL with great favour, since in such a state they would have a clear numerical advantage. They firmly defended the principle of inseparability of the GDL always adding to the four gubernias another three, i.e. Minsk, Vitebsk and Mogilev gubernias (their ethnic lands which were not desired as a part of the future state by the Lithuanians).⁷ That was the major disagreement between the Lithuanians and Belarusians.

However, under the influence of German agents, in early 1916 a compromise was found and in the context of the propaganda war of Germany against Russia there emerged declarations of the GDL confederation which are very well known to contemporary historians.

⁴ K. Pakštas, 'Gudijos santykis su Lietuva', *Lietuvos sienų raida: mokslo duomenys apie lietuvių tautą, jos valstybę ir sienas*, vol. 2, comp. A. Liekis (Vilnius, 1997), p. 320.

⁵ Č. Laurinavičius, *Lietuvos–Sovietų Rusijos taikos sutartis* (Vilnius, 1992), pp. 100–101.

⁶ The nucleus of that party, i.e. Revolutionary Hromada, was established already in the autumn of 1903. More on the circumstances see: Lutskevich, *Za dvadstys piats' gadou (1903–1928)* (Vilnius, 1928).

⁷ R. Miknys, 'Lietuvos demokratų partija 1902–1915 metais', *LAIS*, vol. 10 (Vilnius, 1995), pp. 160–164.

Still the deep-rooted objective discrepancies in the positions of the Lithuanians and Belarusians were not eliminated. They were even exacerbated by the fact that in the Lithuanian politics the conservative wing gained more domination and it clearly represented the ethnographic formula of Lithuania. After the statehood of Poland was declared on 5 November 1916 by Germans, the Lithuanians emphasized goals of their ethnographic statehood even stronger. Meanwhile after the 1917 February Revolution in Russia the Belarusians made stronger demands for the unification of all of their lands crossed by the front line. Yet again the final touch was put by the Germans and their message was that the ideas of the GDL relevant after the changes of the international politics in early 1917 lost their meaning. Cooperation of the Lithuanians and Belarusians terminated in the summer of 1917.⁸

In late September 1917 Vilnius Conference of Lithuanians was held which explicitly declared goals of the ethnographic statehood. A political body representing Lithuanians was formed, namely the Council of Lithuania. In October 1917 the Lithuanian politicians invited representatives of Belarusians to negotiate and offered them a minority status with a guarantee of their rights in the future state of Lithuania.⁹ The Belarusians refused and insisted on their already known demands, therefore, the negotiations ended with no effect. It is interesting to note that before the negotiations when merely a week passed after Vilnius Conference the national committee of Belarusians decided to call a conference of Belarusians as well which was intended to elect 'a national representative body of Belarusians'.¹⁰ Notably the political work of Lithuanians at that time (e.g. Vilnius Conference, forming of the Council of Lithuania) was done on the basis of a certain compromise with the Germans who closely monitored everything and kept interfering. Each political campaign had to be agreed in advance. Thus, the permission for Belarusians to launch similar campaigns was obviously a part of the German politics as well. The most evidently it was manifested in late January 1918 when the planned Belarusian Conference was

⁸ Minutes of the Belarusian organization in 1917, LMAB Rankraščių skyrius (hereafter – LMAB RS), f. 21-2069, fo. 10.

⁹ A rough copy of the minutes of the meeting written by P. Klimas in Oct. 1917, *ibid.*, f. 255-977, fos. 5–6.

¹⁰ Minutes of the Belarusian organization in 1917, *ibid.*, f. 21-2069, fos. 1–3.

held in Vilnius and the *Rada* of Vilnius Belarusians was formed. And again it was obvious that the timing was not accidental since at that time the Council of Lithuania was working hard with the wording of the independence act and the Germans in Brest-Litovsk were negotiating with Bolsheviks, thus the decisions of the nations came into focus. The most important fact was that the *Rada* immediately declared it did not acknowledge decrees of the Council of Lithuania and did not undertake any political obligations declared by the latter.¹¹ That already seemed like the Germans using the Belarusians to blackmail the Council of Lithuania. On 18 February after the terminated negotiations in Brest-Litovsk the Germans launched an attack and on the same day the *Rada* adopted a decision reiterating its statements regarding Lithuanians and declaring breaking of the relationship between Belarus and Russia.¹² It led to a belief that Belarusians were totally controlled by the Germans and even by the most reactionary wing of the latter led by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Friedrich Wilhelm Ludendorff. However, a balance between the politicians and militarists of Berlin was soon restored and the game of political powers once again became moderate. Although the Germans during their attack managed to occupy the greater part of Belarus and enabled the latter to declare the independence of the People's Republic of Belarus in that territory, they had no intentions to join that new formation to the Belarusian land occupied previously. That was noticed by the *Rada* politicians who in fact viewed the prospects of the People's Republic of Belarus very objectively and critically and they reasonably believed that the political centre of Belarusians was Vilnius rather than Minsk. At the end of April the Council once again attempted to talk to the *Rada* representatives concerning cooperation under the same terms as in October 1917. And again an agreement was not reached since the Lithuanians did not abandon their strong ethnographic position.¹³ Yet grounds for dialogue existed at all times because the Lithuanians had certain doubts about joining the Orthodox part of Grodno gubernia and its status in the state of Lithuania. It became the major point of understanding in talks with the *Rada* representatives.

¹¹ Resolutions of the Belarusian Conference 25–27 Jan. 1918, *ibid.*, f. 21-2064 fos. 1–8; Tasks and decisions of the Belarusian Conference in 1918, *ibid.*, f. 21-2066, fo. 1.

¹² F. Turuk, *Beloruskoe dvizhenie* (Moscow, 1921), pp. 113–114.

¹³ Minutes of the commission meeting with the Belarusians, 23 Apr. 1918, LMAB RS, f. 255–977, fos. 1–4.

In October 1918 when Germany was undergoing a military collapse and its administration changed the Germans finally agreed to grant the Council of Lithuania actual powers. On 29 October Augustinas Voldemaras agreed with the politicians of Berlin that the entire Ober Ost (except Courland) would be considered a territory of the state of Lithuania until the upcoming peace conference.¹⁴ It provided the grounds for a new compromise agreement between Lithuanians and Belarusians. Both sides were inclined to agree because while Germany was collapsing, the Polish and Russian Bolshevik threats came into play. On 27 November 1918 an agreement was made signifying that the Vilnius *Rada* recognized Lithuania within the territory of Ober Ost and agreed to cooperate in building the state.¹⁵ Six Belarusians were co-opted into the Council of Lithuania and the Ministry of Belarusian Affairs (headed by a Belarusian) was established under the Government of Lithuania. However, further circumstances deprived that agreement of a more substantial effect. In December 1918 institutions of the Lithuanian authorities withdrew from the approaching Bolsheviks to Kaunas and Belarusian institutions fled to Grodno there attempting to pursue as independent politics as possible.¹⁶ The German forces which used to ensure certain stability in the area were already evacuating and the Polish factor gained its strength. Eventually in April 1919 the Poles took over not only Vilnius, liberated from the Bolsheviks, but also Grodno, deserted by the German forces.¹⁷ The Belarusians lost the last base for creation of its statehood and Lithuania lost all its nationally mixed territories it wanted to claim. The Vilnius *Rada* also ceased to exist and was replaced by another organization working under the Polish terms.¹⁸ The relationships between Lithuanians and Belarusians entered the next stage.

¹⁴ M. Bienhold, *Die Entstehung des Litauischen Staates in den Jahren 1918–1919 im Spiegel Deutscher Akten* (Bochum, 1978), p. 123.

¹⁵ *Lietuvos Valstybės Tarybos protokolai 1917–1918*, ed. A. Eidintas, R. Lopata (Vilnius, 1991), pp. 402–404.

¹⁶ A. Lutskevich, Dzennik, *Polymya*, 1991, no. 4, pp. 215–224.

¹⁷ Regarding complicated political activities of the Belarusians in late 1918 to early 1919 see e.g.: A. Czerniakiewicz, 'Tworzenie białoruskich struktur państwowych: listopad 1918–maj 1919', *Rok 1918. Odrodzona Polska w nowej Europie*, ed. A. Ajnenkiel (Warsaw, 1999), pp. 152–166.

¹⁸ On 9–12 June 1919 a congress of the Belarusians of Vilnius and Grodno districts was held in Vilnius where the Central *Rada* of Vilnius and Grodno Belarusians was established uniting various Belarusian organizations.

Thus, a straightforward and reasonable answer to the question asked in the title of this article concerning allies or adversaries is probably impossible. In terms of certain criteria the Lithuanians and Belarusians could be considered allies, but in terms of other criteria they should be considered adversaries. In the area of the former GDL the Belarusian national movement was the weakest and it needed a natural ally such as Lithuanians, who were best fitted for that position due to their positive historical experience. However, the latter objectively pursued the interests of their nation, primarily formed as an ethnocentric unit, and in the greater politics attributed the Belarusians only a subordinate role.

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VILNIAUS BALTARUSIŲ RADA IR LIETUVOS TARYBA: SĄJUNGININKAI AR VARŽOVAI?

Santrauka

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1915 m. užėmusi lietuvių ir baltarusių žemes Vokietija pasuko tautinio veiksmo eksploatavimo keliu ir kartu palaikė istorinio valstybingumo iliuziją. Vokiečių politikos terpėje atsirado vietos ir lietuvių bei baltarusių praktinės politinės veiklos pradmenims. Buvusios LDK erdvėje baltarusių tautinis judėjimas buvo silpniausias ir jam reikėjo natūralaus sąjungininko, kurio vaidmeniui dėl pozityvios istorinės patirties geriausiai tiko lietuviai. Lietuviai nedviprasmiškai aiškiai pasisakė už etnografinį valstybės modelį, tačiau jų planuojama etnografinė Lietuva faktiškai sutapo su istorine „Tikrąja Lietuva“ ir su vokiečių užimtos teritorijos ribomis. Tai buvo pagrindas palaikyti daugmaž konstruktyvius santykius su baltarusiais, kurie dėl objektyvių priežasčių buvo ištikimi istorinei formulei. 1918 m. įvykių raida parodė, kad lietuviai objektyviai vadovavosi pirmiausia savo, kaip susiformavusios etnocentrinės tautos, interesais ir didžiojoje politikoje baltarusiams skyrė tik pagalbinį vaidmenį. Kartu netiesiogiai lietuviai taip pat skatino baltarusius formuotis kaip etnopolitinę ir etnocentrinę tautą.