PREFACE

The creation of the modern Lithuanian state began 90 years ago. A conference of the representatives of the Lithuanian nation was held in the old capital Vilnius on 18–22 September 1917. Relying on the right of self-determination of nations the conference adopted a decision on the creation of an independent state of Lithuania. It also elected the Council of Lithuania, an executive organ of twenty members who started the concrete creation of a nation state. Despite difficult conditions of occupation and the lack of any previous experience of independent political work, certain features of the new state of Lithuania began to emerge after about a year and a half. Subsequently, although faced with all manner of problems, the new modern national state of Lithuania managed to exist on the map of the world for twenty years. Again, after half a century of Soviet occupation the state of Lithuania was re-established on the basis of the earlier tradition. Thus, the activity of the Council of Lithuania is of especial legal importance for the country and its historical commemoration is natural and understandable.

This collection of articles is intended not only as a celebration of the Council of Lithuania but also as a critical review of its work and analysis of the processes of that time. This kind of investigation is all the more necessary since the existence of the modern state of Lithuania was not particularly successful. Doubtless, to a great extent the fall of the state of Lithuania in 1940 was the result of external aggression. However, for the sake of objectivity, certain circumstances characterizing Lithuania's ineffectiveness in domestic and foreign policy should not be ignored.

The very beginning of the creation of the state of Lithuania was fraught with problems. Formally emphasis was placed on the democratic right of self-determination. Meanwhile other nations inhabiting Lithuania – the Poles, Belarusians, and practically the Jews – did not support the decisions of the Lithuanian Vilnius Conference. In this context, the state-minded Lithuanians could hardly be in the majority in the country. Thus, a principal problem of the relationship between Lithuanian self-determination and democracy arose.

The lack of democracy was in a way resolved by the act adopted by the Council of Lithuania on 11 December 1917. The first part of this resolution stated the re-establishment of the state of Lithuania, but the second part envisaged its 'close enduring ties' with Germany.

Indisputably, the chief document of the Council of Lithuania, adopted on 16 February 1918, stated the necessity of a Constituent Assembly as the ultimate legitimizing of internal and external matters of the state. Therefore, to this day, this document is of profound significance.

However, at that time actually only a small Social Democratic stratum of Lithuanian society supported the idea of the Constituent Assembly. Meanwhile the nationalistic mainstream of Lithuanian politics considered that the primary provision for the state of Lithuania should be an external constitutionalizing power, and at that time it was Germany. These forces stood for the return to the act of 11 December 1917.

Public sentiments varied in contemporary Lithuania. The political strata of the radical left were oriented towards Russia, and that orientation was conditioned by socio-ethnic interests rather than by state ones. One more orientation should be mentioned, namely Polish, and it was represented by a wide social and political stratum. However, the latter orientation, despite certain chances of recreating the former historical statehood, was fraught with the danger of splitting ethnic Lithuania.

All in all, no single political trend or stratum in contemporary Lithuania at that time or could be oriented towards the self-determination of the majority of its citizens and consequently the founding fathers had to pin all their hopes on external powers.

In the aftermath of a complicated international situation, the Lithuanian forces that were oriented towards Germany were in luck. True, a territorial split of the country could not be avoided. However, the loss of the Vilnius region with its the Polish diaspora enabled the Lithuanians to be in the majority in the rest of the country. Thus, chances arose to convene a Constituent Assembly legitimizing the state.

Regrettably, the elections to the Seimas and its work proceeded in the conditions of direct rather than representative democracy conditioned by the desires of social and national masses. Following the realization of these desires the general euphoria gave way to a radical differentiation of interests. The political Seimas system, having

existed for some time under the supervision of military commandants, was forcefully transformed into an authoritarian dictatorship, based on the actual administration of the commandants.

Nevertheless, even under conditions of dictatorship the life of the state continued, and in some spheres it was quite successful. According to some prominent researchers a cultural political Lithuanian nation was formed in the course of the two decades of independent Lithuania. That could be treated as the most outstanding achievement of the work which was started in 1917. However, regrettably, Lithuania failed to develop a modern civil society. Otherwise, the state of Lithuania most probably would not have collapsed like a house of cards in 1940. Incidentally, some scholars hold that in the nations built on nationalism (such was the Lithuanian nation) civic consciousness diminishes instead of growing. Therefore, the conception 'the nation had not grown up' can be arguable and we may ask whether it 'grew' at all.

The foreign policy of independent Lithuania is also worth reviewing. Actually, Lithuania existed as a hot spot throughout the entire twenty-year period. Lithuania and Poland were in a perpetual state of war. To preserve this situation Lithuania exploited the support of Germany and Soviet Russia, which were not interested in a peaceful solution of the crisis. Thus it was easy to predict that such a situation would inevitably lead to a war and maybe – to the disappearance of Lithuania as a state. Therefore, the political elite of the country was not indifferent to international peace initiatives to solve the Lithuanian-Polish conflict. Nevertheless, as a rule, all these initiatives foundered due to the influence of Germany or Soviet Russia. And that impact, though sometimes very negligible, was profound since it related to a sore point with modern Lithuanians: they were not sure whether having lost the support of external forces on which they relied starting the creation of their state in 1917 they would be able to survive as a nation.

The case of Lithuania, although specific, was typical in general. The fate of other nations of Central and Eastern Europe was very similar. Creating or expanding their states they exploited the outcome of the First World War – the defeat of Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia or Turkey and the idea of the right of nations popularized by the president of the USA Thomas Woodrow Wilson. The rise of a number of new national states in Europe somehow marked a new era of the demise of multi-ethnic empires and the spread of democracy.

However, these optimistic moods did not last long since problems related to the new states emerged. First of all, it became obvious that the new states had problems with democratic institutes, and later the problem of the general effectiveness of the new states arose.

First and foremost, many border conflicts arose. As a rule, the new states sought to establish their borders not on the basis of the self-determination of the local population and often even not according to their ethnic composition but appealing to mystical stories about tribes having inhabited certain territories hundreds of years earlier. For these reasons such international conflicts were not only unavoidable but also practically unsolvable in peaceful ways. Incidentally, such clashes could break out both between the new states and their former suzerains and between the new states themselves.

Another problem dealt with the situation of the so-called ethnic minorities. Statistics show that following the formation of new national states the numbers of people living not in their national states decreased immensely. The political atmosphere, however, shows outside that the situation of the people that remained not in their national states became complicated. In the former empires the ethnic minorities often experienced political and social discrimination. Meanwhile in the national states they often found that their ethnic identity as such was at stake.

Sharp social divides and certain exclusions from political representation could also be noted in the new states. These problems were peculiar to the old states as well; therefore these social fissures could be considered a common problem in Europe in the first half of twentieth century. Nevertheless, the occurrence of these phenomena in the societies a short time ago rallied to the common cause of patriotic liberation was particularly painful.

One more feature peculiar to new states in the inter-war period was bandwagoning – the gravitation of small political entities towards stronger political centres. Possibly there were hopes that this phenomenon, which actually related to the physical world would not affect the new states formed on a democratic or national basis. There also may have been hopes that these states would define their national interests based on peace and interdependent cooperation and would not become servants of a particular political giant. Such hopes were doomed to failure. Soon it became clear that the new states simply could not exist independently without being dependent on some great power.

True, after the First World War all European states, including the new ones, sought to rely on a new collective institution – the League of Nations. However, actually this orientation often meant not concern for the collective institution and attention to the common interest but orientation towards the then superpowers – Great Britain or France. And in the 1930s decade a general tendency, peculiar to all new states, became obvious – that is, their stance oriented towards the centre of the then strongest power despite historical reminiscences related to that centre, the ideas it propagated and finally despite its strategic aims. In other words, the new states themselves started to serve the forces of imperialist revenge, interested in a radical revision of the international system.

After the Second World War the sovereignty of small European states was limited to varying degrees. Two centres of power became dominant in the world, as though implementing Alexis de Tocqueville's nineteenth-century prediction. However, it must be noted that no one of the small states disappeared as a definite entity from the map of the world. Only the identification of the Baltic nations was changed – their names were removed from the political map into the administrative one. The half-a-century-long bi-polar system displayed its shortcomings rather than merits or maybe it simply became bored. In any case, at the start of the twenty-first century Europe again entered an era of the spread of small states.

Although the new era has barely reached its second decade, it is quite evident that the same problems which marked the first half of twentieth century are on the rise again. True, it must be stated that the current problems are not as severe as they were in the previous century since now there are a number of factors reducing the new threats. On the other hand, there also appeared quite new sources and means of threats. In any case, there is anxiety about a possibility of an imperialistic revenge presupposing the limitation of the sovereignty of the new states, or Heaven forbid, something more tragic.

Thus it seems reasonable for both historians and political scientists to review the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century and to give an account of the origin of the right of national self-determination as a principle, its practical implementation and development and to explore its future prospects.

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