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ACTIVITIES OF THE LITHUANIAN SEIMAS IN FOREIGN POLICY 1920–1927

R E V I E W

Audronė Veilentienė.

Išsaugoti nepriklausomybę. Lietuvos Seimo veikla užsienio politikoje 1920–1927 metais.

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Išsaugoti nepriklausomybę. Lietuvos Seimo veikla užsienio politikoje 1920–1927 metais (Preserving Independence. Foreign Policy Activities of the Seimas of Lithuania between 1920 and 1927) is a monograph by Audronė Veilentienė written from the perspective of Lithuania's statehood. It addresses the activities of the Lithuanian parliament – the Seimas – in foreign policy during the period between 1920 and 1927. This book is like a breath of fresh air in the historiography of Lithuanian foreign policy and diplomacy, which has long been tormented by foreign concepts and is therefore full of complexes. It also acts as a counterbalance to “the falsification of history, the humiliation of the Lithuanian nation and state, and the compromising of the idea of statehood itself” as well as a stimulus for “developing the nation's historical consciousness” [7, 9]. This in-depth study based on the analysis of Lithuanian and foreign sources immortalises the efforts of the members of the Lithuanian Seimas, Lithuanian politicians, and diplomats in preserving the independence.

Lithuanian foreign policy and diplomacy of 1918–1940 has often been viewed from the perspectives of Great Britain, France, the US, Germany, Soviet Russia (later the Soviet Union), or Poland, which reiterated the image of Lithuania as a puppet of “imperial countries” without its own independent foreign policy. This image was deeply rooted in Soviet historiography. There are still fears or reluctance to take a more critical look at foreign historiography and the influence of foreign countries; the tendency to bow to the evaluations of reputed foreign historians is observed. The so-called law of the “overlapping deck of cards” comes into play: these evaluations spread across the public domain and entrench themselves in the heads of politicians devoid of “state thinking” for a long time ahead.

Veilentienė's monograph marks the first attempt in Lithuanian historiography to reveal and evaluate the input of the members of the Constituent Assembly (Lith. *Steigiamasis Seimas*) to the conclusion of the treaties of fundamental importance (e.g., the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty of 12 July 1920), negotiations over the wording of these treaties or their secret addenda, their assistance to the government in solving the problems of *de jure* recognition and the relations with Poland, participation in the activities in the League of Nations in an effort to negotiate with Poland over the Hymans projects (the projects for the delegations were not drafted by the Foreign Ministry) by simultaneously searching for a solution with the League of Nations as well as their contribution to seeking an agreement with the Poles of Vilnius, establishing the relations with the Baltic states, and pursuing the realisation of the idea of the union of the three Baltic states. The study was hampered by the lost archive of the Seimas Chancellery. In the absence

of the minutes of the sittings of the Seimas commissions, including the Commission of Foreign Affairs, the author had to draw on the documents of the Seimas Commission of Foreign Affairs from the collection of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Archive of the Lithuanian Peasant Populist Union and other material in reconstructing the activities of the Seimas Commission of Foreign Affairs.

Most of Veilentienė's propositions change the concepts rooted in Lithuanian historiography (e.g., concerning Article 2 of the secret protocol to the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty). What is new in the monograph is that it exposes a broad scope of the nationwide opposition to the Hymans projects, revealing the nation's political and civil awareness. Attention is also drawn to the matter of fundamental importance, which has not been given prominence in historiography: "The Hymans project fundamentally changes the laws and the Constitution of the state, which can be only done by the Seimas, not the Government" [7, 143–177]. In brief, both projects proposed by Hymans threatened Lithuania's sovereignty. This fact is expressly highlighted in the monograph. The work of the members of the Seimas on the Hymans projects inspired the drafting of the resolution on the Klaipėda Region.

The author's ability to handle an extensive and diverse base of sources and to revise the erroneous statements, which have already turned into clichés in historiography, is indeed impressive. These sources included abundant material from the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Manuscripts Department of the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, material from the Manuscripts Division of the Vilnius University Library such as the diaries and memoirs of contemporaries, and published sources, namely, the verbatim reports of the Seimas, the sources of the history of diplomacy, the information contained in 15 periodicals, published memoirs of Lithuanian diplomats, members of the Seimas, and public figures. In my opinion, the principal propositions are concerned with the secret addendum to Article 2 of the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty of 12 July 1920. For a number of decades, Lithuanian historians have been "sprinkling their heads with ashes" with regard to this secret addendum, but for some reason Polish historians are not following suit concerning Żeligowski's march to Vilnius and are not even planning to do it. I will leave it for each reader to figure it out for themselves. But let us return to the claims expressed in historiography. According to Česlovas Laurinavičius, the Lithuanian delegation breached the given instruction, and the Government was informed about the secret addendum only upon the delegation's return to Kaunas [3, 149]. Having thoroughly investigated the discussions of the Constituent Assembly's Commission of Foreign Affairs on the instruction given to the Lithuanian delegation, Veilentienė concludes that the Lithuanian delegation did not violate the instruction, and the Government and the Seimas were informed about the secret addendum [7, 55].

In my opinion, the attention drawn by Veilentienė to the addendum to Article 5 of the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty whereby "The Government of Soviet Russia on its part pledged to respect and protect Lithuania's neutrality provided that it participated in establishing the terms and conditions of such neutrality" [7, 55] is important. The addendum is evaluated as "an additional provision to Article 5 whereby Russia undertook to conform to such neutrality and to participate in the guarantees for the maintenance of same" [7, 55–56]. The addendum in Russian was published in Volume 1 of *Lietuvos sutartys su svetimomis valstybėmis* (The Treaties between Lithuania and Foreign Countries) dedicated to the treaties concluded during the period of 1919–1929.

Both the secret addendum and the addendum to Article 5 of the Treaty directly pertain to the telegram of 5 September 1920 sent by Eustachy Sapieha, the Polish Foreign Minister, to Eric Drummond, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, in which he accused the Lithuanian government of violating neutrality. Veilientienė argues that “Poland accused Lithuania of a breach of neutrality so that its army could invade the territory of Lithuania and Poland would not be accused thereof” [7, 61]. This is the first time when such a bold conclusion is published in Lithuanian historiography. There are barely several statements in historiography claiming that Lithuania did not formally violate neutrality, as it was not at war with Poland on the Soviet side (Marija Mankevič, Alfred Erich Senn) [10, 11]. All other Lithuanian and foreign historians succumb to the old clichés and are not even planning of letting them go. I would advise them to take a closer look at the evaluations of Swedish neutrality during World War II.

Having invaded Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940, Germany demanded that Sweden allow using its territory for the transportation of troops and equipment by rail. Sweden refused, permitting only the passage of the supplies of the Red Cross. However, following the French defeat, Sweden had to satisfy German demands and to allow rail transport of equipment to Norway. In June 1941, Germany demanded the transit of armed divisions by Swedish rail from Norway to Finland. Sweden yielded to this demand. Historiography evaluates these actions of Sweden during World War II as “Swedish neutrality more favourable to Germany”. Sweden is not blamed for the breach of its neutrality during World War II.

The author of the monograph observed differences in the numbers of Želigowski’s and Lithuania’s armed forces given in Regina Žepkaitė’s book *Lietuva ir didžiosios valstybės 1918–1939 m.* (Lithuania and the Great Powers 1918–1939) [9, 52] and Piotr Łossowski’s book *Stosunki polsko-litewski w latach 1918–1920* (Polish-Lithuanian Relations in 1918–1920) [5, 273]. Žepkaitė gives a lower number of Želigowski’s armed forces (15,393) compared to the Lithuanian army (19,000). Meanwhile, Łossowski points out that Želigowski’s armed forces of 14,000 soldiers were supported by the Polish 3rd Division of 50,000 soldiers and the 2nd Division of roughly 14,000 soldiers, which is four times more than the Lithuanian troops defending Vilnius. What does that mean? In the former case (Žepkaitė), the reader may get an impression that Lithuania took fright and did not defend Vilnius. In the latter case (Łossowski), it is obvious that the forces were not equal and it was not realistic for Lithuania to combat an army that was four times bigger. In fact, it is difficult to believe that, being well aware of Łossowski’s works, Žepkaitė could overlook it... Most likely, another circumstance had a role to play. Historian Žepkaitė repeatedly mentioned in private communication that the management of the Lithuanian Institute of History had pressured her to provide the general public with the conception that Lithuania renounced its claims to Vilnius and therefore did not defend it...

Veilientienė draws attention to the “suppressed fact in historiography” that the Lithuanian delegation, which arrived in Warsaw on 7 December 1920, was comprised of the members of the Constituent Assembly [7, 102]. And not only them: finally, Stasys Digrys of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, a member of the Constituent Assembly, and the actual head of the delegation, “doctor Jonas Staugaitis, a member of the Lithuanian Peasant Populist Party” (who was previously mistakenly referred to as Justinas Staugaitis) were included in the list of the delegation members. The mistake made by Žepkaitė found its way to the works of Lithuanian and Polish historians [9; 5; 4, 253–260; 6, 253–260, 201–211].

The claims made by Aldona Gaigalaitė are revised as well [1, 30–33]. The British loan for railway construction (1923–1924) is one of them. Having analyzed the sources and historiography of that time, Veilentienė proves with reasonable arguments that “the loan was rejected by the Lithuanian Seimas” [7, 286–287]. All other factors (British, Polish) were largely overestimated. The demand of Great Britain for the so-called “Seimas sanction” mentioned by Gaigalaitė is likely, because when providing a loan to the Lithuanian Farmers’ Union and the Association of Lithuanian Agricultural Cooperatives, Sweden also demanded “the Seimas sanction” (i.e., for the state of Lithuania to assume responsibility in case the abovementioned cooperatives failed in paying back the loans).

In Lithuanian historiography, Veilentienė revised the statement made by the historians of diplomacy, Algimantas Kasparavičius [2, 57] and Vytautas Žalys [8, 81], who claimed that in early December 1925, the Lithuanian government “made the final decision on the change of its international orientation”. After scrutinizing additional documents relating to Lithuania’s international orientation, the author comes to a conclusion that 12 June 1925 “is the start date of the change of Lithuania’s geopolitical course” [7, 260].

After a thorough study, Audronė Veilentienė reasons that the Seimas substantially influenced Lithuanian foreign policy by approving the programmes of the Cabinet of Ministers, establishing the course of Lithuanian foreign policy, and controlling the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Seimas Commission of Foreign Affairs. The Constituent Assembly, which aided the Government in solving nearly all foreign policy-related tasks faced by the re-established state of Lithuania (except for the normalisation of relations with Poland) exerted the most profound influence on foreign policy, while its members participated in all the negotiations that took place in 1920–1921 (as part of the delegations). The contribution of the Seimas Commission of Foreign Affairs to the drafting of the treaties with foreign countries, in particular the Soviet-Lithuanian Peace Treaty and the Soviet-Lithuanian Non-Aggression Pact, was significant during every term of the Seimas (except for the First Seimas).

Veilentienė’s monograph not only provides an in-depth analysis and evaluation of the activities of the Lithuanian Seimas in foreign policy between 1920 and 1927 but also dots all the the i’s in assessing the fundamental documents underlying Lithuania’s statehood, i.e., the Resolution of 16 February 1918 and the Resolution of the Constituent Assembly of 15 May 1920. It highlights the special role of the Resolution of 15 May 1920. If the Constituent Assembly had been disbanded after the said resolution was adopted, “it would have already accomplished the two tasks assigned to it by the Act of 16 February: the establishment of the foundations of the State of Lithuania (the declaration of Lithuania as a democratic republic) and the relations with other countries (the termination of all state ties which formerly bound this state to other nations)” [7, 36]. The ideological accents placed by the author are important to both the society and contemporary Lithuanian politicians: “to act in the interest of the nation and the state”, “to love one’s nation and state”, and “to cherish the independence of the nation and the state”.

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