

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

New Selection 1

Choral societies : Lithuania

Cultural Current: Associations

Cultural Community: Lithuanian

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It is often asserted that the first Lithuanian song festival took place in 1924, much later than the Estonian (1869 in Tartu) or Latvian (1873 Riga). The phrase *Pirmoji liaudies dainų diena* (the First Day of Popular Songs) has become an almost proverbial reference to the event which took place on 23–24 August 1924 in Kaunas, in what was then the newly independent Republic of Lithuania. But Lithuanians had started participating in song festivals well before the Great War. At that time, the culture of non-liturgical public singing was more common in the German lands than in the Russian Empire. Hence, Lithuanians living in the East-Prussian districts, where they made up a significant part of the population, were more exposed to choral culture. One reason for this was that they were predominantly Lutheran, as opposed to the predominantly Catholic Lithuanian-speaking population in the adjoining western provinces of the Russian Empire. Choral singing in the vernacular being an established part of Protestant culture, we notice a development towards secular choral culture, no doubt inspired by the robust German culture of male choirs. In time, Lithuanian choral singing was to express aspirations to foster a distinctive Lithuanian culture. The first Lithuanian choral concerts in East Prussia were given by associations like *Birutė* (est. 1885) and the Lithuanian Choral Society (*Lietuviška giedojimo draugystė* or *Litauischer Gesangverein*, est. 1895), whose moving spirit was the educationalist Wilhelm Storost (ps. *Vydūnas*, 1868–1953). Both associations held their public performances in Tilsit (now Sovetsk), a centre of Lithuanian culture on the Russian-German border. When the *Birutė* Society celebrated its tenth anniversary with a “Lithuanian celebration” on 17 February 1895, a “concert and Lithuanian singing” was included in the programme. The festivity, which was initiated by Enzys (Ensius) Jagomastas (1870–1941) and was housed by the local *Schützengilde* (marksmen’s guild), also included the first amateur performance of a Lithuanian play: “The Demolition of Kaunas Castle in the Year 1362”, a historical drama by Aleksandras Fromas-Gužutis (1822–1900). The event also featured five women and two men from the Lutheran community of Tauragė, a Russian border town, who performed Lithuanian songs. Storost’s Choral Society, founded in December 1895, initially consisted of twenty-three women and eight men, and arose from the church choir of Tilsit’s *Landkirche* (known prior to 1877 as the *Litauische Kirche*). Under Storost’s direction, the choir gradually shifted its performances from church venues to the public locations of Tilsit and, eventually, further afield: in Memel/Klaipėda and a number of church villages in the Memel, Heydekrug (now Šilutė), Tilsit, and Ragnit (now Neman) districts. These venues drew on a more sizeable audience of Lithuanian speakers. Although Storost also led the *Birutė* male choir for a while, it suspended its activities in 1899, and he then focused entirely on his Choral Society. Officially registered in 1899, it

eventually became one of the most active Lithuanian cultural associations in East Prussia, with several performances each year, and soirées that included acting, music and choral singing. Audience figures rose to 1000 and more – some sources mention up to 3000. Such events, with the choral portion called “festivals of Lithuanian singers”, were interrupted between 1915 and 1918 but resumed after the war. But these events did not go beyond the public performances of a single association. Although some Lithuanian festivals involved the participation of several associations (for example, the one organized in 1905 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Birutė), usually the Choral Society performed on its own. Even when the choir of Birutė was resuming its activities (1909-12), concerts failed to widen beyond the single organizing association. Lithuanian choral singing in East Prussia failed to spread to wider sections of society; this was in part due to a lack of educated leaders committed to Lithuanian national culture. Storost, striking figure though he was, was also an isolated instance. It was only in 1912–14 that Lithuanian youth societies emerged in a number of church villages; almost all had choirs that promoted singing as part of their “Lithuanian evenings”. These activities were at times coordinated with the Storost’s Choral Society. But no distinct Prussian Lithuanian song festival developed out of this youth mobilization prior to the Great War. Some Lithuanians living in East Prussia were involved not only in the choral events of Lithuanian cultural associations, but also in the activities of urban choral and music societies. In Tilsit and Memel, the first choral societies (usually male) emerged as part of the German choral movement in the mid-19th century, at a similar time as in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire. The first song festival in the present territory of Lithuania took place on 24–27 July 1869 in Memel. It formed part of a series of Prussian song festivals (Preußische Provinzial-Sängerfeste) which were held in various locations since 1847. In the Prussian districts densely populated with Lithuanian speakers, four such festivals occurred. The 9th and 17th took place in Memel (1869 and 1891), the 13th and 20th in Tilsit (1878 and 1900). They were somewhat similar to the Baltische Sängerfeste (1857 in Reval/Tallinn, 1861 in Riga), in that they were attended primarily by members of town-based German-speaking choral societies. The involvement of Lithuanians in these events has barely been researched; the fact that a local Lithuanian newspaper found it necessary to try and distance its audience from the “German singer festival” in Tilsit in 1900 indicates a possible participation of Lithuanian-speaking singers. The first choral events of (Prussian) Lithuania, called music festivals (Litauische Musikfeste), also took place in East Prussian towns: Tilsit (1895, 1908), Insterburg (1898), Gumbinnen (1902), and Memel (1905). They were dominated by the German choral repertoire, but also indicate that the intensity of German choral culture affected and partially engaged Lithuanians living in East Prussia. At the same time, in the “Lithuanian” provinces of the Russian Empire choral singing remained enclosed in ecclesiastical settings: it was promoted by Catholic, Orthodox and other churches. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Catholic priests in some areas were already teaching their church choristers to sing in Lithuanian (as distinct from the more traditional Latin or Polish). In some villages, organists attempted to form choirs, but these can hardly be compared to the choral societies of secular, urban culture. Unsurprisingly, when Latvians invited Lithuanians from Kovna (Kaunas) Province to participate in the Fourth Latvian Song Festival (planned in Mitava/Jelgava in 1895), no one responded to the call. By now, folk-songs were beginning to be appreciated as repositories of primordial Lithuanian culture, which helped to see choral singing as possibly a secular, rather than religious activity; but Lithuanian speakers were

still a minority in the towns of Russia's western provinces, and freedom of assembly was restricted. Such cultural sociability networks as were tentatively emerging did not lead to the formalization of Lithuanian associations, and thus an important precondition for the emergence of choirs was lacking. This changed in 1904-05, a period of flux for the Russian Empire as a whole. It was then that in Lithuanian-nationalist periodicals, public activists like Liudas Gira began to call for the creation of Lithuanian choral societies and their unification into one centralized organization – on the pattern of sports and athletic associations like the German Turnvereine or Polish Sokol. But until 1914, choral activities of those Russian Lithuanians who were engaged in national culture remained limited to individual associations with little mutual contact: Kanklės in Riga (1904), Daina in Kaunas (1905), Kanklės in Vilnius (1905–08; they were instrumental in staging the first Lithuanian opera, Birutė, in 1906), Aidas in Panevėžys (1906), Varpas in Šiauliai (1908), Gabija in Marijampolė (1911). Prior to the Great War, they all promoted public choral singing as an almost obligatory element of “Lithuanian evenings”, where, however, they were often overshadowed by dramatic acting performances. Prior to the First World War, Lithuanians did develop the choral singing aimed at strengthening their cultural identity; but the politically mobilizing effect of choral associations was far less pronounced than in neighbouring countries.

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