

THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY LITHUANIAN PRESS ON THE WINTER-SPRING CARNIVAL AROUND THE WORLD

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Abstract: The article shows what information the press between 1905 and 1940 provided Lithuanian readers about Shrovetide celebratory traditions around the world. The information collected, consisting of seven articles, thirty photographs and drawings, is fragmentary but fairly informative, providing a good and concise understanding of this cultural phenomenon in a popular manner. By surveying and interpreting the available data, it tries to answer several questions: what significance these publications might have had on Shrovetide celebratory traditions and methods of celebration in the early 20th-century Lithuania; how this information correlates with current academic research and known empirical data; what Lithuanian Shrovetide had in common with the winter-spring carnival celebrated around the world.

Keywords: customs and traditions, periodical press, Shrovetide in Lithuania, winter-spring seasonal carnival

In the early 20th century the Republic of Lithuania became an independent state and re-appeared on the map of Europe and in the community of free societies. The Lithuanian press of the time promoted the clear goal of fully and proudly integrating in the political, economic and cultural context of Europe and the world as quickly as possible. Beyond informing readers of events in Lithuania and the world, the press sought to forge and inculcate a new national consciousness, social morality, fashion, traditions and habits.

Urban Shrovetide (*Užgavėnės* in Lithuanian) carnivals, balls and masquerades and rural-style costumed Shrovetide processions were among the press's favourite topics and among the most exploited, in different ways, of calendrical holidays, right up until World War II. Over time this channel of information became quite significant and in some cases the sole source of information about this subject for academic studies and the reconstruction of tradition. This was discussed in articles by this author in 2013 and 2015 (Petrošienė 2013: 14–21; Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015: 150–163). Other authors researching calendrical holidays including Lithuanian Shrovetide, Dalia Senvaitytė (Senvaitytė 2013: 115–117; 2013a: 267–285) and Eglė Aleknaitė (Aleknaitė 2011: 25–32), also made use of this source in a similar fashion.

D. Senvaitytė, based on the positions of theoretical social constructionism and authoritative cultural studies theoreticians, claims with good foundation the media are one of the most influential social institutions responsible for construing consensus reality. The media, in essence maintaining the dominant ideology, indicate about what people should think and what opinion they should hold about it (Senvaitytė 2013: 115–117).¹ In other words, in verifying and interpreting media reports, one must keep in mind the portrayal of the phenomenon at hand is a specific kind of construction.

The **goal** of this article is to show what information the press from 1905 to 1940 provided Lithuanian readers about the celebration of Shrovetide traditions in the world. By surveying and interpreting the available data, it tries to answer several questions: what significance these publications might have had on Shrovetide celebratory traditions and methods of celebration in early 20th-century Lithuania; how this information correlates with current academic research and known empirical data; what Lithuanian Shrovetide had in common with the winter-spring carnival celebrated around the world.

Of the large mass of material surveyed comprised of 400 items (articles, reports, advertisements, rhymed texts, photographs, drawings etc. dealing with the topic of Shrovetide) published in 38 Lithuanian periodicals between 1905 and 1940, only 7 articles were found which discussed the winter-spring carnival abroad. The visual component of the material is much greater, with 30 photographs and drawings from around the world published between 1927 and 1938. This material constitutes the **research topic** of this article.

Three main themes came up in the publications surveyed: 1) the origin and characteristics of winter-spring season/Shrovetide carnivals in Europe; 2) the historical evolution of carnival; 3) descriptions of carnival in foreign countries and their comparison to Shrovetide as celebrated in Lithuania. These themes dictate the form of this study which will attempt to answer the questions they raise. Textual, interpretive and comparative **methodologies** were used.

It has been said before that in the early 20th century there were at least two models for celebrating Shrovetide in Lithuania, and likewise the articles in the press describing and favouring one of the other ways of celebrating Shrovetide. For instance, a correspondent writing in the illustrated newspaper *Naujas žodis* (The New Word) in 1927 said that Kaunas, then the provisional Lithuanian capital, “following international European traditions”, could not fall behind in celebrating Shrovetide, and therefore many different masquerade balls were being held (NŽ 1927a: 9). Looking at press reports from 1905 to 1940, one can say with confidence Kaunas and the other Lithuanian cities did not fall behind Western Europe at all in this regard.

At the same time there were other voices calling for a return to native village culture. Almost every other ethnographic-type publication on Shrovetide traditions began or ended with regret over the disappearance of Lithuanian traditions. They expressed the aspiration to maintain, support, continue or merely to conserve Lithuanian-ness, sometimes taking great offence at the urban forms of the holiday, condemning them and calling for their ban.

Controversial positions in the press might have had a specific effect on the choice to celebrate Shrovetide in one manner instead of the other, and on the expansion of that model. In the 1930s the state policies carried out by the Nationalists Party and favourable position the highest leaders of the state held towards ethnic culture held great sway.

Origins and Characteristics of Winter-Spring / Shrovetide Carnivals in Europe

The press attempted to explain to readers the etymology of the word carnival and its significance, its origins in Europe and to define the period when carnival was celebrated.

As have many others in all times, the journalists of the period also believed carnival had arisen from “a spring festival from idolatrous pagan times” (NŽ 1927: 10) and the “humorous processions” held during the Saturnalias and epiphanies of ancient Rome (D 1932: 8). This theory of the origin of carnival is widespread and based on the speculation by J. G. Herder and the brothers Grimm and their followers that ancient traditions harken back to very ancient, pre-Christian times, since when over the millennia these traditions and customs have carried on without change. Peter Burke, who examined the popular culture of the early modern period (1500–1800) and the European carnival, believes that, even admitting the antiquity of the Italian carnival, it is impossible to show through documentation that it is the same as that of Roman times, if one wants to speak accurately.² Popular culture is historical and has always been a matter of multi-directional evolution. One can only more comprehensively document it from relatively recent times, between 1500 and 1800 (Burke 1994: 21).

The Lithuanian press called carnival the child of the southern countries and the foster child of urban culture. The mass celebration during the winter season in Lithuania doesn't coincide with the budding of plants in spring and there was no urban lifestyle in Lithuania, and thus there is no carnival. Only the Lithuanian weddings held in rural style had elements of the carnival. And if we are speaking of Lithuanian carnival, “here we have the matter of international masquerade balls and carnival”, in whose footsteps we should follow (NŽ 1927a: 9). There is truth in that, but Burke would say we were looking at carnival “through Italian glasses”. The carnival tradition in Europe was never homogenous. There are clear regional variations. This diversity was the result of natural conditions, climate, social consciousness, the religious and political situation and even the price of meat at specific times of the year (Burke 1994: 182). So the question of what manner of celebration may be called carnival doesn't have a single definitive answer.

Likewise, there is no one strict, fixed date for carnival. Carnival may be connected with Shrovetide, but also with other days of saints in the winter

and spring period. This is what is also indicated in the Lithuanian press (NŽ 1927: 10).

Two etymologies for “carnival” were discussed: “carne vale” and “carrus navalis” (NŽ 1927: 10; ŪP 1937: 11), which are also provided in the current sources of information on the general subject (Carnival; Valantasis 2000: 378). Information about the Germanic *Fastnacht* and very briefly about the Russian *Maslenitsa* has also been provided (NŽ 1927: 11). The explanation of carnival terms and descriptions of carnival traditions in different countries led the authors to identify at least two kinds of traditions, the Roman and the Germanic (D 1932: 8). They are compared against each other, with the comment that “in ancient times the Germans’ *Fasching* [*Fastnacht*] were just as noisy as the carnivals of the southern lands. Only they lacked the prerequisite characteristics of carnival: sanguinity, grace, colorfulness” (NŽ 1927: 11).

In the words of the author, two decades ago, i.e., the late 19th century and early 20th century, there were things similar to carnivals held in Lithuania, but the tradition had now died out. All that was left was “driving around in horse-drawn carriages” (D 1932: 8). Clearly the author isn’t talking about an urban carnival, but rather Shrovetide celebrations in the Lithuanian villages which, in terms of the diversity of forms of European carnival, could also be called carnival.

Nonetheless, the reports in the press from 1905 to 1940 show the local variation on urban carnival was very much alive and thriving in the early 20th century. In Kaunas and the other larger cities of Lithuania, and from the 1930s onward on the periphery, there were extravagant urban-type masquerade balls which were held indoors and enjoyed extremely great popularity (Petrošienė 2013: 14–21; Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015: 149–188). In this regard, Lithuania did not fall behind Western Europe.

The authors of the articles consider the main reasons for the carnival being what it is in Lithuania: the climate and the urban situation in Lithuania (NŽ 1927a: 9). This is in complete agreement with a general summary of research on the carnival of Western Europe. The frigid winter climate in Lithuania as well as in the rest of the cold and dark northern part of Europe caused winter-spring carnivals to be held differently here than in Southern Europe. The active cultural life of the south took place on the streets and squares of the cities and towns, outside, while in the north it happened indoors, in closed quarters. Therefore, according to the authors, the spring carnival is more intense in the south, while

in the north it is a midsummer affair (Burke 1994: 57). It should be noted these sorts of generalisations fail to take into account the Russian *Maslenitsa*.

The evolution of Lithuanian carnivals was in a certain sense also guided by frequent attempts by the secular and ecclesiastical authorities to ban or otherwise regulate mass carnival processions by urban residents. Orders and memorials of the Vilnius Jesuit Collegium and Academy from the 17th and 18th centuries demonstrate there were rambunctious Shrovetide carnivals in Vilnius during that period. Huge crowds of city residents and people from surrounding areas assembled for the Shrovetide fun in Vilnius. Jesuit clerics sought to control it by issuing orders on who could participate in the holiday, how it should take place, and etc. (Memorialai 1987: 193–194, 212–214, 264).

Written sources from the 16th to 18th centuries also contain information that Shrovetide masquerade balls similar to those held in the palaces of magnates in Western Europe also took place at the residences of the Lithuanian grand dukes (Trilupaitienė 2010: 42–45). That means urban Western-type carnivals were held in Lithuania several centuries ago. Elements of the Western tradition spread and took hold in the Lithuanian countryside through the culture of the manor estates and the activities of the Jesuits.

The early 20th-century Lithuania press also has descriptions of different ways the upper and lower classes in Western countries celebrated carnival. These differences are illustrated by Italy's example. The aristocracy celebrated in a sophisticated way in castles. The lower classes of Milan for whom the fancy castles and cafés were inaccessible flocked to the carousels and attractions on the streets and freely celebrated as they saw fit (LA 1930: 5).

Examining European popular culture of the early modern period, Burke calls these ways of celebrating the “large” and “small” traditions, which interacted. Urban artisan and rural peasant as well as so-called marginalised people – meaning in various parts of Europe Jews, Turks, Roma and Muslims – adhered to the “small tradition” in its exotic forms (Burke 1994: 42). A countless number of pop-culture versions went into the making of the “small” tradition in Europe.

There was a clear social stratification in Lithuania and Europe as well which gave rise to the cultural landscape. In reference to Shrovetide and seeking the widest possible context in terms of time and space, there are clearly urban and rural, high class and lower class methods of celebration, and interaction between these methods. In Kaunas in the 1930s, then the capital of the state of Lithuania, a rural-style Shrovetide procession with street battles was held for

the first time. Students in the riflemen's corps at Vytautas Magnus University held the event according to the Žemaitijan (Samogitian) style of celebration (LA 1936). A similar Shrovetide carnival procession was held the following year (LA 1937; LA 1937a).

Processes very similar to those in Western European countries took place in Lithuanian culture. Local variation and colour was the result of a number of factors elaborated above.

Historical Evolution of the Winter-Spring Carnival in Europe

The historical development of the European carnival is described in a small number of newspaper articles and even then only partially. They touch upon interesting political and economic aspects of the European carnival and its connection to ideological and/or political battles.

Although the Roman-type carnival is portrayed as the hearth and origin of the tradition, more historical facts are provided about the Germanic *Fasching*. They say the oldest carnival described in writing was the *Fasching* amusement at the palace of Bohemian herzog Boleslav III in AD 1003. This recalls that the tradition in one way or another had already been continuous for a thousand years (D 1932: 8). Of the European carnivals in the Middle Ages, that of Nuremburg was the most famous one.

It was retold that this well-known entertainment had been going on for two hundred years and attracted lovers of adventure from around the world. Holding the carnival was monopolised in 1349, by permission of king Karl IV, by the city's butchers guild, loyal to the king. The carnival brought them huge profits. In 1539 this monopoly right was rescinded, also because of politico-religious considerations: during one carnival the butchers insulted the famous theologian A. Osiander, portraying him as the fattest priest in the world who would burn in hell (D 1932: 8). The religious battles and the Reformation's relationship to popular culture put a stop to the history of the carnival there for some time.

The evolution of the carnival is connected with the strong craftsmen and shopkeepers' guilds and their culture which arose in the early modern period in the cities of Western Europe. Their leisure time with its holidays, festivals and carnivals was often associated with a patron saint (Burke 1994: 36). At the same time, many different professional guilds sought to participate in the

Shrovetide carnival and to display their talents. The butchers weren't just the favourites of the Shrovetide carnival or *Fasching* in Germany in Nuremberg, they actively participated in the *Fasching* in Königsberg in the 16th century. (NŽ 1927: 11). Returning to the period and the topic at hand, it must be noted Shrovetide masquerade balls were also held by different professional organisations (artists, press workers and various social circles in Lithuanian cities in the first half of the 20th century (Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015: 166–167)).

Carnival was also portrayed as a kind of instrument for government manipulation. The story was retold of the carnival held in Lübeck in the late 17th century which helped quell unrest among soldiers who hadn't been paid. There was such longing for the fun and games of the *Fasching* that it sufficed to overcome a social crisis, at least for the time. Even in time of war the need to have fun was irrepressible: in Frankfurt in 1806 the price of admission to the *Fasching* held there was doubled because too many people wanted to attend. "*Fasching* dancing simply turned into mania" (D 1932: 8). Carnival is also interpreted as means of social control as well as protest (Burke 1994: 199–204), but there are no remarkable examples expressed in concrete actions regarding the connection between Shrovetide celebratory traditions and social protest or control contained in the early 20th-century Lithuanian press.

Control over carnivals was effected not just for religious or political reasons, but also for pragmatic public safety concerns. The historical material contains examples from different locations – London, Seville, Moscow – about the acts of violence and deaths during Shrovetide carnivals (Burke 1994: 187–188). This is also mentioned in connection with English Shrovetide and pancake-making at a Westminster school in the late 19th century. The story was told that the pancake cook used to use a 500-year-old pan for this. He was supposed to flip the cooked pancake masterfully into the air and the students were supposed to grab it and tear off as large a piece of pancake as they could. If the cook was not able to flip the pancake up into the air properly, then the students were allowed to throw books, quills and other objects at him. The year 1864 was the final one for this tradition because the cook became angry and beat the students with a ladle, which hit one student in the temple. Since that time, this "pancake ceremony was toned down" (D 1938: 3).

Religious, social and cultural factors greatly influenced the development of carnival. Secular and ecclesiastical authorities fought for centuries against popular forms of belief and entertainment, but not always successfully. In

Lithuanian villages, priests sought to ban or at least control certain elements of Shrovetide celebrations. The urban masquerade balls held in the early 20th century in Lithuania were also criticised in the press because these sorts of diversions promoted drunkenness and sexual licentiousness, were a waste of money and so on.

Carnivals in Lithuania and Abroad

It was said earlier that the articles surveyed contained much about how the holiday was celebrated and associated customs in the Italian cradle of the carnival, in Venice, Rome and Milan. Venice, “the Queen of the Seas”, is called the centre of the carnival. The carnival especially thrived and attracted many in the Rococo period in the 16th and 17th centuries. Venetians donned expensive antique Italian costumes and played the parts of *commedia dell'arte* characters such as Arlecchino, Colombina, Pantalone, Pulcinella, Pierrot and others (NŽ 1927: 10; LA 1930: 5). These characters were popular at the manor estates in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the 16th to 18th centuries and at the masquerade balls held in restaurants in Kaunas in the early 20th century (Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015: 25–27, 172–173).

In the words of one correspondent, horse racing, solemn processions, confetti and flower battles formed the core of carnivals in Rome (NŽ 1927: 10). Horse races and driving around in horse-drawn carriages had a somewhat different nature and intention in Shrovetide celebrations in the Lithuanian countryside, but were nonetheless important elements of the holiday. The custom was linked with abundance and a good linen harvest in the coming year.

Italian carnival, it was written, didn't just take place on the streets and squares. The public, dressed for carnival, assembled for dances at cafés and restaurants as well. According to the Italian custom, the youth must dance all night, otherwise the coming year will be a sad one and the young person will not find a wife or husband (LA 1930: 5). Regret was expressed that Lithuanians were “cold-blooded” and too reserved, reportedly making this sort of fun inconceivable in Lithuania. While one may admit there are differences in northern and southern temperaments, studies of urban and rural Lithuanian Shrovetide show there were evenings of dancing and feasting that were held at the palaces of magnates in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 16th and

17th centuries, and that dance was a requisite part of celebrations in the early 20th century held indoors at city restaurants and cafés and at rural farms.

Discussing French carnival, they say the French adopted the carnival customs of the Italians. The main event in the Paris carnival was the solemn procession of an ox with golden horns through the streets of the city. Various beauty contests were held during carnival as well, including the selection of the Beauty Queen of Paris (NŽ 1927: 10). The masquerade balls in the cities in early 20th-century Lithuania also featured different contests for masks, costumes, characters, ethnic dress, dancing and so on. Masks and characters portraying heroes from literature of the period, characters from exotic lands, and national, ethnic and patriotic figures were the most popular and frequently took first place in such contests.

It was mentioned that the press incorporated much information from German-speaking countries. According to the author of one article, Germans also celebrated Shrovetide and held loud *Fastnacht* celebrations, which were not as sophisticated and colourful as the Italian and French carnivals. Germans were more concerned with large amounts of food and drink, according to the report, and had certain ceremonies (customs) regarding them. Readers would have noted the similarity between German (Germanic) and Lithuanian Shrovetide traditions. This is primarily the just-mentioned abundant consumption of food and drink, the presence of fatty foods and multiple food feasts before Lent. Ingredients of dishes were also the same: peas, potatoes, pork. Germans connected the abundance of food with success and riches in the coming year, as did Lithuanians. People's actions during Shrovetide in Germany were also responsible for a good linen harvest: the German mother and father were required to dance to ensure flax plants grew taller. The higher the husband raised his wife during the dance, the taller the plants would grow (NŽ 1927: 11). It's easy to see this was a different sort of information, associated popular culture and the concerns of farmers.

On Shrovetide celebrations in England, the Lithuanian press reported English people celebrated it very ceremoniously and tradition demanded the cooking of pancakes, as in Lithuania. English pancake-cooking traditions were "exotic", demanding both special utensils and the ability to juggle pancakes in the air theatrically. Pancake-cooking and special pancake-flipping contests were held in the family, at schools and in the community (D 1938: 3).

Pancakes as the main holiday dish for Shrovetide are also mentioned in writings about Russian *Maslenitsa* (NŽ 1927: 11). There were heated debates about “the ethnic origin” of the popular Shrovetide pancakes in early 20th-century Lithuania and especially at restaurants in Kaunas. There were those who said pancakes were not a dish of Lithuanian Shrovetide and that they had been spread by bureaucrats returning from Russia (Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015: 181–183). There might have been some truth in that assertion, but wheat flour dishes were and are a part of Lithuanian cuisine. The dispute illustrated a rather limited understanding of Lithuanian customs and those of other peoples around the world.

Some others didn't bother describing more fully the Shrovetide customs of other ethnicities and only tried to showcase similarities with Lithuanian customs. It was written that the Portuguese throw beans and wheat flour during carnival, while Lithuanians throw oats. In Peru, as in Lithuania, participants try to pour water over one another. The Czechs lead a bear, while Lithuanians have a bear and other anthropomorphic figures. Tyrolean Swiss leave the peaks for the cities during carnival and entertain themselves by calling city residents Gypsies and little black men (ŪP 1937: 11). As mentioned, those writing about Shrovetide carnivals held abroad found many similarities between German and Lithuanian Shrovetide. They also noted certain things never seen in Lithuania, including the elegant Italian processions attracting foreign visitors and the commercialisation of the *Fasching* in Germany (ŪP 1937: 11). Press reports about the masquerade balls held in Lithuanian towns and cities demonstrate the commercial aspect was just as plain to see in Lithuania.

Conclusion

There aren't many descriptions of foreign carnivals and comparisons with Lithuanian Shrovetide, photo-reportage and drawings in the Lithuanian periodical press in the early 20th century, but those that do exist are done very professionally and served to expand readers' horizons. They failed to have a real effect on Lithuanian Shrovetide celebratory traditions, however, for at least a few reasons. First of all because of the fragmentary nature of the reports spread out over time. Secondly, urban vs. Western-type masquerade balls were not news at all in the early 20th century in Lithuania. The new thing was that this way of celebrating, imparting to it an “exalted content” through the actions of

social organisations and schools, spread to the Lithuanian periphery and was considered, despite criticisms, progressive and acceptable.

By comparing information, one can say the conceptual elements of the Western European carnival and Lithuanian Shrovetide traditions are exactly the same, while some of their methods of fulfilment differ, but also sometimes take the same form. Some elements were adopted from the urban culture of Western Europe and through the agency of palaces and manors of the magnates of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania eventually took root in Lithuanian soil.

The intense Lithuanian ethnic-values propaganda of the 1910s to the 1930s encouraged the incorporation of rural culture elements in the city environment. The village-style Shrovetide processions begun then continue to this day. The urban-type masquerade balls of the early 20th century which had been so intense over time disappeared or became rarer and were held in a closed environment.

Notes

- 1 The author bases this on the work of Stuart Hall (Hall 1997), and McCombs and Donald Shaw (McCombs & Shaw 1993: 58–67).
- 2 Peter Burke says popular culture is the non-elitist culture of less-educated social strata (craftsmen, peasants, etc.) (Burke 1994: xvi–xxiv). This goes by the term *liaudies kultūra* in Lithuanian, literally, “the culture of the people”.

Abbreviations

- D 1932. Karnavalui tūkstantis metų. *Diena*. Kaunas, No. 6.
D 1938. Anglų užgavėnės. *Diena*. Kaunas. No. 10.
LA 1930. St. S. Itališkas karnavalas. *Lietuvos aidas*. Kaunas, No. 47.
LA 1936. Užgavėnių “svečiai” Kauno gatvėse. *Lietuvos aidas*. Kaunas, No. 93.
LA 1937. Užgavėnių karnavalas. Lašinio ir Kanapinio kova Kaune. *Lietuvos aidas*, No. 62.
LA 1937a. Vakarykščios Lašininio ir Kanapinio kautynės. *Lietuvos aidas*. Kaunas, No. 65.
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NŽ 1927. Karnavalas. Carnevale. *Naujas žodis*. Kaunas, Nos. 3–4.
NŽ 1927a. Lietuviški karnavalai. *Naujas žodis*. Kaunas, Nos. 3–4.
ŪP 1937. V. B-unas. Mūsų Užgavėnės ir užsienio karnavalai. *Ūkininko patarėjas*. Kaunas, No. 5.

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