

INTRODUCTION

ON THE MAKING OF NATION-STATES
IN THE EASTERN BALTIC AFTER THE GREAT WAR

In 2018, as Western Europe commemorated the centenary of the end of the First World War, East-Central European countries solemnly marked different centenaries of nation-states. For some, such as Latvia, Estonia and the Czech Republic, it was the anniversary of the creation of the modern state; for others, such as Lithuania and Poland, it was the restoration of the state; whereas Romania marked the anniversary of its 'great unification'. Numerous books and articles have been written about the emergence of East-Central European countries in the aftermath of the Great War, their military actions and territorial conflicts, and political, economic, social and cultural developments in the period between the two world wars. So it is not an easy task for a researcher to say something new in this field.

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The region of East-Central Europe, which for many decades since the Enlightenment has been classified in the mental maps of West Europeans as different, belonging to a lower level of cultural development,¹ took on a new meaning with the end of the Great War and the collapse of empires. Friedrich Naumann, a German politician and theologian, conceptualised the term *Mitteleuropa* in 1915, to mark an area in the centre of Europe intended for German economic and cultural domination.² After the end of the First World War, German influence in the region weakened, and the areas on the east coast of the Baltic Sea (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), which, with the exception of Finland, can be called East-Central Europe, faced similar political and social processes. These processes had a long-term impact on the formation of the identity of local populations.

Lithuania is often considered to be a Central European country, belonging to, as Milan Kundera once put it, 'the uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany' (*La zone incertaine de petites nations entre la Russie et l'Allemagne*),³ which stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans, and is influenced by Western Europe on one hand and by Russia on the other. Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, historically belongs to a set of multicultural and multinational Central European cities, such as Prague, Krakow and Warsaw. The other Baltic states, Estonia, Finland and Latvia,

¹ For more on this issue, see WOLFF, Larry. *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, 1994.

² NAUMANN, Friedrich. *Mitteleuropa*. Berlin, 1915.

³ KUNDERA, Milan. Un Occident kidnappé, ou La tragédie de l'Europe centrale. *Le Débat*, 1983, n°5 (25), p. 14.

which declared their freedom in 1917–1918, are considered more a part of northern Europe, influenced by Protestant ethics and German culture. So it is hardly possible to talk about eastern Baltic states as a region with a real cultural unity.

The First World War created a chaos of new political formations in Europe, but at the same time, it opened a window of opportunity for national rather than ethnic or regional identities in the east-central part of the continent, and paved the way for the emergence of nation-states. Politicians of the post-Great War nations were involved in many activities simultaneously. They had to build state institutions, organise national armies, fight for territory, take control of the borders claimed by their states, begin the reconstruction of an economy devastated by war, look for financial resources to ensure their economic viability, etc. The Baltic region did not differ from other East-Central European countries in that its political stability was fragile. Even decades after the Treaty of Versailles, British politicians could still not provide more stable guarantees for Poland. The chances for Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland were even lower.

Not every nation succeeded in creating a nation-state after the Great War. The attempts by the national elites in Ukraine and the Caucasus failed. The Bolsheviks displaced the new state institutions in these territories, which tried to secede from Russia during the turmoil caused by war and revolution. Almost all the states that emerged in East-Central Europe after the Great War faced geo-political challenges that could not be solved by conventional diplomatic means. The path to independence in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region was full of coincidences that could instantly turn the course of events in another direction.

Lithuania's restoration of its independence and its separation from the Russian Empire is often seen by idealistic historians as a predetermined outcome of the national movement. However, the process requires a more contrasting and nuanced portrayal. Historians raise the question about how much the creation or restoration of the state could have been linked to external forces, such as German political aspirations and support, the collapse of the Russian Empire, and internal civil wars, or the geo-political situation created by the post-Great War power vacuum.

Historical research does not provide an opportunity to conduct experiments that may repeat past events or verify their regularities. Only with a full and recognisable historical picture before our eyes can we try to imagine what would have happened. 'What would have happened if Pilsudski's army had not won in August, 1920, outside of Warsaw?' asked the poet and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz. 'One can only make conjectures [...] One thing is certain: I myself would have become, like several million children of my own age, someone else. I would have worn the red tie of the Kom-somol, and instead of catechism lessons I would have been spoon-fed a vulgarized

Marxism. I did not suspect at the time this link between my fate and the trembling hands that repaired the engine in the tank. If the Germans had won the First World War, no radical changes would have disturbed a French child's environment. But in 1920, what hung in the balance was completely different.⁴

The growing desire to build nation-states faced similar, but at the same time diverse, external and internal challenges at the end of the First World War. In his book about interwar Lithuania written for a general Ukrainian audience, Artem Petryk, whose article is published in this collection, does not draw direct parallels between the fates of Lithuania and Ukraine. Still, they are visible in his book. As a result of the wars of independence and the successful political outcome, Lithuanians won at least 22 years of life with Western values. As Timothy Snyder states: 'Before the First World War, it appeared that the Ukrainian cause in Austrian Galicia had greater hope for success than the Lithuanian cause in the Russian empire.' Compared to the Lithuanians, the Ukrainian nation was larger. In the Habsburgian region of Galicia, they had 'voted in parliamentary elections, formed legal political associations, and published legally in their native language' even before the war.⁵ However, the defeat of the Ukrainian revolution in 1920, caused by the geo-political constellation, forced the remnants of the Ukrainian national army and the patriotic intelligentsia to flee to the West. Once dispersed, the Ukrainian leaders managed to shape the goal of political independence only at the end of the revolution, but no political group or regional faction managed to unite a majority of the country's population. Ukrainian politicians did not fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the Russian Empire. Unlike Ukraine, Lithuania's efforts to defend itself against the Red Army were supported by Germany and Freikorps volunteers. Despite all the challenges, a political consensus was reached in Lithuania. Besides, Soviet Russia recognised the Lithuanian state in the 1920 peace treaty, which, according to the somewhat pathetic statement of Petryk, 'was of epochal significance. For the first time since the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a peaceful, largely victorious, treaty was signed. Lithuania did not lose a war against a much stronger enemy. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this agreement for the formation of the mentality of the modern Lithuanian nation, for believing in one's own strength as "nation-winner", former heirs of the "Great Lithuania"'.⁶

Lithuanians sometimes look for historical parallels with Finland. Especially when discussing the issue of armed resistance to the USSR in 1940, they refer to the Finnish

⁴ MIŁOSZ, Czesław. *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*. Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, London, 1981, p. 52.

⁵ SNYDER, Timothy. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*. New Haven, London, 2003, p. 133.

⁶ PETRIK, Artem. *'Svet i teni' Pervoi respubliki: Litovskoe gosudarstvo v 1918–1940 godakh*. Kherson, 2018, s. 17.

example of late 1939. It is also not unusual for Lithuanians to compare economic indicators, stating in a somewhat naive manner that economic development in Finland and Lithuania was almost identical before the Second World War, and it is only because of the Soviet occupation that Lithuania's economic achievements do not resemble Finland's. However, differences between Lithuanian and Finnish political and economic development, civil rights and economic mentalities were already significant in the late 19th century. Despite having common interests with Russia, Finland developed in a different cultural environment. In Lithuania, the modernisation of the economy, the reorientation from arable farming to livestock, the creation of a farm-based economy, and other social changes, basically started after the end of the First World War, while in Finland there was already a developed network of mechanised dairies, farmers' cooperatives and local commercial banks in the late 19th century. With developing industrialisation, especially in branches related to wood manufacturing and the cellulose industry, and ensuring a stable supply of food, the standard of living was quite different to that in Lithuania. The historian Henrik Meinander provides an intriguing detail about conditions of Finnish life at that time: 'In the last decade of the 19th century, a cup of coffee in the morning was considered a necessity even among villagers. There was no doubt about *pullakahvi*, a bun with coffee. This has become a real ritual of moderate Finnish luxury.'⁷ At the beginning of the 20th century, when Lithuanians were only beginning to formulate their demands for political autonomy, the Finnish language already had the status of an independent language, and the Finns were members of many political parties and participated in elections to the parliament (Eduskunta), whereas in 1907, Finnish women were the first in Europe to participate in parliamentary elections. European states, including Bolshevik Russia, recognised the independence of Finland, which was declared on 6 December 1917. With the outbreak of the civil war, Germany sent aid to the Whites, in the form of the Ostsee-Division led by General Rüdiger von der Goltz, which drove the Bolsheviks out of Helsinki in April 1918 after landing in Hanko and Loviisa. In addition, at the end of the war, the Finnish Whites were joined by hundreds of well-trained light infantry who had previously volunteered for the German army and served in the Royal Prussian 27th Jaeger Battalion.

Prior to the Great War, living conditions were also different for Baltic people who lived in the Russian provinces of Pribaltiiskii krai and Severozapadnii krai. In the provinces of Estliandiia, Lifliandiia and Kurliandiia, the Imperial Russian regime was rather liberal, and Protestants, unlike Catholics, were able to hold high positions in the civil service and the army, and were admitted more easily to higher schools

⁷ Quoted from the translation into Lithuanian: MEINANDER, Henrik. *Suomijos istorija*. Vilnius, 2017, p. 154. See also the English edition: MEINANDER, Henrik. *A History of Finland*. London, 2011.

and universities. Literacy and economic well-being were higher in Estonia and Latvia than in Lithuania.

In this context, Lithuania's achievements in the interwar period cannot be overestimated. Society implemented ambitious political, cultural and economic projects rapidly. It set up a primary education system, established a university, put through land reform and financial reform, created food cooperatives and processing industries, developed the infrastructure of Klaipėda port, and began to train specialists for its merchant navy. The modernising generation of breakthroughs replaced the generation of 'the times when oil lamps were used', and 'the cultural upheaval, Lithuania's "westernisation" included [...] much more than a knowledge of foreign languages or a system of cultural references.' The émigré semiotician Algirdas Julius Greimas claimed that it also included 'the entrenchment of a specific common way of thinking, of concepts of initiative, activity, affirmation of the individual, and the openness of the person to the world'.⁸

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Despite all these differences, the creation of nation-states that began in 1918 was a process that united the region. This set of articles focuses on several issues relating to this process. In the first section, taking Lithuania as example, three articles look at the difficulties faced by nation-states in implementing their territorial claims and manoeuvring between the great geo-political powers whose influence in the region did not decline after the First World War. Valentinas Kulevičius discusses the vision of the Lithuanian political and intellectual elites to create a state with access to the Baltic Sea and actively use it for trade and commerce. Algimantas Kasparavičius raises the question of how smaller international actors had to adapt their policies to the big European players in the game. Despite the fact that its neighbours challenged the Lithuanian nation-state especially harshly, compared with other countries in the Baltic region, there are some similarities between the case of Lithuania, discussed in his article, and other cases such as Poland. The author assumes that the accusations of fate in Lithuanian historiography are rather unsubstantiated: a closer examination of refined and confusing trends in Lithuanian foreign policy, Lithuanian ambitions, strategy and the relationship with the state that was abolished in 1795, shows that the country first attempted to overcome the tradition and legacy of former centuries rather than contemporary geo-political obstacles. The third article, the contribution by Artem Petryk, traces the formation of the image of the Lithuanian state and the representation of its foreign policy in periodicals published in Ukraine or in the Ukrainian language. His article shows that, despite the unenviable geo-political conditions in Lithuania, some Ukrainians saw Lithuania as an example, because their own situation was worse.

⁸ GREIMAS, Algirdas Julius. Antanas Smetona ir kas toliau. In GREIMAS, Algirdas Julius. *Iš arti ir iš toli: literatūra, kultūra, grožis*. Vilnius, 1991, p. 257–258.

The second section in the collection presents several case studies that draw attention to the aim to create a new social and political order in the Baltic region. Aiga Berzina shows the intersection of the old imperial order and the new order in Latvian prisons. From her article, we learn that criminal law and the penal system in Latvia were built on the foundations of imperial legislation and the legacy of the First World War, with codified laws, an infrastructure and experience inherited from Russia, and inadequate and poor prison conditions and legal chaos that followed from the Great War. These conditions presupposed the need to change them rapidly, and to deal with problems relating to criminal law, penal policy and the prison system, in line with the expectations of the new society. Another case in which an attempt was made to realise the expectations associated with the new society on the ruins of the old imperial system is examined in an article by Igor Kopõtin. The author analyses the role of the Estonian army in forming a personality corresponding with the national ideal and subject to collective action. According to Kopõtin, the cultural training programme applied in the Estonian army to this purpose was so effective that its methods were used in the Estonian army even after the beginning of sovietisation in 1940, just by changing the ideological guidelines. On the other hand, the author reveals that the integration of national minorities into the Estonian state was hardly successful, as the attitude of Estonian Russians during the June 1940 occupation showed.

The third section in the collection deals with issues of the integration of national minorities into the new nation-states. To some extent, Kari Alenius continues the considerations addressed in Igor Kopõtin's contribution. Alenius compares the policies of Estonia and Finland towards their national minorities. The author claims that, in the period after the Great War, both countries stood out in the context of other European states, in that they were able not only to declare ideals of social and national equality, but also to put them into practice, ensuring real rights for national minorities. Despite this, the author also notes that the policy towards national minorities in the 1920s differed from that in the 1930s. In a sense, this can be compared to the situation in Lithuania. Although Alenius claims that the titular nations accounted for an exceptionally large proportion of the populations in Estonia and Finland, around 88 per cent, in Lithuania, the titular nation had a rather similar proportion, accounting for 84 per cent of the population (1923). As in the case of minorities in Estonia, Jews in Lithuania had a form of cultural and national autonomy, which was guaranteed by law and functioned in practice from 1920 to 1926. It is only natural that the integration of Jews, the largest minority, which accounted for about 8 per cent of the population (1923), was the most pressing issue in minority policy in Lithuania. This explains why the two other articles in the third chapter deal with the attitudes of Lithuanian Jews towards the Lithuanian nation-state. Ruth Leiserowitz

reports on the mutually beneficial 'pragmatic alliance' formed by Lithuanian Jews and Lithuanian politicians. The author shows how Zionists and members of the Jewish national movement backed the formation of the Lithuanian state politically, by sending representatives to the newly formed Lithuanian government, and supporting the position of the Lithuanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. Hektoras Vitkus presents a detailed analysis of the motives behind the decision by Jewish soldiers to serve in the Lithuanian army during the war of independence. It turns out that the conflicts between Lithuanian soldiers and Jewish communities that arose between 1919 and 1921 for various reasons prevented Jews from having greater sympathy for the Lithuanian army. Despite this, their participation in the struggle for independence drew motives from public attitudes and rumours about the violence of the Polish army against Jews, and the 'pogrom policy' in Poland. By comparing the situation in Lithuania and Poland, they realised that Lithuanian politicians and the military leadership did not promote anti-Semitic policies. At the same time, enlistment by Jewish soldiers (especially volunteers) in the Lithuanian army could have been stimulated by their hopes of acquiring rights equal to the politically dominant Lithuanian ethnic group.

The material provided under the source publication heading at the end of the collection is related to issues analysed in the first section of the book. Documents prepared for publication by Vytautas Jokubauskas and Samanta Zuberniūtė reveal the defensive actions that the Lithuanian armed forces planned in the event of a war with Germany and a simultaneous war with Germany and Poland. The operational plans of the Lithuanian armed forces of 1936 and 1937 cover the sensitive issue of security: another aspect typical of nation-states of East-Central Europe, which has already been examined several times in previous volumes of the *Acta Historica* series.

Vygantas Vareikis