

THE CONTESTED DATE OF THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN LITHUANIA: WAS 15 MAY AN ALTERNATIVE TO 16 FEBRUARY?¹

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ABSTRACT Today in Lithuania, the day of the establishment of the modern nation-state is celebrated on 16 February. It is well known that the origins of this celebration go back to the period before the Second World War. However, historians have stated for some time now that in the 1920s, in addition to 16 February, there was another day that was also known as the National Day: 15 May. An attempt is made here for the first time to look at the two celebrations as alternatives set by political competition. The author seeks to find explanations why some politicians wanted to see 15 May as a counterbalance to 16 February, and examines whether this was influenced by their different experiences and different views as to what constituted the starting point of the independent Lithuanian state.

KEYWORDS: politics of memory, collective experience, National Day, public holidays, religious holidays, democracy and authoritarianism.

Introduction

During the First World War, various Lithuanian groups on either side of the Atlantic voiced their demands numerous times for an independent Lithuania. On three occasions between 1917 and 1920, independence was not just demanded but actually declared. The first was on 11 December 1917, by the Lietuvos Taryba (Council of Lithuania), a body of 20 representatives, elected in September 1917 during a session of the Vilnius Conference, which had gathered with the permission of the German Ober Ost authorities, with Lithuanians choosing and inviting to the conference individuals

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from regions that made up the Lithuanian military district (Verwaltungsbezirk der Militärverwaltung Litauen). This declaration by the Taryba was not made public immediately; it was in effect required by the German government, who wanted to use it in the peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks in Brest-Litovsk. On 16 February 1918, the Taryba again declared the reinstatement of the independent state. This time, it made the declaration public (in Lithuanian and German newspapers), and instead of the words dictated by the occupying government about 'a firm and permanent alliance' (*dauernder und enger Beziehungen*) with Germany, the declaration now contained statements about democratic elections and the Constituent Assembly (Steigiamasis Seimas), which would set down the state's order. When Lithuania's population elected the Constituent Assembly in 1920, at its first meeting on 15 May, it again declared Lithuania's independence. The Constituent Assembly's 'Proclamation of the Independence of the Lithuanian State' basically repeated the main idea in the Taryba's resolution of 16 February 1918, but did not make any specific references to that resolution.²

The presence of three declarations of independence created several options for choosing which date should be considered the beginning of the existence of independent Lithuania. Members of the Taryba first spoke publicly about their 11 December declaration several months later.³ In September 1918, the Taryba chairman Antanas Smetona and its member Juozas Purickis stated that Lithuania's independence should be counted from 11 December.⁴ But later, right up until 1940, few attempts were made to promote the acceptance of this declaration, a too obvious evidence of the Taryba's pro-German posture. Conversely, members of the Taryba gradually tried to encourage the acceptance of the 16 February

² The actual text of the 15 May 1920 statement (in English translation) is: 'Proclamation of the independence of the Lithuanian state. In an expression of the will of the Lithuanian people, the Lithuanian Constituent Assembly proclaims the independent state of Lithuania as restored as a democratic republic with ethnological borders and free of all state relations that have existed with other states.'

³ P. Klimas, '1918 m. vasario 16 d...', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 19 February 1918, p. 2.

⁴ Cf. R. Lopata, 'Lietuvių konferencijos Lozanoje 1918 m. rugsėjo 5–16 d. protokolai', in: *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 1994 (1995), pp. 154, 156, 165.

resolution; some even hurried to announce immediately after the resolution that Lithuania had become a free state.⁵ The first independence day celebrations were intended to take place in the summer of 1918. However, their organisation was associated with the Kaiser's recognition of Lithuania on 23 March 1918 (the Taryba's deputy chairman Justinas Staugaitis even called this recognition 'the announcement of independent Lithuania'),⁶ while recognition was granted based on the Taryba's resolution of 11 December, not 16 February.⁷ It was thought that celebrations would be held over three days in Vilnius at the beginning of July, when each parish was to send representatives, with the Taryba itself taking the front and central position in the celebrations.⁸ Even though in some locations deputies started being selected to go to Vilnius, the celebrations never happened. The first manifestation of the reinstatement of independence was in February 1919, as part of the celebrations of the first anniversary of 16 February. However, not everything went according to plan that time either. With the introduction of martial law on the eve of the celebration, public gatherings of people and a military parade in Kaunas had to be cancelled. Even though the Bishop of Žemaitija instructed priests to explain to their parishioners the significance of the celebration in their sermons,⁹ national manifestations were rather modest. In

⁵ The Taryba member Jurgis Šaulys wrote: 'From this moment, the Lithuanian state, raised by the Lietuvos Taryba, is being born anew [...] In this dire hour, when the war continues to rage, our state is reborn' (J. Šaulys, 'Del nepriklausomybės paskelbimo...', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 19 February 1918, p. 2).

⁶ J. Staugaitis, 'Nepriklausomos Lietuvos valstybės reikšmė', in: *Tėvynės sargas*, 28 March 1918, p. 3.

⁷ See: *Lietuvos Valstybės Tarybos protokolai 1917–1918*, eds. A. Eidintas, R. Lopata (Vilnius, 1991), pp. 230, 235–236. On 9 May 1918, the future celebrations to take place no earlier than 15 June, were announced in *Lietuvos aidas* ('Dėl Lietuvos nepriklausomybės iškilmės', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 9 May 1918, p. 3). The document of recognition was published in the same issue ('Lietuvos nepriklausomybės pripažinimo dokumentas', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 9 May 1918, p. 1).

⁸ To read the text of the project, see: Das Programm der litauischen Festlichkeiten in Wilna [1918], *Lietuvos centrinių valstybės archyvas* (henceforth – LCVA), col. 1014, inv. 1, file 40, pp. 4–44p.

⁹ 'Gerb. Žemaičių vyskupijos dvasiškiai', 13 February 1919, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 52, p. 108, L. Kalasauskienė (ed.), 'Dokumentai apie Vasario 16-osios šventę', in: *Lietuvos archyvai*, No 2 (1990), pp. 30–31.

addition, National Day celebrations were only held on 16 February in a small number of places around Lithuania. Many local communities would organise these kinds of celebrations when they wanted or when they were able to: for example, in Pilviškiai on 4 March, in Skuodas on 11 May, in Leipalingis on 27 July, and in October 1919 in Telšiai.¹⁰ It is no wonder that the Central Committee that was formed to organise the celebration in 1920 felt concern that 16 February 'would actually be celebrated'.¹¹ The situation was not made any clearer by the fact that a few months later, on the day the Constituent Assembly convened, 15 May was also declared a public holiday and a celebration for the public.

Many people should get confused about that variety of the National Days, which were a new phenomenon altogether. In the Imperial Russian provinces that were most densely populated by Lithuanian speakers, all annual public holidays were religious. An exception was celebrations relating to the emperor, his family and the ruling dynasty (the Romanovs) (birthdays, coronation days, etc), whose ritual element involved primarily the Orthodox Church, and military and imperial institutions. When in 1915 most of the future Lithuania was occupied by the Imperial German army, public holidays celebrating the new ruling dynasty (the Hohenzollerns) were introduced. However, most of the population followed Church (religious) holidays, which naturally differed between Catholics, Jews and Orthodox. In this context, the attempt to introduce a public, civil holiday was in effect a suggestion for people to do what they had not done before, to celebrate becoming a new society. Before 1920, only 1 May to an extent formed the experience of public holiday organisation and participation in urban areas; it started being marked in Lithuania as a state (not a religious) holiday in 1919.¹²

In addition to this, some politicians soon started viewing 15 May as an alternative to 16 February. Members of the Taryba

¹⁰ Lietuvos Piliētė, 'Pilviškiai', in: *Lietuva*, 16 March 1919, p. 3; Damazas Treigys (A. Šilgalis), 'Skuodas...', in: *Lietuva*, 3 June 1919, p. 3; J.B. Andraitis, 'Leipgalingis...', in: *Lietuva*, 16 September 1919, p. 3; Augutė, 'Telšiai', in: *Lietuva*, 18 December 1919, p. 3.

¹¹ *Lietuva*, 15 February 1920, 1

¹² Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers, 30 April 1919, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 68, p. 58.

almost immediately began to associate the reinstatement of the Lithuanian state with 16 February. A street in Kaunas was named after 16 February in April 1919.¹³ The government included this date on the list of official state agency public holidays (non-working days) that was confirmed in September 1920. Its commemoration started being established in the Lithuanian army. The University of Lithuania was also founded on 16 February 1922, making it an important day for the student body as well. But the ritual of commemorating 15 May also gradually developed, and became established. During the existence of the Constituent Assembly, 15 May was only declared a public holiday once, in 1920, but its anniversary was marked in 1921 and 1922.¹⁴ However, the anniversary went uncelebrated in 1923, perhaps because the new Seimas (parliament) that had just been elected on 12 and 13 May had not yet convened. This may explain why, when debating the Law on Holidays in the Seimas, the idea was proposed to mark 15 May as a state holiday. As we shall see, the instigators of this idea were not initially recommending an additional holiday, but to change the list of holidays: 16 February would be moved to 15 May. Formally, this recommendation was based on the weather: it was said that it was too cold to celebrate an event of this scale in February, which was why so few people participated.¹⁵

So far, historians that have researched the influence of separate political groups on the Law on Holidays and Leisure in interwar Lithuania do not accept this argument critically. Authors who have written on the topic include Gediminas Rudis, Vladas Sirutavičius, Vita Ulytė-Grigelevičienė and Vilma Akmenytė-Ruzgienė. Rudis' article concentrates on the significance of 1 May, for obvious reasons,

¹³ Cf. List of street names (in Kaunas) changed by the Commission (1919), LCVA, col. 379, inv. 2, file 81, p. 117; Kaunas City Council to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 3 April 1919, *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁴ 'Iš St. Seimo kronikos. Metinių St. Seimo sukaktuvių paminėjimas', in: *Lietuva*, 14 May 1921, p. 2; 'Iškilmingas Stei. Seimo 1921 met. gegužės 15 dienos posėdis metinėms sukaktuvėms paminėti', in: *Lietuva*, 19 May 1921, p. 1; 'Gegužės 15 d. Steigiamojo Seimo iškilmų tvarka', in: *Lietuva*, 14 May 1922, 2; 'Seimo sukaktuvės', in: *Lietuva*, 17 May 1922, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Seimo stenogramos*, II Seimas, 1924, meeting 58, p. 16.

bearing in mind when the article was published.¹⁶ Sirutavičius pays most of his attention to the details behind the transformation of 8 September into a national holiday, in the context of which he touches on the commemoration of 15 May.¹⁷ This is repeated, but without any reaction to Sirutavičius' research, by Akmenytė-Ruzgienė.¹⁸ Thus far, Ulytė-Grigelevičienė has made the most comprehensive discussion of the introduction of 15 May and its history, analysing the political rhetoric behind National Days and related rituals in interwar Lithuania.¹⁹ Nevertheless, she does not go into greater detail (on aspects apparently not directly related to her topic) as to why 15 May was recommended as a 'substitute' for 16 February. It can be said in essence that the 'cold weather' argument, voiced numerous times almost 100 years ago when trying to establish the 15 May alternative, has satisfied historians until now.²⁰ It appears as if in the 1920s, Lithuania was copying Great Britain in this regard, where ever since the times of George II, the king's/queen's birthday was not celebrated on the actual day, but always in the summer.

This article goes beyond just asking whether the inclement weather argument is actually convincing. It tries to test the hypothesis whether it could be that 16 February and 15 May were indeed viewed as alternatives, with different political groups being behind the promotion of each day, each with their own interests

¹⁶ G. Rudis, 'Dėl tautininkų priemonių prieš Gegužės Pirmosios šventę,' in: *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 1981 (1982), pp. 47–53.

¹⁷ V. Sirutavičius, 'Šventės nacionalizavimas. „Tautos šventės“ atsiradimas Lietuvos Respublikoje XX amžiaus 4-ajame dešimtmetyje', *Nacionalizmas ir emocijos (Lietuva ir Lenkija XIX–XX a.)* (Lietuvių Atgimimo istorijos studijos, 17), eds. V. Sirutavičius, D. Staliūnas (Vilnius, 2001), pp. 135–139.

¹⁸ V. Akmenytė-Ruzgienė, 'Dvasios pakilimo dienos': Lietuvos valstybės švenčių transformacijos 1918–1940 metais', in: *Parlamento studijos*, Vol. 24 (2018), pp. 87–89.

¹⁹ V. Ulytė-Grigelevičienė, 'Lietuvos Valstybės Prezidentų kalbų ir Tautos šventės iškilnių sąveika (1920–1938): poveikio komunikacijos', in: *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, Vol. 24 (2009), pp. 83–84; V. Ulytė-Grigelevičienė, 'Lietuvos Steigiamojo Seimo susirinkimo diena kaip Tautos šventė', Steigiamajam Seimui – 90: pranešimų ir straipsnių rinkinys, eds. S. Kaubrys, A. Vyšniauskas (Vilnius, 2011), pp. 205–207.

²⁰ Cf. D. Staliūnas, 'Žuvusių karių kultas tarpukario Lietuvoje', *Nacionalizmas ir emocijos...*, 122; Ulytė-Grigelevičienė, 'Lietuvos Valstybės', p. 83; Ulytė-Grigelevičienė, 'Lietuvos Steigiamojo Seimo', p. 205.

and perceptions of what was the starting point of the independent Lithuanian state. This hypothesis is prompted by recent studies about the politicisation of national holidays in Poland and Germany at the time. Mieczysław Biskupski has shown that not all Polish political groups had the same understanding of 11 November in the period between the two world wars as Poland's new starting point. The influence of Józef Piłsudski did help to entrench the significance of this particular day, but the Polish right did not grant it much attention, instead preferring to promote other alternatives. As we learn from Biskupski's research, this was in effect a collision between different narratives about the beginnings of modern Poland, its relations with the 'First Republic', and the role of separate actors in creating the new Poland.²¹ In Germany, in the period between 1918 and 1933, the National Day also lacked a unilateral definition. The November revolution (1918) that made the state a republic bore associations with losing the war for most people. The 'Day of Establishment of the Reich' (18 January) was marginalised to informal gatherings of the right, while Constitution Day, which was promoted by the political forces that declared the new republic and who were prepared to defend it, was not accepted by extremist forces and opponents of the republic. There were also disagreements on when the National Day of Mourning should be marked, and what it should relate to.²²

The examples of Poland and Germany show that with the emergence of the post-imperial political order, politically active groups had different views as to how this order was created, and what the contributions of those groups were to its creation. Thus, the question arises, can this statement be applied to Lithuania in the period between the two world wars as well? And if it can, is it not the case that the discussion regarding 16 February or 15 May was actually the 'Lithuanian version' of the same phenomenon that we see in Poland and Germany?

²¹ M.B.B. Biskupski, *Independence Day. Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 1–98. See also: H. Hein, *Der Piłsudski-Kult und seine Bedeutung für den polnischen Staat 1926–1939* (Marburg, 2002), pp. 214–269.

²² Cf. F. Schellack, *Nationalfeiertage in Deutschland von 1871 bis 1945* (Frankfurt a.M. u.a., 1990), pp. 133–276; A. Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern. Eine Geschichte des Volkstrauertags* (Frankfurt a.M., New York, 2010).

1923–1925: debates over Independence Day

The inclement weather argument, which the Christian Democrat Antanas Šmulkštys spoke about in January 1924 in the parliament, was probably first expounded in documents in June 1923. In handwritten comments about the draft Law on Holidays, Kazimieras Prapuolenis, the director of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Department of Religions, left a note to another department in the same ministry. According to Fr Prapuolenis, February in Lithuania was cold, so that 'many children and people in poorer health could not participate in this independence celebration so special to our nation.' In his recommendation to move the holiday to a time when 'the weather is fine in Lithuania, the days are long, all the spring jobs are finished, but haymaking has not yet begun', Fr Prapuolenis failed to propose anything better than moving the celebration to 16 June, a day that bore no special significance. According to him, this day 'would be the most convenient for our national independence celebrations. The old, the young, the large and small in all corners of our great Lithuania would feel the National Day. So many more would gather than on 16 February.'²³ The priest's arguments did have a logical basis: Lithuania was not yet an industrialised country, most of its population were still strongly bound to the agricultural cycle, and, as mentioned, no tradition of national holidays existed yet, so some people might not even have understood the meaning of a non-religious holiday.

The recommendation in favour of 15 May was probably made public for the first time in the Seimas on 22 January 1924 by the Christian Democrats. They suggested introducing 15 May *instead of* 16 February ('The celebration is being moved', proclaimed Šmulkštys, as Fr Prapuolenis had recommended), by simply *erasing* one festival, and not by searching for other forms of commemoration that perhaps might be less dependent on weather conditions.²⁴ This would signal deeper goals than just ensuring public attendance at National Day celebrations.

²³ Ministry of Internal Affairs Department of Religions to the Department of Labour and Social Security, 13 June 1923 [appendix], LCVA, col. 377, inv. 9, file 65, p. 7.

²⁴ *Seimo stenogramos*, II Seimas, 1924, meeting 58, pp. 11–14, 16.

Articles supporting the idea of moving the holiday appeared in the press in early 1924. The Christian Democrat newspaper *Rytas* laconically declared that the 15 May 'moment was much more convenient for various manifestations and parades',²⁵ preparing readers for the impending shift.²⁶ The pages of the Riflemen Union's (Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga) semi-monthly *Trimitas* stated that 'the Constituent Assembly ceremoniously declared Lithuania's independence on 15 May, and this spring day was more suitable for the whole nation's celebration; 16 February would only be celebrated in state and municipality agencies.'²⁷ The military weekly *Karys* announced that the army's fifth anniversary celebration would be moved from November 1923 to 15 May 1924.²⁸

However, the Popular Peasants' Union opposed the Christian Democrats' suggestion at the parliament meeting held on 11 April 1924. Rapolas Skipitis, who spoke on their behalf, categorically dismissed any attempts at questioning 16 February.²⁹ The government, headed by Ernestas Galvanauskas, when the minister of internal affairs was the Popular Peasants' Union member Karolis Žalkauskas, also spoke up for keeping 16 February.³⁰ Thus, during the third debate on the Law on Holidays and Leisure, the Seimas voted on what seemed to be a compromise to the draft, where 15 May was to be considered a public holiday (a non-working day) rather than a national holiday.³¹ The decision 'to keep 15 May, the day the Constituent Assembly gathered, a day when state agencies

²⁵ I-nas, '16 vasario Kaune', in: *Rytas*, 19 February 1924, p. 3.

²⁶ 'Kauno žinios', in: *Rytas*, 19 February 1924, p. 3.

²⁷ Abas, 'Įstatymas apie šventes', in: *Trimitas*, No 171 (1924), p. 10. Also, cf: 'Vasario 16. Nepriklausomybės šventė', in: *Trimitas*, No 175 (1924), p. 4; 'Vasario 16 diena', in: *Trimitas*, No 177 (1924), pp. 2–3, where the newspaper was clearly preparing its readers for the changes to come.

²⁸ *Karys*, 15–21 May 1924, 165.

²⁹ Cf. The position of Rapolas Skipitis, who spoke on behalf of the Popular Peasants' Union: 'If we acknowledge 16 February as Lithuanian independence day, as it has already attained historical meaning, then only one state holiday should suffice in order to celebrate our independence [...] We stand in favour of not including 15 May in the list of official holidays': *Seimo stenogramos*, II Seimas, 1924, meeting 87, p. 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

would be closed' was made official one month later at a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers.³²

When 15 May did come round, however, the Christian Democrat press called the day a National Day and an Independence Celebration, announcing that 'from this year onwards, public celebrations are being postponed from 16 February to 15 May, as a time more convenient for celebrating.' In addition, as was mentioned, the Lithuanian army had already planned to celebrate its fifth anniversary on 15 May 1924 (and did not intend to change its plans). Neither was it overlooked that this was also the fourth anniversary of the parliament.³³ Attempts were made to create the impression that the public was much more supportive of 15 May. 'For some reason, unlike 16 February, the balconies, doors and windows of buildings are decorated with rugs, paintings and plants,' wrote the Christian Democrats' *Rytas*.³⁴ The Labour Federation's weekly *Darbininkas* reinforced this claim:

The day the Constituent Assembly gathered is a very important day in the nation's life and it must be celebrated [...] This year the 16 February celebrations are being moved to 15 May. This is highly applauded. We, the workers in particular, are very pleased about this [...] it should always be celebrated in May.³⁵ Even the Popular Peasants' Union press had to admit that 'Never before has Kaunas had such a special celebration as this year's 15 May.'³⁶

When the government changed in June 1924, it was not long before the status of 15 May was brought up for discussion again. Apparently, the Cabinet of Ministers cannot have been satisfied with the status of a public holiday (a non-working day) alone, which 15 May had received in a resolution confirmed by the previous cabinet. Therefore, it decided to suggest to the Seimas

³² Minutes of the Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 12 May 1924, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 387, p. 125.

³³ *Rytas*, 15 May 1924, p. 1.

³⁴ 'Nepriklausomybės, Kariuomenės ir Seimo švenčių išskilmės', in: *Rytas*, 17 May 1924, 1.

³⁵ K. P-is, 'Gegužės m. 15 diena', in: *Darbininkas*, 18 May 1924, p. 1. Also: P. Mačiulis, 'Gegužės 15 d. Reikšmė Darbininkams', in: *Darbininkas*, 25 May 1924, p. 1.

³⁶ J.K., 'Tautos Šventė Kaune', in: *Lietuvos žinios*, 17 May 1924, p. 2.

‘to erase 15 May’ from the draft law.³⁷ The suggestion was now being presented to the parliament by the Christian Democrat minister of internal affairs Zigmas Starkus at the final reading of the law on 18 November 1924.³⁸ Thus, the Law on Holidays and Leisure that was finally passed on that day announced 16 February as ‘Lithuanian Independence Day’.³⁹

However, the Christian Democrats did not stop there. On the eve of 16 February 1925, the Cabinet of Ministers, under Vytautas Petrulis, decided ‘not to hold any public celebrations’. The events were restricted to prayers in the basilica, visits to the president, a special session of parliament, performances at the State Theatre, and an evening dinner organised by the prime minister.⁴⁰ On the eve of 15 May, the Seimas returned to the matter with an amendment. At the recommendation of a group of members of parliament presented by a member of the Labour Federation, a representative of the Christian Democrat camp, Kazys Šukys, on 5 May 1925, the Seimas passed an amendment to the law to add 15 May to the list of national holidays.⁴¹ The next day, at a government meeting, it was decided to celebrate 15 May ‘as exceptionally as possible’ and to confirm ‘the draft outline’ of a celebration programme.⁴²

The day was not given a special title in the final version of the amended law which the parliament had voted in favour of, but at the time the day was referred to as a National Day (*Tautos šventė*), and was often *de facto* marked with greater ceremony than any 16 February celebrations. It is no wonder that the Christian Democrat press that had rushed to announce the amendment passed by the Seimas was the first to give the day the National

³⁷ Minutes of the Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 24 October 1924, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 387, p. 297.

³⁸ *Seimo stenogramos*, II Seimas, 1924, meeting 135, pp. 5–28, here pp. 23–24, 25.

³⁹ Law on Holidays and Leisure, in: *Vyriausybės Žinios*, 2 February 1925, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 9 February 1925, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 420, p. 38.

⁴¹ *Seimo stenogramos*, II Seimas, 1924, meeting 179, pp. 11–12; Amended Law on Holidays and Leisure, in: *Vyriausybės Žinios*, 9 May 1925, p. 6.

⁴² Minutes of the Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 6 May 1925, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 420, pp. 121, 124.

Day title, even though it also used the more neutral identifier '15 May celebrations'.⁴³

It seems that the outcome was hardly expected by many. Even the military first announced that 'the 15 May celebrations would be postponed to 1 August, the day of the approval of the Lithuanian Constitution. Therefore, the 15 May celebrations will not be held' on the eve of the changes to the law.⁴⁴ But two weeks later, the information was updated: 'On 15 May we celebrate the seventh anniversary of Lithuania's independence, the sixth anniversary of the army, and the fifth anniversary of the Constituent Assembly.'⁴⁵ Thus, the same scenario from 1924 was being repeated, and by not organising any celebrations for 16 February, the parliament was presented with the fact that 15 May required special status if Independence Day were to be celebrated at all in Lithuania, with at least some of the more notable part of the public participating.

The National Day was, of course, not the main paragraph in the Law on Holidays and Leisure that provoked discussions in parliament. From April 1922 to November 1924, while debates were under way in the Seimas, the questions that were most hotly debated in the law related to whether the whole multi-confessional and multi-cultural Lithuanian population had to mark Catholic celebrations, which dominated in the list of public holidays. Some MPs challenged the proposal for everyone to consider Sunday a day of rest, and restrict trading on holidays, whereas others discussed how many public holidays (non-working days) there should be, who should and who should not work on holidays. However, as we have read, some disagreement on which date, 16 February or 15 May, the National Day should be did manifest as well. Let us then try to work out the reasons for these disagreements.

⁴³ Cf. 'Gegužės 15 d. – Tautos Šventė', in: *Rytas*, 6 May 1925, p. 1; 'Ruošiasi prie Tautos Šventės', in: *Rytas*, 9 May 1925, p. 3; 'Gegužės 15 d. Iškilmių Komitetas' and 'Gegužės 15 dienos iškilmių tvarka', in: *Rytas*, 12 May 1925, pp. 2–3. See also: V. Neramuolis, 'Šventės ir darbas', in: *Darbininkas*, 24 May 1925, p. 1.

⁴⁴ 'Gegužės 15 d. šventė', in: *Karys*, 30 April – 6 May 1925, p. 144.

⁴⁵ *Karys*, 14–20 May 1925, p. 153.

What lay behind the 'cold weather' argument?

In their public rhetoric, the Lithuanian politicians who recommended the 15 May alternative used the idea that 16 February was unsuitable as the National Day because it was too cold at that time of year. But this argument is hardly convincing. First, the fact that some religious holidays, such as Christmas, were in winter did not mean that people avoided attending the rituals associated with them, such as Mass. Second, 15 May as a *supplement* to 16 February emerged only later as an explanation; the initial goal was to introduce 15 May *instead of* 16 February. Politicians rarely voice what they are actually thinking, hiding their true intentions so that they appear to be the best course of action or decision. Therefore, it is helpful to look for other explanations as to why the 15 May alternative was needed. Let us examine several possible reasons.

First, could it have been that the representatives from the Christian Democrat bloc who suggested 15 May were actually against 16 February? There are arguments that would allow this assumption. The Constituent Assembly that announced its declaration on 15 May 1920 had been elected by universal suffrage, whereas the members of the Taryba had been chosen in 1917 by 200 members of the Lithuanian Conference, with no national mandate as a foundation for their gathering. Also, even though the former chairman of the Taryba Antanas Smetona (he was a member of the Party of National Progress at that time) developed the narrative about the 'fact of an [already] formed independent state', which the Taryba, the army and other institutions were allowing the Constituent Assembly to develop further in his maiden speech at the Constituent Assembly, the Christian Democrat Aleksandras Stulginskis was significantly more reserved in his comments. Elected chairman of the Constituent Assembly at its first meeting, he only referred in passing to the men that still headed the government or 'held other government offices', but did not directly identify the Taryba or the declarations it had passed, even though he belonged to the Taryba and had signed the 16 February resolution.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Steigiamojo Seimo darbai*, 1920, Vol. 1, session I, meeting 1, pp. 1–5.

Regardless of this, there are arguments that allow this explanation to be dismissed. First, in 1920 the Christian Democrat publications *Laisvė* and *Darbininkas* were still urging their readers to celebrate 16 February without voicing any criticism.⁴⁷ Second, even though in 1924 and 1925 the Christian Democrat newspaper *Rytas* not only called 15 May the National Day, but also referred to it as Independence Day, there was no question that the starting point was indeed 1918. Third, even though aspirations to introduce 15 May *instead of* 16 February did seem to be expressed at first, there was no continuity down this path. The Christian Democrats emphasised the significance of the Constituent Assembly everywhere, but that does not mean they either condemned or denied the meaning of 16 February.

In this context, it is worth asking another question: was any political group in general opposed to 16 February? There is data to suggest that this was the case: first, the Social Democrats, who had consistently criticised the activities of the Taryba both before the elections to the Constituent Assembly and afterwards, once it had been elected. In a declaration dated 23 June 1920, on behalf of the Social Democrat faction, Steponas Kairys compared the Taryba to their other 'enemies', despotic Russia and the predatory Prussian Junkers.⁴⁸ In 1921, the newspaper *Socialdemokratas* wrote that the choice of 16 February as Independence Day and National Day was 'disappointing', because 'the people had not participated, and therefore the announced celebration immediately became a "*kaziona*" (paid for by the government) celebration, encouraged by the militia and jingoists, without any broader resonance among the masses.'⁴⁹ When the Kaunas mayor Jonas Vileišis invited members of the city council to participate in the 16 February celebrations in 1922, Vaclovas Bielskis, a Social Democrat representative on the Kaunas council, exclaimed that workers were refusing to participate in the celebrations because the Taryba, which had passed 'the declaration

⁴⁷ Cf. *Darbininkas*, 15 February, 1920, p. 1; *Laisvė*, 15 February, 1920, p. 1; 16 February 1920, p. 1.

⁴⁸ [S. Kairys], *Steigiamojo Seimo Socialdemokratų Frakcijos Deklaracija: Pareikšta Seimo posėdy Frakcijos vardu ats. St. Kairio birželio 23 d.* (Kaunas [1920]), p. 5.

⁴⁹ 'Dėl šešioliktojo vasario', in: *Socialdemokratas*, 17 February 1921, p. 1.

[...] had not been elected and had no right to do so'. According to him, the day of the announcement of Lithuania's independence should be considered the day this was done by the 'democratically elected Constituent Assembly', that is, 15 May 1920.⁵⁰ No such arguments that in principle counter-positioned 16 February and 15 May could be found in the Christian Democrat camp. But the leftists in Lithuania were not united on this matter. Even though the Popular Socialist Democratic Party also raised doubts about the Taryba,⁵¹ the 16 February celebrations were organised in Lithuania by none other than a committee appointed by the ministerial cabinet under Mykolas Sleževičius of the Popular Socialist Democratic Party. The committee was headed by the government's Press and Propaganda Bureau head Juozas Pajaujis, who was also a member of the Popular Socialists.⁵²

If the counter-positioning of 16 February and 15 May was not a matter of principle, arising from fundamental opposition, let us look at another possible explanation: could that counter-positioning have arisen from situational political competition, or somehow drawn into this clash? There are arguments that would support this approach.

In the coalition ministerial cabinets that functioned throughout the first period of the parliamentary republic, the Lithuanian Popular Socialist Democratic Party (from 1922, the Lithuanian Popular Peasants' Union) worked together with the Lithuanian Christian Democrat Party (which sided with the Lithuanian Labour Federation and the Lithuanian Farmers' Union). The opportunities for the Popular Peasants' Union and the Christian Democrat bloc to work together as a political majority obviously became complicated at the turn of 1921 and 1922.⁵³ In the First Seimas (1922–1923),

⁵⁰ Kaunas City Council meeting protocol, 13 February 1922, LCVA, col. 379, inv. 2, file 567, p. 48ap.

⁵¹ D. Blažytė-Baužienė, 'Valstiečių liaudininkų vaidmuo Steigiamajame Seime (1920–1922 m.) ruošiant demokratinės santvarkos Lietuvą pagrindus', in: *Parlamento studijos*, Vol. 21 (2016), p. 65.

⁵² Cf. Documents from January–February 1919 of the Commission for the organisation of the national holiday, LCVA, col. 377, inv. 9, file 90.

⁵³ Cf. D. Stakeliūnaitė, 'Valstiečiai liaudininkai Steigiamajame Seime (1920 06 19–1922 02 02): tarp koalicijos ir opozicijos', in: *Politikos mokslų almanachas*, Vol. 7 (2010), pp. 35–62.

this opportunity was supported only 'out of necessity': no political power had an absolute majority in the parliament. However, by the Second Seimas (1923–1926), the Christian Democrat bloc held 40 out of 78 seats. That is why the Popular Peasants' Union crossed over to the opposition to the Christian Democrat bloc in the Second Seimas (the coalition was formally abandoned in June 1924, once the government of Ernestas Galvanauskas resigned). In debates held between 1923 and 1925 over the Independence Day celebration, the clearest clash in positions was between none other than the representatives of the Popular Peasants' Union and the Christian Democrat bloc. Therefore, this clash should be viewed in the broader context of a clash between these two opposing political streams.⁵⁴ In this setting, what was to become the National Day verged on being treated as a 'party holiday'.

This story goes back to the fact that the first national celebrations in Lithuania were introduced by the Popular Socialist Democratic Party (the future Popular Peasants' Union). Mykolas Sleževičius' government not only organised the first celebrations to mark 16 February in 1919, but also called it 'the National Day' (*Tautos šventė*) already then,⁵⁵ clearly giving it the meaning of a civilian, non-Church holiday, counterbalancing religious holidays. The same government announced 1 May as a public (non-religious) holiday in Lithuania in 1919.⁵⁶ This distinction between public (state) and religious holidays is obvious in the List of Official State Agency Public Holidays, confirmed on 8 September 1920 by the ministerial cabinet under Kazys Grinius, also a Popular Socialist Democrat, where both 16 February and 1 May had the status of state holiday.⁵⁷ The draft Law on Holidays was written according

⁵⁴ Cf. D. Stakeliūnaitė, 'Galimybės mažinti valstiečių liaudininkų ir Katalikų Bažnyčios priešpriešą Lietuvoje 1918–1926 m.', in: *Soter*, Vol. 50, No 78 (2014), pp. 49–64.

⁵⁵ Cf. Documents from January–February 1919 of the Commission for the organisation of the National Day, LCVA, col. 377, inv. 9, file 90.

⁵⁶ Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers, 30 April 1919, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 68, p. 58; *Vyriausybės žinios*, 8 May 1919, appendix.

⁵⁷ List of holidays (*sine datum*), LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 83, p. 56; 'Iš Ministerių kabineto', in: *Lietuva*, 11 September 1920, p. 1; prime minister to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 September 1920, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 3, file 28, p. 132.

to this very list, prepared by Grinius' government (1920–1922), whereupon it reached the parliament. It was first discussed by the Constituent Assembly on 16 May 1922, but then it only progressed to a first reading.⁵⁸

After the election of a new parliament, the Christian Democrats started to alter the content of the law initially drafted by the Popular Peasants' Union. When the director of the Department of Labour and Social Security in the Ministry of Internal Affairs returned the Constituent Assembly's draft Law on Holidays to the government on 13 January 1923, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Christian Democrat Kazimieras Oleka, asked for the opinion of the Department of Religions on 7 March 1923.⁵⁹ In this way, the recommendations of Fr Prapuolenis entered the story, while he had also in turn first consulted with the Bishop of Žemaitija, Pranciškus Karevičius.⁶⁰

Discussions over the introduction of 15 May instead of 16 February entered the context where the Christian Democrats opposed both 16 February and 1 May (as the latter was considered important only to workers, and therefore not to be viewed as a state holiday).⁶¹ The Law on Holidays and Leisure that was finally passed in November 1924 no longer made any distinction between the Church and the state; all public holidays were identified as 'holidays', and all 'holidays', except for one, were religious.⁶² In this context, it appears that 16 February was meant to be erased because it had been the National Day initiated by the Popular Socialists, and not the Christian Democrats; it was meant to be replaced by 15 May. It is difficult to overestimate the importance

⁵⁸ *Steigiamojo Seimo darbai*, 1922, Vol. 1, session I, meeting 205, pp. 83–84.

⁵⁹ Director of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Department of Labour and Social Security to the prime minister, 13 January 1923 (incl. resolution dated 7 March 1923), LCVA, col. 377, inv. 9, file 65, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Internal Affairs Department of Religions to the Bishop of Žemaitija, 7 March 1923, *ibid.*, p. 2; Curia of the Bishop of Žemaitija to the Ministry of Internal Affairs Department of Religions, 9 March 1923, *Ibid.*, p. 5–5ap.

⁶¹ Cf. the comment by the Christian Democrat parliamentary representative Adomas Vilimas during discussions in December 1923: *Seimo stenogramos*, II Seimas, 1924, meeting 50, p. 26.

⁶² 1 May became a public holiday (non-working day). It appears this was the Christian Democrats' tribute to their partners, the Labour Federation.

of this day among Christian Democrats. Even though the Christian Democrats stood out among the rightists who dominated in the Taryba,⁶³ their real hold on power in Lithuania began in 1920 with the election of the Constituent Assembly, as the bloc, led by the Christian Democrats, had over half the total seats in the parliament.

In other words, a possible explanation is that 16 February became the National Day of the Popular Socialists, and 15 May became the National Day for the Christian Democrats, not because these political forces in effect did not recognise their 'opponents' holidays'; after all, it was the Popular Socialists that were likely to have initiated⁶⁴ the declaration of 15 May 1920. The fundamental reason could have been that they were inclined to get the the question of holidays involved in broader political competition.

Let us test the third possible explanation: could it have been that different experiences could have influenced the opposition of 16 February and 15 May? Strong arguments do exist to support the statement. The Taryba and the Constituent Assembly basically lacked any aspects of continuity in terms of personal composition. Of the 150 people who had been members of the Constituent Assembly, only six, Kazimieras Bizauskas, Steponas Kairys, Justinas Staugaitis, Aleksandras Stulginskis, Kazimieras Steponas Šaulys and Jonas Vailokaitis, had been signatories to the 16 February 1918 resolution. Of the 51 people who had participated at any time in the activities of the Taryba, only 12 were members of the Constituent Assembly. The former leaders of the Taryba, Antanas Smetona and Stasys Šilingas, were not even elected into the Constituent Assembly. This fact is perhaps not so significant in itself; however, different experiences of the members of the Constituent Assembly and the Taryba in the Great War should be considered as well. Of the 150 people who had been members of the Constituent Assembly, at least 80, that is, more than half, spent the war outside the territory of the future

⁶³ Cf. Litovskaia gosudarstvennaia tariba (late 1919), LCVA, col. 1014, inv. 1, file 20, p. 2–2ap.

⁶⁴ Blažytė-Baužienė, 'Valstiečių liaudininkų vaidmuo', p. 65.

Lithuania.⁶⁵ Of them, at least 24 served in the Russian army, and at least 17 were involved with refugees and organised war relief to the people who had suffered during the war in the depths of Russia, and those experiences must have played a part in forming the awareness of their contribution to Lithuanian national affairs to some members of the Constituent Assembly. Most of them had no reason for feeling they had somehow contributed to the 16 February 1918 resolution. This is evident from the speech made by Gabrielė Petkevičaitė at the opening session of the parliament. Having received the right to chair the meeting as the oldest representative elected to the Constituent Assembly, Petkevičaitė in no way echoed the dithyrambs of the previous speaker Smetona directed at the Taryba. Her speech made no mention of either the Taryba or the fact that it had declared Lithuania's independence, but concentrated mostly on describing the nation's struggle for freedom.⁶⁶

The different experiences that could have had an influence on assessments existed not only among members of the Taryba and the Constituent Assembly. The experiences of members of the Taryba and later parliaments, the First, Second and Third, also differed.⁶⁷ The Lithuanian members of Seimas who served these terms in office were also elected via secret universal suffrage, and had the nation's mandate of trust, which the Taryba did not have. The First to the Third parliaments also had very few former members of the Taryba in their ranks: six in the First Seimas, six in the Second and five in the Third; they comprised 5 to 7 per cent of all the members of parliament. Also, the different experiences of the Great War among members of the First to the Third Seimas and Taryba members only grew more evident: on average, at least 62 per cent, that is, almost two thirds of these MPs, spent the war

⁶⁵ Calculated by the author of this article, according to data in: *Lietuvos Steigiamojo Seimo (1920–1922 metų) narių biografinis žodynas*, eds. A. Ragauskas, M. Tamošaitis (Vilnius, 2006).

⁶⁶ *Steigiamojo Seimo darbai*, 1920, Vol. 1, session I, meeting 1, pp. 2–3.

⁶⁷ Calculated by the author of this article, according to data in: *Lietuvos Respublikos Seimų I (1922–1923), II (1923–1926), III (1926–1927), IV (1936–1940) narių biografinis žodynas*, eds. A. Ragauskas, M. Tamošaitis (Vilnius, 2007).

outside Lithuania. If in the Taryba there had been 35 per cent of such members, then in the Constituent Assembly they made up 53 to 63 per cent of the First Seimas, 58 per cent of the Second Seimas, and 66 per cent of the Third Seimas (all these calculations reflect the lowest percentage, since there is a lack of biographical information about 10 to 25 per cent of members).

Thus, at the time when members of the Taryba were the first to start promoting 16 February and its importance in 1918 and 1919, most of those in Lithuanian parliamentary life between 1920 and 1926 had very little to do with it. At the very least, this is proof that they could not have viewed 16 February as something unquestionable or unchangeable. And the opposite, as in the Second Seimas that backed 15 May, of the 96 members who had once been members, 38 (40 per cent) had also been members of the Constituent Assembly just a few years previously, this experience appears to have been a very important part of their lives, and was worthy of 'memorialisation'.

15 May after the 1926 coup

In the 1925 amendments to the law, the Christian Democrat bloc managed to get 15 May confirmed as a public holiday in Lithuania, in addition to 16 February, and not as a replacement. Even though the elections held in May 1926 resulted in the leftists winning a majority in the parliament, the Popular Peasants' Union did not undo what the Christian Democrats had established in the list of annual holidays.⁶⁸ However, the coup on 17 December 1926 created an unexpected challenge. Although the Christian Democrats had returned to power along with the Nationalists (the Lithuanian Nationalist Union), by May 1927 they were already stepping down from the government. The parliament was dissolved in April 1927, while Prime Minister Augustinas Volde-
maras, known in Europe as 'Lithuania's dictator', promised new

⁶⁸ For an overview of 15 May events in Kaunas in 1926, see: B. Ivanovas, 'Lietuvių Tautos šventė Kaune 1926 m. gegužės 15 d. ir jos atgarsiai to meto spaudoje', in: *Kauno istorijos metraštis*, Vol. 9 (2008), pp. 219–225.

parliamentary elections in the spring, but did not specify which particular spring he had in mind.⁶⁹

Changes to the Law on Holidays and Leisure after the 1926 coup have already attracted the attention of historians. Rudis has shown how, as Lithuania's governance gradually edged closer to authoritarianism, the new regime ultimately dismissed 1 May.⁷⁰ Sirutavičius analysed the 'invention' of a new holiday, 8 September, but he did not associate this change with the 'expulsion' of 15 May from the list of annual holidays.⁷¹ Ulytė-Grigelevičienė noted that 15 May became undesirable after the 1926 coup, when 'for its democratic traditions, the significance of this day was deemed unacceptable to the authoritarian government.'⁷² In a previous article, I (and later again Akmenytė-Ruzgienė) stated that 8 September, marked for the first time in 1930 as the National Day, essentially replaced 15 May. It was the ever more powerful authoritarian regime's attempt to adapt the list of annual holidays to the new political reality.⁷³ However, the fate of 15 May has never before been discussed in the context of the earlier debates that I discussed in this article. That is why historians have not yet noticed another phenomenon: how did the 'subversion' of 15 May contribute to the 'liberation' of 16 February?

Even though 15 May celebrations were organised in 1927, the official government newspaper *Lietuva* and the Christian Democrats' *Rytas* were already giving different appraisals of the meaning of the 1920 declaration. Where the Christian Democrats were hoping that what was happening in the country 'would not affect

⁶⁹ The former Christian Democrat chairman Mykolas Krupavičius later recalled: 'Voldemaras promised to call a parliament together in the spring. But when the time arrived to announce parliamentary elections in accordance with the Constitution, when asked why he was not keeping his word, he replied vaguely, in true Voldemaresque fashion: "You're right, I did intend to call [elections] in the spring, but I did not say which spring"' (M. Krupavičius, '1926 metų gruodžio 17-toji. Liūdna 30 metų sukaktis, 28 tęsinys', in: *Draugas*, 29 December 1956, p. 3).

⁷⁰ Rudis, 'Dėl tautininkų priemonių'.

⁷¹ Sirutavičius (2001) did not even notice that 15 May had the status of a holiday according to the 1925 amendment to the law.

⁷² Ulytė-Grigelevičienė, 'Lietuvos Steigiamojo Seimo', p. 214.

⁷³ V. Safronovas, 'O tendentsiakh politiki vospominaniia v sovremennoi Litve', in: *Ab Imperio*, No 3 (2009), pp. 431–432; Akmenytė-Ruzgienė, '„Dvasios pakilimo dienos“', p. 83.

the origins of this precious document', the government gazette did not promote 15 May in its comparison with 16 February. It alleged that the Constituent Assembly only confirmed what had already been enacted by the Taryba; the will of the nation had already become 'an existing fact', even before the gathering of the Constituent Assembly, and in general, party bickering only served to destabilise the state, which is why elections were 'an unnecessary waste of time'.⁷⁴ The 15 May ceremony in 1927 was still characterised by the usual attributes, including a parade. However, a parade had already been held on 16 February 1927 as well, even though the celebration of the day for several years before the coup had been significantly more modest compared to 15 May.

When it was decided to celebrate the first decade of independence in Lithuania, the government and a committee specially formed to organise the events headed by Lieutenant General Vladas Nagevičius suggested that celebrations in 1928 should take place on 16 February and 15 May, but that the function of each day should differ. The committee announced that

16 February should be a day of civil reflection and peaceful joy. It should be marked with an appropriate degree of decorum and contemplation. [...] It would be very good if bookshops, reading rooms, schools and other cultural institutions could be established to mark this anniversary. However, 15 May is set aside for parades, processions and other festivities and entertainment.⁷⁵

The celebration of the decade of independence actually took place on two days, as before. Quite a few monuments were unveiled on the occasion everywhere in Lithuania. The Freedom Statue by Juozas Zikaras in Kaunas was unveiled as part of the 15 May ceremonies, rather than on 16 February.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the selection of the starting point of independence for the tenth anniversary celebrations was not a testimony to the Constituent Assembly's importance, but the prioritisation of commemorating the deeds of

⁷⁴ Cf. 'Gegužės 15 d.', in: *Rytas*, 14 May 1927, p. 1; K.M., 'Septyneriems metams praslinkus', in: *Rytas*, 14 May 1927, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Proclamation entitled 'Let's celebrate the National Day', 1928, *Lietuvos nacionalinė Martyno Mažvydo biblioteka* (henceforth – MMNB RS), col. 123-667; published in: *Kardas*, 30 January 1928, p. 34.

⁷⁶ 'Tautos šventės iškilmės', in: *Rytas*, 16 May 1928, p. 2.

the Taryba. In a publication of special historical lectures brought out by the committee for the tenth anniversary of independence, the Constituent Assembly was only mentioned as a fact, while the importance of the Taryba was absolute. This 'handful of enlightened men who stayed in Lithuania' during the Great War were portrayed as the only defenders of Lithuania and the Lithuanian nation, and as saviours from the 'terrible deeds of the Germans' and 'eventual destruction'. The Taryba was basically given the role of ardent fighters against the Germans.⁷⁷ Understandably, the increased attention to 16 February was also a way of showcasing Antanas Smetona, who had become president after the 1926 coup: it was he who headed the Taryba in 1917 and 1918. In turn, the correlation of 15 May with the Constituent Assembly continued to annoy the ruling powers. 'We [...] think that remembering the Constituent Assembly on our national holiday would only mean recalling all those little parties that wrought so much damage to Lithuania during their rule.' This announcement on the occasion of the 1928 national day celebrations in the official *Lietuvos aidas* newspaper already forecast its marginalising tendencies.⁷⁸ The last 15 May celebrations as an official government-sanctioned ceremony were held in 1928, making it possible to associate the celebration on that day with the concepts of freedom, independence and a National Day.

The next year, ignoring the list of annual holidays laid down by law, the government decided to experiment. No official ceremonies were held on 16 February. On 17 January, the government had decided that the 16 February celebrations would be postponed 'until the spring'. The reasoning for this was just as odd as the 'cold weather' argument: the 16 February celebration was not possible because in 1929 the day coincided with the first week of Lent.⁷⁹ It is very likely that this decision by the government made

⁷⁷ P. Ruseckas, 'Nuo spaudos atgavimo ligi nepriklausomybės paskelbimo', in: *Ir eikim Lietuvos keliu... Trumpos paskaitos iš Lietuvos istorijos* (Kaunas, 1928), pp. 51–53.

⁷⁸ 'Tautos šventė – ne partijų šventė', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 14 May 1928, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Minutes of the Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 17 January 1929, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 595, p. 4. On the public's attitudes towards the fact that 16 February coincided with Lent a number of times, cf. Ž. Šaknys, 'Valstybės (Tautos) švenčių formavimo ypatumai 1918–1940 m. Lietuvoje', in: *Lietuvos etnologija*, Vol. 18 (2018), p. 145.

sense in the context of the increasing tensions between Prime Minister Voldemaras and President Smetona:⁸⁰ Voldemaras, who had nothing to do with the 1918 resolution, as if tried to avoid giving President Smetona any additional excuses to take centre stage. On 25 April, Prime Minister Voldemaras publicly declared that it had been decided to identify the National Day with the religious Feast of the Assumption (15 August),⁸¹ even though the government only passed an official resolution on the matter on 13 May.⁸² The official gazette *Lietuvos aidas* later justified this shift on account of 16 February being too cold, and 15 May not being associated with any religious feast; whereas 15 August was an opportunity to combine the National Day with a religious holiday.⁸³ Understandably, this holiday 'reshuffle' did cause some confusion. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked for a resolution on whether 16 February would be celebrated in 1930, because Lithuanians abroad had to be informed in advance.⁸⁴ Finally, on 14 May 1930, on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Constituent Assembly's first session, the president and the government went ahead, and promulgated the new Law on Holidays and Leisure. Even though it had already been over seven months since Voldemaras had been ousted from the government, according to this law, 15 May lost any form of status it had altogether, while the new National Day, along with 16 February, was 8 September.⁸⁵

These experiments in 1929 and 1930 were part of a broader process that began in the spring of 1927, when the Ministry of Internal Affairs started discussing amendments to the Law on Holidays and Leisure.⁸⁶ The ministry presented to the government

⁸⁰ Cf. L. Truska, *Antanas Smetona ir jo laikai* (Vilnius, 1996), pp. 187–195; A. Eidintas, *Antanas Smetona ir jo aplinka* (Vilnius, 2012), pp. 224–237.

⁸¹ 'Ką prof. Voldemaras pasakė spaudai', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 25 April 1929, p. 1.

⁸² Minutes of the Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 13 May 1929, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 595, p. 63.

⁸³ 'Tautos šventė', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 14 August 1929, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Minister of foreign affairs to the Cabinet of Ministers, 30 December 1929, LCVA, col. 923, inv. 1, file 618, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Švenčių ir poilsio įstatymai, in: *Vyriausybės žinios*, 14 May 1930, pp. 2–3.

⁸⁶ Chief labour inspector to the minister of internal affairs, 9 April 1927, LCVA, col. 928, inv. 1, file 844, pp. 129–132.

in the autumn of 1928 a first draft that no longer included 15 May (incidentally, 1 May was still included).⁸⁷ Even if the reasons for eliminating this holiday were not explicitly mentioned, it was clearly a political move that Prime Minister Voldemaras ultimately implemented with the army's assistance. As he was also the minister of defence, in March 1929, Voldemaras issued a ministerial decree in which the Ministry of Internal Affairs was informed that 'the 1 and 15 May holidays are being erased.'⁸⁸ In another decree that Voldemaras signed as minister of defence and addressed to the whole government, which he headed at the time, 16 February, 1 May, and especially 15 May were all condemned.⁸⁹

The draft documents regarding the amendment to the Law on Holidays and Leisure show that soon after Voldemaras had been dismissed, a 'gentler' decision had been conceived in the Ministry of Internal Affairs that took into account the National Holiday ceremonies of the 1920s. Even though 15 May was to be eliminated, and 16 February was to remain, the recommendation was to organise 'a ceremonial procession for the Lithuanian independence celebrations on the last Sunday in May'.⁹⁰ However, it appears that this recommendation was never made public, and did not feature in the final version of the law. Having survived the 'battle of the holidays', 16 February was supplemented by 8 September,

⁸⁷ Minister of internal affairs to the prime minister, 25 October 1928, *ibid.*, col. 928, inv. 1, file 844, pp. 57–63.

⁸⁸ The Lithuanian General Staff of the Ministry of Defence to the director of the Citizens Defence Department, 20 March 1929, *ibid.*, col. 923, inv. 1, file 844, p. 26.

⁸⁹ The note to the government signed by Voldemaras and the head of the Administrative Board of the Lithuanian General Staff, Lt.-Col. Jonas Mačiulaitis, states that 16 February was unsuitable because of the cold inclement weather; 15 May was not suitable because 'the timing is inconvenient, especially regarding army training and recruitment. Some of the newcomers who arrive in early May need to be hurriedly prepared for the parade, thus disrupting the normal new recruits training programme. In order for the army to be better represented in front of the public, the older soldiers need to be kept on for an extra three weeks just for the parade, which has a detrimental impact on the budget of the Ministry of Defence.' 1 May was not suitable for the army because 'on this day, if it is not a Sunday, the army could be doing exercises.' Ministry of Defence to the Cabinet of Ministers, 11 April 1929, *ibid.*, col. 928, inv. 1, file 844, p. 22.

⁹⁰ Draft of changes to the Law on Holidays and Leisure (this document is undated, but is found among documents from 1930), LCVA, col. 377, inv. 7, file 73, p. 351.

a mainly spontaneous, new National Day, mentioned only as a Church holiday marking the Nativity of Mary up to 1930, and, in the context of the 500th anniversary of the death of Grand Duke Vytautas, taking on the meaning of his coronation date (which never happened).

Both holidays confirmed in the new law created symbolic capital for Antanas Smetona only: 16 February was important because it stressed the role of the Taryba, and Smetona as its leader, in creating the modern Lithuanian state;⁹¹ and 8 September was important because the cult of Vytautas, as previous research has shown,⁹² was closely associated with the cult of Smetona himself as the 'Leader of the Nation'.

The hope must have been that by eliminating 15 May, the public gathering to mark the 500th anniversary of the death of Vytautas the Great⁹³ would forget the former celebration. Nonetheless, the Popular Peasants' Union and the Christian Democrats were united in the spring of 1930 in urging society to mark the tenth anniversary of the Constituent Assembly.⁹⁴ The idea was born to organise a special commemoration of the event in the State Theatre (permission was not given). The Christian Democrats' daily *Rytas* and the Popular Peasant Union's *Lietuvos žinios* devoted a great deal of attention to the anniversary. And at the University of Lithuania, student societies organised a special meeting for the occasion,

⁹¹ Cf. V. Safronovas, 'Who fought for national freedom? On the significance of the Great War in interwar Lithuania', in: *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, Vol. 42 (2018), pp. 189–215; V. Safronovas, V. Jokubauskas, V. Vareikis, H. Vitkus, *Didysis karas visuomenėje ir kultūroje: Lietuva ir Rytų Prūsija* (Klaipėda, 2018), pp. 354–358, 370–373.

⁹² D. Mačiulis, 'Vytauto Didžiojo metų (1930) kampanijos prasmė', in: *Lituanistica*, Vol. 46, No 2 (2001), pp. 54–75, esp. 68–71. L. Eriksonas also mentions this in: *National Heroes and National Identities: Scotland, Norway and Lithuania* (Brussels, 2004), pp. 286–291, as does R. Čepaitienė, *Laikas ir akmenys. Kultūros paveldo sampratos moderniojoje Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 2005), pp. 96–97.

⁹³ For more on this campaign, cf. Mačiulis, 'Vytauto Didžiojo metų (1930) kampanijos prasmė'; D. Mačiulis, 'Apie dvi propagandines kampanijas XX a. tarpukario Lietuvoje', in: *Inter-studia humanitatis*, Vol. 9 (2009), pp. 119–139, esp. 127–135; G. Viiliūnas, 'Vytauto Didžiojo kultas tarpukario Lietuvoje', *Nacionalizmas ir emocijos...*, pp. 68–102.

⁹⁴ 'Steigiamojo Seimo sukaktuvės', in: *Lietuvos žinios*, 2 May 1930, p. 1; *Rytas*, 3 May 1930, p. 8; 5 May 1930, p. 1, etc.

attended predominantly by leftist representatives.⁹⁵ At the same time, in an interview printed in *Lietuvos žinios*, Voldemaras said that the Constituent Assembly had submitted to party interests too much, and had not been able to maintain its authority in the public's view,⁹⁶ while the official Lithuanian newspaper criticised initiatives to remember the Constituent Assembly, based on arguments repeated for several years that the parliament had not expressed the will of the nation, but the will of separate parties. The independence it had declared was 'what already existed, what everyone already knew and saw', and, generally speaking, not everyone who voted for the Constituent Assembly understood what they were doing. 'We have a National Day: 16 February. It has already rooted as a day important to the nation, with its own acquired traditions. It is enough to have a single National Day.' So wrote the official *Lietuvos aidas* newspaper.⁹⁷

By promoting the importance of 16 February in this way, all the arguments once voiced in favour of the Constituent Assembly and its meaning lost their relevance among the Nationalists. They did not remember that the people who took up arms to fight for Lithuania's independence were being urged to fight for a vision, the Constituent Assembly, not the idea announced by the Taryba.⁹⁸ There was a specific economic motivation for this fight: when in 1919 the government promised to prioritise the granting of land to volunteer soldiers who were landless or small

⁹⁵ Cf. *Lietuvos žinios*, 15 May 1930; 16 May 1930; *Rytas*, 15 May 1930; 16 May 1930; Alžs. Dd., 'Steig. seimo pagarbinimas Liet. Universitete', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 16 May 1930, p. 2.

⁹⁶ J. Kardelis, '„Niekas nežino tiek konstitucijos laužymo faktų, kiek aš“ – sako prof. A. Voldemaras', in: *Lietuvos žinios*, 14 May 1930, p. 1.

⁹⁷ 'Dėl steigiamojo seimo sukaktuvių', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 3 May 1930, p. 1–2.

⁹⁸ In the first proclamation to volunteers to defend their fatherland, it was clearly stated that 'a free tomorrow' is only dawning, but had not yet been achieved (*Vyriausybės žinios*, 29 December 1918, pp. 2–3). In the proclamation dated 12 July 1919 made by the government under Sleževičius, where citizens were also urged to join 'the ranks of builders and defenders of Lithuania', it was stated even more clearly: 'The Constituent Assembly law is already being prepared and soon the hour may come when Lithuania's society will be able to have the final word on matters of state structure. The government knows how earnestly the Lithuanian public is awaiting the Constituent Assembly, and it will go to every effort to see it called as soon as possible' (Proclamation entitled 'Citizens of Lithuania!', 12 July 1919, in: *Kauno apskrities viešoji biblioteka, Senų ir retų spaudinių skyrius* (henceforth – KAVB SRSP, 32623).

landowners, it said that the final conditions allowing them to become owners of land would be determined by the Constituent Assembly.⁹⁹ Other political groups did not hesitate to remind members of political community of this. After the coup, at the tenth anniversary of 16 February, the Kaunas mayor, the Popular Peasants' Union member Jonas Vileišis, publicly declared that

the aim of fighters for independence was to create the right conditions for Lithuania's master, the Seimas [...] this is also noted in the act of the declaration of independence. If today there is no Seimas, that means it will need to be reinstated, because there's no other way.¹⁰⁰

However, there was no room for the Constituent Assembly in the narrative that formed after the 1926 coup about who fought for Lithuania's freedom, or when.¹⁰¹ This was confirmed in the explanation appearing in *Lietuvos aidas* in 1929 about the Constituent Assembly's declaration of 15 May 1920:

We would not dare to state that this confirmation of the act of 16 February 1918 as the most important evidence to the world about Lithuania's independence was not an idea promoted by a handful of the intelligentsia, but expressed the will of the whole nation. The nation, showing such heroic determination in the struggle for freedom, in our understanding, showed this much more convincingly.¹⁰²

Thus, there was a tendency to contrast the argument of the nation's democratic will with the argument about violence and the nation-state that emerged from the war.

Conclusions

Previous research has not drawn attention to the fact that in the 1920s, 16 February and 15 May competed against each other in Lithuania for Independence Day status. This competition depended a great deal on the changing political climate. The 15 May National Day, which had at first divided the Popular Peasants' Union and the

⁹⁹ Įstatymas kariškiams žeme aprūpinti, 20 June 1919, in: *Vyriausybės žinios*, 1 July 1919, pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁰ 'Šventės pamokos', in: *Rytas*, 18 February 1928, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ For more on this narrative, see: Safronovas, 'Who fought for national freedom?', esp. pp. 196–202.

¹⁰² 'Po 9 metų', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 15 May 1929, p. 1.

Christian Democrats, the two main political forces in Lithuania's parliamentary period, ended up bringing them closer together in the changed situation after the 1926 coup. The two political forces that argued most over the National Day between 1923 and 1925 had now joined up to try to show parliamentary democracy as a value on the basis of this celebration. Enjoying a type of 'coexistence' for some years, after the 1926 coup, both celebrations experienced the new government's attempts at transforming the annual holiday cycle. After these attempts, the only survivor was 16 February, whose growth in significance was also partly determined by the fact that 15 May was eliminated altogether.

Having been downgraded in 1923 and 1924 by the Christian Democrats, and in 1929 by Augustinas Voldemaras, 16 February ultimately remained because most of Lithuania's political forces could identify with the day. Even though they had tried to introduce 15 May instead of 16 February, the Christian Democrats did not reduce or deny the latter's significance. They had no valid reason to play out a strict rejection of 16 February. Thus, the celebration was acceptable to both the forces that dominated in the parliamentary period, and those that became better established in government after the 1926 coup. Meanwhile, 15 May was not noted for this kind of consolidatory potential: firstly, because the Christian Democrat bloc had invented it as 'their celebration' in 1924 and 1925; and secondly, because the forces that came into government after the coup could not identify with it. Even though the 1928 Constitution, which increased the authoritarian regime's powers, was also signed on 15 May, thereby leaving the chance to convert the celebration's meaning in the future, 15 May was characterised by associations with the parliament that were too obvious, the parliament being an institution that existed only 'on paper' in Lithuania from 1927. It was not acceptable to the burgeoning authoritarian regime to celebrate Lithuania's independence on 15 May, the day the democratically elected parliament convened. Moreover, the Constituent Assembly did not have a single member of the Party of National Progress (predecessor of the Lithuanian Nationalist Union before 1924), whereas on 16 February 1918 the Lietuvos Taryba was headed by the same person (and therefore

the main hero in the history of the 16 February resolution) who led Lithuania after the coup, Antanas Smetona.

If we return to the question raised at the beginning of this article, of whether Lithuania was similar to Poland or Germany in the interwar period in this regard, it can be said that some similarities certainly did exist. A national holiday in Lithuania, as in Poland and in Germany, was a new phenomenon after the Great War, which explains why the organisation of such celebrations did present certain obstacles. In Lithuania, leftist and rightist forces also did not agree over the starting point of the state, or which particular celebration should consolidate the nation. During the period of parliamentary democracy in Lithuania, these disagreements were not matters of principle. It is more likely that they were drawn into the situational political competition of the day, where politicians, on the left and the right, were inclined to deem as most important the events that best reflected their own roles and which created additional symbolic capital. That is why the role of personal or group experiences of political actors in the changes to the list of annual universal holidays was very great. Historical events that specific political actors could associate with increased their motivation to highlight these events in particular. In cases where one side experienced a shortage or a lack of associations, while their political opponents could boast of having them, this would serve as grounds for reviewing what was important to the nation, and which event should be marked in Lithuania as the National Day.

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VARŽYTUVĖS DĖL LIETUVOS NEPRIKLAUSOMYBĖS ATSKAITOS TAŠKO:
AR GEGUŽĖS 15-OJI LAIKYTINA ALTERNATYVA VASARIO 16-AJAI?

Santrauka

VASILIJUS SAFRONOVAS

Tyrinėtojai iki šiol nekreipė dėmesio į tai, kad XX a. trečiajame dešimtmetyje Vasario 16-oji ir Gegužės 15-oji Lietuvoje konkuravo dėl Nepriklausomybės šventės statuso. Ši konkurencija labai priklausė nuo besikeičiančios politinės konjunktūros. Gegužės 15-oji, iš pradžių skyrusi liaudininkus ir krikdumus – dvi pagrindines parlamentinio laikotarpio Lietuvos politines jėgas, – po 1926 m. perversmo pasikeitusioje situacijoje galiausiai jas suvienijo. Dvi politinės jėgos, kurios labiausiai ginčijosi dėl Tautos šventės 1923–1925 m., dabar susitelkė bandydamos šios šventės pagrindu parodyti parlamentinę demokratiją kaip vertybę. Kurį laiką „sugyvenusios“, po 1926 m. perversmo abi šventės patyrė naujosios valdžios bandymus transformuoti kasmetinių švenčių ciklą. Po šių bandymų išliko tik Vasario 16-oji, kurios reikšmės išaugimą iš dalies ir lėmė tai, kad Gegužės 15-osios nebeliko.

Vasario 16-oji, prieš kurią 1923–1924 m. buvo užsimoję krikščionys demokratai, o 1929 m. – Augustinas Voldemaras, galiausiai išliko todėl, kad su ja save galėjo sieti dauguma Lietuvos politinių jėgų. Krikščionys demokratai, nors ir bandė įtvirtinti Gegužės 15-ąją vietoje Vasario 16-osios, pastarosios reikšmės nemenkino ir neneigė. Griežčiau atsiriboti nuo Vasario 16-osios jie neturėjo priežasčių. Tad ši šventė buvo priimtina tiek toms jėgoms, kurios dominavo parlamentiniu laikotarpiu, tiek ir toms, kurios įsitvirtino valdžioje po 1926 m. perversmo. Gegužės 15-oji tokiu konsoliduojančiu potencialu nepasizymėjo: pirmiausia todėl, kad krikščionių demokratų blokas 1924–1925 m. ją įtvirtino kaip „savo šventę“, antra, todėl, kad su ja negalėjo tapatintis jėgos, atėjusios į valdžią po perversmo. Nors autoritarinio režimo galias išplėtusi 1928 m. Konstitucija taip pat buvo pasirašyta gegužės 15 d., šitaip paliekant galimybę konvertuoti šventės reikšmę, Gegužės 15-oji turėjo pernelyg akivaizdžias sąsajas su parlamentu – institucija, kuri nuo 1927 m. Lietuvoje egzistavo tik „popieriuje“. Įsitvirtinančiam autoritariniam režimui nebuvo priimtina Lietuvos nepriklausomybės šventę švęsti demokratiniu būdu išrinkto Seimo sušaukimo dieną – Gegužės 15-ąją. Maža to, Steigiamajame Seime nebuvo nė vieno pažangiečio (tautininko), o 1918 m. vasario 16 d. Lietuvos Tarybai vadovavo (taigi buvo pagrindinis herojus Vasario 16-osios priėmimo istorijoje) tas pats asmuo, kuris vadovavo Lietuvai po perversmo, – Antanas Smetona.

Į straipsnio įvadę iškeltą klausimą, ar Lietuva tarpukariu šiuo aspektu buvo panaši į Lenkiją ir Vokietiją, galima atsakyti, kad tam tikrų panašumų būta. Nacionalinė šventė Lietuvoje, kaip ir Lenkijoje ar Vokietijoje, po Didžiojo karo buvo naujas reiškinys, tokių švenčių organizavimas nesiklostė nuosekliai. Ir Lietuvoje kairiosios ir dešiniosios jėgos nesutarė dėl to, kas yra valstybės atskaitos taškas, kuri konkreiti šventė turi konsoliduoti tautą. Parlamentinės demokratijos laikotarpiu Lietuvoje šie nesutarimai nebuvo principiniai. Veikiau jie buvo pajungti situacinei politinei konkurencijai, kurioje politikai – dešinieji ir kairieji – buvo linkę sureikšminti pirmiausia tuos įvykius, kurie geriausiai atskleidė jų pačių vaidmenį ir kūrė jiems simbolinį kapitalą. Todėl politinių aktorių patirčių įtaka kasmetinio visuomeninių

švenčių ciklo kaitai buvo labai didelė. Istoriniai įvykiai, su kuriais konkretūs politiniai aktoriai galėjo save susieti, didino jų norą sureikšminti būtent tuos įvykius. Tais atvejais, kai tokių sąsajų trūko, bet jomis galėjo pasigirti politiniai konkurentai, tai tapdavo pagrindu peržiūrėti, kas yra reikšminga tautai ir kas Lietuvoje turi būti minima kaip Tautos šventė.