

LITHUANIA: THREE YEARS AFTER STALIN

VINCAS RASTENIS

VINCAS RASTENIS, born January 16, 1905, jurist and journalist, was one of the younger leaders of Lithuanian political current known in Lithuania under the name of Lithuanian National Union. Arrested by Soviet authorities in 1940 and for a year held in several Soviet prisons. At the present Mr. Rastenis serves as president of the Association of Lithuanian Journalists; chairman of the Lithuanian National Movement; and chairman of the Lithuanian Independence Drive. Since 1951 Mr. Rastenis has been working with the Free Europe Committee, Inc., as head of Lithuanian Section of the Free Europe Press Division and devotes much of his time to the research on the situation in Lithuania under Soviet occupation.

HAVING lived in comparatively isolated geographical conditions for many centuries, the Lithuanian nation was little known internationally up to the 13th Century. Only in the first half of that century, did Lithuania emerge as a unified Kingdom, and became soon one of the great powers in Eastern Europe. In the 14th and particularly in the first half of the 15th Century, Lithuania played a role in international relations, which in its character and extent, taking into consideration the standards of those days, could easily match the role of the great world powers of the present time. Then, Lithuania met with decline, and was finally occupied by Russia in 1795. In 1918, Lithuania succeeded in regaining independence only to fall again victim of Soviet Russia, after 22 years of independent life, in 1940. The Soviets now consider Lithuania an integral part of the Soviet Union. Most of the Western powers do not recognize the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union, and they consider Lithuania as one of the "captive countries." The Lithuanians themselves consider the present situation of Lithuania as that of a country which is occupied by a foreign power and put under a colonial-like rule.

MARCH 5, 1953

It* looked as if the entire city of Vilnius (capital of Lithuania) was crying that morning of March 5, 1953, when the news of Stalin's death was announced.

•) it should be noted that the article was written before the open campaign of the denunciation of J. Stalin began. However, it should further be emphasized that until March 18 Lithuanian newspapers were silent on the forthcoming denunciation while Vilnius radio withheld its announcements on the matter even until April 5. The campaign against Stalin, undoubtedly, is known in Lithuania and is even discussed in Party meetings, however, open discussion of the events is still not apparent. **Editors.**

Why? It was difficult to understand, but it was surely not because of great love of Stalin. There may be only one explanation: people, having suffered so much during various political changes, were anxiously worried what this change was going to bring them... But a different mood came up soon. The breeze of hope for a little more freedom, for relaxation of terror, as well as shrinking of Russian domination took over the imagination of the population after the uneasiness of the first days or weeks following Stalin's death.

"STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL CADRES"

The slogan of "strengthening the national cadres" became main slogan of the day. The idea was appealing not only to the entire population, but even more to the local Communist leaders, since it meant that numerous Russians, occupying leading positions in almost all branches of the administration and economy, were going to be recalled to Russia and replaced by "nationals," i.e., by persons of local descent, naturally, by those who were good standing Party members, or at least enjoyed Party confidence. The population did not expect more radical changes. Replacing Russian Communists by local Communists was considered a trend good enough for fostering hope that things were going to turn for the better.

Evident facts seemed to confirm such hope. In June, only few days before Beria's downfall, three most important Russians were recalled from Lithuania back to Russia and replaced by Party leaders of local descent. These three Russians had been considered actual administrators of Lithuania, since they had covered the following positions: V. Pisariov — Deputy Premier; V. P. Aronov — second secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party; and P. P. Kondakov — Minister of Internal Affairs, former Minister of State Security in Lithuania. Several other high Russian officials had followed them. Even the families of numerous lower officials which had been imported into Lithuania from Russia prepared themselves for the mass exodus of Russians from Lithuania in May and June of 1953.

Suddenly, news of Beria's "treason" rumbled from Moscow. Nobody from among the common people was concerned much about Beria himself. As head of the secret police, he was symbol of the terror raging in Lithuania for several years. Thus, nobody was sorry for him. However, the general feeling was that this time Beria has suffered' injustice, that he was made only scapegoat for Stalin's deeds. But with this news also the change in slogans came up. The slogan of "strengthening the national cadres" was put under sordine -immediately, and "thankfulness to the great Russian nation" became again the leading tune in the official speeches. This was meaningful. The families of "imported" Russian officials unpacked their trunks...

RUSSIAN DOMINATION STRENGTHENED AGAIN

Almost all officials of local descent, who had profited of "strengthening the national cadres" and had reached higher positions, retained those or similar positions after Beria's downfall. There was no purge in Lithuania in connection with the Beria's affair. However, step by step, the new positions were taken by Russians again.

One of the first steps taken by the Malenkov regime was the so-called "streamlining of the Government." This was meant for the Lithuanian Soviet Republic as well as for the Central Government of the Soviet Union. By abolishing and merging together the Ministries of the Lithuanian SSR their number was reduced from 22 to 16. The administrative division of the country in four provinces was abolished. But soon after Beria's arrest, the abolished Ministries had been reestablished one after another, and even new ones were created, so that there are now 26 Ministries and two cabinet rank Committees in the Government of the Lithuanian SSR. Four new Ministers appointed during the year of 1955 all were Russians. And since January 1956, Deputy Premier and second secretary of the Communist Party are again Russians, as before June 1953. This pattern was followed also in the lower level of the state and CP administration. It is known from experience that so-called "assistant" officials are more important than it formally appeared in the Soviet system for the occupied countries: the "assistant" or "deputy" directors, secretaries (even premiers) are almost without exception actual directors, secretaries, or premiers, ruling under cover of the names of their would-be superiors.

According to approximate estimate, there are from 300 to 400 thousand "imported" Russians in Lithuania at the present time, i.e., over 10% of the population of the entire country. These Russians refilled the space left after about the same number of the original population had been deported to the forced labor camps, or resettled in various distant parts of the Soviet Union. But those newcomers are concentrated mostly in the largest cities, particularly in Vilnius (capital) and Klaipeda (seaport), so that cities became strongly (up to 50%) russified.

Most of these Russian newcomers are covering the leading positions not only in the state and party administration, but particularly in industry. Even the members of the families of those covering such positions are covering the best paid jobs in almost all cases. They manage to establish all kinds of privileges for themselves (such as better living quarters, more and better consumer goods, etc.) to the detriment of the local population.

The hope that most of those Russians may disappear from Lithuania was short lived. It was replaced by an even stronger hate of those colonists. -

"There are only two parties in Lithuania now," according to an eyewitness, who came to the West from Lithuania at the end of 1955 and who explained that one of those "parties," with no distinction as to sex, faith, or ethnic origin, comprised all the original inhabitants of the country, or as many as were saved from the arrests and deportations. Even many Communists of local descent, including the leaders, should not be discounted from this "party," since they were dissatisfied by the Russian domination. "One should see," the witness says, "how the local Communists were enthusiastic about the slogan of the 'strengthening the national cadres,' and how they became silent after that slogan fell out of style."

The second "party" comprises all the Russian newcomers, but not the few old Lithuanian inhabitants of Russian ethnic origin.

The "first party" is larger, but powerless, under privileged. The "second party" is powerful, since its "members" have most of the best positions in the state administration, in the Communist Party, and in industry. They enjoy much better living conditions, of which most of the inhabitants of the country are deprived and driven into standards of living uncomparably lower than before.

Even aside from the normal suffering due to suppression of the innate national feeling, of believed ideology, and the accustomed way of life, this difference in material conditions, felt sharply by everybody, creates a certain feeling of

solidarity within the individual party, and a silent hostility or even struggle against each other whenever there is some occasion for that.

This hostility between local population and Russian newcomers has naturally existed since the very first days of the Russian invasion of Lithuania. However, according to the same witness, it became much more apparent in the post-Stalin era, when the people gained a certain impression that the Soviet dictatorship is somewhat relaxing the application of the terroristic means of governing, or is not daring to act as ruthlessly as before...

"There is a great psychological difference between the old inhabitants of the formerly free countries and the Russians of proper Russia," continued the witness. "The Lithuanians still feel they are legitimate masters of their own country, despite the unjust deprivation of their rights by the invaders. You can see expression of this feeling even among the young boys and girls born already under the present regime. And Lithuanians dare to use their rights whenever they can. Russians in Russia do not. For instance, if a Russian, having lived for long time in Lithuania, goes to visit his relatives in Russia, the relatives ask him not to reveal to their neighbors from where he came, because Lithuania is still a foreign country in the

eyes of the Russians, and they feel that it might be dangerous to show themselves having visitors from that strange site... Therefore, even now, after Stalin, few Russians dare to write letters to the foreign countries from Russia proper, although they would like to contact their relatives or friends abroad not less than others do. It is known that some Russians have managed to move into Lithuania for permanent residence in the hope of establishing contact with their relatives living in the United States. They think it was unimaginable to write a letter to some foreign country, especially to the United States, from Moscow, Leningrad, or from any other Russian city. But they believe that it is natural to do so from Lithuania, since they know that Lithuanians are doing this widely enough, at least during the last couple of years."

Is it really safe to correspond with friends living abroad from Lithuania now? The witness's answer was as follows: "Nobody believes that. Everybody knows that the correspondence is under control. The address of the sender must appear on each envelope to a foreign country. It is understood that the address not only may, but actually is, used for the purpose of registering anyone who is in correspondence with foreign countries. They know that it may and probably will take a tragic end... But the desire of those contacts is stronger than fear of consequences... They use every possible precaution not to expose their feelings, but they know that no precaution is "airtight". They just take the chance, because they still are too accustomed to enjoy freedom..."

COLLECTIVIZATION

The land collectivization was the most destructive action of the Soviet regime in Lithuania. Started in 1948 and having caused two mass deportations of farmers in 1948 and 1949, it was completed in 1950-51, still under Stalin. No change in this branch was brought about by Stalin's death. The amalgamation of originally small kolkhozes into large ones, started in 1950, was continued and completed in 1955. As a result of this action, about 360,000 former individual farms have been merged into 1,787 large estates, called kolkhozes.

The program of moving all the former individual farmsteads into kolkhoz villages, announced still under Stalin, made almost no progress until the end of 1955, but is going to be continued more actively in the near future.

It was recognized recently that the amalgamation of kolkhozes was carried out too zealously and that there were established some too large kolkhozes, which are almost impossible to administrate expediently. Revision of the amalgamation program has been ordered, and splitting of many kolkhozes is to be expected.

Improvement of agricultural production has been one of the main slogans in the entire Soviet Union during past three years. The answer given to that slogan by former Lithuanian farmers, now kolkhoz-workers, was shown in the resolution of the IX Congress of the Lithuanian Communist Party, held in Vilnius, January 24—26, 1956. It said:

"Sowing, harvesting, and threshing is being delayed, and great losses of crops are occurring. The yield of crops remains poor in many kolkhozes. The number of cattle has fallen, and the productivity of cattle has shrunk in the kolkhozes of the Republic during the past year. The production of fodder has lagged far behind the needs of cattle breeding. Because of this, the production of agricultural goods decreased considerably during the past few years.

The main event in the agriculture of Lithuania was the introduction of corn growing, which was started on a large scale in 1955. The first year was a failure. Only 41% of the acreage planted with corn gave the satisfactory results, and 59% of the acreage gave poor or no yield. However, the orders have been given to try it again in 1956 even on enlarged scale.

On December 1, 1955, the Central Committee, of Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union adopted a special decree concerning the means of improving agriculture in the Lithuanian SSR. It shows the exceptional concern caused by the agricultural situation in Lithuania. Contrary to the usual procedure, the decree was not made public, its contents were communicated only to the officials concerned. From a few mentions, it is known that the agricultural situation was strongly criticized in that decree and several assignments were given to the Government

Lithuanian SSR in order to improve that situation. "Manpower and financial means are being mobilized" now in order to execute those assignments. Only one of these assignments was told publicly. Huge amount of organic fertilizer must be carried to fields of kolkhozes during the winter. However, because of unusually severe colds and storms, this program is already lagging very far behind.

COMMUNIST PARTY

Amazing stability characterized the selection of the top personnel of the state and party administration of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic during the last 15 years since 1940 (not taking into consideration the interruption by the German occupation period during 1941-44). The first secretary of the Communist Party, the chairman of the Presidium of Supreme Council (President), as well as the chairman of the Council of Ministers (Premier), remained unchanged for over 15 years. All other top officials of local descent have remained in high positions since 1940, although changing their chairs among themselves from time to time.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (the infamous MVD) was the main subject of changes in 1953, right after Stalin's death. First of all, this ministry was merged with the Ministry of State Security and was taken over by former Minister of State Security, a Russian, while the former Minister of Internal Affairs had to content himself with the position of member (later of chairman) of the Audit Committee of the Communist Party.

A few weeks later (according to the slogan of "strengthening the national cadres"), a Lithuanian was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs. At the end of the same year, a new person (a Soviet-educated Lithuanian) was appointed to this post, while the predecessor became mayor of the city of Vilnius. A few months later, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs became chairman of the newly created Committee of State Security; thus the ministry received a new minister again. Thus, the Minister of Internal Affairs was changed four times during a period of about thirteen months.

The first change in one of the highest positions came January 16, 1956, when M. Gedvilas, the Prime Minister for over 15 years, was removed and replaced by M. Sumauskas, formerly first Deputy Premier, then Second Secretary of the Communist Party. However, even in this case there was nothing that could be called "purge", since the removed Premier was re-elected to the Central Committee of the Communist Party 12 days later (he was not re-elected, however, to the Party Bureau and did not receive any new appointment in the administration).

This change was made in connection with Moscow's criticism on the agricultural situation in Lithuania. In order "to strengthen the leadership," not only was M. Gedvilas replaced, but also a new First Deputy Premier, as well as a new Second Secretary of the Communist Party, were appointed, both unknown either in state or Party administration in Lithuania up to the date of their appointment.

CHANGES IN LEADERSHIP

There are 38,087 Communist Party members in Lithuania (as of January 1, 1956). This is about 1.3% of the population, while in the Soviet Union the Party membership makes about 4% of the population on the average, including also the Baltic Republics. It has to be emphasized that a large part of the Party members in Lithuania are newcomers from Russia. It is not less important to emphasize that 17,422 Party members (46%) are in the four largest cities of Lithuania with a total population of about 575,000; about 14,000 other Party members are in towns and Machine Tractor Stations where people are dependent on salaries, and only 6,676 Party members are dispersed in the kolkhozes, so that on the average there are less than four party members to each kolkhoze, which comprises an average of over 200 families. In some kolkhozes there are six or more Party members, but about one third of the kolkhozes do not have any Communists among their members.

While Russian newcomers have settled themselves mostly in the cities, towns and MTS's, the kolkhoz population remains almost purely Lithuanian. Rarity of party members in kolkhozes shows how Lithuanians are resistant in that sense especially when we keep in mind that even of the same 6000 party members in kolkhozes most are sent to the kolkhozes by the party administration in order to supervise their management.

It is worth noting that during the past three years the party membership increased only by about 2000 in Lithuania.

RESISTANCE

"Armed Resistance" would probably have been the most true characteristic of the reaction shown by the Lithuanian people toward the Soviet regime during the several years after the restitution of this regime in Lithuania in 1944, when the Nazi-German occupation collapsed in the Lithuanian territory. However, this kind of resistance was tragically unsuccessful, since the Lithuanian resistance forces, with no support from the outside, could not hold out against the unlimited forces of the MVD and Red Army. Thus, about 1949, that kind of resistance was almost completely suppressed and ceased, excepting scattered eruptions in 1950, and even in 1951.

"Silent Resistance" may be the true characteristic of present relations between the Lithuanian people and the occupational regime. The very existence of such resistance had been corroborated by the Communist Party leaders themselves several

times. For instance, A. Sniečkus, First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, complained before XIX All-Union Communist Party Congress, October 5, 1952:

"Bourgeois nationalists, having been exposed as the enemies of the people, do not act openly any more. They and their visible as well as invisible followers are attempting to inculcate their views in all fraudulent disguised ways..."

That the situation did not change during three years, T. Tilvytis, a poet, who became a leading regime mouthpiece, verified again, in his radio speech, January 26, 1956. He said:

"The internal enemy is still not defeated. He is sitting right here, only having disguised himself, only having changed his weapons and fighting tactics. Instead of showing his teeth, as he did yesterday, he is smiling now and saying that everything is allright around us..."

It is interesting to note, that even the failure of corn action is considered as a result of still raging class struggle, in which the class enemies "were helped by the hostile propaganda from abroad" (J. Šimkus, Chairman of the Ass'n of the Soviet Lithuanian Writers, "Pergale" No. 11, 1955).

It would not be wise to reveal all the forms of expression of the passive resistance. But at least one indication of what may be called the "silent resistance" might be mentioned here, since it is publicly known and not concealed even by Russians in Lithuania itself. According to the eyewitness mentioned above, Lithuanian men, at least those living in Vilnius, are "wearing" a special distinction mark: most of them are walking bareheaded in the streets, even during the winter... Russians know that this demonstration means: "I am not one of yours." But they cannot do anything about it. Usually they say: "Look, an 'American' is coming!" (They know that in America many of men are walking bareheaded). Russians have no way to stop such a demonstration, and no possibility to punish it...

THE INDUSTRIALIZATION

The industrialization of Lithuania is being continued after Stalin as before. The regime claims that the comparative gravity of the industry has reached 65% of the national economy of the country, in comparison to 36% before the war. In effect, some former industrial plants have been enlarged (especially textile and furniture plants), several new plants were established (turbines, turning lathes, cement), and the capacity of those industry branches overpasses the needs of the local population. The industry is working for export to the "sister Republics", and even for China, North Korea, and Vietnam, so that the products of the industry are still many times scarcer in Lithuania itself now than they were when the country was "poorly industrialized"...

The increased comparative gravity of the industry from 36 to 65%, even if true, does not necessarily mean equal increase of output. The productivity of agricultures being undoubtedly decreased, it is easy for the industry to show high relative gravity even without any increase of the output.

WORKERS' RESISTANCE, SLOWDOWNS...

It is difficult to judge the reasons of frequent failures in fulfilling the production plans, openly complained by the Communist press. It may be worker's unwillingness to do the work, but it may also be the poor administration, bureaucracy, etc. Intentional slowdowns can rarely serve the purposes of political resistance, since in the Soviet wages and salary system he who does not fulfill the assignments, punishes himself first of all, not the regime...

Information has been received recently that most workers do not appear at work during Christmas days (December 25 and 26), and some factories are forced to stay shut those days. Although it is an evident offense, the administrations of the factories rather pretend that they did not notice what happened during those days instead of trying to punish the workers for absenteeism, and start the work on December 27, as if nothing had happened...

Generally, in the post-Stalin era, people dare to take more liberties, and the administration dares less in using means of suppression.

There was a stubborn resistance against the collectivization in Lithuania in 1948 and 1949. However it was broken after two mass deportations of peasants. But even now, the Party press complains frequently of "private-owner's mentality," and "violating of the rules of agricultural cooperatives," which mean simple stealing of kolkhoz goods. Eut organized slowdowns are hardly possible since it would leave the kolkhoz workers without means to live. The kolkhoz has first to deliver a fixed amount of agricultural products to the state, to remunerate the MTS for its service, to establish the seeds fund, and only that which remains (if!) may be distributed among the kolkhoz workers in proportion to the workdays accounted. Therefore, the slowdown might mean that nothing would remain for the workers.

RELIGION

Concerning religious life, generally the same conditions are prevailing in Lithuania as in the Soviet Union. From thirteen Catholic bishops only one is left, an 80-year old bishop. Less than 30% of the former clergymen are left in the country. However, two signs of "relaxation" have marked the year of 1955.

(1) Two new bishops were consecrated in Lithuania on August 11, 1955. This news was broadcasted from Moscow Radio to the foreign countries in foreign languages. But there was no word on that matter from the local radio or the press, intended for the local population;**

••) Moscow's short wave transmitter, intending its programs for North America, often mentions freedom of religion in Lithuania. No mention of this freedom, however, occurs in local newspapers or through local programs. It is broadcasted to the outside world at about 1:30 a. m. Lithuanian time and through a transmitter which most likely cannot be heard in Lithuania. The news, generally, is used for propaganda purposes only.

(2) A Catholic calendar (with indication of religious holidays, with instructions on the performance of religious ceremonies in death cases when there is no priest at hand, an apostolic appeal by bishop Paltarokas dealing with the problem of alcoholism, etc.), and a Catholic prayer-book were permitted to be published.

The antireligious propaganda is still officially urged and supported by all the means of the state and Communist Party. Only a small part of the churches is still open for the worship. They are attended heavily. The christening of children as well as religious wedding ceremonies are widely practiced. Even Russian families let their children be christened after they move to Lithuania. In case a Party member is in the family, other family members take care of it so that it can be "without his knowledge"...

YOUTH

The population of Lithuania has not lost hope that the situation will change somehow sometime. But at the time being, the people are much disappointed and do not see any reason for urging the youth to resist the regime openly.

The youth is being hypnotized by steady propaganda and by complete isolation from the outside world, from any exchange of minds.

Only the shocking living conditions may and frequently do awake the youth from that hypnotic state.

The youth is driven into pioneer and Komsomol organizations, is educated in Communist spirit at school, in the army, and in everyday's life. But still not even a half of youth is soaked into Communist network. And most of those who are, still may be considered very shaky in their Marxist convictions. However, only a radical change of circumstances might call them back.