

IN A DISTORTING MIRROR Lithuanian literature under the Soviet rule

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In the Western world literature is generally considered to be a free artistic reflection of the beliefs, doubts, and esthetic and emotional experience of individuals belonging to a particular nation or identifying themselves with humanity as a whole. We expect our writers to tell the truth as they perceive it, even if in their honest effort to hold a mirror up to life they should find it necessary to say things that are unattractive or disturbing or both. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, no one would dare openly to assert that the fountainhead of creative accomplishment is one's individual experience or that the Soviet life could appear to anyone gloomy or terrifying. The Soviet writer cannot express his personal beliefs because the dictatorial state has its own system of ready-made beliefs which the writer is expected to embrace. He cannot embody in his works his own doubts and his personal search for creative values, since all doubts are resolved for him by the Communist Party and the cultural values of communism are loudly proclaimed over all media of mass communications. The inspiration for creative work in the Soviet Union does not originate in the soul of the writer but in the desk drawer of a Communist Party bureaucrat.

During years of independence, Lithuanian literature adhered to the Western concepts of art. Lithuanian writers, learning to use words as a means of expressing what was new and meaningful to them in life, attempted to contribute their own cultural values to the total achievement of human civilization. When Lithuania, through no fault of her own, became a part of the Soviet Union, Lithuanian culture underwent a forcible transformation designed to bring it into conformity with the Soviet pattern of life. The Communist Party referred to this transformation as "revolution from above", but the Lithuanian people quickly recognized this semantic curiosity for what it was: Soviet cultural imperialism, reinforcing political imperialism.

The regimentation of Lithuanian literature began with the establishment of the Lithuanian Soviet Writers' Union, patterned on the Soviet Writers' Union. This organization has the power to determine the choice of themes, political loyalties and literary interests of each individual member through a complicated mechanism of controls emanating from the policy-making body of the Union—its Communist Party organization. No member of the Union can get his work published unless it has been thoroughly discussed and approved by the representatives of the Party and his fellow-writers. It is not officially forbidden to be a writer without joining the Union, but such a writer will find it next to impossible to appear in print, since the publishing houses obey the orders of the Party and would not dare to publish anything that is likely to be subsequently criticized and denounced by its spokesmen. Thus Lithuanian writers discovered that in order to remain in the field of literature they had to renounce the very thing that makes writing worthwhile — the freedom to follow their own creative vision, wherever it may lead.

Literature, like everything else in the Soviet Union, is considered to be a manifestation of politics, and the purpose of belles-lettres is mainly to support and embellish the dictatorial actions of the Communist Party. One of the major "revolutions from above" in Soviet-occupied Lithuania was the collectivization of agriculture. There had never been any collectivist tradition among Lithuanian farmers, who preferred to remain full masters of their own piece of land, depending on their own skill, diligence and enterprise for their economic welfare. The only collective labor the Lithuanian peasants ever did in the past was serf labor performed for foreign landowners under Polish and Russian oppression. Naturally, such

servitude left only the most unpleasant memories. Therefore they resisted vigorously the establishment of collective farms in Lithuania, since to their minds this was serfdom all over again, with the state occupying the place of the former foreign landowner. The collectivization of Lithuanian agriculture was carried out at the cost of thousands of lives, at the cost of mass deportations to the Soviet Union and the economic ruin of the whole peasant class. However, in Lithuanian literature of that period we find glowing descriptions of happy peasants tearing down their old houses in order to build new ones on the collective farm lands. There are numerous short stories and novels devoted to the theme of "class struggle", in which the resistance to collectivization is depicted as sinister activity on the part of "kulaks" — rich farmers unwilling to relinquish their economic hold over the poor peasantry — and in which the representatives of the Soviet power are depicted as self-sacrificing heroes of communism. Not one word is said about the deportations and political terror accompanying the collectivization process. The purpose of such literature was to make the Lithuanian farmers accept their subjugation not only as something inevitable but also as something desirable.

The chief carrier of indigenous Lithuanian culture during the years of independence was the newly-formed Lithuanian middle class living in the cities and consisting of tradesmen and peasant-born intellectuals who achieved their education either in the larger universities of the former Russian empire or in the educational institutions of the young Lithuanian state. These intellectuals had participated in the creation of independent Lithuania and in their hearts they harbored deep-seated traditions of individualism and democracy. The Communist Party made it one of its main tasks to re-educate or to destroy this middle class, hoping in this fashion to break the backbone of Lithuanian resistance to the communist rule. Here again, Lithuanian writers, many of whom were themselves former members of that middle class, were forced to denounce it, to depict its ideals and spiritual values as worthless and irresponsible and to pretend that the violence committed against Lithuanian culture was in fact merely the painful birth of a new socialist civilization to which the future must inevitably belong. A young Lithuanian writer, J. Dovydaitis, wrote a novel called *Great Events in Naujamiestis*, the main heroes of which — school teachers, engineers and professional people — through a torturous process of doubt, revolt and self-incrimination, learn to give up their spiritual independence, to submit to the demands of the Party and, paradoxically, to experience their subjugation as a liberation from themselves for the good of the collective. J. Dovydaitis chose to ignore the fact that, far from identifying themselves with the new Soviet society, devoid of fundamental humanitarian values, these intellectuals in most cases went into an "internal emigration", preferring to keep their convictions to themselves rather than to be subjected to terrorism because of their reckless revolt against armed oppression. The state of mind of such intellectuals is very effectively described by the Polish-Lithuanian writer Czeslav Milosz in a book called *The Captive Mind* (published in the United States), where it is made clear that not even the total dictatorship of the Communist Party is capable of making its slaves enjoy their chains.

Finally, the Lithuanian writers were forced to contribute to the "hate America" campaign, which had reached its peak around the year 1952. Lithuanian cultural tradition is an integral part of the Western concept of culture, and consequently the principles expressed by the Declaration of Independence of the United States are also the principles of the Lithuanian people. Many Lithuanians have in the past found refuge from czarist oppression in the hospitable and generous atmosphere of the New World, and even after World War II a large number of Lithuanians were fortunate enough to escape the Soviet tyranny by entering this country, which to them had always been the symbol of the most precious human values. However, in the Soviet Union the Lithuanian people were told by the Communist Party that America is a land of bloody exploiters, imperialists and ruthless capitalists, which has done incalculable harm to the Lithuanian people. Since there were no facts to support such accusations, the Lithuanian writers were forced to concentrate on slander and denunciations of everything that America stands for. On the other hand, the Russians were represented as the historic partners and faithful friends of the Lithuanians, to whom the Lithuanian people owe everything, from material welfare to the highest spiritual values. This kind of propaganda was so much in contradiction with reality that many of the vicious anti-American attacks seem perfectly ridiculous. The tragedy of the situation is that in Soviet-occupied Lithuania no one dares even to smile at them for fear of being denounced as an "enemy of the people". And "enemies of the people" do not live long in the Soviet Union.

It goes without saying that many Lithuanian writers have found it impossible to submit themselves to such destruction of their personal and artistic integrity. Not being able to raise a voice of protest, they simply disappeared from the literary scene. Balys Sruoga, a powerful dramatist and poet, has not published a single work of any significance. Kazys Binkis, a sparkling and irrepressible poet of modernistic tendencies, is no longer heard. Antanas Miškinis, whose poetry was the very embodiment of the lyrical and profoundly humanitarian spirit of the Lithuanian peasantry, has not been mentioned in the Soviet press. On the other hand, those Lithuanian writers who managed to adjust to the Soviet regime did so at the cost of their literary stature. The present works of such important Lithuanian writers as Antanas Vienuolis and Mykolaitis-Putinas can hardly be distinguished from the run-of-the-mill concoctions of hack writers. The heroes of their novels, who used to be live, suffering and searching individuals, have now become simple vehicles for the repeated verbalization of communist political ideas. Lithuanian literature under the Soviet rule has become a distorting mirror in which lies are shown as truth and the tragedy of the Lithuanian people is concealed from the eyes of the world.