

LITHUANIA, 1795-1940

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When a nation reaches a certain point in its political, cultural, and technical development, it tends to unite and form a state. The formation of a state is a great event in the history of any nations. But the retaining of independence has always been and is a problem for every state. It is an especially grave problem for the small states in our modern world which are controlled by great nations constantly struggling for more lands and more power.

The Lithuanians formed an independent state comparatively early — in the 13th century. It grew and prospered until in the 15th century it extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea and included in its territory Ukraine, White Russia, and other Russian lands. Lithuania was one of the greatest states in Eastern Europe. In 1569 the Great Duchy of Lithuania was united with the Kingdom of Poland on personal union basis. However, the rise of Russia on the East, of the Germanic powers — Austria and Prussia — on the West, and the mismanagement of the union-state resulted in three divisions of Lithuania and Poland among Russia, Austria, and Prussia. These divisions occurred in 1772, 1793, and 1795. The largest part of Lithuania, and since the Napoleonic Wars the whole of Lithuania, fell under Russian control. In 1795, Lithuania lost her independence for the first time since the creation of the Lithuanian state.

Years of hard oppression followed. But Lithuanians never lost sight of their common aim — the regaining of their independence. For more than a half century, the nobility constituted the opposition to Russian rule. Then, the intellectuals who rose from the common people took over.

The first hope for separating from Russia came with the coming of Napoleon. Lithuanians helped the Napoleonic army, hoping that Napoleon would create an autonomic state under his protection. With the defeat of Napoleon, all hopes vanished. Though the Czar had pardoned all those who helped Napoleon, many were persecuted, sent to Russia, etc.

After this unsuccessful attempt, secret societies were being formed among the nobility and among the youth in the schools of higher learning. Eventually, encouraged by the liberal revolutions of 1830 in France and Belgium, Poland revolted in November of 1830, and Lithuania followed early in 1831. The common people helped the nobility, expecting that this revolution would bring an end to serfdom. But the revolution was unsuccessful and was cruelly put down. Several churches were closed, people were arrested and deported, Lithuanian schools were closed and Russian ones were opened instead, but they usually did not have any pupils. The only University of Lithuania was closed in 1832, and in 1840 the Lithuanian Statute Bock was abolished and Russian law became the law of the land.

Hoping to win the common people over for the Czar, Russian administrators distributed the confiscated lands of the revolutionary nobles to the people for very small sums. Pressed from all sides, Czar Alexander II even proclaimed the abolishment of serfdom on Feb. 19, 1861. But the serfs gained actually little from it, and dissatisfaction spread as before.

In 1863, a second insurrection started. Proclaiming liberty and equality to all, the noblemen wanted to win the commoners to their aid. But this insurrection, like the preceding one, met failure. Only it was put down even more harshly than the first. Muravyov, who came to be called the "Hanger", was sent especially from Russia to Lithuania to suppress the insurrection. Many leaders were hanged, people were arrested, killed, deported to Siberia or other Russian lands, their farms were confiscated, churches were closed, and priests were either killed or deported. Whole villages like Gulbinas, Ibenai, Javorava, Miškaičiai and others were completely burned and their inhabitants deported. An intense russification of Lithuania was started.

This policy of Russification was first directed most severely at the schools. Only Russian teachers were appointed to higher schools, and in 1864 all parochial grammar schools were closed. Russian governmental schools were instituted here and there, but they had very few pupils. In these Russian schools all subjects were taught in Russian — even religion. Police had the power to inspect these schools in order to see that the teachers carried out all these regulations. Besides, teachers were forced to sell or distribute books printed in Russian alphabets. (Russians use a completely different alphabet from the Latin one, which is used by Lithuanians.) They figured that if the children knew only the Russian alphabet, they could read only Russian, then they would speak only Russian, and eventually they would become Russians. With this purpose in mind, in 1865, the printing of Lithuanian books in Latin letters was prohibited.

The churches were also attacked. Building of new churches and the repair of the old ones was prohibited. Some churches were closed and their priests deported. All church organizations, even Temperance Societies, were prohibited. People were forced to pray from Russian prayer-books or even attend Russian Orthodox churches. Many Russian Orthodox churches were built for the Russian colonists who were brought into Lithuania. They were given free land, which was confiscated from the revolutionary Lithuanians, and the Russian colonists were not allowed to sell their land to Lithuanians.

At this same time intellectual and nationalistic movement started among the common farming people. When serfdom was abolished, their children were given the right to attend the schools of higher learning. A generation of true Lithuanian patriots was coming into being. The nineteenth century saw the birth of nationalism in all Western Europe, and Lithuania also experienced its force.

People did not send their children to Russian schools, but secretly taught them their religion and how to read and write in Lithuanian at home. They refused to buy books in Russian letters and opposed as well as they could the closing of churches. Since 1865, when the printing of Lithuanian books in Latin letters was prohibited, printing of books in the Latin alphabet was started in Tilžė across the German border. It was started by Bishop M. Valančius (1801—1875), who himself wrote many books of religious and lay character which were published in Tilžė. These books were then secretly smuggled into Lithuania. The Rev. M. Sederavičius (1829—1907) was another great worker in this field. He organized a whole network of book-smugglers to bring these secretly printed books over the carefully watched border and spread them through the whole of Lithuania. One of the most famous book-smugglers was J. Bielinis (1846—1918), for whose capture the Russian government had offered an award. Many of these books were confiscated; many book-smugglers were killed, or arrested and deported to Siberia. Nevertheless, the secretly distributed books and newspapers spread through the villages and with them grew the number of patriotic farmers who could read in Lithuanian and who cherished their language, history, and traditions.

Most of the earliest books were prayerbooks or were religious in character. But later, when the number of patriotic and educated laymen grew, more books of general character were published. In the period of 1865—1904, when the printing of books in Latin letters was prohibited, 3,320 books, not including newspapers, were published, as estimated by Prof. Vaclovas Biržiška in **Senujų Lietuviškų Knygų Istorija** (1953), p. 31.

The first Lithuanian newspaper published in Tilžė was "Aušra" (The Dawn), which was started in 1883. Its originator was Dr. J. Basanavičius, who also contributed many articles. The two editors were Mikšas and Šliūpas. But it was forced to stop because of economic difficulties. The next well-known newspaper was "Varpas" (The Bell), started and edited by Vincas Kudirka, a writer and the author of the Lithuanian national anthem. It was published from 1889 till 1905. There were other newspapers like "Apžvalga" (1890—1856), "Tėvynės Sargas" (1896—1904), "Šviesa", "Vienybė Lietuvininkų", "Lietuviškas Balsas", and "Ūkininkas", the last one especially suited for farmers.

In spite of all the persecutions of book—smugglers and the readers of these secretly published books and newspapers, the number of publications, the number of readers, and the patriotism of the readers was greater than ever. Realizing that this secret movement could not be stopped and that it was doing too much harm, the Czar pressed by his advisors proclaimed the freedom of press on May 7, 1904. Only the censorship of all the publications was retained. Now many more newspapers, magazines, and books were published and read.

Lithuanians also started to organize politically. Since the Revolution of 1905 in Russia and Lithuania, a Duma — a representative advisory body to the Czar — was created in Russia, in which Lithuanians also gained representation. The movement for more political rights grew stronger with time. In 1914, World War I started, and Russia had to turn her eyes from the domestic matters to foreign affairs. The Lithuanians organized a representative Congress in Vilnius, which basing its act upon the Wilsonian principle of self-determination of nations proclaimed on Feb. 16, 1918, the independence of Lithuania.

It was easier to proclaim Lithuania independent than to make her really so. Russian and German armies had to be defeated and chased out of Lithuanian territory. A constitution had to be drawn up, a government and an army had to be organized. But through the faith and sacrifice of the Lithuanian people everything was accomplished, and Lithuania became a free and democratic republic with 2.7 million inhabitants and a territory of 32,090 sq. miles. Lithuanian independence was first recognized by Germany, then by Russia in 1920, and by 1922 by all major countries of the world.

Lithuania immediately entered on the road of reconstruction. But the work was not, easy, for the country was badly devastated by war and foreign armies. Lithuania was mainly an agricultural country, and therefore land reform was given

serious consideration. In March, 1922, a Land Reform Law was adopted providing for more individual farms. Apart the actual distribution of land, efforts were made to increase the quality and quantity of agricultural produce in Lithuania. Drainage systems were introduced on rather extensive scales. Cooperative organizations like Pienocentras, Lietūkis, Parama, Lietuvos Kooperacijos Bankas, Lietuvos Cukrus were organized to help the farmer and to raise the quality of Lithuanian products. Dairy industry grew considerably. As an example of the growth of Lithuanian agriculture, let us compare these figures. In 1913, there were 766,000 horned cattle in Lithuania, but in 1937 there were 1,172,240. In 1924, there were 43,540 pigs in Lithuania, but in 1937 there were 137,680. Not only the numbers but the quality increased also, because products were prepared for export as well as for home use. Our exports increased tremendously too. As an example, the export of butter increased from 524 tons in 1924 to 15,058 tons in 1937. Also, no bacon was exported in 1924, but in 1937, 10,577 tons of bacon was already being exported. These developments were probably helped by the institution of higher agricultural schools, special traveling instructors, and the publication of special magazines for farmers.

As a part of the program of reconstruction, in 1922, Lithuania adopted its own currency with its basic unit "litas".

Also in 1922, the University of Lithuania was opened again. Cultural life developed very quickly. Lithuania had 2 Operas, a Ballet Company, several theatrical groups, museums, libraries, art galleries, etc. Many newspapers, magazines, books, and various other publications were published. The number of schools also increased very rapidly. There were 875 elementary schools in Lithuania in 1914 and 37 high schools. In 1937, there were 2,550 elementary schools with 287,000 pupils, and 89 high schools with 18,830 pupils, plus several commercial schools and various trade schools. There was the University, an Agricultural Academy, Trade Institute, 3 Seminaries, Pedagogical Institute, Arts Academy, 2 Musical Academies, Veterinary Institute, Military Academy, and Science Academy.

As can be seen, Lithuania really achieved a lot in its cultural, social, and economic life during the several decades of its independence. The people were free and happy in their native land, progressing each day nearer to the level of other Western European nations.

In spite of all the non-aggression pacts with Russia, Russian armies entered Lithuania in 1940, because of a secret agreement between Russia and Germany which gave Lithuania to Russia. Lithuania lost her independence and is again under Russian control.

With sadness in our hearts we commemorate at the present time the sixteenth of February as Lithuanian Independence Day. We will not let our faith waver, and we will keep our hope to see Lithuania regain her independence for the second time.

All statistics taken from:

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Scene from the Lithuanian Ballet "Sužadėtinė"