

LITHUANIA UNDER THE SIGN OF SWASTIKA (Occupation of Lithuania from 1941 to 1944)

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The relations between Germany and Lithuania during the existence of the latter as an independent and sovereign state from the 12th century until the second World War would afford a study of vast proportions and should be dealt with separately and on a later occasion.

Whenever war broke out, the German slogan "Drang nach Osten" (Drive to the East) was a cause for dread and apprehension to Lithuania as an eastern neighbor of Germany. History repeated itself during the last World War when, on June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany marched against Soviet Russia, which had already invaded and occupied the Republic of Lithuania. The Soviet Army in Lithuania met swift defeat, and, scattered and disoriented, surrendered to the Germans or retreated eastward in disorder. The Lithuanian nation, whose spirit of independence could not be suppressed, had risen in arms and contributed no little in overthrowing the yoke of Soviet occupation which had destroyed its towns, villages, farms and families. The workers had strenuously and stubbornly defended their factories and workshops. The officials of the Soviet administration in Lithuania and of their Communist Party fled in panic, following the Red Army in retreat to Russia. With their withdrawal ended the murder and deportation of people, a nightmare of cruelty and terror defying all description. A temporary government of Lithuania was constituted to guide and reconstruct the political, cultural and economic life of Lithuania. Order was reestablished in the administration and in the country. But this moment of peace and exultation was shortlived, for the new invaders, the Nazis, soon started to show their unfriendly aims. On July 17, 1941, a General Commissar, Dr. Adrian von Renteln was appointed to govern and control the territory of Lithuania occupied by the Germans. The German commissar for all German occupied territories in the eastern theatre of war Lohse, in his proclamation of July 28, 1941 to the people of Lithuania, defined the position of General Commissar Renteln in Lithuania in the following manner:

General Commissar Dr. von Renteln is responsible to me, as a representative of the Commissariat of the Reich for the Eastern Area, for the execution of all orders of the Government of the Reich and mine. His own orders and decrees in the area under his control are also obligatory in any case.

On that same day five other district commissars were appointed for the territory of Lithuania by decree: for the city of Kaunas — Kramer, for the district of Kaunas — Lentzen, for the city of Vilnius — Higtst, for the district of Vilnius — Wulff, for the town and district of Šiauliai — Gewecke. The same decree emphasized that the "orders of the district commissars were to be carried out in all cases" and that "in the future, orders to civilians would be given only by the organs of the civilian government."

The coming into power of the civilian members of the Nazi Government, the commissars, ended whatever cooperation had existed on secondary and non-political issues between the German Military Government and the Temporary Government of Lithuania. The Temporary Government of Lithuania, against its own will, ceased its functions on August 5, 1941, and its members joined the underground movement of resistance of Lithuania. One tyrant had succeeded another, and now one had to submit to the German—Nazi rule. Any public speech on the independence of Lithuania was met by the GESTAPO with those same measures used to maintain peace and order in the country.

The Nazi government of occupation in Lithuania had three purposes:

- a) to suppress the political and cultural consciousness of the country and its expression in any form.
- b) to exploit the country economically by amassing as many agricultural and other products as possible to further the continuance of their war at the expense of the material welfare of the local inhabitants.
- c) to mobilize the youth of Lithuania and to incorporate it into their "war machine" against the western allies.

When necessary, these aims were enforced with police measures.

Perhaps, in carrying out their three-point program, the invaders were most successful in the economic plunder of the country. According to the calculations of the experts, during the first incomplete 28 months of occupation (until the autumn of 1943), the Germans took the following out of Lithuania:

live pigs	31,700 tons
eggs	34,000,000
milk	50.000 tons
cattle	over 254.000 tons
grains	over 424.000 tons
potatoes	426.000 tons
horses	about 100.000

and sundry other stock and produce. This was a lethal blow to the economy of Lithuania and to its people.

The "brains" of the political life of that time, as well as the members of the former temporary government, joined the underground movement. Political parties or movements representing the interests of the Lithuanian nation did not exist in the open. The publications and manifestoes of the illegal underground press which were appearing regularly and copiously served to nourish and kindle the feelings of the people, supported the determination of the country to resist, and brought to light the material and moral damage caused to the country by the occupant.

Tribute must also be paid to the Lithuanian academic youth. The students of Lithuania joined in the cause in full strength and with thorough understanding of the problem facing their country. Very often student bodies and single individuals played a prominent part in this fight for freedom.

On February 16, 1944, a Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania was formed out of the existing political parties and underground movements which had originated during the years of occupation, and today, from the free world, it leads all efforts striving for the liberation of Lithuania.

In autumn of 1942, the Nazis struck at the higher Lithuanian educational institutions and other educational organizations. The schools were occupied by military personnel, and were often used for civilian government purposes. The students of elementary schools were forced to study the German language. Finally, in March, 1943, the universities and other schools of higher learning were closed. The students were forced to join the German military corps and the German "war machine." Lithuanian intellectuals: professors, administration officials and students were arrested and sent to German concentration camps. The press and publishing houses did not fare any better. The publication of books was restricted, and the press was under the constant and meticulous vigilance and censure of the Nazi occupation government. Even the publication of school texts was prohibited on the pretext of a paper shortage. As a result of these reasons and of other privations, work in the elementary and high schools became impossible.

The mobilization into the German Army of the Lithuanian youth was a complete failure from the point of view of the interests of the invader. Recruiting was resisted in every way. The students of the universities and of the intermediate schools did not heed the German decrees and sabotaged them with all the means available to them. When the universities were closed, the students left larger cities and moved to the villages to live with their parents or relatives. The German police tried to hunt them out and deliver them to the German military service, but they were unsuccessful. They did not have enough personnel to capture each youth and their efforts were further hindered by the Lithuanian so-called "self-government" organs and police who helped such youths to hide.

This obstructive action against the mobilization of the Lithuanian youth by the German Army, directed by the underground movement for the liberation of Lithuania, provoked the anger and revenge of the occupants, especially when the mobilization of the youths into the so-called "SS" detachments in 1942—1943 did not succeed. The deportation of workers for forced labor in Germany and in their war industries also failed. During the entire period of occupation, about 35,000 to 40,000 people were deported. The German Civilian Government demanded that this number be raised at least up to 150,000. But this plan, like the others, did not succeed. Finally, the summer of 1944 drew near. The Germans were on the eve of losing the war, and the Lithuanians were again threatened with a Soviet occupation. The Lithuanian nation placed its hopes in the Western Democratic countries, but the Soviets were allowed to occupy Lithuania and the other two Baltic countries, Latvia and Estonia, with the approval and blessing of the "Big Four".

Besides the huge material damages suffered by Lithuania at the hands of the Nazis, the losses in human beings were great. About 124,000 Lithuanian people of Jewish descent were annihilated, and about 29,500 people of Lithuanian descent who had sought to weaken the military strength of Germany and who had fought Nazi vandalism and the policy of occupation in Lithuania were sent to German prisons and concentration camps as active enemies of National Socialism. About 6,000 of them, unable to bear the hard regime of the prisons and concentration camps, died or were murdered. About 2480 Lithuanians perished in the concentration camp of Flossenburg alone, about 1,000 in Stutthof and 700 in Sachsenhausen. The number of the victims among- those, deported for forced labor who perished • during the bombardments of German war industries has not been established, but it was considerable and a heavy blow to the Republic of Lithuania.'

During the second Bolshevik invasion the number of persons who fled from Lithuania reached 120,000 to 130.000 persons, but part of them never reached western Germany as they were overtaken by the Bolshevik Army detachments. They were never returned to Lithuania, but found "shelter" in the forced labor camps of the Soviet Union.

And who can count the scars left by the damages and abuses of war which overnight transformed the efforts and creations of a people into ashes and turned that same people into homeless beggars seeking charity?

The free Lithuanians in the western world believe that the work and the fight, the funds collected and spent, and the pains suffered will not be in vain. It is their faith and determination that Lithuania will be free again.