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THE EMERGENCE OF UNIFIED LITHUANIAN RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AGAINST OCCUPANTS 1940 -1943

National freedom and independence, as well as an authentic cultural life, constitute the air which a nation breathes in order to survive—they are an existential minimum. The entire Lithuanian nation was aware of this truth on the first day of the Soviet occupation. June 15, 1940, was not only the day when Russian tanks and soldiers flooded across the Lithuanian border; it was also the day when Lithuanian resistance was born. That resistance came into being spontaneously, and it grew into a mighty movement, embracing all political parties and all segments of the population: workers, farmers, white-collar employees, professionals, soldiers.

The sudden emergence of the Lithuanian resistance movement made necessary an immediate action to unite this expression of popular determination, to channel it in the right direction and to determine the methods of the struggle, so that the maximum gains could be achieved with the smallest losses. An intelligent and devoted leadership was immediately needed. But the formation of an authoritative leadership of a resistance movement is one of the most difficult and complex tasks imaginable. Exceptional and strong personalities are needed. They must represent all segments of the population and every political grouping.

Formation of political coalitions in the new resistance movement was made impossible by the conditions of the first Soviet Russian occupation. Yet the idea of a movement embracing all social and political groupings had a wide appeal and retained its vitality. In a short time, the new resistance movement was transformed into an all-embracing and powerful underground organization with its masses of fighters and its leaders — the Lithuanian Activist Front (**Lietuvių Aktyvistų Frontas**).

The Lithuanian Activist Front developed a strong, purposeful, and courageous activity during the first Soviet Russian occupation. One of its chief achievements was the preparation of the nation for an uprising, and the triggering of an uprising at a proper time, at the beginning of the German-Soviet war. The uprising itself did not lack its quota of troubles and errors, but it achieved its goal: On June 23, 1941, before the advancing German troops could reach Kaunas, the independence of Lithuania had been restored and the Provisional Government of Lithuania formed and announced. It was a significant and historic act, of which the Lithuanian people will always be proud.

But the victory, accompanied by severe losses, also led to the demise of the Lithuanian Activist Front. By organizing and carrying out the uprising, the Front had fulfilled its main function, and the leadership of the newly restored independent Lithuania was taken over by the Provisional Government.

The situation of the Provisional Government, however, was extremely difficult. The country was teeming with German troops in pursuit of the fleeing Red Army; a formal German military occupation was imminent. The fate of the Provisional Government was hanging on a thread, and the newly regained Lithuanian independence was facing destruction.

Aware of the dangers it faced, the Provisional Government made every effort to establish formal contact with the Reich government and to regulate the relations between sovereign Lithuania and the German army that was moving through the country. But all such attempts were in vain. Soon it became evident that Nazi Germany preferred to ignore both the Provisional Government, which was of an utterly different ideology, and Lithuanian independence, since both stood in the way of Hitler's expansion plans. After ignoring the Provisional Government for seven weeks, Nazi authorities simply imposed their own civil administration on the country. On August 5, 1941, the Provisional Government convened for its last conference. The members of the Government concluded that in imposing their German administration, the Nazis were forcibly terminating the activity of the Provisional Government against its will. The last act of the Provisional Government was a silent demonstration before the monument of the Unknown Soldier, in the garden of the War Museum in Kaunas,

after which the members dispersed. The independence of Lithuania came to an end, and the German occupation formally began.

Again the sky of Lithuania darkened. The new Nazi masters ruled in Lithuania with their customary brutality. All Lithuanian organizations were shut down, and their members were placed under constant Gestapo surveillance. After the fading away of the Activist Front, the resistance movement lacked a unifying organization and a single leadership. Each underground movement acted on its own. The over-all impact of Lithuanian resistance was strong, but it was less effective than it might have been under a central leadership.

Yet attempts to unify the various Lithuanian resistance groupings were initiated immediately after the first signs of the split in the Activist Front. These unification efforts received a strong impetus after the breakup of the Provisional Government. The political and non-political groupings in the underground began to crystallize around two ideological centers: the Liberal-Nationalist-Socialist **Vyriausiasis Lietuvių Komitetas** (Supreme Lithuanian Committee) and the Christian Democrat-oriented **Lietuvos Taryba** (Council of Lithuania). Cooperation between the two centers, rather haphazard at the beginning, soon became broader and more constant. Thus, in mid-1942, two underground resistance centers were waging a courageous struggle against the foreign occupation. Their activity was two-pronged: destructive and constructive. Marked for destruction was the Nazi machinery of subjugation and their attempts to consolidate their position as masters of Lithuania. The constructive efforts consisted mainly of preparation to rebuild Lithuania after the recovery of freedom.

The Nazis, whose announced goal was total incorporation of Lithuania into the German Reich, did not expect such fierce resistance from a numerically small nation. The Lithuanian resistance movement, however, was suffering from the division in its ranks. The two centers were unable fully to coordinate their actions and even, although they were fighting a common enemy, to avoid friction between themselves. The Gestapo officials in Lithuania were understandably gratified by the friction and hoped for its intensification. The Lithuanians themselves, seeing the pernicious efforts of disunity, redoubled their efforts to find a common platform, but a basis of mutual understanding eluded them for some time.

The turn for the better came in June, 1943, at a special conference of the Council of Lithuania, in which the author of this article took part. The main item on the agenda was a report on endeavors to form a single center of resistance. The reporter, having summarized all the unsuccessful efforts of the past, proposed that an end be made to fruitless discussion and that all the forces and reserves of the resistance movement be merged. The participants were deeply impressed by the report and agreed on the vital need for unity. A unanimous decision was made to take up again the question of unification with the Supreme Lithuanian Committee. This mission was entrusted to Adolfas Damušis and myself.

My task was to approach the Supreme Lithuanian Committee and to inform it of the desire of the Council of Lithuania for new unification talks. I decided that the most useful channel would be through Juozas Audėnas, whom I know since my university days; he was closely connected with the Supreme Committee and I had already discussed problems of unity with him. On June 29, 1943, taking all necessary security precautions, I visited Audėnas at his home and gave him a brief account of the Council's decisions. Audėnas promised to report to the Supreme Committee immediately, and to inform me of its attitude. By the next day I knew already that the Supreme Committee had accepted the Council's proposal and had appointed Juozas Audėnas and Bronius Bieliukas as its representatives in the unity talks.

The first talks were held on July 3, 1943, at my apartment in Kaunas. The participants —Audėnas, Bieliukas, Damušis, and myself — were all members of the younger generation, holders of academic degrees and firm believers in a united resistance movement. This boded well for the ensuing discussions.

The other three participants voiced their regrets about the present situation and expressed their real determination to do everything possible to achieve unity. Then the discussion turned to the essence of the problem. The representatives of the Supreme Lithuanian Committee, Audėnas and Bieliukas, proposed that one of the two active resistance centers cease its activity and join the other, with the number of its representatives in the new body agreed upon in advance.

In their opinion, the Council of Lithuania was in a better position to take that step, since the Supreme Lithuanian Committee had been established earlier, had developed a more extensive activity in Lithuania and abroad, and would therefore be more difficult to abolish. Terminating the activities of the Supreme Lithuanian Committee, they said, would cause consternation in Lithuania and would complicate the relations abroad of the resistance movement.

Damušis and I could not agree with this view because, as far as we knew, both resistance centers were founded at approximately the same time, and neither was in a position to claim seniority rights. We also contended that it was difficult to determine objectively which center carried more weight, since both were equally active in the country and since both claimed to represent the entire resistance movement abroad. Our suggestion was to approach the problem from a different angle: instead of liquidating one of the two centers, to search for a basis on which to form a new, united, and all-embracing supreme organ. Once this basis is attained, we said, the transfer of the activity of the two centers will be solved by itself.

Finally, all four participants agreed to consider the first conference an informative one and carefully to weigh new principles and possible methods of unification for the next meeting.

The second conference took place at the apartment of Audėnas. The participants were the same, and the discussion was resumed at the exact point where it had been interrupted. The two main proposals - absorption of one center by the other as against establishment of an entirely new center -- were again the subject of a long and complex discussion. All present obviously desired to reach an agreement, but at the same time sought to legitimize as large a portion as possible of the terrain already covered by their respective centers and to enshrine it in the new organ to be formed.

This attitude was especially marked in the proposals and arguments advanced by the representative of the Supreme Lithuanian Committee. The attitude of the delegates of the Council of Lithuania was different — we were convinced that the paths traveled until now had been taken in emergency and that, for the sake of Lithuania's cause, we had to embark on a new common road.

Gradually the conflicting opinions began to converge. We agreed to leave the two existing centers untouched and to concentrate all our efforts on finding a formula that could serve as a platform on which all the resistance groups could unite. Of course we recognized that the political parties and resistance organizations were by no means of equal weight and importance. But we quickly decided not to undertake the involved, complex task of determining the relative strength of each grouping. Instead, we agreed that in forming the new common center of resistance, all parties and resistance organizations would be considered equal and would have an identical vote.

Our main concern was thus not with proportional representation but with the unification of the entire fighting Lithuanian underground. The question inevitably arose as to which parties and resistance groupings would be qualified and authorized to participate in the new resistance center. We agreed on the following formula: The groups would include all political parties that had been represented in the last parliament of democratic Lithuania and all resistance organizations that had made a tangible contribution in the fight against the occupant.

On the basis of this consent on principle we found seven traditional political organizations: the Christian Democratic Party, the Lithuanian Labor Federation, the Social Democratic Party, the Nationalist Alliance, the Farmers' Party, the Farmers' Union, and the Peasant Populist Union. Four new fighting organizations, established during the occupation, qualified: the Freedom Fighters' Union, the Lithuanian Front, the Nationalist Party, and the Movement for Unity.

The total came to eleven units — in our opinion, too numerous for clandestine resistance activity. A collective of such size would have lacked smoothness and flexibility in making decisions, as well as speed in exploiting targets of opportunity. Operational security presented the largest problem, since the activities of a large collective could be more easily detected by Nazi agents. All these considerations compelled us to look for a simplified arrangement. Having reviewed the old parties and the new organizations, Damušis and I suggested that some organizations might wish to form blocs and to send a single representative to the new resistance center, rather than two. In this way, we pointed out, the eleven units could be reduced to five.

We refrained from giving advice as to how the blocs should be formed, but recommended that the groupings in the Supreme Lithuanian Committee try to reduce their number to three representatives, and that the Council of Lithuania attempt to reduce theirs to two. If this recommendation were accepted by both centers, the new supreme organ would embrace five units and thus be flexible enough, as well as safer from the spies and agents of the occupation authorities.

The Council of Lithuania reacted favorably to our proposal, although a quota of two representatives meant a major concession and the acceptance of a minority position in a body of five. The Supreme Lithuanian Committee, however, after a prolonged debate, gave a negative answer. It based its decision on the fact that the groupings represented in the Supreme Lithuanian Committee differed on matters of principle and could therefore not merge to such an extent that one person could properly represent two or three groupings. Thus we failed in our attempt to reduce the number of members of the future supreme organ.

The unification talks proceeded much more slowly than had been expected. The negotiators were prevented from meeting more often by other activities, the need for extensive discussions within their centers, and security considerations.

We knew that frequent meetings would immediately put Gestapo agents on the scent. Since caution was imperative, we rarely met twice in the same place and always tried to create some officially accepted pretext.

By the end of the summer, the Nazi security agencies intensified their watchfulness, and persons within these agencies, friendly to the Lithuanian cause, warned us to exercise extreme prudence. The meetings became fewer, and soon Bieliukas and Darnušis were compelled to stay away from them altogether. Only Audėnas and myself carried on the discussions.

During our clandestine meetings, Audėnas and I concluded again that the only way to achieve unification was by forming a new organ which would embrace all political parties represented in the last parliament of democratic Lithuania and all the new movements that had made a mark in the struggle against foreign occupation. We agreed that all members of the new organ would have equal rights and equal responsibilities. The new center of resistance would be the only and the highest institution to defend the rights of the nation, to speak in Lithuania's name at home and abroad, and to work for restoration of independent Lithuania. Its competence could never be put in doubt, since it would represent the entire organized nation.

The new center would have the first and decisive word on matters of national importance, and it would be vested with enough authority among the Lithuanian people to demand all sacrifices, including that of life, necessary for the achievement of the final goal. Only such concord and unanimity, we agreed, could lead us to victory.

Again we submitted our conclusions to the respective centers. The Council of Lithuania immediately approved of the principles suggested by us, since the unification of all political organizations had engaged its attention for a long time. Now, since everything hinged on the decision of the Supreme Lithuanian Committee, I was waiting impatiently for my meeting with Audėnas. When we finally met, he had glad tidings: the Supreme Lithuanian Committee had also endorsed our suggestions.

Our minor obstacle still had to be cleared. The Supreme Lithuanian Committee informed us that one of its members, the Farmers' Party, had temporarily relinquished its right to participate in the new supreme organ. Consequently, the Supreme Lithuanian Committee suggested that in reciprocity one member of the Council for Lithuania, namely, the Farmers' Association, also give up that right. Should the Farmers' Association agree with the suggestion, the supreme organ would be reduced to nine members, instead of eleven. I was given the task of ascertaining the opinion of the Council of Lithuania on this question and, in the event of a positive answer, obtaining the agreement of the Farmers' Association itself.

I was well aware of the difficulty of the problem, but was inclined to support the new proposal. The final decision had to be made by the Farmers' Association. After a long and soul-searching debate, the Farmers' Association decided to refrain temporarily from sending an individual representative to the new resistance center, but to authorize, instead, the future Christian Democratic delegate in the new center to represent its interests and views there. Thus the final obstacle was cleared. It was agreed that the new supreme body would be composed of nine members, appointed by these political parties and resistance organizations: the Christian Democratic Party, the Lithuanian Labor Federation, the Social Democratic Party, the Nationalist Alliance, the Peasant Populist Union, the Freedom Fighter's Union, the Lithuanian Front, the Nationalist Party, and the Movement for Unity.

The five months of intense negotiations were thus crowned with an agreement. The supreme center of resistance embraced all the political parties and movements of that time, leaving not a single organization outside. The newly established organ had no opposition, since all the groups, large and small, that sought Lithuania's freedom had joined it and contributed their share to the common struggle. The unification of the Lithuanian resistance movement was a great national victory, unequalled in any other nation smarting under foreign subjugation.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL POSTSCRIPT

For a detailed account of the activities of the Supreme Committee for Liberation of Lithuania since its founding to the present, see Juozas Audėnas, ed., *Twenty Years' Struggle for Freedom of Lithuania*, New York, 1963. The article by St. Lūšys, presented in this issue, is taken from this collection of articles. A more general and extensive survey of Lithuanian resistance against the Soviet and Nazi occupations will be found in a special issue of *Lituanus* (Nos. 1-2, 1962), which also contains a number of documents of the resistance movement.