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## AUGUSTINAS VOLDEMARAS

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April 16, 1983, marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Augustinas Voldemaras (1883-1942), a man characterized as one of the most controversial figures in the history of modern Lithuania. Comparatively little has been written about him, perhaps because, as Alfred Erich Senn wrote, "Unfortunately he had a peculiar knack for antagonizing people, which, with his egotism and his quick temper, was a great handicap to his political career."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the role he played in Lithuania's struggle for independence was a significant one.

Augustinas Voldemaras was born in the eastern part of present-day Lithuania in 1883. His parents were neither wealthy nor well-educated, but his desire for learning eventually earned him a gold medal, the highest honor in his graduating class at the University of St. Petersburg. He did graduate work in history and philosophy at the same university. In 1910 Voldemaras received his master's degree and was awarded another gold medal for his dissertation. A scholarship fund was set up to enable him to further his studies and eventually achieve a doctorate.

During his years as a student, Voldemaras was greatly influenced by the spirit of nationalism which was sweeping Lithuania. Though the country was still under Russian domination, small groups both in the country itself and in the outside world were forming to agitate for Lithuania's autonomy. Voldemaras joined one of these student groups in St. Petersburg and was elected as its representative to the Congress of Non-Sovereign Nations at Kiev in September 1917.

This honor, as well as his academic record, brought him recognition in the academic world outside the University. He received offers to teach at various schools, but turned them down in order to take advantage of an opportunity to study abroad. After a period of study in Italy and Sweden, Voldemaras returned to the University of St. Petersburg and was invited to join the institution's faculty in 1915. He moved to Perm when the University was forced by the Bolshevik revolution to relocate there, and finally left Russia in 1917.

When the new Russian government (the Bolsheviks) capitulated to the Germans, Lithuania was in a precarious situation. The major portion of it had been under Russian control, and thus as Russian property, had been occupied by Germany during the war. Voldemaras was elected to represent Lithuania at the peace conference at Brest-Litovsk to try to negotiate a viable existence for Lithuania. Lithuanians in the country itself and emigrants in western countries wanted, at best — independence, at least — autonomy. Germany offered recognition of Lithuania as an independent nation (with the condition that Lithuania always consider the interests of Germany as equal to its own), while the Russians offered nothing. Thus, the Lithuanians preferred to link themselves with Germany. Officially, however, Lithuania was not allowed to send a representative to the peace conference, so Voldemaras appeared there as a "Lithuanian advisor" to the delegation of the newly created Ukrainian Peoples Republic. He accomplished little, as he was not allowed to speak. At this conference Lithuania was handed over to Germany.

On his return to Lithuania, Voldemaras was invited to join the Taryba, a group which had formed to establish a Lithuanian government, not only to govern the country, but also to negotiate with Germany and other foreign powers. He, along with others, was to replace four men who had resigned from the Taryba in protest. The Taryba wanted to invite Wilhelm von Urach to become King of Lithuania as Mindaugas II, and the resigning members felt this decision should be made by the constituent assembly, and not the Taryba alone.

Besides the Taryba in Lithuania, other groups of Lithuanians around the world had claimed to represent the country. Some agitated for autonomy, others for freedom. While they helped to publicize the Lithuanian cause, they also managed to confuse the world and thus provided a hindrance when it came to collecting funds and gaining popular support.

In September of 1918 Voldemaras and other members of the Taryba (including Antanas Smetona, future president of Lithuania) proceeded to a conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, with these various groups. They met to discuss their differences and make plans for the future. A dispute arose between the American-Lithuanian delegation and the Taryba, centering upon two basic points: (1) Which committee would be acknowledged as true representative of Lithuania; and (2) Should the country of Lithuania depend on Germany to achieve her freedom or establish ties with the western powers? Eventually, the Taryba assumed leadership of the Lithuanian people and proceeded to strengthen ties with Germany, for it felt Germany would be the greater power after the war.

In November 1918, after the Kaiser had "abdicated," Germany allowed the Lithuanians to set up their own government, proclaim a constitution and establish diplomatic relations with other countries. Germany recognized Lithuania as an independent state and proceeded at once to withdraw all German forces from the area, leaving the Lithuanians to form their own defenses.

After this announcement, the presidium of the Taryba (three men who were the formal heads of state) and the temporary representatives of Lithuania abroad met to choose a prime minister, whose cabinet would be under the jurisdiction of the Taryba. For this post they chose Voldemaras. It was left to him to choose a cabinet.

The political parties active in Lithuania at the time each nominated men for these positions and each fought the opposing members with vigorous political maneuvers. Voldemaras decided to ignore the political parties altogether and choose individuals who would not be encumbered by the vested interests of the parties. He himself took on two posts besides that of prime minister: minister of foreign affairs and minister of defense. This first cabinet, approved by the Taryba on November 11, 1918, came to be known as the "cabinet of talents." On the same day, the Taryba issued a manifesto to all Lithuanians declaring that it would act as a provisional government until a meeting of the constituent assembly could be called.

The first point of business for the cabinet was the bringing of order to the country. Voldemaras, as minister of defense, felt that internal disorder was a more serious problem than possible attacks from neighboring countries. He felt a declaration of neutrality would be enough to deter any invasion, and so only a token force would be needed to guard Lithuania's borders. To organize an army of volunteers for this purpose, he appointed General Kondratovich as deputy minister of defense. For this appointment both Voldemaras and the Taryba were severely criticized.

First of all, Kondratovich was Russian, and because of the recent years of Russian domination, sentiment against him was strong. Also, even though there were a willing number of men ready to serve in a volunteer army,

Kondratovich made no effort to organize them. They were not even told where to gather. The few that did serve under him were not well equipped. The Germans, though they stated they supported this army, sent few supplies and little money. Yet the German army was quickly retreating, leaving the country virtually undefended.

On November 28, Voldemaras announced that the country was in danger of invasion by the Bolsheviks. They were approaching Vilnius, the capital, and the army would be unable to restrain them. Both America and Sweden had refused aid, saying that they did not want to get involved.

Kondratovich directed the volunteers to assemble near Gardinas (now called Grodno) which, besides being far from the center of Lithuania, was also the site of mobilization of the Polish army, organizing for a march on Vilnius in another attempt at unifying Lithuania and Poland. The two countries had once been unified during the fourteenth century by the marriage of an unpopular Lithuanian king to a Polish queen. When their protests at Kondratovich's directives went unheeded, the members of the army took it upon themselves to have him replaced.

At this time, December 21, 1918, Voldemaras and Smetona (now President) had left the country. They went first to Germany to secure a loan of 100,000,000 marks to support the weak Lithuanian government and then on to Paris for the peace conference of Versailles.

A great deal of controversy raged (and still rages) on this action: The members of the government felt that Voldemaras and Smetona had fled and given up the country to the approaching Bolsheviks. They instituted a new cabinet with Mykolas Sleževičius as prime minister. A letter of the time states: "Voldemaras' government was not a complete success. He did not effect a single step in the foundation of Lithuania. He was replaced, not by way of resignation, but of expulsion, by the cabinet of M. Sleževičius."<sup>2</sup> News leaked out that Smetona and Voldemaras were overthrown in a revolution, but the new government made it appear to be a routine reorganization.

In Versailles, Voldemaras became furious upon hearing what had happened. He insisted that he and not Sleževičius was the real prime minister on the grounds that he had never resigned. Smetona asked him to drop the matter and, as he was still minister of foreign affairs (even in the new cabinet), Voldemaras led the Lithuanian delegation at the conference. Incidentally, this delegation was supported by funds donated by American-Lithuanians.

On February 14, 1919, Voldemaras presented three demands to the representatives at the conference:

1. recognition of the independence of the Lithuanian state within territorial limits as defined by the Lithuanians themselves;
2. official admission of the Lithuanian delegation to the conference on the grounds that, though Lithuania was not officially involved in the war, it had suffered through both loss of men and ravaging of territory; Lithuanians had fought in the Russian front against Germany and also in the American army;
3. aid against the Bolsheviks in the form of men, advisers, and equipment.

These demands had little effect on the members of the conference. The Polish National Committee presented a demand that Lithuania become a part of the Polish state on the grounds that it would otherwise soon be conquered by Russia or Germany or in some other way become a threat to Poland. The Russian Political Conference (representatives of the Bolsheviks) asked that the Baltic States — Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia — become self-governing bodies within the Soviet Union. Committees and sub-committees were formed to study these conflicting suggestions and Voldemaras returned to Lithuania. Eventually the talks came to a standstill with no decision reached.

In the next three cabinets (formed March 12, April 12, and October 7, 1919) Voldemaras again served as minister of foreign affairs. April 23, 1919, he was invited to speak before a subcommittee of the Committee on Polish Affairs in the League of Nations. He refused at first, stating that he resented the fact that Lithuania was being considered merely a part of the Polish question, but on May 10 he appeared before the full committee requesting recognition of Lithuania as completely independent of Russia and Poland. He returned to the League again in July of that year and gave the committee a favorable picture of Lithuania, claiming the country could now keep its affairs in order, free from the "disruptive influences"<sup>3</sup> of Germans and Poles.

Meanwhile, the economy of Lithuania was in serious difficulty. The citizens could not be taxed by the Taryba. The Taryba received some money from German authorities, for it operated under their patronage, but it was a loan from Britain in return for Lithuanian flax which kept the country from collapsing. To reduce expenditures, Voldemaras cut back on Lithuanian representation abroad, keeping only a few diplomatic missions in western capitals.

Besides the economy, the greatest problem Lithuania faced at the time was that of recognition by the major powers of the world. Voldemaras himself stated, "Now the positive work begins. Our ministry is looking more toward opening and extending ties with foreign countries, first of all with the great states, whence stems our political future."<sup>4</sup>

Few countries, however, responded to the request for recognition. In August 1919, Norway announced de facto recognition of the Lithuanian government. Great Britain had a favorable view of the new country, but no other Western power did. On November 25, Voldemaras wrote to the American mission in Paris asking for de facto recognition. Since one of the basic considerations that had encouraged the Lithuanians to declare their independence was the advocacy of the self-determination of nations as presented in the Fourteen Points of the American president, Woodrow Wilson, they expected a favorable response from the American delegation at Versailles to their demand for independence. Voldemaras also pointed out that the uncertain political status of Lithuania was causing problems in passports and inheritance questions for American Lithuanians. The Americans responded by refusing recognition, but stated that they would allow a Lithuanian delegation to enter the United States. Voldemaras immediately sent such a delegation.

Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks attempted to seize Vilnius. American Lithuanians organized a brigade of 10,000 men to aid in the fighting. However, no agreement could be reached about whether the unit would stay together or be dispersed among the Lithuanian units, so they were not used. Some of the peasants supported the idea of Soviet rule in hopes of land reform. And, as mentioned before, there were the problems of Kondratovich's command. As Senn puts it, "The military issue was to prove the fatal weakness of his (Voldemaras') short-lived cabinet."<sup>5</sup> Despite these drawbacks, the Lithuanian army managed to oust the Bolsheviks. Hoping not only for peace, but also for recognition of the Lithuanian government, Voldemaras sent the following telegram on March 31, 1920, to the Russian foreign affairs commissar:

Since there are no longer any Russian soldiers in the territory of the republic of Lithuania, and secondly, since the Lithuanian nation took to its weapons only to regain and protect its independence, and not to take over any Russian territories, the Lithuanian country announces that it consents to make peace with Russia.

The most important condition for peace is: a complete acknowledgement of Lithuanian independence within its ethnological boundaries, that is, speaking generally, the areas of the old gubernijas of Vilnius, Kaunas, Gardinas, Suvalkija, with the capital in Vilnius.

If the Russian government accepts these conditions, we will send our representatives to work out the details and sign the treaty. Time and place for the meeting of these delegates must be by common agreement.<sup>6</sup>

The Russians accepted this proposal and talks were planned for May 7 in Moscow. However, disputes arose there over what constituted the ethnographic boundaries of Lithuania and so the Russians refused to recognize Lithuania's independence.

In June of 1920 voting finally took place for a Steigiamasis Seimas, a constituent assembly. Voldemaras, along with the other ministers in the cabinet, resigned. He returned to his academic life, which at this point centered on the University of Kaunas. He helped set up courses and became dean of sociological studies, as well as writing a set of statutes for the newly formed university.

While he was an eminent and highly respected professor, he was not a well-liked one. It was said that he had no tact. He would keep students waiting an hour or so and then lecture for two to three hours at a time. Voldemaras was a brilliant speaker and was able to present history in an exciting, living light, yet his courses were often poorly organized. This made it difficult for his students, who had to pass examinations based on material he was to have presented in his lectures.

Besides teaching, Voldemaras was very active in writing. His published works in cultural and social fields were much acclaimed, especially a work to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the death of Dante. He wrote in French as well as in Lithuanian. Critics say that if he had not deserted history for politics he would have achieved tremendous success. However, once he entered the political arena, it was felt that his writing lacked the scholarly depth of his earlier work.

One of Voldemaras' political works, written during this time, brought him strong political censure. Voldemaras, as well as Smetona and others, believed the government of the third Lithuanian president, Kazys Grinius, was too lenient, tolerant, and democratic. They disagreed with its allowing Russians, Jews, Poles, and other nationalities to establish their own schools, churches, and organizations in Lithuania. Voldemaras and others favored a more dictatorial government, following the example of the Fascist government which much of eastern Europe was leaning toward at the time. Voldemaras favored a Fascist dictatorship more strongly than did Smetona; however, it is said that without the strength and force of Voldemaras, Smetona might not have achieved the presidency.

For his political articles against the policies of the Grinius government, Voldemaras was sent to a camp of forced labor for one month. He received amnesty at the end of that time and returned to teaching and writing.

In 1926 a segment of the army that also disagreed with the policies of the Grinius administration planned a military coup. They asked Voldemaras and Smetona to lead them and both agreed. A coup took place on December 17 and Smetona became president again with Voldemaras as prime minister. To present a suitable front to the world, Grinius (after a presidency of six months) agreed to "appoint" Voldemaras prime minister if the latter promised to uphold the constitution of 1922. Though Voldemaras promised, all his actions favored a dictatorial form of government.

During this, his last cabinet position, came the event for which Voldemaras became famous throughout Europe: his defense in the forum of the League of Nations of Lithuania's claim to Vilnius. For decades, Lithuania and Poland fought for ownership of Vilnius. Lithuanians claimed it on historical grounds; Poles claimed that, according to a census, there were more Poles than Lithuanians living in Vilnius. After the Lithuanians had successfully repelled the Bolshevik attack on Vilnius, the Poles attacked and seized it. General Pilsudski (said to be a Lithuanian who, nevertheless, considered himself a Pole) directed the attack and began a persecution of the Lithuanians left in the city. As the Lithuanian army mobilized and prepared for war, the League of Nations stepped in and refused to allow it to march. The League stated that the world had seen enough bloodshed and that the argument would be mediated by the League. Voldemaras himself led the negotiations at the meeting of the League in Geneva. It was considered the high point of his career.

Though he was the leader of the delegation of a small, relatively unknown country, Voldemaras spoke before the full assembly for, two hours. The assembly waited anxiously as, during the course of negotiations, the Polish dictator, General Joseph Pilsudski, approached Voldemaras and after extensive provocation asked him, "Peace or war?" After a pause Voldemaras answered "Peace" and the assembly relaxed. Poland was then pacified, but Vilnius was not returned. The question continued to be discussed in committees of the League and time and again the right of Lithuania to Vilnius was affirmed; however, the Poles would not give it up.

Another important event during this administration was the treaty signed with Germany in 1928. A section of the country called Klaipėda, located on the west coast on the Baltic Sea, had been claimed by both the Lithuanians and the Germans. The inhabitants were primarily Lithuanian and, therefore, particularly anxious to have the question settled in Lithuania's favor. Also, this section of disputed territory contained the city of Klaipėda (Mėmel), which is the only harbor of Lithuania. It was vital to the future prosperity of the country. The German foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, returned Klaipėda to Lithuania.

That spring, Great Britain signed a trade treaty with Lithuania, lowering the import tax on Lithuanian goods, and a new constitution was put into effect. It was another in a series of moves initiated by those in power to steer the country even farther from democratic principles and give a great amount of power to the president.

Meanwhile, disagreements and resentments between the various political parties of Lithuania were growing. Voldemaras was the head of a society called "Geležinis Vilkas" (Iron Wolf) whose honorary head was President Smetona. Though he and Smetona had formerly worked closely together and shared similar ideologies, their association was soon to be brought to an end, partly because of Voldemaras' intense involvement with Geležinis Vilkas. It was said about Voldemaras that he "endeavored to build a personal following among the younger nationalist officers who were favorably impressed by emergent fascism . . . the majority of the senior officers favored conservative policies and usually stood by the chief

executive. On the other hand, the dynamic personality of Professor Voldemaras continued to attract admirers among the younger officers who were displeased with Smetona's moderate course."<sup>7</sup>

On May 6, 1929, an attempt was made on Voldemaras' life. Shots were fired outside a theater, killing Voldemaras' adjutant, Captain P. Gudynas, and wounding Major L. Virbickas. Voldemaras was not hurt, but this event caused him to become even more involved in the Geležinis Vilkas. His attitude alienated the president, who withdrew from the society and removed Voldemaras from office. He was evicted from the best suite of the hotel in Kaunas (the city to which the government had moved when Vilnius was seized) and from that time lived mostly with his cousin in Zarasai, an area in northeastern Lithuania. There he was constantly under police surveillance and delighted in eluding them with his cousin's children.

Upon Voldemaras' removal from office, Geležinis Vilkas went underground and received aid and encouragement in its activities from Germany. The group planned and executed a coup in 1934, flying Voldemaras in from Zarasai to take over as head of the government. However, the coup was unsuccessful, and Voldemaras was imprisoned for the next four years. During this time he wrote another major work, an historical account of the life of Christ, which was banned in Lithuania because of its controversial nature.

In 1938 Voldemaras received amnesty and was exiled. He attempted to return in 1939, but was arrested and sent to Zarasai. He tried to return a number of times, but each time was returned to his place of exile.

In June 1940, a few days after the Bolsheviks attacked and seized Lithuania, Voldemaras again attempted to return inland. Why he chose this particularly dangerous time, when many members of the government were being imprisoned or sent to Siberia, is not clear. In post-war Lithuania there were speculations that he may have been a member of the NKVD (the Bolshevik secret police), and, therefore, had nothing to fear. This has not been proved, however, and some historians believe this to be another effort by the Soviets to discredit members of the Lithuanian government.

Voldemaras was arrested at the border by the Bolsheviks and was not heard from again. Only in the past decade did family members learn that he had died in a Moscow prison on May 16, 1942. The controversy over his true character continues, 100 years after his birth.

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