

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 33, No.2 - Summer 1987
Editor of this issue: Antanas Klimas

ISSN 0024-5089
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Pranas Čepėnas. Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija

(A History of Modern Lithuania), vol. II. Chicago: Dr. Kazys Grinius Fund, 1986. 840 pp. Hard cover.
No price given.

This is the second, and final, Volume of the comprehensive history of modern Lithuania by the late Pranas Čepėnas, former professor of history at the University of Vilnius and an eyewitness to many of the events he describes. Originally conceived as a three-volume work, it was cut short by the author's death in 1980. While the first volume encompassed the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second essentially covers the years between 1914 and 1923. This was the crucial decade of the First World War and the reconstruction of an independent Lithuanian state. Unfortunately, it is little understood even among relatively well-educated Lithuanians and, for this reason alone, Čepėnas' study is welcome.

Čepėnas' history of modern Lithuania can best be described as a reference work: it is almost encyclopedic in scope. Extraordinarily rich in detail and thorough in coverage, it analyzes virtually every aspect of Lithuanian history during this period. In addition, there is a further, albeit somewhat less important, advantage to *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija*: it surveys the broader background of world history, which served as the stage for Lithuania's struggle for independence. Thus, for the Lithuanian reader of the older generation who is less than fluent in English, it is a reasonably good account of European and Russian history of the early twentieth century. To his credit, and in contrast to certain other Lithuanian scholars of his generation, Čepėnas utilized some of the more recent Western scholarship on the Great War, for example, Fritz Fischer's once controversial and now classic study of German war aims, which discusses Germany's intentions toward Lithuania in some detail. The English version, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, came out in 1967.

It is my impression that many Lithuanians are accustomed to viewing their recent history on the basis of a few select themes: for the nineteenth century, the tsarist oppression of the Lithuanian national movement, especially the press ban of 1864-1904, and, for the twentieth century, the tragedies of World War II and the postwar period. Such readers will find Čepėnas' book a valuable revelation. The author successfully explores the oft-forgotten aspects of the Great War's impact on Lithuania: the physical destruction, which rivaled the losses of the Second World War; the massive and often forced exodus of Lithuania's inhabitants to Russia during 1915; the brutal occupation policies of the German military authorities; the chaos in the countryside. "The administration established by the Germans and its methods of government in Lithuania," writes Čepėnas, "were more severe than . . . (the period of) the blackest reaction of Tsarist rule" (p. 85). In some respects, for example, in the recruitment of forced labor for industrial work in Germany, German occupation policy in Lithuania during World War I bore a disturbing resemblance to Nazi rule. Eventually, it also provoked a popular resistance movement. Čepėnas recounts that by the spring of 1916 clandestine leaflets appeared urging men to evade forced labor conscription. In addition to the harsh occupation of Lithuania, Čepėnas discusses Germany's broader policy. Here again, some of the German fantasies regarding Eastern Europe (including Lithuania) were uncannily reminiscent of Nazi plans for the "East" (see, for example, p. 141).

Čepėnas is correct in emphasizing the harsh nature of the German occupation, for it is only against this background that the political machinations of the *Taryba*, the Lithuanian council that formed the nucleus of the future Lithuanian government, can be understood; and it is important to understand them since both contemporaries and historians have occasionally criticized the council for a tendency to placate the Germans at the expense of Lithuanian interests. Čepėnas takes a balanced view: he notes that the *Taryba*, unlike the Lithuanian leftist leaders, failed to comprehend the depth of anti-German feeling among the populace, but he also describes the persistence with which the *Taryba* pursued its goal of Lithuanian independence. Čepėnas reminds us that when the war broke out in 1914, a number of prominent Lithuanian leaders, including Jonas Basanavičius and Martynas Yčas, supported the Tsar against the Kaiser, in large part because of their hope that Lithuanian East Prussia would be united to the Lithuanian areas of the Russian Empire under a liberal, perhaps even democratic, postwar regime. The point here is that it is essential to understand the political and military realities which both conditioned and limited the political possibilities of the Lithuanian national movement during these

repressive and uncertain times. The description of these realities is one of the strengths in Čepėnas' *Naujujų laikų Lietuvos istorija*.

The political struggles of the Lithuanians during the Great War took place on several fronts. First, there was the organization of the secret Lithuanian Political Bureau in Lithuania itself (see Chapter VI), which originally sought to defend Lithuanian interests vis-a-vis the German military authorities and gradually evolved into a body with much broader political purposes taking on an international scope, for example, in its appeals to President Wilson and the attempts to defend a future Lithuania against nascent Polish territorial ambitions. In retrospect, two aspects of this early struggle for self-determination stand out: the Lithuanians' certainty that their country's political future would be radically different after the war (some form of statehood would be achieved), and the determination to grant equal rights to all of Lithuania's nationalities, most important, to the Belorussians and Jews who, it should be remembered, also served as useful allies against the Poles. This second aspect of Lithuanian history has received only cursory attention and, unfortunately, in this respect Čepėnas' work is no exception. The activities of the *Taryba* in 1917 and 1918, such as the independence resolution of December 11, 1917, and the actual Declaration of Independence on February 16, 1918, are relatively well-known and need not be detailed here, except to say that Čepėnas' account of this period is as good a survey as we presently have in the Lithuanian language.

One should also recall a second, perhaps equally important, feature of the Lithuanian movement during the war: the remarkable organization of social, cultural, and educational work among the Lithuanian population, which had either fled or been deported to Russia during the German advance of 1915. It is estimated that as many as one-half million of Lithuania's inhabitants, including some 300,000 ethnic Lithuanians, found themselves in Russia during the war years. The Lithuanian War Relief Association provided critically needed assistance to its countrymen and eventually became a kind of de facto ruling body for Russia's Lithuanians. It established cultural organizations and printing presses, organized hundreds of primary schools, and even established a number of fine secondary schools, most notably in Voronezh. Thus, an entire generation of Lithuanian intelligentsia received a substantial part of its education in Russia's heartland. Politically, by 1917 the demands of the Lithuanians in Russia began to approach those of the *Taryba*, that is, the creation of a Lithuanian state.

Another important "front" in the Lithuanian struggle took place in the West, particularly in Switzerland and the United States (which by 1914 contained between a fourth and a third of the world's Lithuanians). Despite internecine quarrels over ideology and relief appropriations, it is clear that in America as well, the idea of Lithuanian independence had struck root by war's end. Čepėnas notes that while the political and financial contributions of Lithuanian-Americans to the struggle for Lithuanian independence were immense, their propaganda work was no less important.

Čepėnas emphasizes that, until the collapse of Germany, the famed February 16th Declaration was mainly of symbolic (albeit important) value. A provisional Lithuanian government was announced only in November 1918, and it did not acquire even rudimentary administrative and military capabilities until the following year. Meanwhile, the successive Lithuanian governments, protected by their own meager forces and a shaky German military umbrella, survived the following in rapid succession: a Bolshevik invasion; the creation of a short-lived Lithuanian-Belorussian (Litbel) Soviet Republic in the east; continued obstruction by the German military administration; a devastating attack by well-equipped White Russian and German volunteers from the West (the so-called Bermondists); a determined Polish invasion and attempted coup d'état; financial crises; and innumerable other problems. Čepėnas' account reveals that the threatened Lithuanian Republic survived through a combination of good luck, timely though reluctant German military support, occasional Allied intervention, and, last but not least, a poorly armed, but enthusiastic and determined volunteer army. While Čepėnas' style is objective and detached, his sympathies seem to lie with Prime Minister Mykolas Sleževičius and his center-left cabinets who doggedly hung on during the trying months of early 1919. He is critical of Antanas Smetona and Augustinas Voldemaras who went abroad during the same period in a move that some people have regarded as desertion.

In both Western and Lithuanian historiography, the period of the Independence War (1918-1920) and the accompanying international negotiations have received considerably more emphasis than the themes mentioned above, so that it would be redundant to summarize them here. There is extensive coverage of the Lithuanian question, such as it was, behind the scenes at the Versailles Peace Conference, as well as of the various pacts which finalized independent Lithuania's borders and international status. There is a comprehensive discussion of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict over Vilnius with a rather overlong section on the historical background.

There are, however, two more interesting, though less familiar, topics which deserve mention to those who have more than a passing interest in modern Lithuanian history. Čepėnas presents us with a concise overview of the brief history of "Central Lithuania" *Litwa Srodkowa*, a supposedly independent state (1920-1922) of more than 20,000 square kilometers and some 700,000 people, which actually served as a fig leaf to cover Poland's annexation of the Vilnius region. This "Central Lithuanian" regime suppressed the national minorities, in particular the Lithuanians and Belorussians. Elections to a local parliament were held, but they were boycotted by most Lithuanians, Belorussians, and Jews. Even the League of Nations Control Commission viewed them as flawed. The Central Lithuanian Parliament's "application" to be incorporated into Poland was formally approved by the Polish government in March of 1922.

Another valuable section of the book includes a history of Lithuanian East Prussia, or what Lithuanians prefer to call Lithuania Minor, *Mažoji Lietuva*, an area separated from the Lithuanian lands east of the Nemunas by peculiarities of religion and history. While the Lithuanians of this region had traditionally been Germanophiles politically, a considerable segment of the enlightened intelligentsia here sought unity with Lithuania Proper when the outcome of the Great War presented such an opportunity. However, the Klaipėda (Memel) territory was the sole part of Lithuania Minor added to Lithuania as an autonomous region, and this was accomplished only after the Lithuanian government supported a revolt in January 1923 which overpowered the local French garrison that had been enforcing an Allied mandate.

Perhaps the book's greatest drawback is structure: the work is organized thematically, which invariably leads to repetition, but this particular volume seems to have more than its share of unnecessary duplication. For example, Chapter VIII ("Lithuania's Ethnographic Borders") contains some of the same information as Chapter XVIII ("The Problem of Vilnius"), in addition, there are lengthy "historical introductions" to some topics dating back several centuries which, while sometimes informative (particularly on East Prussia), detract from the unity of a work that is, after all, a history of twentieth century Lithuania. Perhaps the author's untimely death contributed to this problem.

This brings us to what Čepėnas' book is, and what it is not. It is not particularly original in content since virtually all the cited sources are published works, most of them secondary. It is too crowded with facts (sometimes repetitive) to serve as an easy introduction to this period. However, as a textbook and reference work in the hands of an educated reader literate in Lithuanian, it is indispensable. The footnotes alone provide an invaluable guide to additional historical literature. One hopes that this book will become available to people in Lithuania where it could serve as a corrective to the cliché-ridden Soviet histories of the period, which minimize the achievements of "bourgeois" Lithuania and exaggerate the accomplishments of the Bolshevik Litbel regime. Lithuanian college students writing history papers on this period should consult Čepėnas' work first, and it is my opinion that it should be required reading for all graduate students of the University of Illinois' endowed chair in Lithuanian studies. In terms of Lithuanian studies, the publication of Čepėnas' work has been money well-spent. We owe a debt to the late professor, and to the Čepėnas family, who were instrumental in the publication of this valuable study.

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