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Actions of Lithuanian Government and Its Citizens in the Soviet Union's War Against Finland in 1939–1940

Key words: Winter War, Lithuanian government, Lithuanian assistance to Finland, neutrality, Finland, the Soviet Union

Summary

The aim of the article is to compare the attitudes and actions of the Lithuanian government and citizens in the war of the Soviet Union against Finland and to highlight its essential characteristics. The author of the article defines two objectives: 1) to indicate what reasons influenced the choice of Lithuania to stay neutral during the military aggression of the Soviet Union against Finland; and 2) to reveal by what means some citizens helped Finland, and whether this did not contradict the neutrality policy of the Lithuanian government. Actions of Lithuanian government and its citizens are examined based on the research methods of document analysis, qualitative content analysis, and the comparative method. The sources used for this article are documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania in Lithuanian Central State Archives, Lithuanian volunteers' documents in the Military Archives in Helsinki, Lithuanian citizens letters written in 1939–1940 to the Finnish Consul in Lithuania in the Joensuu Regional Archives which were published in the collection of documents compiled by the author of this article. We also use reports and political articles of that time printed in the pro-Government daily *Lietuvos aidas* (Echo of Lithuania), military magazines such as *Kardas* (Sword), *Karys* (Soldier), and *Trimitas* (Trumpet). Accordingly, the author of the article concludes that the policy of neutrality in Lithuania did not bring the expected results of preserved statehood: the USSR occupied the country in 1940. There was no common view in society on the observance of neutrality in the event of the war between the Soviet Union and Finland as the active position of some of inhabitants striving to help Finland was contrary to the Lithuanian government's policy of neutrality. Lithuanian citizens' support for Finland can be seen as an expression of civic virtues in the country under the authoritarian regime of that time, since it was necessary to take an active civic position that did not coincide with the policy of the government.

Lietuvos valdības un tās pilsoņu rīcība Padomju Savienības un Somijas kara laikā: 1939.–1940. gads

Atslēgas vārdi: ziemas karš, Lietuvas valdība, Lietuvas palīdzība Somijai, neitralitāte, Somija, Padomju Savienība

Kopsavilkums

Raksta mērķis ir salīdzināt Lietuvas valdības un pilsoņu attieksmi, rīcību Padomju Savienības un Somijas kara laikā, izcelt tās būtiskākās iezīmes. Pētījuma autore definē divus mērķus: norādīt, kādi iemesli ietekmēja Lietuvas izvēli palikt neitrālai Padomju Savienības militārās agresijas laikā pret Somiju; atklāt, ar kādiem līdzekļiem pilsoņi palīdzēja Somijai, vai tas nebija pretrunā ar Lietuvas valdības neitralitātes politiku. Lietuvas valdības un tās iedzīvotāju rīcība tiek aplūkota, balstoties uz dokumentu un kvalitatīvā satura analīzi, salīdzinošās metodes izpēti. Rakstā izmantotie avoti ir Lietuvas Centrālā Valsts arhīva Lietuvas Ārlietu ministrijas fondu dokumenti, Helsinku Militārā arhīva Lietuvas brīvprātīgo fonda dokumenti, Lietuvas pilsoņu 1939.–1940. gadā rakstītās vēstules Somijas konsulam Lietuvā, kas atrodas Joensū Reģionālajā arhīvā. Visi minētie dokumenti ir publicēti šī raksta autores apkopotajā dokumentu krājumā. Tiek izmantoti tā laika valdības ziņojumi un politiskie raksti, kas drukāti valdību atbalstošajā laikrakstā “Lietuvos aidas”, militārajos žurnālos “Kardas” (Zobens), “Karys” (Karavīrs) un “Trimitas” (Trompete). Pētījuma autore secina, ka Lietuvas neitralitātes politika nav devusi gaidītos valstiskuma saglabāšanas rezultātus, jo PSRS okupēja valsti 1940. gadā. Sabiedrībā nebija vienota viedokļa par neitralitātes ievērošanu Padomju Savienības un Somijas kara gadījumā, jo dažu iedzīvotāju aktīvā nostāja, cenšoties palīdzēt Somijai, bija pretēja tā laika Lietuvas politikai. Lietuvas pilsoņu atbalsts Somijai uzskatāms par pilsoniskā tikuma izpausmi tā laika autoritārā režīma valstī, jo bija jāieņem aktīva pilsoniskā pozīcija, kas nesakrita ar valdības politiku.

Introduction

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the international community is discussing what actions should be taken by governments together with their citizens to defend sovereignty and territorial integrity of state. As some Central and Eastern European states are geopolitically vulnerable in terms of security, their leaders face the dilemma of whether to select a proactive policy and support the country subject to aggression, or to remain neutral in order to maintain economic and energy stability and protect themselves from threats to national security. Some insights can be gained by examining the case of the position assumed by the states and citizens in the Soviet Union's war against Finland between 1939 and 1940. The purpose of the article is to compare the attitudes and actions of the Lithuanian government and citizens in the war of the Soviet Union against Finland and to highlight its essential characteristics. The author of the present article defines two objectives: 1) to indicate what reasons influenced the choice of Lithuania to stay neutral during the military aggression of the

Soviet Union against Finland; and 2) to reveal by what means some citizens helped Finland, and whether this did not contradict the neutrality policy of the Lithuanian government. Letters and documents of Lithuanian citizens found by the author of this article in the Finnish archives presupposed the problem of the study, what actions of some Lithuanian citizens helped Finland in the war against the Soviet Union and how this can change the established attitude towards the country's neutrality when researching the subject from an individual perspective. Actions of Lithuanian government and its citizens are examined based on the research methods of document analysis, qualitative content analysis, and the comparative method. The document analysis method is used to collect empirical data and analyse the neutrality policy of the Lithuanian government, and the support of its population for Finland. The method of qualitative content analysis is applied to examine ways in which the conflict between the Soviets and the Finns was covered for a wide audience in Lithuanian media. The comparative method serves to reveal divergent actions and attitudes of the Lithuanian government and the population in and towards the Winter War¹. The sources used for this aim and objectives can be classified into three groups. The first group includes documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania contained in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, which reflected the behaviour of the President, the Government, and the Lithuanian delegation in the League of Nations when considering the exclusion of the USSR due to its military aggression against Finland (LCVA, f., 383. apr., 7, b. 1114, 2114). The second group includes documents of Lithuanian volunteers stored in the Military Archives in Helsinki (Sota-Arkisto, 1940), letters written by Lithuanian citizens in 1939–1940 to Väinö Aarnio, the Finnish Consul in Lithuania, which are preserved in the Joensuu Regional Archives (JOMA, 1939–1940. f., 1) and the documents published in the collection of documents compiled by the author of this paper on the Winter War and Lithuania, which reflected the attitudes and actions of Lithuanian citizens of that time regarding support for Finland (Janužytė 1997). The third group of sources consists of reports and political articles of that time printed in the pro-Government daily *Lietuvos aidas* (Echo of Lithuania)², military

¹¹ The war between Finland and the USSR in 1939–1940 in scholarly publications is referred to as the Winter War. Therefore, this name is used in this article.

² *The Lietuvos aidas* (published in 1917–1918 and in 1928–1940) was the official daily of the Lithuanian government and the Lithuanian Nationalist Union. The newspaper was issued on daily basis, with three daily editions (in the morning, afternoon, and evening) in the period from May to December 1939, followed by two editions from January to May 1940. It mostly covered issues of the national politics, economy, and foreign news. The daily had its correspondents in a number of foreign capitals, and its circulation was 90,000 copies in 1939 (Žeimantas).

magazines *Kardas*³ (Sword), *Karys*⁴ (Soldier), and *Trimitas*⁵ (Trumpet) which revealed the essential features of presenting the conflict to the general public in Lithuania.

Some reasons of neutrality

A number of common and specific reasons for the neutrality policy can be distinguished, which are characteristic of Lithuania. The first reason was prompted by international politics: after the failed attempts to create a system of collective security in Europe in the 1930s, the Baltic and Scandinavian states gradually moved towards and pursued a policy of neutrality in international relations. The second reason concerns the conflict between Lithuania and Poland over Vilnius city and region, which hindered the creation of a collective Baltic security or defence organization (aside from the Baltic Entente founded in 1934 by a treaty between Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia) able to coordinate foreign policy and security issues in the Baltic Sea region. The third reason was the beginning of the Second World War. After Germany attacked Poland on 1 September 1939, and the Soviet Union began hostilities against Poland on 17 September the same year, the front line came dramatically closer to Lithuania. After establishment of Soviet military bases with 20,000 troops under the Mutual Assistance Treaty between Lithuania and the Soviet Union of 10 October 1939, the level of threat to Lithuania's independence became high (Janužytė 2021, 97–98). To neutralise the threat to Lithuanian statehood arising from the Soviet Union, the Lithuanian government sought to remain neutral also when the Assembly was considering exclusion of the USSR from the League of Nations due to its military aggression against Finland (LCVA, f., 383. apr., 7, b. 1114, l., 21). It should be noted that the delegations of Lithuania as well as those of Latvia and Estonia acted with extreme caution and avoided participating in official discussions so that the USSR would not have a pretext to accuse them of supporting Finland. A message was sent to the international community that the delegations of the Baltic States to the League of Nations will be neutral towards both Finland and the USSR, i.e., they will neither defend nor support Finland. On 14 December 1939, the Assembly of the League of Nations voted in favour of expulsion of the USSR from the League of Nations, whereas Lithuania abstained. Voting data show that 31 states voted for exclusion of the USSR from the Organization of the League of Nations and 10 states abstained, among them three Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, and Denmark), three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), Bulgaria, Switzerland, Mexico, and China (LCVA, f.,

³ *Kardas* (published in 1925–1940) was the magazine of Lithuanian military officers. This semi-monthly was published by the Lithuanian Officers' Club in 1933–1940. It published articles on warfare, military history, armaments, issues of training and mentoring of officers. Its circulation was 2000 thousand in 1938 (Urbonas (a)).

⁴ *Karys* (published in 1919–1940) was the magazine of the Lithuanian Armed Forces. It was published by the Press and Education Unit of the General Staff of the Lithuanian Armed Forces since 1929. The magazine was intended for the soldiers, youth, and the broader public. It featured various articles on war subjects and had circulation of 33,000 copies in 1940 (Urbonas (b)).

⁵ *Trimitas* (published in 1920–1940) was a weekly magazine of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and patriotic society with circulation of 32,000 copies (in 1940). Its articles covered not only activities of riflemen and military-themed issues, but also the current news of Lithuanian political life and events of foreign countries (Trimitas).

383. apr., 7, b. 2114, l., 6; Vilkelis 1994, 54). After the vote, the delegations of the Baltic States issued a joint statement in which they indicated that they abstained as they had not participated in the debate of the special 13th Commission on expulsion of the USSR from the League of Nations. Such an argument did not convince diplomats. The delegations of the Baltic States felt isolation, cooling of relations and suspicion when communicating with foreign diplomats. Moreover, they felt like they had lost their trust as now they were regarded as “Russian agents” without the right to act freely and make decisions (LCVA, f., 383. apr., 7, b. 2114, l., 5, 12). Rudolf Holsti, the permanent representative of Finland to the League of Nations, ironically joked about the Baltic States behind the scenes of the Assembly: “The Russians had Estonia for breakfast, Latvia and Lithuania for lunch, and now they are looking for dessert in Finland.” (LCVA, f., 383. apr., 7, b. 2114, l., 5, 10). The decision of the Baltic States to abstain from voting was not unexpected for the Finns. They feared that Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia would even vote against expulsion of the USSR from the League of Nations. The Finns were more worried about the failure of Estonia to maintain neutrality, as Soviet planes shelled the Finland’s cities from the Soviet military bases in Estonia (Estijos neutralumas 1939, 1). This fact was not denied by the Estonians, and as a result diplomatic relations cooled down (LCVA, f., 383. apr., 7, b. 2114, l., 5, 10). The Finnish government was pragmatic about the neutrality of the Scandinavian countries during the conflict. Their support was of paramount importance for military transit, and it would be difficult to fight the USSR without the help of the Scandinavian states.

Dilemma: stay neutral or contradict the neutrality policy of the government

During the conflict, the Lithuanian government sought to remain neutral so as not to give a pretext for the USSR to accuse Lithuania of a pro-Finnish position and start an aggressive policy against Lithuania. Therefore, it was emphasised in the Lithuanian press that Lithuania strictly pursues a policy of neutrality with both Western and Eastern neighbouring countries and takes a neutral position in the event of a conflict. The position of some Lithuanian citizens differed from the neutrality policy pursued by the Lithuanian government. Their support for Finland can be classified into several types, i.e., it took the form of moral, financial support, requests for admission as volunteers to the Finnish army, and engagement as volunteers in the war against the Soviet Union.

From the very beginning of the war, inhabitants from various cities, towns, and villages kept sending condolences and pro-Finnish telegrams, postcards, and letters addressed to Väinö Aarnio, the Finnish consul, and Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, the commander-in-chief of the Finnish army, in support of the Finns against the Soviets. The Joensuu Regional Archives contain 33 pieces of correspondence from Lithuania expressing support of its people for the Finns in their war against the Soviets, and the gratitude of the Consulate of Finland in Lithuania to the people for their support (Janužytė 1997, 59–89). Inhabitants perceived resistance against the Soviet military aggression as a struggle for Finnish autonomy and expressed

the hope that the Finns would defeat the Soviets and defend their independence (JOMA, 1939. f., 1, no. 244, 245; 1940. f., 1, no 7, 14, 24, 61).

Lithuania's people, both as individuals and communities, collected and sent money orders to the Finnish consulate in Lithuania. In addition, 6 pieces of financial remittance correspondence from Lithuania are kept at the Joensuu Regional Archives (Janužytė 1997, 74–75, 80, 82–85, 88–89). The letter of 1 March 1940 from students of Tauragė state gymnasium can be singled out in which they expressed regret that Lithuania could not help Finland for known reasons, and asked to accept 20 Lithuanian litas and 80 cents collected by them and “[...] not to thank them in public [...] as they were sending the money without knowledge of the [...] gymnasium management.” (JOMA, 1940. f., 1, no. 55). Two aspects are important in that letter. Firstly, the reasons why the Lithuanian government is neutral in the event of a conflict were clear for the students but they, as citizens, had to take an active position and help Finland in her war against the Soviet Union. Secondly, when sending money to Finland, they clearly realised that they were opposed to the official Lithuanian politics. Therefore, to avoid adverse consequences for either the school leaders or the Lithuanian government, they asked to keep it secret. The choice of students to support Finland financially is a proof of their strong moral and civic principles to help the nations defending their sovereignty.

Some Lithuanian civilians and officers were determined to become volunteers and applied to serve in the armed forces of the Republic of Finland. The Joensuu Regional Archives also store 9 pieces of correspondence with requests from Lithuania (Janužytė 1997, 59, 64–65, 69–71, 73, 76–79, 81). It is possible to speculate and identify several reasons why they were not accepted as volunteers in the Finnish army. The fact was that the war lasted only slightly more than 3 months and there was no time to prepare all the necessary documents for their departure to Finland, also not everyone had military service experience, and their suitability to serve in the Finnish armed forces was questioned. In addition, there were fears that among the volunteers there might be agents recruited by the Soviet Union. For this reason the authorities avoided giving permission for them to leave for Finland as military volunteers.

According to the statistics of 13 March 1940, 11,663 foreign volunteers fought together with the Finns in the Winter War (8,680 from Sweden, 1,010 from Denmark, 695 from Norway, 372 from the USA (Finns), 346 from Hungary, 56 from Estonia, 51 from Belgium, 18 from Germany, 13 from the United Kingdom, 6 from Poland, 4 from Latvia, and 2 from Lithuania) (Talvisodan Historia 1979, 52). It was established based on the documents of the Military Archives in Helsinki that two Lithuanian citizens took part in the Winter War, namely Mykolas (Mikolas (Mikko)) Mikalūnas (Mikalunas) (date of birth 24 November 1905) and Georgas Erikas Žukas (Zukas) (date of birth 18 August 1907). As can be seen from the data provided in the questionnaires of their foreign volunteers, it is known that they were Lithuania's citizens of Lithuanian nationality and lived in Helsinki when the war began. Both were single, completed the military service in the Lithuanian army, had medical record stating their fitness for military service and recommendations from the Finns to be accepted as volunteers in

the Finnish army. On 9 January 1940, the two volunteers signed contracts for military service in the armed forces of the Republic of Finland (Sota-Arkisto 1940, 6574, 6574/7, 6574/9, 6574/11). The author of the article has not succeeded to find more information about the Lithuanian volunteers.

This study of aid to Finland from an individual perspective makes it possible to change the prevailing approach in historiography that the Lithuanian citizens were neutral in the Winter War.

The question is whether the Lithuanian media remained neutral when reporting on the Soviet Union's war against Finland. Unwilling to aggravate their relations with the Soviet Union, the Lithuanian government took all possible precautions and advised representatives of the media not to judge but remain impartial in the analysis of the war (Ministro pirmininko pareiškimai 1940, 1). From 30 November 1939 to 14 March 1940, the front page of the daily *Lietuvos aidas* almost every day featured reports on hostilities in Finland. The information was provided without any comment so that the Soviets could not accuse the Lithuanian media of siding with Finland. Moreover, from January 1940 onwards, the course of the war was covered on the basis of reports of the Finnish and USSR military leaderships whose statistical data about war casualties and other losses were contradictory. Such military magazines as *Kardas*, *Karys*, and *Trimitas* published more analytical articles on the Finnish armed forces, military strategies and tactics, battles, and armaments (Janužytė 2021, 116). To answer the question whether the Lithuanian media retained neutrality in covering the Winter War, it must be noted that they did not manage to write about it impartially in all cases. This is quite clearly shown by at least 2 facts discussed below. First, the press broadly covered the emergence of state and public, collective and individual initiatives to assist Finland in the war against the USSR and involvement of volunteers in the war with the Soviets. This may also have encouraged Lithuanian citizens to help the Finns collectively and individually in the war against the aggressor. Second, Lithuanian foreign policy commentators used the concept of “enemy” when writing about Soviet troops, thus drawing a clear “red line” between the aggressor (the Soviet Union) and Finland, which defended its sovereignty and territorial integrity. For example, the articles on tenacious fighting and battles in Finland read, “the enemy with a large military force attacked in the Karelian Isthmus”, “all enemy attacks were repulsed by the Finns”, “enemy warships and planes attacked some of the Finnish islands” (Suomijoje atkaklios kovos, 1939, 1; Suomijoje atkaktūs mūšiai, 1939, 1). Finnish soldiers were called conscious patriots who bravely and relentlessly defended independence of their country and could serve as role models of heroism for every small nation or state (Kiaulėnas 1939, 1487; Girius 1940, 143; Vilkelis 1940, 212).

Conclusion

Finally, it could be claimed that the policy of neutrality in Lithuania did not bring the expected results of preserving statehood: the USSR still occupied the country in 1940.

There was no common view in society on the observance of neutrality in the event of the war between the Soviet Union and Finland as the active position of some of the inhabitants striving to help Finland was contrary to the Lithuanian government's policy of neutrality. In other words, pro-Finnish actions of some Lithuanian citizens demonstrate that the society lacked a unified opinion as well as was inconsistent with the neutrality policy of the Lithuanian government.

Lithuanian citizens' support for Finland can be regarded as an expression of civic virtues in the country under the authoritarian regime of that time, since it was necessary to take an active civic position that did not coincide with the government policy.

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