

**Gintautas Jakštys**

## **Tripartite Authority on the Lithuanian Latvian Border in 1919: the example of Seda**

**Key words:** Lithuanian Armed Forces, Seda, Povilas Plechavičius, Commandant of Seda, Lithuanian Wars of Independence

### **Summary**

At the end of December 1918, when the German army began its withdrawal from the territory of Lithuania, the local population was faced with a situation in which the occupant administration was no longer able to maintain order in the regions, whereas the institutions of independent Lithuania did not have the resources to take over the governance in a very short period of time. In this uncertain situation, the tripartite rule developed in many parts of Lithuania. Often, three different authorities were operating in Lithuania at the same time, trying to consolidate their power in one way or another. Firstly, there was the still active German occupation administration, supported by German troops. Secondly, it was the militant revolutionaries who organized local councils and militias. And the third authority were the supporters of the independent Lithuania, who set up military commanderies and local self-defense units (they called themselves partisans or guerillas). The analysis of the activities of the Seda Commandant's Office in 1919 shows that the commandant's offices, which had been established at the end of 1918 (as self-defense units of partisans), played an important role not only in the struggle against the invading Red Army troops, but also prevented the pro-Bolshevik forces from taking root in the local self-governance. Due to Commandant's Headquarters, it was possible, in a relatively short time, not only to legitimize but also to consolidate the activities of the institutions of the independent Lithuania throughout Lithuania. Commandant's Offices played an equally important role in protecting the local population from individual and organized gangs of looters. This gave the local population greater confidence in the independent Lithuanian State and its institutions.

### **Trīspusējā vara uz Lietuvas un Latvijas robežas 1919. gadā: Sedas piemērs**

**Atslēgas vārdi:** Lietuvas bruņotie spēki, Seda, Povils Plechavičius, Sedas komandieris, Lietuvas neatkarības kari

## Kopsavilkums

1918. gada decembra beigās, kad vācu armija sāka atkāpšanos no Lietuvas teritorijas, vietējie iedzīvotāji saskārās ar situāciju, kad okupācijas administrācija vairs nespēja uzturēt kārtību reģionos, savukārt neatkarīgās Lietuvas institūcijām nebija resursu, lai ļoti īsā laikā pārņemtu pārvaldību. Šajos nenoteiktajos apstākļos daudzās Lietuvas daļās attīstījās trīspusēja vara. Lietuvā vienlaikus darbojās trīs dažādas iestādes, kas mēģināja nostiprināt savu varu. Pirmkārt, joprojām darbojās vācu okupācijas administrācija, ko atbalstīja vācu karaspēks. Otrkārt, tieši kaujinieciskie revolucionāri organizēja vietējās padomes un miliciju. Trešā vara – neatkarīgās Lietuvas atbalstītāji, kas izveidoja vietējās paš aizsardzības vienības (sevi dēvēja par partizāniem). Sedas komandantūras darbības analīze 1919. gadā liecina, ka komandantūras, kas tika izveidotas 1918. gada beigās (kā partizānu paš aizsardzības vienības), spēlēja svarīgu lomu ne tikai cīņā pret iebrukušajiem Sarkanās armijas karaspēkiem, bet arī neļāva proboļševiku spēkiem iesakņoties vietējā pašpārvaldē. Pateicoties komandantūras štābam, relatīvi īsā laikā bija iespējams ne tikai leģitimēt, bet arī nostiprināt neatkarīgās Lietuvas institūciju darbību visā Lietuvā. Komandantūrai bija svarīga loma vietējo iedzīvotāju aizsardzībā no individuālām un organizētām laupītāju bandām. Tas nodrošināja vietējiem iedzīvotājiem lielāku pārliecību par neatkarīgo Lietuvas valsti un tās institūcijām.

## Introduction

At the outbreak of World War I, almost the entire territory of present-day Lithuania was occupied by the Kaiser's German army. In 1915, Germany established an administrative-territorial unit in the territories of the Russian Empire occupied by the Eastern Front troops – *Oberost* (German: *Oberbefehlshaber der gesamten Deutschen Streitkräfte im Osten*), imposing a strict occupation regime on its territory. Despite the fact that the Council of Lithuania, chaired by Jonas Basanavičius (1851–1927), proclaimed the restoration of the independent State of Lithuania on 16 February 1918, the territory of Lithuania was actually controlled by the German occupation army. The situation changed dramatically after the November 1918 revolution in Germany. The new geopolitical realities created real opportunities for the full realization of Lithuanian independence. In order to take over the control of the territory, commandant's headquarters were established to consolidate the independent Lithuanian governance in the restored state. At the end of December 1918, the demoralized German army began to retreat from the Lithuanian territory, followed by the Red Army, which captured Vilnius on 5 January 1919, and later most of Lithuania. Lacking both financial and human resources, the Lithuanian government and the nascent Lithuanian army retreated from Vilnius to Kaunas. In this uncertain situation, the tripartite rule developed in many parts of Lithuania. Often, three different authorities were operating in Lithuania at the same time, trying to establish their power in one way or another. Firstly, there was the still functioning German occupation administration, supported by German troops. Secondly, the militant revolutionaries who organized local councils and units of Militia. The supporters of the independent Lithuania were the third authority, who set up military commandant's headquarters and

local self-governance offices. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the occupying German army was not only demoralized, but also actively engaged in the so-called “Spartacists”, who not only created soldiers’ councils, but also actively hindered the state institutions of the independent Lithuania from taking over the control of the state power. Refugees returning from Russia also played a significant role in destabilizing the situation in Lithuania. Some of them were fascinated with revolutionary ideas and became active in helping the approaching Red Army to establish “people’s power” in Lithuania. The local population, seeing the chaos and seeking to defend themselves against arbitrary and marauding gangs, started to set up local self-defense units (who called themselves partisans) and the so-called “Republics”. In 1918–1923, the Republics of Joniškėlis, Perloja, Raseiniai, Veliuona, Babtai, Vandžiogala, and Varviskė were functioning in Lithuania.

The aim of this article, by referring to the example of the commandant’s headquarter of Seda (Mažeikiai district), is to analyze the conditions and circumstances under which the governance of the independent Lithuania was established in the remote regions of the state.

### **The situation in Seda**

On 22 December 1918, the German army withdrew from Seda and Skuodas. When the German army began to withdraw from the region, the local population faced a new problem. The weakening of the German military administration created not only favorable conditions for the establishment of local self-governance, but at the same time increased the activity of criminal elements. At the end of December 1918, the local population began to encounter ever increasing cases of looting (LMA VB RS 193-13-2). The population was plundered by retreating demoralized German soldiers, prisoners of war travelling home from prisoner-of-war camps of Germany, and gangs of various criminal elements who sought to take advantage of the situation and plunder the population with impunity. The situation was aggravated by the fact that there was very little news or information from the Lithuanian Provisional Government, and even that reached the local population very belatedly. In addition to the gangs organized by criminal elements, local councils and militia units organized by militant revolutionaries sympathizing with the Bolsheviks began to spring up in smaller towns. With no other source of funding, these revolutionary councils used to tax richer local farmers. Militiamen coming from small towns would flog farmers if they found weapons the latter needed to defend themselves against marauders (LMA VB RS 193-13-2).

On 1 January 1919, the Bolshevik Party Conference of Samogitia was held in Seda, during which the Samogitia Military Revolutionary Committee was established. This course of events was a source of anxiety and fear for local farmers and business people. In the face of this situation, local farmers began to look for persons who could organize and lead the so-called local partisan detachment to fight against criminal plunderers and to defend against the self-proclaimed local authorities of militant revolutionaries and their militiamen. In addition to that, the local farmers committed themselves not only to provide the self-defense units (partisans) with food and equipment, but also to pay a monthly salary of 200 marks. Eventually, the organization

of the partisans' unit was undertaken by Povilas and Aleksandras Plechavičiai, former officers who had returned from the front of the Russian Imperial Army. It should be noted that their parents were local landowners near Seda in Bukončiai, which also suffered from arbitrariness and robbers (LMA VB RS 193-13-4). In a relatively short period of time, the brothers Povilas and Aleksandras Plechavičiai organised a group of several dozen local partisans, covering the districts of Skuodas, Mažeikiai, and Akmenė. The number of fighters in Officer Povilas Plechavičius's partisan detachment can be seen from the oath-taking ceremony held on 11 January 1919 in the church of Skuodas, during which Officer Plechavičius, his brother Aleksandras, and about 20 other partisans took the oath (LCSA, 930-2P-79a-32). In January 1919, the detachment, organized and led by Officer P. Plechavičius, took part in 15 battles against the Red Army units and those supporting them. This activity was soon duly noticed. On 24 January 1919, the Bolshevik leadership issued a proclamation promising a reward of 300,000 gold roubles to whoever would shoot or deliver P. Plehavičius alive (LCSA, 930-2P-79a-65).

### **Establishment and activities of Seda Commandant's Headquarters on the Lithuanian-Latvian border**

As a professional officer, Povilas Plechavičius was aware of the legitimacy of his actions. Therefore, as early as 19 January 1919, he received permission from the German administration in Liepāja to travel to Gdańsk and from there to Kaunas. After stabilization of the situation in the Seda district, he was granted by the local German administration permission to go to Kaunas. On 16 February 1919, he arrived in Kaunas, the provisional capital of Lithuania, where on 18 February he was officially appointed as the Commandant of the Seda District by Order of the Ministry of Defense No. 44 (Orders for Army 1919). This change in the situation caused considerable confusion in the councils led by the militant revolutionaries, whose legitimacy was called into question. By becoming an official Lithuanian state official and ensured the support of the German VI Army Corps stationed in Liepaja, officer P. Plechavičius *de facto* took control of the region into his hands. With several dozen armed partisans under his command, he became a real force capable of asserting the jurisdiction of the independent Lithuania in the region. It must be admitted that Officer Plechavičius was exceptionally opposed to the Bolsheviks and their sympathizers. The militant revolutionaries tried to influence the Provisional Government of Lithuania in Kaunas and to convince it that they were not supporters of the Bolsheviks in order to replace Plechavičius with a more moderate commandant. For that reason anonymous signed complaints were written "about the activities" of Officer Plechavičius, the Commandant of Seda. There were so many complaints accumulated that on 28 August 1919 all the material was handed over to the interrogator of the Army Court, who was to carry out a detailed investigation (LCSA, 384-3-44; 1-76). Augustinas Bounovenauskas in his complaint concerning the activities of the Commandant of Seda, Officer P. Plechavičius, written on 25 April 1919, stated, among other things, that in Seda, from January to 20 April 1919, 50 persons were shot to death without trial, yet the number would be approximately 100 persons if the surrounding areas were

taken into account. However, in the provided complaint he was able to specifically identify only 7 persons (LCSA, 384-4-44-4). On 6 June 1919, an officer of the Legal Division of the Ministry of Defense, arrived at the scene and, after the investigation, stated that on the personal order of the Commandant P. Plechavičius only his maid had been shot to death after it had been established that she had been collecting and providing intelligence information to the Bolsheviks. The other 6 persons named in the complaint were executed by German soldiers (LCSA, 384-4-44-56).

The study reveals a complex situation that emerged by the Lithuanian-Latvian border. The data collected suggest that the Seda Commandant's Office under the command of Officer Plechavičius operated in three directions. Their first task was to fight against the advancing Red Army in order to prevent them from gaining a foothold in Skuodas, Mažeikiai, Akmenė, Kretinga, and Telšiai. These operations were often supported by the troops of the German VI Army Corps stationed in Liepāja. This cooperation was motivated by a mutual interest in deterring the Red Army's further westward drive towards Germany. As already mentioned, an equally important task was to establish the jurisdiction of the Republic of Lithuania in this region. It should be noted that the councils led by the militant revolutionaries did not recognize the appointed representatives of the Lithuanian Republic. They strictly instructed the Commissioner appointed by the Lithuanian Minister of the Interior, Ferdinandas Kauneckas, and the Commandant of Seda, Officer Povilas Plechavičius, to move out of the county with all their credentials, certificates, and appointments (Jankauskas 1997, 193). For these reasons, Officer P. Plechavičius focused on disbanding these committees and disarming the militias they had formed. It often happened that soldiers under the command of Commandant Plechavičius used force to disperse various rallies organized by left-wing organizations. Finally, in order to win the favour of the local population, much attention was paid to protecting the inhabitants from the gangs of looters that had formed and were torturing and marauding the local population. In order to ensure maximum area control and to react promptly to attacks by criminal elements, the Seda Commandant's partisans were deployed in small groups at the checkpoints where they were to protect the local population from organized gangs of robbers and looting by individual criminal elements (LMA VB RS 193-97-3). One such public execution of a gang of robbers took place in Seda on 25 April 1919 at noon, when seven persons were shot dead in accordance with the wartime law (LCSA, 384-3-44-32). Another gang of five was executed in Skuodas at a similar time, at the request of the head of the Skuodas police station. However, neither the earlier nor the later complaints mentioned the names of those executed for criminal offences. It is most likely that they were "included" in the total number of persons executed.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the activities of the Seda Commandant's Headquarters in 1919 shows that the commandant's offices, which were established at the end of 1918 as self-defense (partisan) units, played not only an important role in the struggle against the invading Red Army troops, but also prevented the pro-Bolshevik forces from taking root in the local self-governance. Owing to the commandant's offices, it was possible

in a relatively short time not only to legitimize but also to consolidate the activities of the institutions of the independent Lithuania throughout the entire Lithuania. Commandant's Offices played an equally important role in protecting the local population from individual and organized gangs of robbers. This gave the local greater confidence in the independent Lithuanian State and its institutions.

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