On the pathway to independence: The Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front (1917)

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Abstract

When the World War I began Lithuania was on the vanguards of the military operations. Around 60,000 Lithuanians were recruited in the Russian Army and employed on the operational fronts of the war. However, they were not blind performers of Tsarist ambitions, but, as The Amber Declaration showed, nurtured political ambitions of their own. The document issued on 4/17 August 1914 was signed, inter alia, by the patriarch of national credo, Jonas Basanavičius, and clearly affirmed the Lithuanian ideals, i.e. the aim of unifying Lithuania with Lithuania Minor then in German hands and the awarding of an autonomous status to a united Lithuania within the Russian Empire.

This article tackles an enticing moment in the process of national rebirth, the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front held in Bender (Tighina), in southern Bessarabia, on 1-3 November 1917, calling for the creation of a Lithuanian national state. How this congress and the proclamation it issued fitted into the general frame of self-determination movements and Lithuanian national revival of 1917-1918, which led to the rebirth of the Lithuanian state? Who were the conveners and the participants to

Rezumat

La începutul Primul Război Mondial, Lituania a fost în prim-planul operațiunilor militare. Aproximativ 60.000 de lituanieni au fost recrutați în armata rusă și angajați pe fronturile operaționale ale războiului. Cu toate acestea, aceștia nu au fost interpreți orbi ai ambițiilor țariste, ci, așa cum a arătat Declarația Ambrei, au nutrit aspirații politice proprii. Documentul emis la 4/17 august 1914 a fost semnat, printre alții, de patriarhul naționalismului lituanian, Jonas Basanavičius, și a afirmat clar idealurile lituaniene, unificarea Lituaniei cu Lituania Mică aflată în mâinile germane și acordarea unui statut autonom unei Lituanii unite în cadrul Imperiului Rus.

Acest articol abordează un moment interesant din procesul renașterii naționale, Congresul reprezentanților ofițerilor și militarilor lituanieni de pe Frontul Român, organizat la 1-3 noiembrie 1917 la Bender (Tighina), în sudul Basarabiei, care a stipulat crearea statului independent lituanian. Cum s-au încadrat acest congres și proclamația emisă cu acest prilej în cadrul general al mișcărilor de autodeterminare și renaștere națională lituaniană din perioada 1917-1918, care a dus la reconstituirea statului lituanian? Cine au fost inițiatorii și participanții la acest congres? Ce argumente au

this congress? What arguments did they put forward in their national-building claims? What role did it play on the pathway to Lithuanian independence?

Overlooked in most of the Lithuanian historical treatises, the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front in Bender City had in fact of greater significance than it allows to be understood when counting solely the relatively lower visibility of its leaders or the direct institutional lineage to the proclamation of independence.

prezentat în revendicările privind construcția națională? Ce rol a jucat în genealogia independenței lituaniene?

Neglijat în majoritatea tratatelor istorice lituaniene, Congresul reprezentanților ofițerilor și militarilor lituanieni de pe Frontul românesc din orașul Bender a avut, în realitate, o semnificație mai mare decât permite să se înțeleagă atunci când se are în vedere doar vizibilitatea ceva mai mică a conducătorilor săi sau linia instituțională directă cu organismul care a proclamat independența de stat.

Keywords: The Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers; Romanian front; Lithuanian independence; World War I; self-determination; devolution; Russian Revolution; Taryba

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Introduction

When the World War I began Lithuania was on the vanguards of the military operations. Around 60,000 Lithuanians were recruited in the Russian Army and employed on the operational fronts of the war.¹ However, they were not blind performers of Tsarist ambitions, but, as *The Amber Declaration* showed, nurtured political ambitions of their own. The document issued on 4/17 August 1914 was signed, *inter alia*, by the patriarch of national credo, Jonas Basanavičius², and clearly affirmed the Lithuanian ideals, i.e.

¹ Zigmantas Kiaupa, *The history of Lithuania* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005), 228.

² Jonas Basanavičius (1851–1927) was the most prominent Lithuanian intellectual of late 19th and early 20th century. After graduating the secondary school in the cultural city of Marijampolė, he moved to Moscow graduating the Medical School in 1879. The following year he started a medical and political career of 25 years in Bulgaria. Basanavičius received Bulgarian citizenship, married a Bohemian German in 1884, was shortly chosen Prince Ferdinand I of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha's physician and became a member of the Bulgarian Democratic Party. Regardless his involvement in Bulgarian politics, he remained attached to the Lithuanian roots and became a founder and the main figure of *Aušra* (published since 1883), the main newspaper promoting and heralding the birth of modern Lithuanian nationalism. Returning in Lithuania in 1905, he was chosen chairman of the Great Assembly of Vilnius convened on 21 November 1905 in the context of Russian 1905 Revolution. He remained steadfast to his cultural convictions and thus founded the Lithuanian Scholarly Society and attempted to focus the Lithuanian nationalist which he helped nurturing on

the aim of unifying Lithuania with Lithuania Minor then in German hands and the awarding of an autonomous status to a united Lithuania within the Russian Empire.³ Already in August 1914 the advance of the Russian Army towards East Prussia induced the atmosphere of war in the Baltic states. A year later, city after city and village after village, Lithuania fell under the occupation of the German Army, which devastated the city of Šiauliai, 50 towns and 1,200 villages. The last of the occupied lands was the historical capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the multicultural city of Vilnius (18 September / 1 October 1917).⁴ No less than 550,000 inhabitants of Lithuania found refuge in Russia in order to shelter themselves from the horrors of World War I.⁵ Alongside with Lithuanian soldiers of the Russian Army, some of these refugees played an important role in the process of national reawakening in the latter part of the war.

This article tackles an enticing moment in the process of national rebirth, the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front held in Bender, in southern Bessarabia, on 1-3 November 1917, calling for the creation of a Lithuanian national state. How this congress and the proclamation it issued fitted into the general frame of self-determination movements and Lithuanian national revival of 1917-1918, which led to the rebirth of the Lithuanian state? Who were the conveners and the participants to this congress? What arguments did they put forward in their national-building claims? What role did it play on the pathway to Lithuanian independence?

cultural sphere. A signatory of the Lithuanian Declaration of Independence of 16 February 1918, he seemed prone to a prominent role in the political life of independent Lithuania, but instead chose to remain the leading figure of Lithuanians in the historical capital of the country, Vilnius, which was then occupied by Poland, Saulius Sužiedėlis, *Historical Dictionary of Lithuania* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 63-64. On the Great Assembly of Vilnius, see Saulius Sužiedėlis, „A Century After: The ‘Great Diet of Vilnius’ Revisited,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 4 (2007): 419-432

³ Alfonsas Eidintas, Alfredas Bumblauskas, Antanas Kulakauskas, Mindaugas Tamosaitis, *The History of Lithuania* (Vilnius: Publishing House "Eugrimas", 2013), 146.

⁴ Silviu Miloiu, Florin Anghel, Veniamin Ciobanu, Zigmantas Kiaupa, *Istoria Lituaniei* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2011), 160 (hereafter Miloiu et. al a).

⁵ Tomas Balkelis, "Nation-building and world war I refugees in Lithuania, 1918-1924", *Journal of Baltic Studies* vol. 34, issue 4 (2003): 432-456

In order to answer these questions, I resorted to a blend of documentary research and examination, historiography review, historical comparison and content analysis. At the backbone of this article stands the investigation of two documents held by the National Archives of Lithuania and published in the volume *The Romanian-Lithuanian Relations. Diplomatic documents (1919-1944)*, namely the Minutes of the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers on the Romanian Front in Bender City in 1917 and the Correspondence of the Association of Lithuanian Military Officers Additional Committee on the Romanian Front, 2 December 1917. Relevant for the Lithuanian efforts to repatriate its citizens from Ukraine and Romania at the end of World War I is also the Letter from the Government of the Republic of Lithuania by which it delegated Romanas Chadakauskas as representative with diplomatic affairs to Ukraine and Romania, Vilnius, dated 19 November 1918.⁶

Investigating these documents gives us a clearer image of the popular endorsement and legitimacy of Lithuanian claims of independence. Historiography has already revealed the support for independence among large circles of Lithuanians in Lithuania proper, in Russia, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden⁷, but has neglected so far to integrate more thoroughly

⁶ Silviu Miloiu (coordinator), Florin Anghel, Dalia Bukelevičiūtė, Alexandru Ghișă, Ramojus Kraujelis, Bogdan-Alexandru Schipor, *The Romanian-Lithuanian Relations. Diplomatic documents (1919-1944)* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2011), 25-37.

⁷ See, for instance, Raimundas Lopata, "The Lithuanian Card in Russian Policy, 1914–1917," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, 42, no. 3 (1994): 340-54; Bent Jensen, "Lithuania's declaration of independence > Danish and Scandinavian reactions, 4 1999): 40-53; LtCol Andrew Parrott, "The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence," *Baltic Defence Review*, 8, no. 2 (2002): 131-158; Chistian Rust, "Self-determination at the beginning of 1918 and the German reaction," *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 13 (2008): 47-66; Joachim Tauber, "„No Allies’: The Lithuanian Taryba and The National Minorities 1916–1918," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 4 (2007): 433-444; David S. Foglesong, "The United States, self-determination and the struggle against Bolshevism in the Eastern Baltic region, 1918–1920," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 107-144; Robert L. Nelson, "The Baltics as Colonial Playground: Germany in the East, 1914–1918," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2011), 9-19; Joachim Tauber, "German Eastern Policy, 1917-1918," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (2008): 67-74; Edmundas Gimžauskas, "The Rada of Vilnius Belarusians and the Council of Lithuania: allies or adversaries?," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (2008): 119-126; Česlovas Laurinavičius, "One again on Soviet statehood in Lithuania in 1918-1919," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (2008): 179-189.

the pledge to independence of the Lithuanian military located on the southern front voiced in Bender, Bessarabia. We shall first give an overview of the general situation of Lithuanians in Russia, undertake an analysis of the self-determination streams which flowed into East-Central Europe and the Russian Empire and the Lithuanian drive towards independence. We will then proceed to the historical analysis of the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front and focus on the documents issued as a result of this summit and the two other aforementioned documents. Comparisons and parallels with other documents asserting the independence of Lithuania will be also carried out.

The twilight of the First World War and the ideas of self-determination in East-Central Europe

When the German Army occupied Lithuania the region had belonged to the Russian Empire for more than a century and would legally remain therein with the status of occupied territories until 1918. For two years Lithuania was administered by the German Eastern Front through *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost*. The situation in most of the new military provinces in which Lithuanians lived, such as Vilnius, Lithuania (with headquarters in Kaunas), Suvalkija, Courland, Grodno and Bialystok was appalling, while in Berlin plans signed by Prof. Max Sering of the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung der inneren Kolonisation* (Society for the promotion of internal colonization) in September 1915 and October 1916 called for the colonization of Lithuanian lands by German farmers.⁸ Already at this time concepts such as *Herrenvolk* and *Lebensraum* were *expressis verbis* being employed. Sering's ideas received the backing of outstanding figures of the German military such as Erich von Ludendorff who recalled the civilization mission of the Germans in Eastern Europe. The song *Mein Deutsches Vaterland* had to be sang in churches on Sundays.⁹

In the meanwhile, freed from Russian occupation but under the joke of the German military administration the Lithuanians fused in a series of organizations in Lithuania or in exile, the most important of which was The

⁸ Nelson, 13.

⁹ Kiaupa, 230-234.

Lithuanian Committee for the Discussion of Political Affairs, which counted Jonas Basanavičius, Antanas Smetona, Aleksandras Stulginskis, Juozas Stankevičius, and Petras Klimas among its members, and made attempts to turn the Lithuanian problem into a European one. In mid-March 1917 the German-occupied Lithuanians were reunited within the *Militärverwaltung Litauen* (The Military Administration of Lithuania), whereas the ones settling in Russia or drafted in the Russian Army created the Lithuanian National Taryba, which three months later met in the first Seimas in Petrograd.¹⁰

The Bolshevik coup of October 1917 had a tremendous impact on the Lithuanians. A Lithuanian National Diet of 222 delegates assembled at the Vilnius Theatre on 11 December 1917 and a first document proclaiming the restoration of Lithuania's independence was issued. The document had to take into account the situation of the country which was under German occupation and therefore the new state emerged rather as a German protectorate than a fully independent state. In matters of foreign and economic policy, trade, transportation, customs etc. Lithuania was dependent on Berlin.¹¹ Germany would recognize under these terms the independence of Lithuania next year on 23 March, and soon Wilhelm von Urach of Württemberg was proclaimed, following the advice of chairman of Catholic Party Mathias Erzberger as King Mindaugas the Second.¹² It seemed like a compromise was found between the German ambitions of controlling the area and the Lithuanian desire of statehood, but the settlement was short-lived. Even if the most radical plans of the German advocates of *Herrenvolk* and *Lebensraum* were jeopardized, their proponents would not give up so easily. On the other hand, the Lithuanians, initially content with an autonomous statute, recalled the glory of their Grand Duchy and started to look for a complete restitution of independence.

Indeed, Lithuanians were quite an exception among the nations situated on the Western verge of the Russian Empire. Alongside with the Poles, and for a few centuries together with them, they had a state of their

¹⁰ Ibid., 160.

¹¹ Mindaugas Maksimaitis, „Lietuvos valstybės ir teisės atgimimo koncepcijos formavimasis“ [Formation of the Concept of Rebirth of Lithuanian Statehood and Law], *Jurisprudencija* 20, no. 1 (2013), 11.

¹² Kiaupa, 323.

own to refer to. At times, this state constituted an impressive regional power of 800,000 sq.km., which was able to conquer even Moscow. This history started to be remembered especially from mid-19th century among the middle classes of Lithuania and constituted an engine in the drive towards independence.¹³ This trend was further prompted inter alia by President Wilson's 14 Points and Lenin's affirmation of the right of nations to self-determination with large echoes in the whole East Central Europe.¹⁴

In the meanwhile, the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of early March 1918 separated *de jure* Lithuania from the Russian state and Lithuanians felt encouraged to differentiate themselves from the empire. The National Council (Lietuvos Taryba) of 20 members (including Jonas Basanavičius and Antanas Smetona) was formed and this body would eventually secure the full independence of Lithuania. On 16 February a new declaration (whose originals were recently discovered) was adopted on Pilies Street 26 proclaiming the full independence of Lithuania with its capital in Vilnius:

"The Council of Lithuania in its session of February 16, 1918 decided unanimously to address the governments of Russia, Germany, and other states with the following declaration:

The Council of Lithuania, as the sole representative of the Lithuanian nation, based on the recognized right to national self-determination, and on the Vilnius Conference's resolution of September 18–23, 1917, proclaims the restoration of the independent state of Lithuania, founded on democratic

¹³ Alvydas Nikžentaitis, "The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth As an Ideological Oundation of the Unity of Intermarium?," *Politeja : Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych I Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego* 6 (2018): 91-105

¹⁴ There is a rich literature on the limits of Wilsonianism in terms of self-determination, especially in what regards former Russian territory, see Betty Miller Unterberger, "The United States and National Self-Determination: A Wilsonian Perspective," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Fall, 1996): 926-41; Allen Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson and the Principle of 'National Self-Determination': a Reconsideration", *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002): 419-436; Norman A. Graebner, and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 54; Eugene P. Trani, "Woodrow Wilson and the Decision to Intervene in Russia: A Reconsideration". *The Journal of Modern History*, 48 (1976), no. 3: 440-461; Derek Heater, *National Self-Determination: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2019).

principles, with Vilnius as its capital, and declares the termination of all state ties which formerly bound this State to other nations.

The Council of Lithuania also declares that the foundation of the Lithuanian State and its relations with other countries will be finally determined by the Constituent Assembly, to be convoked as soon as possible, elected democratically by all its inhabitants.”¹⁵

In November 1918, in circumstances turned bleak to Germany and the allowed the Lithuanians to ask King Mindaugas II to leave the throne and the country, and on November 2nd 1918 the country became a Republic as it is still today. A new provisional Constitution was adopted the same day and the power was entrusted to Antanas Smetona¹⁶ in his capacity of President of Taryba and Augustinas Voldemaras as Prime Minister.¹⁷ This was not, however, the end of a very complex and difficult drive towards statehood and its international recognition.

Following the independence of Finland of 6 December 1917, the proclamation of Lithuanian independence was the second in the eastern Baltic region, soon to be emulated by Estonia on February 24 and Latvia on

¹⁵ Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Zalys, Alfred Erich Sen, and Edvardas Tuskenis, *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of First Republic, 1918-1940* (Vilnius: Vaga, 2004), 29-30.

¹⁶ Antanas Smetona (1874-1944) was Lithuania's founding father and its authoritarian head of state between 1927 and 1940. Born on 10 August 1874 in Ukmerge region, Lithuania, Russian Empire, Smetona graduated in law in 1902 at St. Petersburg University. Soon he became involved in politics, journalism and teaching. As editor of the newspaper *Viltis* (The Hope) from 1907, he advocated national unity, an ideal he was to uphold during his entire political career. One of the main organizers of the Lithuanian Conference in Vilnius (18-23 September 1917), he eventually became the chairman of the Lithuanian State Council. In this capacity, Smetona signed the Lithuanian Declaration of Independence from Russia on 16 February 1918. The State Council elected him on 4 April 1919 the first President of the Republic of Lithuania. In the aftermath of a military coup against the Socialist government in December 1926, Smetona was re-elected President of Lithuania (as he would also be in 1931 and 1938). In April 1927 he dissolved the Parliament and started building a nationalistic and paternalist regime. Smetona was called *Tautos Vadas* (Nation's Leader). His regime collapsed abruptly following the conclusion of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (23 August 1939) that ended in Lithuania's incorporation into Soviet Union during 1939-1940. Upon his government's reluctance to resist militarily to the Soviets, Smetona handed over power on 15 June and secretly fled to Germany, reaching the U.S.A. at the beginning of 1941. Smetona died in a fire at his home in Cleveland on 9 January 1944.

¹⁷ B. Darijus, M. Gediminas, & V. Milda, "The role and place of the preamble in Lithuanian constitutional regulation", *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, 8, no. 2 (2015), 136-158

18 November. This reverberated in the entire Baltic area, in Western Russia and beyond it.

The Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front in Bender City

In fact, many networks were already operational at the time of the proclamation as the war created new unprecedented opportunities of interactions and contacts. A Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front in Bender City was summoned on November 1-3, 1917 whose resolutions prefaced the proclamation of 16 February 1918.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the Congress's name, Bender did not yet belong to Romania before the decision of *Sfatul Țării* (Country Council) of March 27th, 1918 of unification with Romania.

After the formal scrutiny and approval by the Congress, forty-eight representatives attended at the congress, five additional guests appearing at the meeting having a deliberative vote. By secret ballot a presidium was elected, Doctor in Medicine Bol. Kaunas receiving 45 votes, a soldier named A. Babilius (who was also the initiator of the Congress) only one less, praporshchik Žilinskas 42 votes and a clerk K. Juknevičius 29 votes. Eventually, other delegates showed up making a total of 89 voters. Babilius, Žilinskas, Juknevičius alongside Lithuanian physician and future eminent politician Eliziejus Draugelis¹⁹ and equally importantly the future prominent

¹⁸ "Protokolai Lietuvių karininkų atstovų Rumunų fronto suvažiavimo, įvykusių Benderų mieste 1917 metuose", Lietuvos vyriausiojo archyvaro tarnyba (National Archives of Lithuania), f. 384, ap. 3, b. 630, l. 78-79; Miloiu et al., 25-37.

¹⁹ Eliziejus Draugelis (1888 - 1981) was born on 11 April 1888 in Vilkaviškis county, Gižai parish. He graduated in 1914 the Faculty of Medicine of Moscow University, after serving from 1910 as chairman of Rūta Moscow Students' Association. During wartime he was recruited as a physician for three years. Eventually he was selected member of the Supreme Lithuanian Council in Russia, had been shortly imprisoned by the new Soviet Regime before returning to Lithuania and being nominated as member of the Council of Lithuania in 1918, in the Marijampolė City Council and later mayor of the city. Elected in the Parliament, he became Minister of the Interior (1919-1920) and continued to play a crucial role both in high politics, health care politics and medicine. An adversary of dictator Antanas Smetona who had him imprisoned for five months, in the 1930s he would devote himself to medicine. Member of the Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party during World War II, he succeeded extracting himself from the country before the renewed Red Army occupation, spent three

general Vincas Vitkauskas²⁰ were elected for the executive committee of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front.

The main issues stood at the centre of the congress regarded organisation, the national issue, and the attitude in respect of the Russian Constituent Assembly, followed by debates. Unanimously, the Congress agreed to hail the formation of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Military Officers, the triumvirate for the establishment of the Supreme National Body in Russia constituted of Jonas Jablonskis, Pranas Mašiotas and Kazys Grinius, the Rada of Ukraine on the Romanian Front and the congress of the front of Romanian comrades and the Rumcherod.²¹

years in Germany as a camp physician and ended his career in Brazil as a professor at Faculty of Medicine of the University of São Paulo, Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, „Dalių Steigiamoji Seimo narių (1920-1922) biografijos“, at https://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter/w5_show?p_r=4160&p_d=2735&p_k=1 (accessed on 22.05.2018).

²⁰ Vincas Vitkauskas (1890-1965) came from a poor farmer family which managed to earn a living as a result of his father's hard work in Pennsylvanian coal mines. This allowed his son to study mathematics at Moscow State University. Recruited in the Russian Army he became a junior army officer (*praporshchik*) after attending the short-term courses of Alekseevskoe Military School located in Moscow. When he was elected to the Bender Congress he was a member of the 5th Infantry Regiment belonging to the 9th Army. In 1919 he joined the Lithuanian Army and fought in the independence wars asserting the country's independence against Soviets, Germans and Polish. His professional position was fostered by Antanas Merkys whom he met on the Romanian Front. Although he supported the coup of Antanas Smetona, his career lingered until 1930s when he was raised to position of inspector of the infantry. He was made a general in 1939 and soon promoted commander of the Lithuanian army. He marched into Vilnius on 28 October 1939 following the Soviet-Lithuanian Mutual Assistance Treaty imposed as an outcome of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty. On 15 June 1940 he counselled the political leadership to accept the Soviet ultimatum and consent to the loss of Lithuanian independence. To prove right some of the misgivings of his army comrades and political bosses, he continued to serve under Soviet-dominated people's government as Minister of Defense and accepted the assignment of calling for the official Soviet annexation in a delegation of 20 Lithuanian representatives voyaging to Moscow. He even received an appointment to Stalin and Soviet Commissar of Defense Semion Timoshenko in order to prepare the ground for dismantling the Lithuanian Army wherein he served for two decades. Now a Soviet lieutenant general, he was elevated to membership in the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union and the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR, professorship, etc. Alfred Erich Senn, *Lithuania 1940: Revolution from Above* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 54, 75, 78, 105, 108, 120, 133, 141, 144, 145, 173, Eidintas, Zalyis, Sen, Tuskenis, 182-183; Eidintas, Bumblauskas, Kulauskas, Tamošaitis, 212-213; Dangiras Mačulis, Darius Staliūnas, *Lithuanian nationalism and the Vilnius Question, 1883-1940* (Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2015), 177.

²¹ Miloju et al., 25-37.

The establishment of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Military Officers belongs to the countless initiatives of framing the soldiers in nation-builders that flourished as a result of the Russian Revolution. Jablonskis, Mašiotas and Grinius, the founders of the *Trijų tarybos*, were well established intellectuals who would continue to play a key role in independent Lithuania. Grandfather of Vytautas Landsbergis, Jonas Jablonskis (1860–1930), nicknamed “Rygiškių Jonas” (John from Rygiškiai), was the gifted offspring of a farmer who started at the end of the 19th century to study the Lithuanian dialects and shape them in the interwar period, with governmental support, into standard Lithuanian of today. He grounded this linguistic construct on the idiom of aukštaičiai (a dialect spoken in Suvalkija).²² Mašiotas (1863–1940) came from a farmer’s family as well, studied Physics and Mathematics at Moscow University and gained notoriety as one of the pens of the pioneering Lithuanian language newspapers *Aušra* and *Varpas*. Eventually, he grew into a diligent writer and translator and was a children favourite for his fiction books devoted to them. He was chosen in the *Trijų tarybos* with the support of the Lithuanian military representatives and was lifted to the position of vice chairman of the Supreme Lithuanian Council. Father-in-law of celebrated Lithuanian diplomat and foreign minister Juozas Urbšys, during the interwar period Mašiotas held key positions in the Ministry of Education and the education sector in general.²³ Kazys Grinius (1866–1950) raised to the status of head of state during interwar period between 7 June and 19 December 1926, being removed from power by the same coup of Antanas Smetona which rocketed Mašiotas’s career. A physician educated at the University of Moscow, Grinius came from a higher positioned family when compared to Jablonskis and Mašiotas. Before the war he gained audience as an intellectual, journalist for *Varpas*, history author, social activist who swore allegiance to Lithuanian national credo and one of the faithful supporters of the rule of law, diversity,

²² Eidintas, Zalyš, Sen, Tuskenis, 2, 130; Saulius A. Suziedelis, *Historical Dictionary of Lithuania* (Scarecrow Press, 2011), 165, „The eternal search for normality” (2018, Feb 17), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.am.e-information.ro/docview/2002586351?accountid=136549>

²³ Algirdas Grigaravičius, “Politinė lietuvių veikla Rusijoje 1917 metais”, *Darbai ir dienos* 60 (2013), 23–72.

dialogue and democracy, which he fostered in independent Lithuania as Prime Minister and chief of republic. Following the coup, he manifested his resentment against the dictatorship principles, protested against Nazi Antisemitism in Lithuania during the World War II and got arrested, finally finding his relief in exile after 1944.²⁴

While the first two bodies regarded directly the Lithuanian national renaissance and the document does not mention reasons for greeting their appearance, in all other cases arguments were offered. The Lithuanians regarded the Ukrainian and Romanian bodies, which were already harbouring inimical views with regard to the geographic definition of the national realm and borders, as foster-brothers fed by similar national and social ideals.

The Central Rada was founded in early March 1917 in the wake of the Russian Revolution under the head of Mykhailo Hrushevsky supported by a new generation of Ukrainian nationalists. The initial goal was to seek for the territorial autonomy of Ukraine, which was also supported by Ukrainian military units. In summer of 1917 Rada was elevated to the status of parliament. The Bolshevik coup of October 1917 prompted the more radical Ukrainian nationalists to consider, at the time when Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front met, an independent course for their country. On the contrary, the new Bolshevik regime gave its recognition to Communist-sponsored Ukrainian Congress of Workers', Peasants', and Soldiers' Deputies as the commanding authority in Ukraine, a decision which was rebuked by Ukrainians who in a large proportion cast their vote in the All-Russian Constituent Assembly elections for nationally-inclined parties.²⁵ Subordinated to the Central Rada were various regional or local bodies often called Radas, as the one mentioned in the document.

²⁴ Gediminas Ilguanas, *Kazys Grinius* (Vilnius: Pradai, 2000); Alfonsas Eidintas, *Kazys Grinius: ministras pirmininkas ir prezidentas* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1993).

²⁵ Georgiy Kasianov, „Ukraine between Revolution, Independence, and Foreign Dominance”, in Wolfram Dornik, Peter Lieb, Alexei Miller, Hannes Leidinger, Georgiy Kasianov, Vasyl Rasevych, and Bogdan Musial, *The Emergence of Ukraine: Self-Determination, Occupation, and War in Ukraine, 1917–1922* (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2015), 77–89; Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

Harbouring national ideals, the Congress of Moldovan soldiers and officers on the Romanian Front met in Jassy between 10 and 12 October 1917 pleading for an autonomous Bessarabia, Romanian language in state education, land reform, social change, etc. The Congress underwritten the creation of the Sfatul Țării, a national body that would eventually proclaim first the autonomy, then independence and finally unification with Romania on 27 March 1918.²⁶ It also prepared the ground for the Moldovan Military Congress of 20-27 October 1917 gathered in Chișinău attended by 900 participants of which 600 were soldiers and officers and 300 belonged to political parties and factions, various movement and organizations. Reinforcing the decision of seeking for autonomy within the Russian Empire, the Congress also decided to proclaim a land reform allowing for the redistribution of lands to peasants without compensation, establish public schools, prepare the ground for a Bessarabian army and a separate budget, etc.²⁷

Similar to the Ukrainian Rada and the Congress of Moldovan soldiers and officers on the Romanian Front, Rumcherod or *Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of Romanian Front, Black Sea Fleet, and Odessa Oblast*, a creation of the 1st Congress of Front and District Soviets in Odessa of May 1917, was initially anti-Communist, placing emphasis on social issues and the national question. After the Bolshevik coup, however, the first Rumcherod was disbanded and the Leninists concocted a new body that swore allegiance to their government and Communist ideology.²⁸

The programme in nine points adopted in Bender was far-reaching when compared to Ukrainian or Romanian Moldavian aspirations, the Congress demanding no less than the independence of Lithuania. This appears plainly expressed in points 1 and 9 of the resolution. The first point

²⁶ Ion Țurcanu, *Sfatul Țării. Istoria zbuciumată a unei importante instituții politice basarabene din anii 1917-1918* (Chișinău: Editura Arc, 2018).

²⁷ Alberto Basciani, *Dificila unire: Basarabil și România Mare (1918-1940)* (Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2018), 95.

²⁸ Victor Savcenko, „Sfatul Țării, Rada Centrală și Rumcerod: conflictul de interese în sudul Basarabiei (decembrie 1917 – februarie 1918)” [Sfatul Țării, the Central Rada and Rumcherod: Conflict of Interests in South Bessarabia], *Conferința "Centenar Sfatul Țării: 1917-2017" Materialele conferinței științifice internaționale*, Chișinău Moldova, 21 noiembrie 2017 (Chișinău: Editura Lexon, 2017): 493-497.

is imperative and leaves no ambiguity on the goal of the Congress: „Lithuania shall be independent”. The ninth point details how this independence had to be achieved: the Provisional Government was to pronounce the independence of Lithuania under similar conditions laid down for Poland.²⁹ In fact the proclamation of an independent Poland on 30 March lacked any minutiae as to how this would be implemented.³⁰ On the other hand the Russian Provisional Government had already lost popularity and would soon be doomed as a result of the Communist takeover.

In the same token, other decisions adopted by the Congress emphasized the sovereignty of the new state: „no other country shall take the initiative to solve the future of Lithuania” (point 4) and its total divorce from Russia: „The Russian Constituent Assembly shall recognize the right of the Lithuanian Nation to decide upon the life of the State of Lithuania in the Lithuanian Constituent Assembly” (point 5).

A geographic concept of the new state is to be identified in point 9 of the resolution calling for the unification of Lithuania Major and Lithuania Minor to which the Suwałki Governorate was also to be added. When the Teutonic Order set foot on the Eastern Baltic it gradually absorbed territories inhabited by local communities including an area dwelled by Lithuanians, which later came to be known as Lithuania Minor.³¹ The territory passed on to the Duchy of Prussia and the Kingdom of Prussia. Following the German unification in 1871 it became part of the German Empire, while its Lithuanian settlers were baptized *Lietuvininkai* or Prussian Lithuanians. In contrast to its name, Lithuania Minor became the cradle of Lithuanian literary creation already from mid-18th century. In the century of nationalities in Lithuania Minor more literature and press were printed than Lithuania Major or Lithuania proper.³² It was in Lithuania Minor where the Liberal nationalist of mixed Sorbian descent and linguistic prodigy Georg Julius Justus Sauerwein (1831-1904) composed the anthem of *Lietuvininkai* of Lithuania

²⁹ Miloiu et al., 25-37

³⁰ Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 279, 285.

³¹ Burnam W. Reynolds, *The Prehistory of the Crusades Missionary War and the Baltic Crusades* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016).

³² Eidintas, Bumblauskas, Kulakauskas, Tamošaitis, 14-15.

Minor "Lithuanian we were born /Lithuanian we want to be / We received that honour at birth / We cannot let it perish". Sauerwein adopted the Lithuanian name Jurgis Sauerverinas and plainly rejected the Germanization policies of the end of the 19th century.³³

Although the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front codified remarkably early in its programme the unity of Lithuania proper with Lithuania Minor, the aspiration had already been advocated at the beginning of the war in July 1914 in Vilnius when Jonas Basanavičius, Stasys Šilingas³⁴ and Donatas Malinauskas³⁵ compiled the abovementioned Amber Declaration which called in the event of a Russian victory in the war for the unification of the two territories divided by the river Nemunas, Lithuania proper and Lithuania Minor, in an autonomous province within the Russian Empire. The declaration was not sheltered from public eyes, but openly professed in the Russian Duma on 4 August 1914. The Germans would not remain silent but prompted MP Vilius Gaigalaitis³⁶ to profess in the Landtag the aim of

³³ Vejas G. Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107; Leonidas Donskis, *Identity and Freedom: Mapping Nationalism and Social Criticism in Twentieth Century Lithuania* (London: Routledge, 2002), 45.

³⁴ Stasys Šilingas (1885–1962) was a Lithuanian statesman and nation-builder of baronial extraction who was involved in all major turnabouts of Lithuanian history of the first half of the Twentieth Century. He was a literate and fine arts collector, took part on the barricades of the Russian Revolution in 1905, was promoted a diplomat in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1915 and 1917, returned to Lithuania to play a crucial role in the reestablishment of an independent state of Lithuania in 1918 as a member of the State Council of Lithuania and one of the three heads of state in 1918 alongside Antanas Smetona and Justinas Staugaitis (1866–1943). Compiler of the Lithuanian Constitution, minister, and an influential supporter of the authoritarian regime of Smetona, he had been deported by the Soviets in Siberia on June 14th, 1941 and allowed to return to his country only two decades later, Sužiedelis, 235; Robert A. Vitas, "Civil Military Relations in Lithuania Under President Antanas Smetona 1926-1940" (1986). Master's Theses. 3437, https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/3437, 50, 226.

³⁵ Donatas Malinauskas (1877-1942) was a Lithuanian nationalist trained in Bohemia and a signatory of the Declaration of Independence in 1918. A diplomat during the interwar period in Czechoslovakia and Estonia, he was instructed in March 1920 to ask for the international recognition of his country from Kingdom of Romania with no concrete results, Dalia Bukelevičiūtė, „The political and diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Romania (1935-1940)“, *The Romanian Journal for Baltic and Nordic Studies* 2 (2010): 26.

³⁶ Vilius Gaigalaitis (1870-1945) was a theologian and social and cultural figure with an education background in theology and philosophy at the universities of Königsberg and

reuniting the two Lithuanias within the German Reich.³⁷ It was therefore a red thread which connects the resolutions adopted in Bender to the general aspirations of the Lithuanian intelligentsia, but it is also to be placed emphasis on the maturation of the national aspiration prompted by the war and the Russian Revolution even before the Bolsheviks had launched their final bid for power.

Lithuania Major or proper was the inheritor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that alongside Poland had given birth to Rzeczpospolita according to the Lublin Union of 1569 and was annexed by Russia following the third division of Rzeczpospolita of 1795. During the Napoleonic Wars in 1801 Lithuania proper was divided into Vilnius and Grodno gubernyas and three decades later, following the 1831 uprising, the name Lithuania was banned and the province was re-baptized North-western Krai.³⁸

A Lithuanian memorandum of 10 June 1916 defined Lithuania as a composite of Kaunas Gubernya, Švenčionys, Trakai and Vilnius districts of Vilnius Gubernya, areas of Lyda and Ašmena districts, the northern part of Grodno Gubernya, Palanga and some three quarters of the Suwałki Governorate, which is also mentioned in resolution of the Bender Congress was an inseparable part of a reborn Lithuanian state.³⁹ Therefore, the claim for Suwałki, detached from Lithuania as a result of the Vienna Congress of 1814-1815, was likewise fully in line with earlier nation-building projects.

The Congress defined sovereignty equally in terms of domestic and external self-determination. The new state was to exert control over its territory independently with no interference from external countries within its borders, including Russia from which it was to split up. Besides, Lithuania

Berlin. Repeatedly elected MP in the Prussian landtag for Lithuanians he would be a member of National Council of Lithuania Minor and eventually served as a diplomat at the Peace Conference in Paris with the task of securing the Klaipėda region (or Memel, in German) for Lithuania. In interwar Lithuania he served as chair of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Consistory and was one of the founders of Faculty of Evangelical Theology at Vytautas Magnus University of Kaunas. In 1941 he settled in Germany and was under Gestapo surveillance. „Gaigalaitis Vilius”, at <https://www.silutesknygininkai.lt/silute/gaigalaitis-vilius/> (accessed on 2.03.2018).

³⁷ Eidintas, Bumblauskas, Kulakauskas, Tamošaitis, 146.

³⁸ Ibid., 16.

³⁹ Miloju et al. a, 162.

was to be able to pursue a foreign policy of its own, to enter into treaties and agreements with other countries, to assert itself internationally and at the outset to seek international recognition.⁴⁰ Domestic sovereignty is reflected in points 2 and 3 of the resolution clearly spotlighting the idea that „the sovereign authority shall belong to the nation in Lithuania” and „the Lithuanian Constituent Assembly shall have the exclusive power to decide upon the form of government of Lithuania”.⁴¹ The chanting and Lithuanian national anthem provides additional proof of the allegiance of the Congress.

Equally unambiguously is defined the external self-determination in point 3 of the resolution („Lithuania’s relations with the neighbouring nations and countries”), although allowing for an international decision to give recognition to the new state. Point 6 circumscribed the issue of Lithuania as an international issue to be decided by the Peace Congress, but such a pronouncement could only be made providing that Lithuania was fully represented on an equal footing with other nations (point 7).⁴²

The Bender Congress did not eschew from outlining the envisaged political system of a reincarnated Lithuania. The country was to be „government by democratic principles”⁴³, which was fully in tune with the general mood in the new Russian Republic.

The dissemination of the principles and documents adopted at the Congress was to be achieved to all Lithuanian units and Lithuanian soldiers on the Romanian front and beyond and by so doing it almost certainly reached a large audience.

An Instruction to the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front in the Event of Demobilisation of 26 November called for the Lithuanian soldiers and officers who would not be able to return to their homeland to wait for instructions of a Lithuanian Demobilisation

⁴⁰ There is a vast literature on sovereignty, see for instance Stephen D. Krasner, „Rethinking the sovereign state model”, *Review of international studies* 27 (2001): special issue, 17-42; Leonard V. Smith, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴¹ Miloiu et al., 25-37.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Commission and informed this body weekly on the situation of Lithuanians drafted on the Romanian Front.⁴⁴

With the „German bayonets”, as the document read it, in control of Ukraine, many Lithuanians who had been assigned on the Romanian front found it extremely difficult to reach Lithuania before the Compiegne Armistice which ended the Great War. This explains why barely a week after the armistice, on 19 November 1918, the Lithuanian Government rushed to dispatch Romanas Chadakauskas on a diplomatic mission to Ukraine and Romania.⁴⁵ The nature of his mission is to be understood when recalling the fact that already in August 1918 Chadakauskas had been appointed by Lietuvos Tarybos (The Council of Lithuania) to Germany with the same assignment of returning the POWs held in custody in this country.⁴⁶ Even as late as September 1920 a Lithuanian delegate lawyer Andrius Lisauskis (1879-1949) had been given the task of travelling to Romania and Odessa in order to return Lithuanian citizens to their home land.⁴⁷ He was received by Romanian Prime Minister Alexandru Averescu, the most prominent of Romanian generals of World War I, who offered him all assistance he needed to travel the Lithuanians from Ukraine⁴⁸ through Bender (Tighina) Galați and Constanța and then on to Czechoslovakia on the way back to their motherland.

Conclusions

Overlooked in most of the Lithuanian historical treatises, the Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Military Officers of the Romanian Front in Bender City had in fact of greater significance than it allows to be understood when counting solely the relatively lower visibility of its leaders or the direct institutional lineage to the proclamation of independence. First,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ Sandra Grigaravičiūtė, „Lietuvos Tarybos (ne)atstovavimas Šveicarijoje 1917–1918”, 67, at <http://www.parlamentostudijos.lt/Nr25/files/37-77.pdf> (accessed on 22.05.2018).

⁴⁷ Miloiu et al., 38.

⁴⁸ On the basis of article 6 of the Lithuanian peace treaty with Russia of 12 July 1920, see „Peace Treaty between Lithuania and The Russian Socialist Federal Republic, and Protocol, signed at Moscow On July 12, 1920”, <http://gis.nacse.org/tfdd/tfdddocs/archiveApril2010/25ENG.htm> (accessed on 22.05.2018).

the resolutions of the Congress make a perfect outfit of the national aspirations of the Lithuanian nationalists as embodied in The Act of Reinstating Independence of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Valstybės atkūrimo aktas*) of February 16th, 1918. The goal of devolution from the Russian Republic and the proclamation of full independence precedes and anticipates the proclamation of independence three months later. It is remarkable how detailed and well-phrased are these national goals laid down in the document. Secondly, the document strikes with its far-reaching objectives when compared to the contemporary Ukrainian or Bessarabian intentions as asserted in their congresses and assemblies. In Ukraine or Bessarabia even the search for territorial autonomy was very recent and its exponents regarded as radicals. The authors of this resolution are perfectly informed on the evolutions on the Romanian front, in Ukraine, Poland, Russia and in their own country, which allows them to come up with state-of-the-art reflections and solutions expressing their desires. The document is not only far-reaching, but wide-ranging as well. It provided not only for sovereignty, but defined territoriality, provided for the international recognition of devolution, the international representation of Lithuanian interests and the nature of its internal political regime.

Besides, the document is a refutation of the arguments of a whole body of historians who argued that after the removal of the Tsar and autocracy the Russian Republic might have been able to endure relatively unchanged provided that the Bolsheviks could be prevented from seizing power. As this and other documents demonstrate, the Russian government was already loosing grasp of power for not being able to take more steadfast decision of reforming the state.

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