SOURCE PUBLICATIONS

DECISIONS OF THE LITHUANIAN ASSEMBLY (THE GREAT SEIMAS OF VILNIUS) OF 4–5 DECEMBER 1905

Rimantas Miknys

Dealing with the Lithuanian national movement, scholars usually distinguish certain stages in this process.¹ If we generalise their different versions, it is possible to state that the first stage of the national movement was both cultural and national. Rebirth covered the period between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the middle of the 1890s. The time between the last period of the cultural stage (starting in 1883) and the first period of the political stage (ending ca. 1905) is referred to as the transitional period. The third stage covering the years between 1905 and 1917 is usually called the political period. The latter date (more precisely, 21 September 1917) is treated as the beginning of the activity of the Lithuanian Assembly as an official institution expressing the political aims of the principal Lithuanian political forces and aimed directly at the creation of a state structure.

The question under consideration is closely linked to the transitional stage from the cultural to the political periods. Three phases are to be distinguished in this stage. The first phase is characterised by the ideology of historical romanticism, which aimed to awaken national self-consciousness. At this time Jonas Basanavičius and other Lithuanian patriots rallied behind the *Aušra* newspaper, which idealised Lithuania's past, and created myths about Grand Dukes

¹ M. Römer, *Litwa. Studium o odrodzeniu narodu litewskiego* (Lvov, 1908), pp. 339–436; *Lietuvių nacionalinio išsivadavimo judėjimas (ligi 1904 metų)*, ed. V. Merkys (Vilnius, 1987), pp. 47, 48, 70–71, 101; R. Vėbra, *Lietuvių visuomenė XIX amžiuje* (Kaunas, 1992), pp. 28–30, 93, 114, 117; A. Kulakauskas, 'Apie tautinio atgimimo sąvoką, tautinių sąjūdžių epochą ir lietuvių tautinį atgimimą', *Lietuvių atgimimo istorijos studijos*, vol. 1, *Tautinės sąmonės žadintojai* (Vilnius, 1990), pp. 132–142; J. Ochmański, *Litewski ruch narodowo-kulturalny w 19 wieku (do 1890 r.)* (Białystok, 1965).

Kęstutis, Gediminas and Vytautas to stimulate patriotic self-awareness and form a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic grouping – a nation. The second phase of the activity of Lithuanian patriots is marked by the appearance of the *Varpas* journal in 1889 and by the clash of two ideologies: Catholic and Liberal, the latter being based on rationalism, social radicalism, democracy and anti-clericalism. The Lithuanian national movement split into two ideological trends. Although fighting between themselves for the influence among the masses, the adherents of these trends among the secular and clerical intelligentsias maintained the same national idea. Nevertheless, as yet there was no genuine socio-ideological differentiation, just a struggle between different conceptions rather than a confrontation between two social groups or classes. It was only between 1890 and 1905 that the Lithuanian national movement became politicised. The two aforementioned philosophical historiosophic conceptions became social in the sense that their manifestation was already clearly apparent in everyday social life. Gradually principles of the party division and political activity gained ground in social life. Organised groupings called political parties started rallying active members of society according to their socio-political status, religious views, world outlook and so forth. They expressed their opinions on public matters and were prepared to compromise on issues ensuring a successful development of national society. That was the beginning of the rise of a social political organisation, the highest form of which is the state. This type of process was taking place among the people propagating a liberal rationalistic ideology. Thus in around 1896 the first Lithuanian political party was established – the Lithuanian Social-Democratic Party (of Lithuania) (LSDP). It stood out as a group which set itself the task of defending the interests of the workers as a new developing social stratum. The same period was marked by the formation of one more political party – the Liberals. Their party was set up in 1902; and they called themselves the Democrats; and after 1905 – the Democratic Party of Lithuania. Later they split into the radicals, oriented towards the self-organisation of the nation on democratic principles, and the moderates, setting priority on nationalism and developing their cultural activity only within the limits established by Russian authorities. Both political groupings outlined their objectives in their manifestos. No such significant moves were observed among the Catholics. The fact that

in the national Lithuanian movement the Social Democratic and Democratic Parties rather than the more moderate ones were to appear first was conditioned by the specific character of the social structure of Lithuanian national society. Contemporary society gave an advantage to landless and small peasants over the well-to-do people in the countryside, let alone those in the towns. Basically, the Lithuanian nation, placing emphasis in its identification on the Lithuanian language, was a society of one social grouping, i.e. of small and middle peasant farmers.

It was the time of the formation of two radical parties based on a certain rather numerous grouping of Lithuanian national society and representing its clearly defined interests. Meanwhile the process of the formation of moderate parties had not yet started despite the fact that they had their organisers – intellectuals of various outlooks. However, those parties lacked a strong social grouping whose interests they could defend and on whom they could base their programmes. Anyhow, in 1905 it was impossible to speak about explicit differentiations in Lithuanian society on a party basis.

The political or third stage can be divided into two phases: the first – prior to the First World War, or more precisely, before the start of the German occupation in 1915, and the second – coinciding with WWI. The revolutionary events of 1905 radically changed the situation in the Lithuanian national movement – it became more massive and more social. Its political leaders remained the same Social Democrats and Democrats, future Populists (in 1919–1940). They are also commonly called Democrat Populists since in 1905 they established their separate organisation – the Lithuanian Peasant Union, oriented towards the masses. In this movement national postulates were naturally harmonised with radical and political ones.

The Catholic clergy, having actively participating in the national movement especially since 1890, took up a counter-revolutionary position and resigned themselves to the policy of the authorities. However, the majority of the Catholic clergy remained undecided, while former activists tried to establish a party late in 1905 – the Christian Democratic Party of Lithuania. The moderate ones, in particular nationally-minded Lithuanian intellectuals, organised into a party – the National Lithuanian Democratic Party. Nevertheless, the right-wing forces of the Lithuanian national movement, in essence, remained inactive.

The year 1905 as the year of the Russian democratic revolution was also marked by the national Lithuanian assembly, later called the Great Seimas of Vilnius, which took place in Vilnius on 4–5 December. That was a gathering of the representatives of Lithuanian rural districts, parishes and of various national and cultural organisations and political groups functioning outside the boundaries of Lithuania. Altogether about 2,000 people took part in the assembly. They represented all contemporary social groupings of the country. The most numerous were the peasants (ca. 50–70%) and intellectuals (30–40%). The rest were landowners, workers and artisans. All Lithuanian political groupings were represented: Social Democrats, Democrats (Populists, Christian Democrats, Democrats, and National Democrats). Besides, the assembly was attended by the democratically oriented Polish intellectuals *Krajowcy*, the delegates of the Jewish Socialist organisation, and the representatives of the Belarusian Socialist Party *Hramada*. The Seimas adopted several political national resolutions, stating all significant national and legal aims of the Lithuanians and expressing the request for political autonomy in a general form. It was this gathering that approved the Lithuanian formula of legal statehood and defined Lithuania as a state with its capital in Vilnius and a territory including the ethnic fringes voluntarily orienting themselves to this state. This formula became a starting point for all future declarations of Lithuanian statehood. This principle was accepted by all the main aforementioned Lithuanian political groupings as the ideological basis of their activities.

One of the principal clauses of the decisions of the Lithuanian Assembly stated:

To require the autonomy of Lithuania with the seimas in Vilnius, elected by universal, equal (and secret) ballot regardless of gender, ethnicity and religion. Such an autonomous Lithuania shall consist of present-day ethnographic Lithuania as a nucleus and those fringe areas which for various economic, cultural and ethnic reasons are attracted to the nucleus and whose population would be willing to belong to it ...²

Actually, the year 1905 and the Lithuanian Assembly of Vilnius should be assessed as having produced the following results: (1) masses of the people became politically active; (2) the politicisation

² J. Silius [J. Basanavičius], *Iš didžiojo Vilniaus seimo istorijos* (Vilnius, 1925), p. 20.

of the masses made the national movement more massive, and the formation of the Lithuanian political structures was completed; and (3) the national objectives recorded in the decisions of the Great Seimas of Vilnius, expressed the will of the nation to which it was always appealed in raising the issue of Lithuania's independence between 1915 and 1918.

Historical literature on this singular event is rich and varied; and the most recent work is Egidijus Motieka's study.³ In it an attempt is made to review in greater detail the development of Lithuanian political conceptions not only in 1905–1906 but also at the start of the twentieth century. In this study the events of 1905–1906 are treated as a national revolution in Lithuania, and the Great Seimas of Vilnius is considered as its apogee. 'The national revolution in Lithuania was part of the democratic revolutionary movement in which the Russian Empire, many countries of Asia and partly of Central and Western Europe were involved'.⁴ Research shows that

the national revolution was also a part of the general Lithuanian revolutionary movement, directed against absolutism and concentrated on political and social reforms. At the same time it was quite an independent phenomenon, the aftermath of the Lithuanian national movement with its own specific aims. ... The revolution of 1905 was a combination of various movements, while the national revolution was a purposeful movement of the entire Lithuanian society oriented towards a re-establishment of Lithuanian statehood based on the Lithuanian ethnicity and the formation of a democratic society in the country. The aim of the national revolutionary movement, which had its ideological political and social underpinning, was the consolidation of Lithuanian society in its struggle for autonomy. The agent of this movement was the Lithuanian political structure represented by Lithuanian political parties and, in general, by the Lithuanian intelligentsia; its social basis was the Lithuanian peasantry. The Great Seimas of Vilnius was part of the national revolution, its culmination. Therefore separating the national revolution from the Great Seimas of Vilnius would be a formal solution of the problem.⁵

Motieka's study also raises the question of the likelihood of similar revolutions by other nations within the Russian Empire.

³ E. Motieka, *Didysis Vilniaus seimas / Lietuvių atgimimo studijos*, vol. 11 (Vilnius, 1996).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 260.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262.

Attention is drawn to the opinion prevalent in inter-war Lithuanian historiography⁶ that the Lithuanians were the only nation in Russia who ‘had convened their national parliament’. According to Motieka, this statement is only partially true. The Latvians, Estonians, Poles, Georgians, Moldavians, and Ukrainians managed to organise similar assemblies. A congress of the Muslims of all Russia also took place. However, probably only the assembly of the Armenians, despite its smaller scale, equalled that of the Lithuanians with respect to organisation.⁷

The Assembly of the Latvian Representatives of Rural Districts was also quite numerous, but it was not universal because it was attended poorly by the intelligentsia. The Estonian Congress, sanctioned by the Russian authorities, split in the aftermath of internal disagreements between the revolutionary and liberal groupings. The Ukrainian Assembly actually was a meeting of the representatives of the parties rather than of the nation. In Poland the Endeks (National Democrats) managed to convene ‘a peasant congress’, etc. Actually, no other nation of the Russian empire succeeded in conducting an assembly of the representatives of the entire nation on such a vast scale.⁸

The significance of the decisions of the Great Seimas of Vilnius is described most comprehensively in Motieka’s study. The author states with reason that the achievements of the Great Seimas of Vilnius and of the national revolution were great: in conformity with the requirements of the Seimas Russian authorities permitted Lithuanian teachers to work in primary schools, to teach Lithuanian as a separate subject in the Catholic Spiritual Seminary of Vilnius and in some secondary schools, the Lithuanian press ban was lifted, the establishment of various Lithuanian economic and cultural organisations was allowed, religious persecutions ended, etc.⁹ True, many of these restrictions were formally lifted by the tsarist authorities in the course of 1905–1906, but their practical

⁶ A. Alekna, *Lietuvos istorija* (Tilsit, 1923), pp. 211–213; P. Šležas, V. Čižiūnas, *Lietuvos istorija* (Kaunas, 1936), pp. 110–112; P. Šležas, I. Malinauskas, *Lietuvos istorija* (Kaunas, 1934), pp. 104–105; *Lietuvos istorija*, ed. A. Šapoka (Kaunas, 1936), pp. 516–518.

⁷ Motieka, *Didysis Vilniaus seimas*, p. 261.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 212–218, 338–339.

implementation began only following the activity of the Seimas and the national revolution.

Thus, Lithuanian scholarship has developed the opinion that the revolutionary situation in the Russian empire in 1905 created conditions for the Lithuanian political movement to attain a qualitatively new level by holding an assembly representing the whole nation and approving the decisions expressing the will of the nation the most significant of which was the declaration of Lithuania's autonomy conceived as an independent Lithuanian social political organisation. Since 1905 the Lithuanian Question had been deepening and gradually becoming political. The new situation was most evidently attested in the activity of the Lithuanian representatives in the Second–Fourth Dumas of Russia. It is noteworthy that in the Duma debates the representatives of the Democratic Party of Lithuania and the Lithuanian Social-Democratic Party endeavoured to reject the attempts of Polish politicians to include the Lithuanian area of Suvalkai province into the boundaries of the then projected territory of autonomous Poland. The Lithuanian arguments were based on the decisions of the Great Seimas of Vilnius, which expressed the will of the Lithuanian nation. Propagating the political idea of Lithuania's autonomy and raising the issue of the attachment of the Lithuanian part of Suvalkai to Lithuania, they emphasised the ethno-political distinctiveness of the Lithuanian nation and its difference from the Polish nation.¹⁰ The decisions of the Great Seimas of Vilnius were also cited in the decisions of the 21 September 1917 Lithuanian Conference of Vilnius, which authorised the elected Lithuanian Council to act towards the organisation of the Lithuanian state.¹¹

¹⁰ In greater detail, see R. Miknys, *Lietuvos demokratų partija 1902–1915 metais / Lietuvių atgimimo istorijos studijos*, vol. 10 (Vilnius, 1996), pp. 158–160.

¹¹ *Lietuvos Valstybės Tarybos protokolai 1917–1918*, comp. A. Eidintas, R. Lopata (Vilnius, 1991), pp. 7–8, 76.

Appendix no. 1

Publication [translated from Lithuanian]

Decisions of the First Congress of the Representatives of the Lithuanian Nation, adopted at open sessions in Vilnius 4–5 December (21–22 November, old style) 1905**I. The Current Situation in Russia and Lithuania**

Taking into consideration the fact that the current tsarist government is our deadly enemy, that now all lands of the Russian state have risen against this government, and that better life can be won only in the struggle against the old order, the Lithuanians, taking part in the assembly, announce the need to educate themselves, to unite and together with the insurgent nations of Russia join battle.

II. Lithuanian Autonomy

As the Lithuanian population can be satisfied only by full autonomy for their country and that other nationalities inhabiting Lithuania could enjoy full rights, the ‘Lithuanian Congress’ has decided:

To demand autonomy for Lithuania with a Seimas in Vilnius, elected by universal, equal and secret ballot regardless of gender, ethnicity and religion. Such an autonomous Lithuania shall consist of present-day ethnographic Lithuania as a nucleus with those fringe areas which for various economic, cultural, ethnic or other reasons are attracted to the nucleus and whose population would be willing to belong to it.

As the Lithuanians of the Suvalkai province participating at the Congress unanimously considered it necessary to fight together with the Lithuanians of other provinces for autonomy for Lithuania, the Congress decided that the Lithuanians of the Suvalkai province must be attached to autonomous Lithuania.

Relations with adjacent Russian countries must be established on federate basis.

III. Ways to Win Autonomy

In order to gain autonomy it is necessary first and foremost to destroy completely the present order of suppression. Therefore, it is necessary to unite the forces of all Lithuanian political parties and separate individuals. After unification at home, it is essential to come together with all other nations of Russia which can contribute to the destruction of that order. Meanwhile no taxes should be paid, monopolies must be closed, children must not be sent to Russian primary schools, courts of law and other institutions of authorities in the provinces of Kaunas, Vilnius and Grodno should be ignored, young men must not be conscripted to the Russian army; if need be a general strike of all working people in the towns and countryside should be staged.

IV. Rural Districts and Schools

The native language must be used in the management of all affairs in all rural districts of Lithuania.

Since schools today are an instrument for destroying ethnic identity and morality, they must be replaced by purely national schools in which tuition would be given in the native tongue and that the people themselves could choose teachers.

Vilniaus žinios, 24 November (7 December, new style) 1905.

Appendix no. 2

Publication [translated from Lithuanian]

Decision of the Lithuanian Congress in Vilnius concerning the Use of the Lithuanian Language in the Churches of the Diocese of Vilnius

This separate decision of the Lithuanian Congress was adopted in the evening of 22 November (5 December, new style) 1905 after the adoption of the general decisions of the Congress.

Since the Polish language is used in the services in Lithuanian churches in the Diocese of Vilnius to further political aims, the Lithuanian Congress unanimously decided to wish success to Lithuanians living in the Diocese of Vilnius and fighting against the Polonising clergy for the rights of the Lithuanian language in Lithuanian churches and to censure the current ecclesiastical order in the Diocese of Vilnius.

J. Basanavičius, 'Prie Lietuvių Susivažiavimo nutarimų', *Vilniaus žinios*, 24 November (7 December, new style) 1905.

Vilniaus žinios, 25 November (8 December, new style) 1905.

Translation: Alfonsas Laučka