Introduction

Why another book about Antanas Smetona, the authoritarian president of Lithuania from 1926 to 1940? In 1988–1990, serialized in a magazine, I produced the first effort in Lithuania (then still under Soviet censorship) to examine the life of this best known Lithuanian. My book, Antanas Smetona. Outlines of a Political Biography, which appeared in 1990, would seem to have made clear Smetona's political biography. But my concern then was to present a general outline of his life. The people of Lithuania, after a half-century, could acquaint themselves with this political leader whom the Soviet regime had smeared and caricatured. The work's purpose was to show that Smetona, while later an authoritarian ruler who ignored the principles of ruling a democratic state, had nevertheless contributed significantly to the Lithuanian national movement and to the formation of the Lithuanian people and nation. More important, he had planted an understanding that we are a nation, capable of ruling ourselves. Although he relied on the support of the army and the organs of state security, he was neither a Lithuanian Stalin nor a Hitler. He ruled for 13½ years and perhaps with more liberal reforms he might have remained in power longer but for the Hitler-Stalin pact and the subsequent Soviet occupation in June 1940. That book more or less realized these goals, even though it was handicapped by limitations on its size and the impossibility of using more pictures or longer citations from Smetona's rich journalistic legacy, as well as the problem of restricted access to archival materials.

On the other hand, twenty-five years ago I interpreted many matters differently than I do now, especially Smetona's understanding of the national consciousness and his work in creating the Lithuanian nation as such. In comparison with other nations of the region, Lithuanian national development had been catastrophically delayed because of particularly unfavorable circumstances in the development of a standardized language, as well as national institutions and traditions. Secondly, I perhaps did not fully understand that Smetona's cultural policy and patriotic stance, despite his own limitations, prepared the so-called independence generation and essentially molded the modern Lithuanian nation. Of course, in the end Smetona could not complete the state in its proper territory, not because of his own inability but because of the conflict with Poland over Vilnius and the Vilnius region.

Thirdly, that first book was written in a fumbling manner – at that time a whole complex of questions of Lithuanian history were just coming under investigation. I was not critical enough of works written in the Lithuanian emigration, mostly memoirs of activists of independent Lithuania. Before 1988 the
Soviet authorities gave historians only very limited access to archival materials. There was a shortage of monographs about the mechanism of ruling states, about economic development, about political parties and the work of the Lithuanian Seimas (parliament). The biographies of leaders of political parties and social activists lay in a historical limbo, making research on their personal contributions to the art, science, culture, and politics of the country impossible. Not just Smetona's policies were important, but also those of the people around him – Smetona's family, his close friends, his comrades, with whom he developed ideas and plans for the building and development of the state. On what questions did they influence Smetona and the development of the state?

And fourthly, over those intervening years I have myself changed. To be sure, the reader might complain that I ignored Smetona after that book of 1990, that having entered Lithuania's diplomatic service, I am no longer a professional historian. That is somewhat true, but not entirely: There is no such thing as a “former” historian. You are or you are not. A quarter century ago, because of my lack of experience in writing a larger work, because of the characteristics of life emerging from the Soviet years, I simply could not have written this kind of study. But at all my diplomatic posts – Washington, Ottawa, Tel Aviv and Oslo – I collected documents and collections of documents I have read almost everything published in Lithuania and other countries on this topic and about that period in Europe. Now it has all somehow come together. I unconsciously prepared to write this work for a long time without concretely planning it.

Now I can write freely, using the work that historians of Lithuania and other countries have produced. I can now look at Smetona from a different time, from the perspective of the modern development of Lithuania's independence, using not only the literature and documents collected over long years but also the practice gained in the diplomatic service of observing and analyzing the politicians of the world's important countries, as well as using historians' biographies of various national and state leaders.

For a small nation, its history is one of the roots and foundations of its strength: taking pride in victories, in great states organized in the past, and in contributions to other countries. We Lithuanians are no exception. Smetona himself gave history an important role in his national ideology. In 1934, speaking to university students, he declared,

The nation is not just the present, but also the past. We have the history of the Lithuanian state written from Polish, Russian and German perspectives, but we do not yet have a history of the Lithuanian nation. We must ourselves examine our past; ourselves scientifically present it and correct the errors of others. Even now some foreign scientists declare