Smetona and Izidorius Tamošaitis: The Justification of the Coup

It is difficult to say when Smetona became close to the army officers who formed the Secret Officers Union (sks). In 1931 Voldemaras wrote that he learned about the coup only after it had taken place, but that Smetona had been connected already from 1925. Most likely that was so.

The tactics of the Tautininkai deputies in the Third Seimas, delay or waiting, were not surprising; nor was it surprising that Smetona rarely went to the parliamentary tribune. But just the appearance of the trio of LTS members in the Seimas allowed them to play the role of keeping a balance between the extreme left and the Christian Democratic right. Smetona was a true master of this. The left restored all democratic freedoms: ending censorship and martial law and permitting trade unions to function. The communists became more active, and that aroused panic in the Christian Democratic bloc.

The first signal came in the middle of June 1926. Exploiting the interregnum after the Christian Democratic government had resigned, the local communist “groupers” (kuopininkai, the communists had gone into the elections under the guise of Darbo kuopa, “Labor Group”) used the occasion to organize a meeting and demonstration in the streets of Kaunas that became a riot by disorganized gangs. A Soviet diplomat, angered by this behavior of “their own,” wrote to Moscow that the demonstrators swore, damaged property, and beat civilians as well as policemen and military who did not take over their hats in respect. Only by chance the demonstration did not become bloody, but its negative impact was great. The LCP at that time was weak and oppressed, and its first task was to win workers from the Social Democratic Party.

By December 1926 the atmosphere in Kaunas and in all of Lithuania was becoming heavier. The communists claimed that the right was organizing a coup, and the right accused the communists of the same. There were disturbances in the streets of Kaunas, and President Grinius and his ministers were “at fault” for everything. The pro-government newspapers Lietuva and Lietuvos žinios raised the question of the danger of the fascist movement.

But let us return to the events in the streets. Lithuania was an agricultural country; the farmers were deeply religious and rather conservative. When the political course suddenly turned leftward, the leftists, including the communists, felt a freedom of action, and they organized public demonstrations.
The conservative side felt insecure: Bolshevism and atheism were for them offensive phenomena. The appearance of aggressive youth, speaking other languages in the non-Lithuanian cities, the disregard of Lithuanian values, all frightened Lithuania’s “salt of the earth,” the substantial peasantry and their sons, the young Lithuanian army lieutenants. The streets, filled with red slogans and ribbons, aroused horror. The military budget would be cut; officers would be discharged from service since they belonged to the wing of other political views. Priests heard that the new administration planned to cut their salaries. Newly created private Polish schools – their number suddenly grew from 20 to at least 80 at a time when the Poles were crushing Lithuanian education in the Vilnius region – upset patriots. Those phenomena even seemed to endanger independence. Opposition developed to all these actions, an opposition that did not think of observing the constitutional norms of administrative change.

The LCDP leaders, now out of power, felt threatened. In the Seimas on November 26, the Christian Democratic leader Father Mykolas Krupavičius unambiguously attacked the left and the liberals: “Fascism is itself a healthy national movement [applause on the right and shouts: Bravo!] A reaction against the socialist regime and Kerenskyism, which led the state to the edge of disaster. If you call national understanding, patriotism, and national ideals fascism, in that sense I too am a fascist. And, as Lithuanian nationalists, we all are fascists! [Stormy applause on the right].”

Figure 21  Oreliai primary school pupils.