CHAPTER 22

The Intriguer: Stasys Raštikis, the Army, and the President

The army was a new phenomenon for the Lithuanian public. It was the winner of independence in battle, the most important part of the military action in Klaipėda, the protector and guarantor of the state frontiers. The army was respected, but it was also part of the same politicized public. At first there was a catastrophic shortage of officers – a military school opened in 1919, graduating class after class of young officers. The first officers were mostly veterans of the Russian army and spoke Lithuanian badly; the nationally minded younger band of officers squinted at them warily. The army was politically active – the great proof of this being the military coup of 1926. Smetona was at first thankful to the SKS, the organizers of the coup, and to their dictator Povilas Plechavičius. The organizers received Smetona at the headquarters of the army, the office of the army chief General Silvestras Žukauskas. The Christian Democratic leader Father Mykolas Krupavičius came to the headquarters and kissed Major Plechavičius, saying, “Povilas, you have saved the country...” For this the army had to be rewarded – the two Tautininkai leaders tripled the officers’ salaries.

Let us just briefly return again to Smetona’s travel through Lithuania in the summer of 1927, from Samogitia to Kaunas. Who accompanied the president? What signals did the cortège send to the public? There were a number of military: the president’s adjutant Captain Aloyzas Valušis, also the army chief General Žukauskas, General V. Grigaliūnas-Glovackis, Major Plechavičius, Internal Affairs Minister Ignas Musteikis. Representatives of the press included the American Petras Jurgelevičius-Jurgėla (also a soldier – a military correspondent), Smetona’s friend Father Tamošaitis and Father Tumas-Vaižgantas. Everywhere there were receptions, bread and salt, speeches, feasts. Plechavičius was presented as the liberator of Samogitia from the Bolsheviks and the Bermondtists. He was rather popular although he had ordered harsh punishments – in the opinion of the political left, too many. In some places celebrants carried the guests on their shoulders. The scouts carried Jurgėla (he was the founder of the Lithuanian scout organization); riflemen and army volunteers carried Plechavičius; volunteers carried the president. Plechavičius, as already mentioned, was also a guest of the Smetonas at dinners and receptions, where a tall man with a fine uniform was visible from afar.
On January 26, 1928, army chief General Žukauskas, an unconditional supporter of the December coup, requested discharge into retirement. The Defense Minister Teodoras Daukantas, who had become close to Smetona after studying Lithuanian with him, thanked the general with such words: “You requested to be relieved of duties several times. But you were so necessary to the army command that it would have been difficult to get along without you. Only now can we satisfy your request.”815 In other words, the army leadership was beginning to change, the search was on for better, more obedient leaders who would bring order in the politicking army. But in this area Smetona made many errors and miscalculations with candidates.

From the numbers alone, the searches appear to have been rather uncertain. Raštikis calculated that during the period of independence, there were 18 prime ministers, 22 ministers of state security, and 22 chiefs of the army’s general staff.816 Each new prime minister had his own candidates for the most important military posts, and the military leadership was rotated annually, sometimes even more frequently. That interfered with reform and with organizing the armed forces to carry out their direct duties. On January 4, 1927, the central figure of the coup, Plechavičius, was named chief of the General Staff administration, the deputy of the chief of the General Staff, and until summer he was acting chief since his chief, Col. Daukantas, a naval officer, had little understanding of army matters and most concerned himself with administrative details. From summer 1927 to February 15, 1929 Plechavičius was chief of the General Staff as well as chief of cavalry. No one was named to Žukauskas’s post as head of the army, and therefore Plechavičius directed the entire army of Lithuania. That was undoubtedly thanks to the coup. When General Kazys Ladiga was released from service in the summer of 1927, Jurgėla asked Smetona’s friend Prof. Tamošaitis what had happened. Tamošaitis replied that he did not know himself, but every time he was with the president, Daukantas spoke against Ladiga, and Ladiga against Daukantas.817

Having pushed Plechavičius out, Daukantas became Defense Minister for seven months, but in December 1928 he was discharged, and no, he was not sent to command Lithuania’s naval affairs as one might expect. Rather, he was sent overseas as Lithuanian consul as far from Lithuania as possible – to South America. Another brave soldier, a hero of the wars of independence, was Colonel Jonas Petruitis, a frequent guest at the prezidentūra: He and Smetona addressed each other by first names; they were true friends. But in November 1927 in the presence of colleagues Petruitis urged Smetona to turn to democracy and convene the Seimas. (Instructed to do so by Christian Democrat Leonas Bistras, Petruitis was a part of the LCDP’s effort to unseat Voldemaras). After this intervention Petruitis was released to the reserve and “exiled” to stay