

Piotr Łossowski

LITHUANIA'S NEUTRALITY IN THE POLISH-GERMAN WAR OF 1939

As time goes by and ever new sources come to light, the origin and development of Poland's defensive war in 1939 appear more and more multi-faceted and complex. At first, the predominant trend was the interest in the military aspect of the war and the search for the reasons of the defeat. Then, studies embraced the diplomatic history, later also the behaviour of the civilians in those decisive weeks. Now, forty years on, many aspects have been already thoroughly examined. But there are still many other problems, only apparently less important, which had not as yet attracted the attention of scholars in a satisfactory degree.

For instance, the growing war crisis in August 1939 has been presented almost hour by hour, as well as the development of Poland's relations with the main European powers, then and in the first weeks of the war. The importance of those matters is unassailable and interest in them justified. But at the same time the relations between Poland and her smaller neighbours in the south and north have been dealt with much less thoroughly than they deserve. Yet, much depended on the attitude of those countries lying directly across the borders. First and foremost, it conditioned the degree of Poland's isolation in the face of the Nazi aggression. The behaviour of the neighbours could improve

or worsen the political and strategic situation of the Second Republic. We have grounds to suppose that various solutions were possible, that decisions were often of the most delicate nature, and that events could have developed in quite a different direction than they actually did.

In this article I wish to dwell on the example of Lithuania whose behaviour has been described by historians as "circumspect",¹ because it was consistent throughout: up to the end Lithuania remained neutral. But such a policy was not adopted spontaneously. Lithuania's neutrality had been fought for, both on the international scale and inside the country.

Lithuania's siding with the Third Reich against Poland—and that was at stake—would have been of tremendous importance. The already extended frontline, over 1000 km long, with which the Germans had encircled Poland, would have been lengthened by 500 km in the north-east. The limited and relatively shallow hinterland of the Polish army would have been further reduced. The distant region of Braślav, Wilno (Lith. Vilnius) and Grodno would have become frontline zone. The adversary, already possessing a crushing superiority, would have been strengthened by four infantry divisions and one cavalry division.

The Polish General Staff and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were well aware of this. As the conflict with Germany was coming to a head in the spring of 1939, the Polish side multiplied its efforts to improve the relations with Lithuania and to secure her neutrality. This was one of the reasons for inviting General Stasys Raštikis, commander of the Lithuanian Army, to Poland early in May 1939. State dignitaries were prolific in their assurances of goodwill and even friendship.² They tried to dispel prejudices and erase the memory of last year's ultimatum. In assessing the results of General Raštikis's visit to Poland, the Polish military attaché in Kaunas, Colonel Mitkiewicz, said that "politically, they were quite satisfactory" adding that "Kaunas'

¹ Cf. H. B a t o w s k i, *Agonia pokoju i początek wojny (sierpień-wrzesień)* [*Agony of Peace and Beginning of War (August-September)*], Poznań 1969, chapter X.

² S. R a š t i k i s, *Kovose del Lietuvos. Kario atsiminimai*, part I, Los Angeles 1956, pp. 569 - 582.

political circles maintain that the visit has greatly immunized Lithuania with regard to Germany".³

Yet, the matter was not as simple as that. At the same time the German side took steps to increase pressure on Lithuania and to draw her within the orbit of its influence. The Nazis were impervious to the fact that after the occupation of Klaipeda the feeling of having been wronged by Germany ran high in Lithuania. The German diplomats were encouraged by the attitude of the Lithuanian minister in Berlin, Kazys Škirpa, who only in December 1938 had left the legation in Warsaw. Škirpa was openly hostile to Poland and as openly friendly to Germany. Moreover, he used to say that in the case of a German-Polish conflict Poland would have to buy Lithuanian's neutrality with the return of Wilno. Officials in the Auswärtiges Amt concluded that Škirpa's utterances were evidence of the Lithuanian government's thinking about the chances which a possible war conflict would provide for realising its intention to occupy Wilno.⁴

This reasoning, based, as it turned out later, on false premises, encouraged further steps towards Lithuania. The main argument, used by the Germans, was the trump card of economic benefits. In the second half of May they moved towards the conclusion of a new trade agreement with Lithuania. The purpose of the agreement was quite plain to the German side: the closest linkage between the economies of Lithuania and the Third Reich.⁵

The agreement was signed on May 20, 1939; it really did provide for a far-reaching dependence of Lithuanian's economy on that of Germany. Trade was to increase from 117 million lits in 1938 to 299 million in 1939, and was to cover 75 per cent of Lithuanian exports and as much as 86 per cent of imports.⁶

³ L. Mitkiewicz, *Wspomnienia kowieńskie* [Reminiscences of Kaunas], London, 1968, p. 201.

⁴ Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918 - 1945, Series D, (henceforward ADAP), Baden-Baden 1956, vol. VI, doc. 328, pp. 349 - 350.

⁵ ADAP, doc. 445, p. 495.

⁶ Data based on Lithuanian sources, quoted after K. Navickas, *TSRS vaidmuo ginant Lietuvą nuo imperialistinės agresijos 1920 - 1940 metais*, Vilnius 1966, p. 263. According to German figures, the Third Reich's share of Lithuania's imports amounted to 50 per cent of exports

The signing of the agreement was an occasion for Lithuanian foreign minister, Juozas Urbšys's visit to Berlin. On May 21, he was received by Hitler. When summing up the talk with the Führer, Joachim Ribbentrop told the Lithuanian minister that his country could rest assured that Reich's policy towards her would be one of friendship, and that she may count upon Germany, should such need arise in the future.⁷

These German endeavours did not escape the notice of Poland. Even before his visit to Poland, General Raštikis was in Germany where he was invited to attend the celebrations of Hitler's 50th birth anniversary. In this connection, the Polish minister in Kaunas, Franciszek Charwat, informed the Polish foreign office that during their talks with Raštikis the Germans dwelt mainly on the Polish-Lithuanian relations. They gave their Lithuanian guest to understand that it would be a mistake to give up Wilno and consoled him by saying that nothing was yet lost.⁸

On his part, Colonel Mitkiewicz reported about the endeavours of the German military attaché, Lieut. Col. Emil Just, "who perpetually importuned the Lithuanian General Staff with ever new requests". For instance, he demanded that several score German officers be admitted for longterm training during the summer months of 1939.⁹

The Polish fears were justified and the reports reflected accurately the state of affairs as concerned the Germans' behaviour and intentions. But the Lithuanian government gave no ground for anxiety. Although representatives of Lithuania dodged between the Poles and the Germans, the government did not commit itself to either side and followed a policy of neutrality.

This policy was based on several fundamental premises. First, it was assumed that such a small country would best save its

40 per cent. Characteristically, these figures were considered confidential by the Germans and were not for publication.

⁷ ADAP, doc. 421, pp. 460-461.

⁸ Minister F. Charwat's Report of 2 May 1939, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych [Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] (henceforward AAN, MSZ), *Wybrane dokumenty do stosunków polsko-niemieckich* [Selected Documents on Polish-German Relations], doc. 486.

⁹ L. Mitkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

independence and draw most profits if it remained neutral. Here, the example of some neutral European countries during the First World War was not without influence. Of importance was also the fact that from 1934 Lithuania was a member of the Baltic Entente and was politically allied to Latvia and Estonia. These two countries were also in favour of neutrality.

Towards the end of 1938, shocked by the events in Czechoslovakia and fearing the growing war conflict, the states of the Baltic Entente drew up identical texts of neutrality acts.¹⁰ In Lithuania the bill was tabled in the diet on December 23, 1938. Prime Minister Vladas Mironas said in presenting it: "Lithuania, well aware of her geographical position, should, first and foremost, rely on her own forces".¹¹ The bill was passed by the Diet on January 10, 1939, and two weeks later, on January 25, it came into force.¹²

Since then, the policy of neutrality had often been confirmed by official Lithuanian representatives, among them by General Raštikis during his visit to Warsaw. Minister Urbšys, replying to Ribbentrop's declaration of 21st May, also declared that "strict neutrality was the supreme principle of Lithuanian policy".

An article, which appeared in the official daily *Lietuvos Aidas* of June 15, 1939, developed and justified this policy of neutrality. Its author, a well-known journalist and activist of the ruling nationalist party, Valentinas Gustainis wrote: "In the dispute between her big neighbours Lithuania, firmly and clearly, wants to have no part, she wants to be absolutely neutral. This life instinct, expressed in political and diplomatic formulas, has been adopted as the basis of our foreign policy. In Lithuanian eyes it is the most correct and most profitable policy... We ought to keep to neutrality by all means. This is imperative because of our geographical position and the complete lack of knowledge as to which side would come out victorious from the general turmoil..."¹³

¹⁰ "Lietuvos Aidas", No. 584, of 24 December 1938.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² "Vyriansybes Žinios", No. 632 of 25 January 1939.

¹³ V. Gustainis, *Lietuva tarp kaimynų*, "Lietuvos Aidas", No. 298 of 15 June 1939.

But neutrality could have different hues, could be more favourable towards one or the other of the potential adversaries. Lithuania was bound to Germany with strong economic ties, the trade developing briskly. Nevertheless, the Lithuanian government watched with apprehension the growing power of Germany, her increasing pressure on Poland, the events in Gdańsk which reminded vividly of the events preceding the annexation of Klaipeda. Minister Charwat was right when in his extensive report to the foreign ministry of August 21, containing a survey of Lithuania's policies and situation, he emphasized that "in relation to Germany, decisions are governed by fear and the consequent tactics of avoiding irritation and, primarily, of creating no precedents in the relations with other countries". Next, the minister reported that the Lithuanians were disillusioned with the Germans because, among other things, none of their promises concerning the relations in occupied Klaipeda had been kept. He concluded that Lithuania did not want to dance to the tune called by the German conductor.

Charwat did not hide the fact that in respect of Poland certain negative attitudes had recently emerged. "The reasons lie in the first place in the Wilno complex and the fundamental mistrust of the sincerity of our intentions",¹⁴ he wrote.

But the most important part of the report was the assessment concerning Lithuania's neutrality. "*Absolute* neutrality continues to form the theoretical foundations of Lithuania's foreign policy", but, he continued, "in case of a conflict between Poland and Germany this neutrality will probably last for a few days and then become fiction. For Lithuania, against her own will, will be drawn into the whirlpool of conflict".¹⁵

All in all, he rather warned the Ministry than reassured it,

¹⁴ These fears and constant suspicions are reflected in Lithuanian sources. For instance, extensive internal correspondence had been caused by Roman Knoll's pamphlet, "Uwagi o polityce polskiej w 1939 r. [Remarks on Polish Politics in 1939]". A tendency towards the renewal or even imposition of a union on Lithuania was read into it. Many comments have also been caused by a vaguely mentioned map on which Lithuania was placed within the Polish frontiers (cf. K. Novickas, *op. cit.*, p. 281).

¹⁵ AAn, MSZ, file 6075, pp. 25 - 34.

and he gave it to understand that danger may threaten from the Lithuanian side, particularly in case of an unfavourable turn in the affairs. But his warnings had no major practical consequences. The Polish high command did not alter its plans for the translocation and concentration of troops which were being carried out in the last decade of August. The Wilno promontory was almost completely devoid of troops. Infantry divisions and cavalry brigades were directed to the German frontier and only reserve units remained as rearguard protection. Numerically, they were fairly strong and could be reinforced by calling up reservists, but, more importantly, they had insufficient armament. Thus, the Polish side gave palpable evidence of its belief in the assurances of the Lithuanian government, and of taking into account Lithuania's neutrality when preparing for defence in the face of the growing Nazi threat.

At the same time the Polish diplomacy did not spare efforts to consolidate Lithuania in her neutrality. The days immediately preceding the outbreak of the war brought events which had their bearing on the situation in Lithuania. Information reached Warsaw from various sources about the increasing German pressure on Lithuania to push her against Poland.

On August 26, Tadeusz Kobyłański, deputy director of the political department in the ministry of foreign affairs, reported anxiously to Deputy Minister Jan Szembek about the development of events in Lithuania and, particularly, about the growing German propaganda campaign. "If we do not take a proper stand", he said, "Lithuania may slip away from us." He also suggested a non-aggression treaty with Lithuania.¹⁶

This idea was not put into practice. But two days later, Mr. Kobyłański, at the minister's request, received the Lithuanian envoy in Warsaw, Jurgis Šaulys, to whom he expressed his surprise at Lithuanians believing the rumours, inspired by Germans, about Poland's allegedly aggressive intentions towards Lithuania. Kobyłański described these rumours as absurd. The envoy denied that they were listened to and declared that the

¹⁶ Diary and files of Jan Szembek, vol. IV. London 1966, p. 698.

Lithuanian government's confidence in Poland was beyond question.¹⁷

The cable to the Polish legation in Kaunas informing about the meeting contained the statement that in case of further complications "a formal declaration about the respect of Lithuania's neutrality would be made in Kaunas." In this matter a special instruction was to be sent.¹⁸

In reality, the situation was more complicated and fraught with danger than the Polish side supposed.

In the last days of August the German diplomacy did really take new steps with respect to the Lithuanian government. On August 29, the German minister in Kaunas, Erich Zechlin, was instructed to make a declaration that the Germans would not use force against Lithuania, if she observed strict neutrality. Then, the envoy was to declare that Germany in her conflict with Poland was counting on understanding on the part of Lithuania because "as the German Gdańsk and Corridor have been wrenched away from Germany, so the aspirations of the Lithuanian people have been similarly wronged by being deprived of Wilno in consequence of the coup carried out by Poland."¹⁹ Thus, the formation of a common front against Poland was unequivocally suggested, so far on moral grounds. On the same day Herr Zechlin made such a declaration in the presence of Kazys Bizauskas, deputy premier of Lithuania.²⁰

On that same day, August 29, the German minister in Kaunas received another cable which instructed him to find out "in a cautious form", if the Lithuanian government would not be inclined to stage a sort of demonstration by concentrating troops on the Polish frontier.²¹ The military attaché, Colonel Just, received an identical instruction.

In the evening of August 30, yet another cable arrived at the German legation. It recommended Zechlin to express more explicitly than in the declaration of the day before the German

¹⁷ Coded cable to mission in Kaunas, 29 August, 1939, AAN, MSZ, file 6075, p. 78.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ ADAP, vol. VII, doc. 410, pp. 337 - 338.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, doc. 419, p. 344.

²¹ *Ibidem*, doc. 429, p. 353.

sympathies "with the Lithuanian aspirations to the Wilno region", and emphasized that, should there be another territorial division between Germany and Poland, the Lithuanian claims to Wilno would be taken into account in a far-reaching way.²²

It follows from other reports by the German minister that he had carried out the instruction and that he did not let pass any occasion to sow mistrust of Poland. In his talks with Lithuanian politicians he tried to persuade them that a possible threat could only come from Poland which, unlike Germany, had no non-aggression treaty with Lithuania and which, up to August 31, had not even announced a declaration about respecting Lithuania's neutrality.²³ In this context it is clear that Mr. Kobylański's idea was quite reasonable, while the delay in the declaration about the observance of Lithuania's neutrality was an evident mistake.

According to Zechlin's report of August 31, the Lithuanian government was not inclined to come out against Poland because opinions were divided among the Lithuanians. Some courted the thought of regaining Wilno, others, and the divisions were to be found also inside the government, inclined if not towards Poland, at least towards England and France.²⁴

This analysis was correct and adequately reflected the real aspirations and balance of power in Lithuania. Inside the country there emerged groups of supporters and opponents of intervention. Much depended on the victory of this or that trend.

Usually, when speaking of the supporters of the German side, Voldemaras's followers are mentioned. Such a group did exist but at the time it was not the most dangerous one. In analysing the balance of political powers in Lithuania as illustrated by the question of interest to us, we shall begin with the traditionally Germanophile faction among the followers of professor and former premier Augustinas Voldemaras.

Without dwelling on the history of the activity of Voldemaras and his supporters, it is worthwhile to recall that after their defeats, and particularly after the unsuccessful putsch of 1934,

²² *Ibidem*, doc. 459, p. 375.

²³ *Ibidem*, doc. 481, p. 389.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

they formed a relatively small extremist group, devoid of any meaningful influence in the country, and seeking support of the Germans. They made good use of the situation which prevailed in Klaipeda Area at the turn of 1938 and tried to develop some lively activity there. After the annexation of Klaipeda by Germany they increasingly played the role of Nazi agents. German documents mention explicitly that they approached the Nazi security authorities with proposals to create a Lithuanian national-socialist party, reinforce the anti-Semitic movement in Lithuania and, finally, to carry out a subversive campaign against the Lithuanian government. They asked the Nazis for money and arms. The latter were refused but individual, casual grants helped the group financially.²⁵

Still another aspect should be emphasized. At that time, differences began to emerge more and more clearly between Voldemaras himself, then in France, and the activists working in his name. The young followers of Voldemaras complained that he showed little interest in their plans and did not approve of their goals. Algirdas Slesoraitis, the organisation's chief of staff, became their real leader.²⁶ Doubtless, the group led by Slesoraitis was ready to do anything in order to make Lithuania join the German side. They even had plans for an armed uprising in those August days and they tried to spread the network of conspiracy. But, as was said before, their influence was limited, and police watched their every step.

In contemporary press and, subsequently, in the literature on the subject, the importance of Voldemaras's coming to Lithuania on August 27, 1939, was exaggerated. It is difficult to assess the reasons which prompted the former premier to return to his country, but it is a fact that immediately upon crossing the frontier at Wierzbołowo he was arrested and deported under escort to Jeziorosy (lith. Zarasai) on the north-eastern border of Lithuania. He did not play any political role in the coming months.

Much more influential than the extremist followers of

²⁵ ADAP, vol. VI, doc. 587, p. 679.

²⁶ *Galežinis vilkas [Iron Wolf]*, Collected Documents, Vilnius 1965, doc. III/1, pp. 54 - 55.

Voldemaras was a group within the ruling nationalist (Tautininkai) party. They were mostly young activists, somewhat opposed to the elder Thautininkai members and even to the country's dictator, President Antanas Smetona. Among these so-called radical nationalists, the most important was Jonas Statkus, the union's secretary. In contrast to Voldemaras's followers, the "radical nationalists" had access to the powers that be, their influence reaching the government, the administration and the army.

For some time they had been charging, albeit in a veiled manner, President Smetona with slowness, lack of energy, even indolence. As concerns the matter of most interest to us, the neutrality of Lithuania, her behaviour in case of a Polish-German war, they inclined in the last days of August 1939, towards firmer actions and making the most of the occasion in order to take back Wilno.

On August 24, an article by Statkus, signed J.S. and headlined "Lithuania's Neutrality", appeared on the first of the main organ of the Tautininkai, the weekly "Vairas."²⁷ The author opposed in it the absolutising of the notion of neutrality. He argued that the application of the principle of neutrality should be elastic, depending on the actual balance of forces, and serve a supreme purpose: the interests of Lithuania. A week later, the same weekly "Vairas" printed another article by Statkus, headlined "The Requirements of the Moment" and signed with his full name. This time Statkus went even further, saying that neutrality was not a dogma but a consequence of the community of interests of Lithuania and her neighbours, and that it will exist as long as it is required by the general interests. The most significant sentence was the one about the Tautininkai resolution not to forget about the areas outside Lithuanian frontiers, where Lithuanians were living. The article ended on a strong note, calling for a break with passiveness when the protection of own interests was at stake.²⁸

It would seem that the matter had been put quite explicitly. But Statkus wished to dot the I's and cross the T's. In the same

²⁷ "Vairas", No. 34 of 24 August 1939, pp. 657 - 658.

²⁸ "Vairas", No. 35, of 31 August, 1939, pp. 673 - 674.

issue of "Vairas" (Aug. 31) he wanted to publish an appeal for a march on Wilno. At the last moment this appeal was removed and replaced by an advertisement about the subscription to the weekly.²⁹

Doubtless, such articles or appeals might have been favourably received by some, at least, part of the population, particularly the young. It should be borne in mind that for years they have been brought up with the sense of the wrong done by Poland, when General Żeligowski occupied Wilno in October 1920. Propaganda on this subject was very intensive, and the question of regaining Lithuania's old capital fascinated many people. The following oft-repeated slogan was significant: "When the time comes, we shall all march on Wilno: the army, the *šaulai* (Rifles, a paramilitary organization), members of the Union for the Liberation of Wilno, the whole organised and non-organised population. There will our bodies lie, there our souls and hearts will rest in peace".³⁰ Now, with the war approaching, not a few Lithuanians might think that the time, which had been announced long ago, was coming.

But the authorities tried to damp such moods. Official propaganda strongly emphasized that the only way for Lithuania to follow was to keep away from the coming conflict. The official organ "Lietuvos Aidas" said on August 30: "Lithuania ... is convinced that only by following the policy of strict neutrality she can defend her independence which she values above everything. In other words—Lithuania's vital interests dictate the policy of neutrality..."³¹

The same issue contained an attack on foreign agents, an easily deciphered name for the followers of Voldemaras. "Foreign agents", said "Lietuvos Aidas", "have already surfaced during the difficult time of the Suwałki events. Now they are again trying to act, mostly in border areas... Foreign agents, seeing Lithuania's determination to stand aside from all the

²⁹ Cf. L. Sabaliūnas, *Lithuania in Crisis. Nationalism to Communism 1939 - 1940*, Bloomington/London 1972, p. 147.

³⁰ "Mūsų Vilnius. Vilniui Voduoti Sąjungos iliustruotas menesnis laikraštis", No. 3 of March 1929, p. 1.

³¹ "Lietuvos Aidas", No. 489 of 30 August 1939.

current conflicts, are trying to weaken her by sowing confusion and causing conflicts. They must be dealt with..."³²

To round the picture it is worth noting that the population was upset by the coming war. There was some panic-buying of, particularly, salt and sugar, and the authorities were trying to calm the anxiety. Premier Jonas Černius said on August 30 that no danger threatened Lithuania, and appealed to the people to remain calm and to go about their duties as usual, and also not to stock up unnecessarily.³³

Although Lithuania expected the war to break out any day, the outbreak itself, which started with the Nazi aggression against Poland, was something of a shock. The Lithuanian government behaved as expected. On September 1, the president of the republic proclaimed the coming into force of the neutrality act of January 25, 1939.³⁴ At the same time, Smetona announced to the nation that two of Lithuania's big neighbours, Germany and Poland, were in a state of war. But they had assured him that they would respect Lithuania's neutrality and it was to be hoped that they would keep their word. "But we, too, have our duties", the appeal went on, "we must be neutral, we cannot incline towards any of the warring sides. That is our big duty. Its fulfilment is determined by our neutrality act and by the international law..."³⁵

The confirmation of the respect of Lithuania's neutrality by Poland came quickly. On the same day, Minister Charwat notified the ministry of foreign affairs, and Colonel Mitkiewicz—the general staff, that the Polish government had taken note of the assurance of Lithuania's neutrality communicated by the Lithuanian government, and declared officially that on her part Poland would respect Lithuania's neutrality. Colonel Mitkiewicz also formally informed the Lithuanian side about the unprovoked

³² They were strikes and peasant troubles in the north of the Suwalki region in 1935, when the dispute between Lithuania and Germany about Klaipėda was at its peak. The authorities said at the time that the troubles were inspired by German agents in order to weaken Lithuania's resistance.

³³ "Lietuvos Aidas", No. 491 of 31 August, 1939.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, No. 498 of 2 September 1939.

³⁵ Quoted after A. Merkeliš, *Antanas Smetona, Jo visuomenino, kultūrinė w politinė veikla*, New York 1964, pp. 530 - 531.

aggression against Poland perpetrated by Germany. "That day I was received at the general staff with engaging warmth and extraordinary courtesy", says Mitkiewicz in his reminiscences.⁸⁶

Minister Charwat immediately informed the Polish foreign office about the proclamation of Lithuania's neutrality. The relevant document with the French translation of President Smetona's act was dispatched from Kaunas on September 2. It arrived in Warsaw on the 4th, and was taken cognizance of at the ministry of foreign affairs by Director Kobyłański and head of section, Stanisław Zabiełło. It was the last document received in Warsaw from the Polish legation in Lithuania.⁸⁷

In announcing its neutrality the Lithuanian government also undertook certain measures strengthening the state's defences. A special ruling sharpened the law on the state of emergency, which had been in force for years, by giving the home minister and the administration broader powers. The possibility of introducing obligatory work for all citizens between the ages of 16 and 60 was provided for. Special directives were sent to hospitals in order to get them ready for the possible admission of an extra number of sick and wounded.⁸⁸

A partial mobilization was the most important step. This began as early as the end of August and continued after the outbreak of the war, discreetly and on a limited scale. According to Smetona's secretary, Alexander Merkeliš, General Raštikis proposed a broader mobilization but the president did not agree.⁸⁹ A certain number of reservists was called up and the units, thus brought up to required strength, were moved to the frontier.

Here, a characteristic fact should be noted, which indicates how the Lithuanians tried to face it both ways. On August 31, General Raštikis "told" the German attaché "in strict confidence" that the measures undertaken were exclusively meant to reinforce the units on the Polish border, whereas on the German

⁸⁶ L. Mitkiewicz, *op. cit.*

⁸⁷ AAN, MSZ, file 6085, p. 7 and 8.

⁸⁸ K. Navickas, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁸⁹ A. Merkeliš, *op. cit.*, p. 533.

frontier only a few garrisons had been put on war footing.⁴⁰ This was an indirect answer of the Lithuanians to the German suggestions about a demonstration to be carried out on the Polish border.

But the concentration of Lithuanian troops did not contain any serious threat. Colonel Mitkiewicz, who watched it, mentions only partial mobilization and the formation of four infantry divisions. He adds that "on the frontier with Poland a protective screen has been developed."⁴¹

In any case, the fact remains that the Lithuanian command concentrated part of its units in the south of the country, in the area adjacent to the opening theatre of war. Certainly the major part of those troops was stationed near the Polish territory. But this followed from the very line of the Polish-Lithuanian frontier which ran here in a big curve from Orany (Lith, Varena) to Wizajny. From two sides the Polish territory hugged that of Lithuania whose narrow wedge projected south in the area of Kopciowo (Lith. Kapčiamicstis) and Druskienniki (Lith. Druskininkai).

Perhaps not only geographical considerations prompted the concentration of the major part of the mobilized troops on the Polish frontier. The Lithuanian high command may have feared that any incursion into the territory of Lithuania could come only from the Polish side. In this context, there was the memorable precedent of September 1920, when, during the Polish-Soviet war, the Polish divisions which were carrying out a manoeuvre towards the rear of the enemy violated the Lithuanian territory when they marched from the region of Sejny to Druskienniki. It was no accident that General Raštikis, during his conversation with Colonel Mitkiewicz on August 28, 1939, asked him straightforwardly, if he was sure that Poland would not violate Lithuania's neutrality by launching an attack on East Prussia from the Suwałki region through the Lithuanian territory.⁴² To sum up, it seems that although the majority of

⁴⁰ ADAP, vol. VII, doc. 481, p. 389. Also K. Navickas (pp. 269 - 270) declares, on the basis of archival sources, that the majority of troops were concentrated on the Polish frontier.

⁴¹ L. Mitkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 222.

Lithuanian troops put on a war footing was in the vicinity of the Polish frontier, yet this concentration was of a purely defensive nature.

The outbreak of the war caused Lithuania's getting further away, as it were, from Poland, as concerns transport and communications. Some of the direct trains were taken off schedule, telephones and the telegraph functioned with delays and after a few days were practically limited to the region of Wilno.⁴³

Yet, despite this severing of links, news about everything that was happening in Poland and on the front was received with the greatest interest by the Lithuanians.

Beginning with September 2, the Lithuanian press published communiqués on the hostilities on their front pages. The manner of their exposition, the headlines, showed that their sympathies were with the Polish side. For example, the government organ, "Lietuvos Aidas" of September 2, published the communiqué of the Polish general staff on the leading place of its front page, printing in large type the subtitle: "Poles shot down 16 German planes."⁴⁴ Next day, the paper also published the Polish communiqué as the main item of news, the subtitle saying: "Poles destroyed 100 enemy tanks."⁴⁵

But the papers did not limit themselves to the publication of official communiqués. They also wanted to print their own information. With this in view, a largish group of correspondents went near the zone of battle, to the meeting point of the Polish, German and Lithuanian frontiers. One of them, from the daily "Lietuvos Žinios," reported about the movements of Polish troops in the Sopoćkinie area. He wrote about the many German aircraft over the Polish territory, the air-raids, the sounds of the bombing of Grodno and Augustów. The report emphasized that, in the face of these threatening events, the Lithuanian border population everywhere demonstrated its satisfaction that thanks

⁴³ "Dzień Polski" (Kaunas), No. 199 of 6 September 1939, and No. 205 of 14 September 1939.

⁴⁴ "Lietuvos Aidas", No. 498 of 2 September, 1939.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, No. 501 of 3 September, 1939.

to her policy of neutrality Lithuania had escaped the war sufferings.⁴⁶

The forced landing on the Lithuanian territory of a damaged German aircraft was quite a windfall to the correspondents who gathered on the frontier in the evening of September 1. Its pilot, an N.C.O., was interned. Another German aircraft force-landed on Lithuanian territory on September 10. Its two-member crew was also interned.⁴⁷

The reports from Klaipeda, published in Lithuanian newspapers, were very interesting in that they spoke, among other things, of the numerous instances of Polish nationals fleeing abroad from Klaipeda and East Prussia. The newspapers also wrote about many Lithuanians who wanted to leave the territories occupied by the Germans.

But generally speaking, not much was known about the war itself and the Nazi methods of waging it. In this respect, much could be learned after the arrival in Lithuania, on September 6, of the staff of the Polish General Commissioner's Office in Gdańsk. Most of them, contrary to elementary international usage, had been maltreated by the Nazis. "They came to Kaunas," noted Colonel Mitkiewicz, "in a terrible state, beaten up and maltreated by the Gdańsk German police. Colonel Wincenty Sobociński, the military attaché in Gdańsk, and Counsellor Wiesław Artlet bear marks of strangling on their throats and dark bruises on their faces."⁴⁸ But this fact was not publicized in Lithuania. Soon the Commissioner's staff left for Poland.

To return to the most important matter—that of Lithuania's neutrality. It is worth noting that the issuing by the president of the republic of the act of September 1 did not close the problem. A covert fight developed around it and even grew in the first days of the war. True, Statkus, the secretary of the nationalists, stopped publishing inciting articles because "Vairas" was

⁴⁶ "Lietuvos Žinios", special issue of 3 September, 1939.

⁴⁷ "Dzień Polski", No. 197 of 4 September, 1939 and No. 201 of 11 September, 1939.

⁴⁸ L. Mitkiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 237 - 238. Colonel Mitkiewicz has incorrectly described the post of Colonel Sobociński who was really the head of the military department in the Polish Commissioner's Office in Gdańsk.

suspended for some weeks. But he did not stop his other efforts. Inside the government, opinions were, it seems, divided on the subject. According to some accounts, the premier and the home minister were for intervention but they failed to get a majority.⁴⁹ On another plane, the efforts of Voldemaras's followers oriented towards the same purpose, were also unsuccessful. Slesoraitis, who at the end of August issued an order to begin preparations for an insurrection, was called up under the scheme of partial mobilization, which was not, probably, an accident. Also many other leading men in the Voldemaras group were called up and sent to various units. Thus, communication between them became difficult if not impossible, and the organisation of an action prevented, at least in the immediate future.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, sometime around September 8 - 9, a new phase opened in suggestions or even pressures on the part of Germany, aimed at persuading Lithuania to intervene in the war. The initiative came from the highest level. We can only assume the nature of the motives which prompted the leaders of the Reich to take up such energetic steps vis à vis Lithuania. Military reasons do not seem to have played the principal role. A Lithuanian thrust towards Wilno would be of great importance to Poland by worsening her position even more. But the Germans would not have felt any major effects on their front. The Polish high command would not have been able to move a single regiment from the German front to face the Lithuanians. Political considerations seem to have been of more significance to the Germans. As they considered Lithuania to be within their sphere of influence, they intended to draw her into an armed action on their side (with the consequent introduction of German troops into the Lithuanian territory) and thus to make her dependent on them both militarily and politically. Lithuania, having acquired Wilno, would have found herself in the position of another Slovakia.

It follows from German documents that on September 9, Ribbentrop, after a talk with Hitler, recommended the military attaché in Kaunas to approach the commander of the Lithuanian

⁴⁹ L. Sabaliunas, *op. cit.*, pp. 148 - 149.

⁵⁰ *Geležinis vilkas*, pp. 58 - 59.

army with a suggestion about the Wilno question. The same was to be done by Minister Zechlin in his diplomatic line of business.⁵¹

We know from Lithuanian sources that Colonel Just paid several visits to the Lithuanian general staff in those days, persuading them to march on Wilno. He promised that the Wehrmacht would support the Lithuanian troops with air strikes, armour and heavy artillery.⁵²

At the same time the Germans had talks on the matter with the Lithuanian envoy in Berlin, K. Škirpa. He needed no persuasion. He had already declared himself a fervent supporter of intervention. During a meeting with Dr Kleist from Ribbentrop's office (Dienststelle) on September 9, Škirpa assured him that he was doing everything possible to persuade his government to make a move under the slogan: "We shall drive Żeligowski's bands out of the capital of Lithuania." His proposals, assured Škirpa, had been discussed by the government and he was certain that they would be accepted, and he would immediately inform the German side about it.

During this conversation another question surfaced, namely the fact that Škirpa had earlier shown the Germans a map on which he had traced the limits of the Lithuanian claims. This map had been shown Ribbentrop who wrote a resolution on the margin of Kleist's notes from the conversation: "Tell Škirpa that Lithuania should immediately occupy Wilno, but nothing else".⁵³

So Ribbentrop did not approve of the claims advanced by Škirpa. It is worthwhile to ponder over them. It is quite probable that they followed the line which Lithuania had officially proclaimed for years (it was incidentally modified unilaterally⁵⁴) and which was demarcated by the Lithuanian-Soviet peace treaty of July 12, 1920. In accordance with this line Lithuania would have got extensive areas in the east and south: Braślów, Święciany, Wilno, Oszmiana, Lida, Grodno, Augustów and Suwałki.

⁵¹ ADAP, vol. VIII, doc. 36, p. 27.

⁵² S. Raštikis, *op. cit.*, p. 591.

⁵³ ADAP, *op. cit.*, doc. 41, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁴ Cf. P. Łossowski, *Stosunki polsko-litewskie w latach 1918-1920* [*Polish-Lithuanian Relations in 1918-1920*], Warszawa 1966, p. 212.

Acting on Ribbentrop's instructions, Kleist received Škirpa again on September 12, and declared that Lithuania's claims marked on the map seemed to be too far-going, and that they had aroused reservations not only on political grounds but also, and primarily, for military reasons, because doubts existed as to Lithuania's capability of occupying them. Kleis advised Škirpa to carry out the claims in two stages. First, to occupy Wilno and the surrounding region by force of arms, the outcome of such an action seeming a foregone conclusion. Secondly, to start a diplomatic campaign during which the final borders of Lithuania would be resolved by political negotiations.⁵⁵

The German pressure on Lithuania reached its climax on September 13. On that day Colonel Just again paid a visit to General Raštikis. On behalf of Generals Brauchitsch and Halder, he officially once more proposed that the Lithuanian army start its action against Wilno without delay, promising the support of the German air force and technical troops. Just emphasized that the two generals warmly advised the Lithuanian high command not to by-pass that opportunity and to open hostilities against Poland.

Raštikis replied that the decision about an armed action was in the hands of politicians, not the military. He added that, although the Lithuanian government considered Wilno and its region legally, historically and ethnically an inseparable part of Lithuania, yet it could not denounce the neutrality it had proclaimed. It was a refusal, albeit clothed in a polite form. Winding up the conversation Raštikis revealed to Just that pressure on Lithuania was being exercised not only by the Germans but also by the English and the French, but in the opposite direction.⁵⁶

It is to be noted that Raštikis's mention of the English and the French was not just a diplomatic dodge. The governments of France and Great Britain did warn the Lithuanian government not to breach its neutrality. For instance, the Lithuanian envoy in Paris, Pietras Klimas, cabled on September 1 to his ministry :

⁵⁵ ADAP, *op. cit.*, doc. 58, p. 43.

⁵⁶ S. Raštikis, *op. cit.* A slightly less accurate but conforming in details is the report from this conversation drawn up by Minister Zechlin for the Auswärtiges Amt, of 13 September, 1939 (ADAP, vol. VIII, doc. 58, p. 43.).

"We must be particularly circumspect with regard to Poland, because this will find an echo in England and France."⁸⁷ On September 11, the ministry in Kaunas received a cable from the envoy in London, Bronius K. Balutis. He reported that he was told at the Foreign Office that the British government "had been repeatedly receiving information that in Lithuania the idea of making use of the opportunity to take Wilno back was gathering strength." Should this really happen, warned the British, "the position of Lithuania at the peace conference would be very difficult."⁸⁸

Even more active and blunt than the military attaché was the German envoy Erich Zechlin. Having received his instructions on September 9, he redoubled his efforts with regard to the Lithuanian foreign office and other government officials. He endeavoured to convince them by way of various arguments, particularly by insisting that Poland had already been defeated. For instance, on September 11, talking with Vice-Premier Kazys Bizauskas, he "informed" him that the Polish government was flying to Rumania and thinking of staying there. But Germany will not allow that and has threatened to consider it a breach of Rumania's neutrality. Bizauskas replied enigmatically that he did not imagine such a situation.

At the time Zechlin's intention was to obtain audience with President Smetona, for he knew that the fundamental decisions depended on him. He solicited it through the foreign office and through the military command. But Smetona refused, arguing that he would then have to agree to a visit of the Polish envoy, who also wished for a meeting.

Minister Charwat did ask for an audience, but the purpose of his visit was very untimely. The minister was dissatisfied with the tone of some of the Lithuanian newspapers with regard to Poland, and wanted to submit his protest to the president and even threaten repressions. "In the given circumstances, it was as well", wrote Henryk Batowski, "that these endeavours had come to nought."⁸⁹ Indeed, such untimely protests, when the whole

⁸⁷ Quoted after Navickas, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁹ H. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

edifice of the Polish state was disintegrating, could only unnecessarily harm the Polish-Lithuanian relations. If the information about the envoy's intentions is accurate,⁶⁰ then it once more confirms the fact of Charwat's inexpedient behaviour as the chief of mission in Kaunas.

To return to Herr Zechlin's endeavours. There are two versions of the final result of his attempts to obtain audience with President Smetona. According to one, given by General Raštikis, the president agreed to receive the German envoy but did not want to talk on the subject of interest to the latter.⁶¹ On the other hand, Smetona's secretary, Merkelis, denies it absolutely. He says that the president received neither the German nor the Polish envoy, and did not even agree to give audience to the Lithuanian envoy in Berlin. In this situation Zechlin asked privately for an audience with Černius and the premier agreed.⁶² Merkelis's version is confirmed in official German documents.

On September 14, Zechlin reported to Berlin that he had had a talk with Premier Černius and that the talk was of a private character. During the meeting he once more presented the German view on the Wilno question, underlining that time was short and that the rapidly progressing defeat of Poland required immediate decisions. The offensive of the German forces might soon result in the occupation of Wilno. In his reply, Černius repeated that Lithuania could not forego her policy of neutrality although she considered the region of Wilno "occupied by Poland and belonging to Lithuania from the legal and ethnic points of view." The Lithuanian prime minister put off the resolution of this problem until the future peace conference was convened. So this was another refusal.⁶³

Next day, September 15, premier Černius declared in the Diet: "So far we have kept wholeheartedly to neutrality. We shall continue to do so."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ In quoting this information H. Batowski refers to the article by W. Zyndram-Kościółkowski, *Litwo, Ojczyzno Moja* [Lithuania, My Homeland], "Kultura", No. 3 of 1949, p. 99.

⁶¹ S. Raštikis, *op. cit.*, p. 592.

⁶² A. Merkelis, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

⁶³ ADAP, vol. VIII, doc. 65, pp. 48 - 49.

And then came a change in the attitude of the German side. The first sign of this was a telex by Ribbentrop of September 14, which recommended Dr Kleist not to have anything to do with the Lithuanians in the immediate future.⁶⁵ Minister Zechlin, on the other hand, received official directives only in the evening of the 16th. In accordance with them he was to drop the Wilno question and to interrupt all the talks which the Lithuanians would like to open on this subject.⁶⁶

What could be the reasons for such a radical change? Above all, the German side had probably concluded that the attitude of the Lithuanian government on neutrality was unassailable. But there was something else. The Nazi dignitaries, very sensitive where their prestige was concerned, lost their temper when they learned, through channels known only to themselves, that the Lithuanians were double-dealing with them, that they kept the British and the French informed about the German pressure and the confidential German-Lithuanian conversations on the Wilno question.

On September 17, the head of the political department in Auswärtiges Amt, Ernst Woermann, presented Minister Škirpa with a declaration, "very seriously worded", describing the rumours spread in the west by Lithuanian diplomats as "shameless". He added that "it was a matter of complete indifference to the Germans whether the Lithuanians would receive Wilno or not. If the Lithuanian government was behaving as it did, then it must be aware that consequences will be drawn". Škirpa tried to deny the truth of the German information referring to the declaration made on the subject by representatives of the Lithuanian foreign office to Minister Zechlin. But Woermann remained unconvinced. Wishing to sweeten the bitter pill, he added that the charges did not concern him personally.⁶⁷

Thus, the German-Lithuanian dialogue on the subject of Wilno ended on an unpleasant note. The efforts aimed at pushing Lithuania into an armed action on the side of Germany against

⁶⁴ Sejm Shorthand Reports, VII ordinary session, 139th sitting, 15.9.1939, p. 49.

⁶⁵ ADAP, *ibidem*, doc. 57, p. 43, note.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, doc. 76, p. 58.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, doc. 84, pp. 65 - 66.

Poland, had failed. This fact had some consequences for Lithuania. But Poland, fighting an unequal war with Germany, did not suffer any harm at the hands of Lithuania.

Colonel Mitkiewicz, who had heard about the proposals presented by Colonel Just to the Lithuanian high command, left for Wilno on the memorable 13th of September, in order to find out about the situation there and to see on his way if there was any concentration of Lithuanian forces in the border areas.

Mitkiewicz found Wilno "completely devoid of troops", full of fears of an expected Lithuanian aggression. "Wilno would not have been able to defend itself", he noted, "if the Germans attacked it, neither would it be able to oppose the Lithuanians, should they reach out for it".⁶⁸ But at the same time, the Polish military attaché saw it for himself that the Lithuanian side had no such intentions. "On the way to Wilno and back", he noted, "I was able to see that General Raštikis did, indeed, keep his word about Wilno. Contrary to the persistent rumours in Wilno that large numbers of troops were concentrated on the approach to Wilno on the Lithuanian side, I did not see any sign of it..."⁶⁹ He repeated it firmly a few days later: "The Lithuanians will not march on Wilno," he wrote on September 16, "the assurances, given me by Generals Raštikis and Černius have so far been kept throughout. The Lithuanians have proved to be an honest and gallant people, they do not want to give the *coup de grâce* to the gravely wounded Poland..."⁷⁰

It is worthwhile to consider why no intervention, no armed action by Lithuania against Poland ever came to pass.

It seems that the most significant role was played here by considerations regarding Poland's allies, Great Britain and France. Their warnings have already been mentioned. In Lithuania the German military successes were, in those early days, regarded with some scepticism. It was generally thought

⁶⁸ L. Mitkiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 243 - 245. It should be noted that in a characteristic gesture Lithuania sent to Wilno, around September 10, i.e. during the war, a consular officer, Dr Antanas Trimakas. This fact did not contribute to the calming of Polish fears as to Lithuania's intentions.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 246 - 247.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 254.

that the final victory would not be Germany's. In this context, a significant article appeared on September 15, in the government's paper "Lietuvos Aidas." Although it began by describing the might of Germany and her will to fight and win, it continued by saying that both Britain and France were convinced of their invincibility, not just because of war preparedness but because of their economic potential. The true reason for England and France taking part in the war, the article went on, was not so much the will to defend Poland as the will to destroy national socialism in Germany, which has become a threat not to Poland only. The writer of the article concluded that war would not end in compromise but firm victory of one of the sides. The elimination of Poland will not mean the end of the war which will be decided in the west, the article concluded.⁷¹

President Antanas Smetona shared this view. In the specific circumstances prevailing in Lithuania, where after the coup of December 1926 he exercised dictatorial powers, his opinions were decisive. We have some information which illuminates Smetona's views on the matter. His secretary Merkelis noted: "After Great Britain and France declared war, A. Smetona was deeply convinced that sooner or later Germany would suffer absolute disaster".⁷² General Raštikis confirms this, writing that "when war began, Smetona said that Germany would lose it and the Anglo-Saxon powers, i.e. America and Great Britain, would be the winners".⁷³ It is clear that with such a general mood and view of the end of the war, the most persistent attempts on the part of the Germans and the vision of immediate and easy benefits presented by them, could not be very effective.

The analysis of the reasons prompting the attitude of Lithuania leads to yet another conclusion. The alliance with western powers of 1939 was not an abstraction to Poland as it is often thought. Its effects were felt not only much later, at the then far-off end of the war, but also much earlier: it prevented Lithuania from an active involvement against our country.

Certainly, there were also other reasons for Lithuania's

⁷¹ "Lietuvos Aidas", No. 535 of 15 September, 1939.

⁷² A. Merkelis, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

⁷³ S. Raštikis, *op. cit.*, p. 661.

attitude. Among them was the wish to remain on the sidelines of the war, as did the allied Latvia and Estonia, and thus to preserve her independence. Kaunas was aware that taking up Germany's side would not only draw Lithuania into the whirlpool of the hostilities, but would also subject her completely to the Third Reich. And Hitler's Germany aroused many a resentment and fear.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to assume that Lithuania's neutrality was due in some part to the fact that Poland was fighting a Nazi aggression. Although the Polish-Lithuanian relations had signally improved of late, yet Poland was still considered a dangerous enemy and potential conqueror. Lithuania had never given up Wilno. And certainly, if there was only the enfeebled Poland to consider, the Lithuanian government would not have hesitated to reach out for its historic capital, perhaps even without German help.

President Smetona had always been and continued to be a fierce enemy of Poland, although there were some subtle, discreetly concealed ties between him and some Polish milieus in Lithuania. Colonel Mitkiewicz was certainly right when he wrote on August 28, 1939: "Since the ultimatum of the Polish government of March 1938 until now, President Smetona has uttered not a single word for the improvement of relations between Lithuania and Poland, and he has kept his intransigent attitude towards Poland, tolerating the new state of affairs but not participating in it personally... President Smetona is supposed to have said once: "As the Head of Lithuania I can receive the Polish envoy only in Giedymin's Castle in Wilno..."⁷⁴

The increasingly unfavourable course of the war aroused an ever lively interest in Lithuania. Admittedly, most of the accounts were favourable to Poland. The correspondents, gathered on the frontier, reported about the increasingly loud gunfire heard in the south-west, and the fires seen at night. The indirect accounts speak significantly much about the heroic defence of Westerplatte "which astounded even the Germans", and later about the defence of Warsaw.

⁷⁴ L. Mitkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

The order of the publication of war communiqués underwent a characteristic change compared with the first days of the war. Information from the French headquarters was printed first, then the German, and finally the Polish—as long as it was available.

The first authentic report from the theatre of war was published on September 13. It was sent by the Warsaw correspondent of "Lietuvos Žinios," Pranas Ancevičius, and described the gallantry of the Polish soldiers repelling attacks by German tanks. More extensive accounts of the hostilities in Poland appeared in Lithuanian newspapers later, in October, November and December 1939. Among them was a series of reports by Ancevičius headlined "Warsaw in the heat of war. From notes by a correspondent", and reminiscences printed in the same "Lietuvos Žinios" in December 1939 - January 1940, by A. Plackovskis, entitled: "During the war tempest in Poland"; there were also articles by the young writer Vytautas Sīrijos-Gira who described his war experiences in Poland in the newspaper "XX Amžius".

The events of the war affected Lithuania more directly when the wave of many thousands of soldiers and civilian refugees crossed the border seeking shelter in a neutral country. But this problem is beyond the limits of this article. It is just worth noting that the Polish soldiers were, as a rule, well received and fairly good living conditions were provided. The Lithuanian authorities facilitated their discharge from internment camps and many soldiers benefited from it but only a few managed to reach the west.

Speaking of Lithuania's attitude towards the Polish-German war and to the fall of the Second Republic caused by it, the breaking of diplomatic relations between Poland and Lithuania in October 1939 should be mentioned.

In the last decade of September, these relations were clearly worsening: "The attitude of the Lithuanian authorities towards the Polish legation", noted Colonel Mitkiewicz on September 21, "is becoming increasingly cool and reserved".⁷⁵

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

Even more explicit was the note under the date of September 24: "The situation of the Polish legation in Kaunas is getting increasingly difficult. It seems that the time will come soon, when we shall stop functioning here".⁷⁶

It was significant that on the same day the staff of the Lithuanian legation in Warsaw returned to Kaunas. The Lithuanian envoy, in contrast to some other diplomatic representatives, did not accompany the Polish government in its journey south-east towards the Rumanian frontier, but remained in Warsaw. He lived through the bombardment of the city and the air raids until September 21, when the Germans agreed to let the staff of the Lithuanian legation through their lines. They arrived in Kaunas after three days via Königsberg.⁷⁷ In consequence, the diplomatic relations were already severed, at least from one side.

Meanwhile Minister Charwat, as well as Colonel Mitkiewicz, felt very uncomfortable in Kaunas. Under the date of September 28, Colonel Mitkiewicz wrote that he felt as if he were in a trap and that the ground was burning under his feet. But two days later the Polish legation in Kaunas received instructions from the new minister of foreign affairs, August Zaleski. The minister recommended the legation to remain there, its staff at full strength, as long as possible. Leaving Lithuania was allowed only if the legation staff was personally in danger.⁷⁸

Yet Minister Charwat, acting with irresponsible speed, did not stop the measures undertaken on the 26th and aimed at winding up his mission. The formal reason for his departure and the actual breaking of relations was the Lithuanian-Soviet treaty, concluded on October 10, by virtue of which Lithuania received Wilno and the western part of the Wilno region. Colonel Mitkiewicz wrote that the Polish legation expected the Lithuanian government to make some special explanation in connection with

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

⁷⁷ Minister Jurgis Saulys described his experience in a special article. He emphasized that the decision to defend Warsaw was enthusiastically received by the inhabitants of the city. They collected arms on their own and joined the ranks of fighters ("Lietuvos Aidas", No. 566 of 27 September, 1939).

⁷⁸ L. Mitkiewicz, *ibidem*, p. 272.

the treaty. When nothing materialised, a protest note was sent after two days to the Lithuanian foreign office. Its reply came on the 14th. It said that Wilno, the capital of Lithuania, was an integral part of the Lithuanian state. The note went on to say that the Lithuanian government did not recognize the Polish government in Paris, because Poland had ceased to exist as a state. According to Mitkiewicz, Minister Charwat, in protest, decided upon the immediate departure from Kaunas. Only four consular officials were left under the care of the British legation.⁷⁹

It looks somehow as if the decision to leave on the 14th of October had been made earlier, hastily and contrary to the directives of Minister Zaleski. It ended the functioning of the mission, though it was still possible and could have been useful for many reasons. Colonel Mitkiewicz admits that a visit was paid to Mr Charwat on October 13 by an official of the Lithuanian foreign office in charge of Polish affairs, Pietras Mačiulis, who "tried to persuade Minister Charwat and myself by way of hints that we were leaving Kaunas unnecessarily", but—adds Colonel Mitkiewicz—he did it only "pro forma".⁸⁰

But it follows from Lithuanian sources that the matter looked somewhat different. In the protest note, handed to the Lithuanian foreign office on October 13, there was a passage saying that "the Polish envoy feels obliged to leave the territory of Lithuania"; that was even before receiving the Lithuanian reply which, according to Colonel Mitkiewicz, was directly responsible for the departure from Lithuania.⁸¹

Lithuanian documents maintain that it was the Polish side which broke the diplomatic relations with Lithuania. This is, for instance, what Stasys Lozoraitis, the former Lithuanian foreign minister wrote, emphasizing that "Minister Charwat left Lithuania protesting, together with the legation staff, although our ministry of foreign affairs had suggested he

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 276 - 280.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

⁸¹ K. Navickas, *op. cit.*, p. 286. This information corresponds with another given by Mitkiewicz about Mačiulis's attempts at persuasion. Why should he persuade the envoy to stay on, on 13 October, if the decision was allegedly made on the 14th?

continued his mission".⁸² The question should be further studied with the help of archives. But one thing is certain : Mr Charwat was too hasty and acted against the directives of Minister Zaleski ; he did not make use of the possibilities of continuing his mission to Kaunas, even in the worsened circumstances.

This article has presented a less well known aspect of the political history of Poland on the eve and in the first weeks of the 1939 war. It has described the battle waged between the Polish and German diplomacies, this time for the important cause of Lithuania's neutrality during the war. Germany failed in her efforts to force Lithuania into aggression against Poland which owes this primarily to the protection on the part of her western allies.

(Translated by Krystyna Dunin-Kęplicz)

⁸² Lozoraitis, *Kelios pastabos Lenkijos ultimatum klausimu Aidai*, No. 6 of 1976, p. 252.