

THE YEAR 2000: HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE*

Edvardas Gudavičius

The world is living on the eve of the two-thousandth anniversary of its predominant time counting system. Only 318 days remain until the start of the jubilee year.** For Lithuania 10 years remain until its one-thousandth anniversary. Russia celebrated its thousandth anniversary in 1862, Hungary - in 1896, Poland - in 1966. If only listing the dates, Lithuania's lag behind these countries is not so great, but the content of these dates differs. All of the mentioned nations also celebrated at that time the anniversary of their statehood. Sometime during this decade Lithuanian statehood will count, or already has counted, three-quarters of a thousand years. But this is not what is most important. The Poles and Russians at least commemorated their thousandth anniversary, relating it to their possession of a state (the Hungarians claimed a bit too early chronology). There was no state in Lithuania in the year 1009.

The mark of the lag, often dimming our past, is also remembered today. However, can many nations say that there was no such mark in their history? And history itself, world history, if it wants to teach people, has to admit that it can show only the very difficult road on which mankind has traveled. Nothing can be made from nothing, life does not provide anything for free. The more man frees himself from nature, the more he ravages it, cutting the branch on which he is sitting. But people are part of nature and the relations among them are marked by the same law of nature - the necessity to survive. This necessity directs every person's biography and every community's or nation's history.

History and contemporary experience tells us that people have learned to live better and today are learning not to devastate their planet. With a more prosperous life, the relations of humans or nations were and are improving. Never before have people had such opportunities as those our generation is using, and we can not even imagine the opportunities that are awaiting our children. One thing is clear: the 21st century will be completely different. And that will be only the beginning of the changes that will occur during the three thousandth era. Nevertheless, in the 21st century there will also be laggards and forerunners. Humans will remain human and the necessity to survive will not abandon them.

Lithuanian history evolved in this sea of opportunities and threats, in the standoff between achievements and losses. The baptism of a Lithuanian tribal chief in 1009 becomes part of the row of baptisms in Central European countries (Bohemia, Poland, Hungary) at the end of the early middle ages. However, the Lithuanian state did not yet exist, the centers of European civilization at that time were still too far away and the visit by St. Bruno to Lithuania remained a solitary episode. Lithuania's geographic location predetermined its lagging behind, for winning one's place, while in contact with neighboring countries, was possible only by adapting to their civilization. Lithuania felt this, especially painfully, when European civilization, in the form of German colonies, directly approached it. Here history threw out a challenge to the Lithuanians, their newly

* An article is reprinted from weekly newspaper *Atgimimas*. An original version, please, see: "2000-ieji: istorija ir šiandienos patirtis [The Year 2000: History and Contemporary Experience]," *Atgimimas*, 10 (March 12, 1999), 12; *Ibid*, 11 (March 19), 12.

** An article was prepared by paper presented in 81st Anniversary of Independence of the Republic of Lithuania, February 16, 1999, Vilnius.

created state was confronted with these colonies. Arnold Joseph Toynbee, one of the pillars of the history of civilizations, used the Lithuanian encounter as a model for the emerging civilization phenomenon and for the famous cause and effect, and called our Vytis (the coat of arms of Lithuania - Ed.) a heraldic symbol of this response. In this way Lithuania's role in world history appeared.

Accepting baptism only during the later half of the Middle Ages, Lithuania became the last country in the Central European civilization area, thus completing its formation. Lithuania provided the dynasty that ruled over this whole area, preventing the dynastic assimilation that later inflicted so much damage on Czech and Hungarian statehood. The political framework expressed by the dynastic union enabled Central Europe to manifest itself as a civilization unit, while the Grand Duchy of Lithuania played perhaps the crucial role in the emergence of the separate Ukrainian and Belarusian nations. When, in 1989, Europeans asked us what will we give to the world, we could have answered that they do not know what we had already given. Someone perhaps might not like that Central Europe was and is existing, but it would probably be necessary first to ask its nations if they do or do not want to exist. Lithuania's contribution here might not be the greatest, but no one can deny it. Hungary gave mankind charity organized by the rulers St. Elisabeth and St. King. Bohemia gave the Hussite national revolution and Jerzi Podebradishki's idea of the peaceful coexistence of nations. Poland gave the heliocentric system of Michael Copernicus. Lithuania gave Kazimieras Semenavičius' basics of rocket construction. Overcoming its backwardness and the accompanying consequences, Lithuania was able to become a subject of European civilization.

The Crusades, the colonial period, and today's hot spots on Earth show that the greatest conflicts arose and, regrettably, are still arising out of the collision of different civilizations. Lithuania always had to fight for its existence, but that was also the historical problem of the whole Central European area. When mankind faced the positive changes pointing at the beginning of new, more humane relations, this area disappeared from the political map of Europe. Lithuania and Poland were the last countries which still for almost two hundred years maintained an united Republic of both nations, even though its borders were diminished. The year 1795 erased these borders. This happened at the time when the subjects of the English Crown in America established the right of self-determination and when the Great French Revolution proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.

These political deeds appeared at the time when steam and electricity liberated the human muscle from the role of energy provider and made them into the levers of the commands of the mind. At the beginning of our century, the history of the 19th century was singled out as the century when people produced more than ever before, the century in which the majority of people had at least the smallest possibility to live better. It was the century in which this majority understood that it could live in this way, and was given the opportunity to strive for it. The ideals of democracy and independence became the guideposts for mankind's development. In the middle of the 19th century the Chartists of England firmly established the concept of adequate pay for work, which became the basis for a society which made democratic decisions.

Politically stifled Central Europe remained on the sidelines. The empires were able to rule and control its nations, but could not break their will. The poems of Sandor Petöfi and the preludes of Franz Liszt, as the highest creations of word and sound, embody the will of these nations and loudly shout about their trampled rights. In the 19th century Lithuania revolted three times. But both the support for Napoleon, and the uprisings of

1831 or 1863 were only accompaniments to the Polish national liberation movement. Lithuanians almost lost their social elite, Lithuania - the only country in Europe where serfdom lasted until the second half of the 19th century. Lithuanians almost lost the level of a nation, just before becoming a socially unorganized ethnic group. This was the result of unfavorable political circumstances and inherited backwardness. Yet, this was not a historical process having a single meaning.

We understand the 40 year-long struggle against the prohibition of the press as one of the most beautiful manifestations of our history. No doubt this was a struggle for the printed Lithuanian word, but not only that. This was a clash of different civilizations, an examination checking if the Lithuanian nation existed. The “exam monitors” only saw a tribe here and, of course, they erred. Indeed, it would have been surprising, if they had not erred. The struggle was by a people who almost did not have an intelligentsia, but the printed word was necessary for their way of life. Desiring modest careers for their children, it had become accustomed to sending them to schools, and when these were closed down, village school teachers emerged and a secret corner for teaching the children was found. The crooked from hard work fingers of the ploughman would set aside several coins for books, and they were sufficient that the need for Latin alphabet books would appear along with other contraband goods. During the same 19th century workers in Western Europe stopped breaking machines while Lithuanian peasants, still under the yoke of serfdom, stopped drinking. The one and the other understood who was really taking their bread away. They did not have the same level of understanding, but in one place and the other it was Europe. The Lithuanian people responded to the brutal force of the empire with European methods of organization and struggle. Much has been written about the Teutonic knights as bearers of culture, their stereotype as global culture carriers was created. The world does not know anything about the Lithuanian book-carriers although they protected and defended European culture. Only in the Lithuanian language does the word *knygneðys* [bookcarrier] (other languages also have such a word) have a special meaning. Lithuanians proved that they were not only a nation, but also part of European civilization. Anatol Lieven tried to understand the phenomenon of the Baltic revolution, but was unable to understand Lithuanians. He probably did not have this in mind, when he wrote that no one was able to defeat the Lithuanians, but, nevertheless, that might be his most accurate observation, if we single out the case of the fight for and the defense of the Lithuanian printed word.

The press prohibition examination demonstrated that the modern Lithuanian nation was maturing after the abolition of serfdom. The heritage of the European estate society helped to pass this examination, but it was also an obstacle. Western Europe solved this contradiction by decapitating its kings, the people put their own king on trial. The rulers of foreign occupying forces removed the rulers in Central Europe. In the historic memory of these nations, the rulers did not embody social oppression, but the lost statehood. In the youngest country of Central Europe, Lithuania, they were also remembered in this way, but the time period of time separating their era from the occupational present was the longest. And not so much the duration of the period but its nature was the determining factor. Latvians and Estonians developed as modern nations without having had the experience of past statehood, but newly reaffirming their national identity. Lithuanians had to overcome the unionist tradition of the past. Latvians and Estonians were separated from the Germans by a glass wall, generation after generation saw them as the conquerors. The Polonized Lithuanian gentry was regarded as if our own, not getting Lithuanian prayer-books, the people acquired Polish ones. Therefore, the chronologically closer but also more

remembered tradition of statehood acted more to suppress than to promote the Lithuanian national identity. Lithuanians encountered a problem which the Latvian and Estonian national movements did not experience. But the image of ancient Lithuanian statehood, resurrected by romantics, became a support which neither the Latvians nor Estonians had. Such were the peculiarities of the formation of the modern Lithuanian nation. Vincas Kudirka, a genius, comprehending the importance of this past began his poem, which later became the national anthem, with such words. In this way, the ideals of democracy, just as in the other countries of Central Europe, did not come into conflict with the memory of the old rulers, but was supported by it.

The heritage of the 19th century was the First World War. Empires with their imperial methods resolved the question of the division of the whole world. For the first time in the history of mankind, a state was able to feed, arm, “move by” railroads, drive millions of men into trenches and maintain them in these trenches for several years. For the first time the human mind introduced in this web of ditches the manufacturing industry of mass slaughter. The “cabinet” politics of the empires prepared and planned the world war. A war caste of officers, distinguished by birth in a majority of the empires, “led” the gray meat of the cannons. After successful operations the noble generals would prepare parties for these officers, taking them away from their direct work and in this way sentencing the hungry soldiers to the additional hardships of chaos. This was the way it was in the past, and still is in the present. The inter-war Lithuanian novels and Latvian paintings described in memorable works what the people of these nations felt, in the words of the czarist strategist Mikhail Dragomirov turned into the holy greyness of the little animals, and the immortal soldier Zweick laughingly buried the ideals of the empires. And it is probably natural that such biting satire of imperial politics appeared in Central Europe. Central Europe was the hot spot in which the self-determination principle, expressed in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America became the existence program of the whole region.

This program also affected the development of the modern Lithuanian nation. The decade after the abolition of the press ban was distinguished by very rapid and universal progress. The start of the war interfered with the discussion of the Lithuanian autonomy project in the Russian State Duma, but also the new occupiers, when the victorious army of the Kaiser got bogged down at the fronts, were forced to begin negotiations about Lithuania’s future with its representatives. The empires were exhausted. Even the “tiger” of democratic France, Georges Clemenceau, had to take extreme measures - to execute every tenth soldier refusing to go to the front. The intervention of the most powerful country of the new world, which along with small Switzerland had developed the most civil society in the history of mankind, outweighed the plate of Blind Fortuna. At the beginning of 1918, the Fourteen Points of Thomas Woodrow Wilson, setting forth the new, corresponding more with the positive changes in human relations, were announced. According to these points granting independence only to Poland was foreseen, but this led to the abolition of the other consequences of imperial politics. The end of the war, prompting the collapse of the empires which had divided Central Europe, turned this concession into a chain reaction of national self-determination. Just as the baptism of Netimer ends the row of baptisms of the leaders and heads of the emerging Central Europe, just as the fresco in the St. Peter Church in Strasbourg fixes Lithuania in the ranks of the European nations under the flag of Christ at the junction of the 14th-15th centuries, so does the Act of February 16 enter into the ranks of the declarations of independence of Central Europe’s politically reborn states.

We are talking about the modern Lithuanian nation at the beginning of the 20th century. Truly, we can specify the indications of such a level and such a structure. But these characteristics also show how fragile that structure still was. The scanty Lithuanian intelligentsia in Lithuania itself had been decreased, part of it withdrew to Russia. The persons, who made up the Council of Lithuania and declared the independence of the state under unfavorable circumstances, had to declare this after much reflection, coordinating the postulates with contrary meanings and assigning them to the idea of the total sovereignty of the nation and of unrestricted statehood. They understood that they were making an extraordinarily responsible step, marking and determining the further development of events and also the historical fate of Lithuania. They were only incidental political figures with no past experience whose educational background fit the qualifications of statesmen only slightly. No experts held consultations with them, they themselves had to find the needed words and expressions, determining the effectiveness, weight, and power of the declared act's political manifestations. And they found these words.

In 1789 the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen had 17 points, the number of points in T.W. Wilson's Fourteen Points is mentioned in its title. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America also contains many postulates. The Act of February 16 fits in one page, of which almost half is devoted to the signatures, and of the four articles of the text only two are devoted to the statehood of Lithuania. These articles are only two sentences and I will cite them here:

“The Council of Lithuania, as the sole representative of the Lithuanian nation, in conformity with the recognized right to national self-determination, and in accordance with the resolution of the Vilnius Conference of September 18-23, 1917 proclaims the restoration of the independent state of Lithuania, founded on democratic principles, with Vilnius as its capital, and declares the termination of all state ties which formerly bound this State to other nations.

The Council of Lithuania also declares that the foundation of the Lithuanian state and its relations with other countries will be finally determined by the *steigiamasis seimas* (Constituent Assembly), to be convoked as soon as possible, elected democratically by all its inhabitants.”

In evaluating political declarations one usually looks at what they had to say and how it was said. The analysis of the Act of February 16 should be done in an opposite manner: seeking what it did not say. The consciousness of the young modern Lithuanian nation was based on two principles - the right of national self-determination and the pre-union historical tradition of the Lithuanian state. In the Act of February 16 paragraphs are not devoted to these principles, but the very principles are divided by paragraphs, i.e. every one of them is based on these principles, but this is done in a different plane. In other words, the principles are expressed realistically, adapting their expression to the existing situation to a maximum degree, making concrete their validity both for that moment and for the future. Such behavior was dictated by the specifics of historical Lithuania, and the Council of Lithuania understood this very well. It directed its attention not to the somewhat known statehood of the union Lithuania, but to that of the forgotten earlier Lithuania. But the world considered the reminder of statehood only a mothball smelling illusion. Briefly and in a concentrated manner expressing the viewpoint of French society, the small Larousse encyclopedia (1906 edition) described Lithuania as an old province of Poland annexed by Russia. And the same encyclopedia in its 1926 edition illuminates the history of the already existing Lithuanian state in that perspective. Meanwhile, in writing about Poland, Lithuania's statehood is mentioned, noting that Jogaila became the king of Poland.

In this way the signatories of the Act of February 16 had to evaluate how the world understood the old statehood of Lithuania. This was both support and chains for Lithuania's new statehood. The right of self-determination in this case could also have been used against Lithuanians. Polish activists were already working in this direction. The signatories unraveled this complicated knot with two formulations. The Act announced that an independent country was being restored (rebuilt) and it also noted that it "terminated all state ties which formerly bound this State to other nations." This formulation also defended Lithuania from the claims of Germany which could have arisen from the agreement of December 11, 1917. Relying on the principle of national self-determination, the past, present, and future were evaluated in this way. The reestablishment of the state on democratic grounds (foundations) declared the most general principle of harmony between statehood and self-determination, and the directive that the democratically elected Constituent Assembly will have to decide the nature of the state's structure and relations provided content to this trite declaration. The Act of February 16 does not mention state borders, but it is clear that they had to conform with the ethnic territory of Lithuanians. However, this territory was not uniform, and all the more it was impossible to talk about uniformity in seeking even the minimal borders of historic Lithuania. There is more than incidental mention of Vilnius in the Act: this was absolutely necessary if one wanted to rely on the argument of the historic tradition of the Lithuanian state. The Constituent Assembly, elected by all the inhabitants, had to resolve at the same time the questions of the Lithuanian national state and of the rights of the national minorities to flourish. Empires also hide their national problems behind the veil of democracy. The Act of Lithuanian statehood pointed out that this problem had to be determined not by the scale of a multinational large state, but of the national state, not forcing nations to be national minorities, but giving each nation the possibility to have its own home, not forcing it to live in the dormitory of nations controlled by the commandant of the ruling nation.

This decision of the signatories was especially important because the "cabinet" politics which were being pushed out of the history of mankind very quickly decided to use the idea of the self-determination of nations in its own way. During the Berlin conference Otto von Bismark was angry that the affairs of some Danube shepherds prevented him from using the best time for vacation. At the beginning of the 20th century politicians loved the word *Balkanization*, but it appeared because there had not been any national states in the Balkans for several centuries. Declaring the powers of the *seimas* elected by all the inhabitants of the state, the Council of Lithuania foresaw an agreement with the national minorities, as its further activities showed.

The most complicated heritage of Lithuania's past is its relations with Poland. Why does Poland celebrate its declaration of independence nine months later than Lithuania? Already in 1916 Austria-Hungary had given Poland guarantees of independence, it was the only one mentioned in W. Wilson's Fourteen Points, it disposed the forces of an armed legion. It could wait for the appropriate moment. The Council of Lithuania did not foresee any better perspectives, a defeated Germany could only be replaced by the victorious Russia and Poland. The Council of Lithuania had to dare, and it did so. The signatories of the Act of February 16 were very brave men.

For several months it appeared that this Act was only an empty declaration. We have recently experienced that governments declaring the ideas of human rights and democracy, first ask the small nations if their state institutions control their territory. When the government of Lithuania began to control this territory, Soviet Russia had already occupied half of it. And here in addition to the bookcarriers we have to talk about the

second phenomenon of the modern Lithuanian nation - the volunteers. Several or tens of thousands of volunteers are not many. And historians have to assert that the promise of land was as important an incentive for the volunteers as it was for their fathers to distinguish between the incentives of contraband books, sugar, and matches. However, the essence is that the bookcarriers and volunteers felt the great support of the people behind their backs. This indeed showed that Lithuanians were a nation and the signatories of February 16 understood this. That is why they were not afraid, that is why they made to some extent real the power of their declaration. The year 1918 showed that in Lithuania such people would always appear and be supported.

Statistics did not say then and, of course, will not say now what percent of the people of Lithuania supported the Council of Lithuania and organized the Lithuanian army. It is clear that the percentage was greater in Estonia, and smaller in Belarus. We can not ignore those who opposed, just as it would be impossible to see only them. Speaking about national consciousness and the very nation, these percentages, even if it would be possible to determine them, would remain as only one of the facts allowing one to make the more important conclusion: did the percentage of supporters determine the direction of the state. The implementation of the Act of February 16 allows one to answer this in a positive manner. The Act became and remains the most important landmark of Lithuania's history. It embodied the return of the Lithuanian nation, already in the form of a modern nation, to world history, after successfully winning its place among the world's nations. It is, therefore, necessary to talk about this place, but one also needs to understand the meaning of these values. That is not only the red carpet, being placed for representatives of Lithuania. That is foremost the opportunity to use better all the victories of mankind. That is the opportunity for people living better, to become more rapidly the majority of the inhabitants. One will not achieve this only through a red carpet, but it will not achieve it without it.

The First Republic of Lithuania realized the points of the Act of February 16. It is possible to and we should discuss how and how successfully this was completed. In many places the number of people living well and the amount of democracy and culture was significantly greater than in Lithuania. However, the amount of these values was much greater than when foreigners ruled, and greater than ever before in the past. Only the sum of these values cultivates a citizen. One can find many things to criticize in Lithuania between the world wars, but the citizen grew up in it, all of our newest history proves it. And although the situation was different, Lithuania during the postwar resistance and of January 13 was the same. In 1991 Lithuania persevered and the history of the world turned in this and not another direction. This is how the question "what will you give" was answered. The people who answered it knew that they were defending the points of February 16.

Translated by Saulius Girnius