



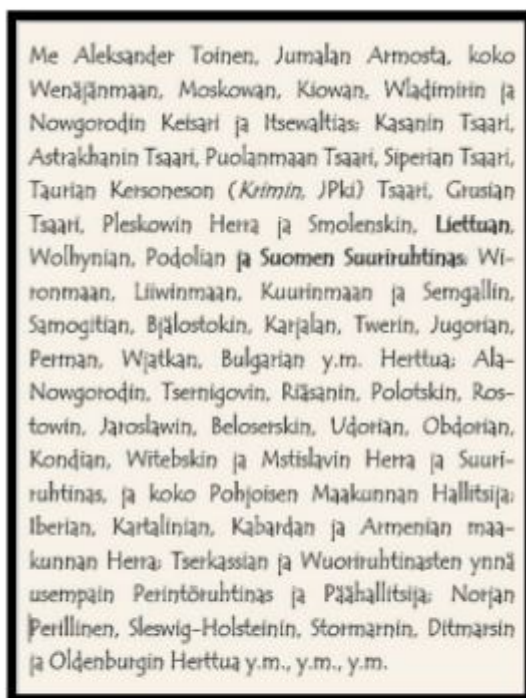
## Article by Jyrki Paloposki, Senior Officer, Documentation Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland

### RELATIONS BETWEEN LITHUANIA AND FINLAND IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The road of Lithuania and Finland towards independence followed different paths from the end of the 19th century, often due to their past history and geographical location. But in the early decades of the 20th century, there was also common ground to be found between the two nations. Having gained their independence in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Finland and Lithuania did not have major opposing goals; instead, they had more to achieve through co-operation.

#### I LITHUANIA'S ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

##### Lithuania and Finland in the Russian Empire



Titles of the Russian  
Emperor

Most parts of Lithuania had belonged to the Russian Empire since the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795. Finland was annexed to Russia less than 15 years later. After the suppressed 1863 uprising had spread



to Lithuania, the Empire enforced Russification policies on the Baltic countries and Poland. Literature and press as well as teaching in the Lithuanian language were banned in Lithuania, Russian was imposed as the official language and Russian conscription came into force. Civil rights were restricted. The Baltic countries and Poland lost their special status and became Russian governorates.

Finland, where the uprising had not taken hold, remained an autonomous Grand Duchy with its own administration and laws. Later, at the turn of the 20th century, Finland experienced its own period of oppression, though one that was shorter than Lithuania's.

## **The 1905 Revolution**

Russia's authoritarian and inefficient government, unequal society and the Russo-Japanese War, which had ended in defeat for Russia, were causing long-running general dissatisfaction that eventually broke out in 1905 in strikes, demonstrations and uprisings across Russia. The unrest was evident also in Lithuania, with violent strikes taking place as early as the summer of 1905. In mid-October, the army fired on protesters in Vilnius, killing several people. However, ethnic groups, social classes and political parties in Lithuania had different goals in this movement. Some demanded social reforms, others called for autonomy and recognition of nationality, and yet others made the case for an independent Lithuania. The first documented idea of a sovereign state of Lithuania had been put forward a couple of years before the 1905 Revolution. The Assembly of more than 2,000 Lithuanian representatives, the Great Seimas, convened in Vilnius 4–5 December 1905. The Seimas called for Lithuanian self-government, a local parliament and the permission to use the Lithuanian language in schools and administration.

At the time, Finland was undergoing the first period of Russification. The ordeal made Finns sympathetic to the aspirations of Russia's other minority peoples and prompted the nation to follow the unfolding of the events closely, particularly in the Baltic countries. Throughout 1905, the Lithuanian situation was covered by Finnish newspapers. On 29 March 1905, in an article headlined "Different nationalities are waking up", the Uusimaa newspaper reported that Lithuanians were demanding full civil rights and the use of the Lithuanian language in schools and government agencies. Newspapers also described the demands to give Lithuania self-government and the publication of the first Lithuanian-language newspaper subject to pre-censorship.

The Emperor responded to the demands for more democratic governance and civil rights by establishing a parliament, the all-Russian State Duma, to which Lithuanians could also send their representatives. However, the Duma was a parliament only in nominal terms, as most subjects still lacked the right to vote and real power remained with the Emperor. In the end, nothing was promised to the national projects that were born and gained strength during the 1905 movement, and the Emperor continued to promote unity and stronger Russian culture across the Empire.

Meanwhile, the strike movement had spread to Finland, and in November 1905 a general strike had stopped the whole country. The Emperor bowed to the demands of the Finns, and the special rights of the pre-oppression autonomy were restored.

Finland did not have to send representatives to the Duma, and the Emperor agreed to reconvene the Diet of Finland, with representatives from the four estates, to legislate for a new and more equal parliament and civil liberties.

## **From the first State Duma in 1906 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914**

The first Duma, which opened in St. Petersburg in April 1906, focused on the reform of the Russian electoral law and on land ownership questions. The rights of nationalities were only touched on among other, more pressing matters. The Duma had some sixty representatives of national factions. In matters of nationality, Lithuanians usually found their partners among the representatives of Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine. Although the most radical parties had boycotted the Duma, its proactive action was enough to frighten the Russian government and the Emperor. The Duma was dissolved in July 1906. Some members immediately moved to Vyborg on the Finnish side of the border, out of reach of the Russian authorities, where an attempt was made at Hotel Belvedere to continue the unfinished reforms.

Members of the Duma published the Vyborg Manifesto, also signed by four Lithuanian representatives. The Manifesto lamented the dissolution of the Duma and called for general civil disobedience, including the refusal to pay taxes or to serve in the military. The text of the Manifesto was translated into Lithuanian, inspiring the people there.



Members of the Duma at Vyborg railway station

In subsequent Duma sessions, Lithuanians continued to argue for Lithuanian autonomy. Finland now had its new parliament, and Finns did not participate in the Duma sessions in St. Petersburg. The Lithuanian representatives of the Second Duma (1907) sent their congratulations to the Finnish Parliament on the exercise of universal suffrage. They also expressed their admiration for the Finnish people for their vigorous defence of their rights and autonomy. The telegram from the Lithuanians was read with "gratitude and favour" in a parliamentary session in May 1907. It was decided that the Speaker of Parliament would send a reply telegram, expressing Parliament's gratitude to the Lithuanian members of the Duma.

In July 1906, the heavy-handed Pyotr Stolypin, who had been educated in Lithuania and had worked in the administration of the Lithuanian region, had become the Prime Minister of Russia. Although the Finns did not participate in the sessions of the Duma, the Third Duma (1907-1912) also dealt with Finland's privileges and autonomous status. Stolypin gave

passionate speeches against Finland's special status, while among the Lithuanians Andrius Bulota, a lawyer, enthusiastically defended the Finnish cause. When Russian legislation finally supplanted parts of Finnish legislation in 1910, the Russian ultra-nationalist representative Vladimir Purishkevich had cause to shout excitedly: *Finis Finlandiae!*

## During First World War 1914-1917

Purishkevich's wish, however, did not come true. The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 halted the Russification programme in Finland. While Finland largely remained outside the theatres of war, Lithuania's fate was harsher. First, 70,000 men were mobilised for the Russian army. Then, when Germany invaded Lithuania in the spring of 1915, tens of thousands of Lithuanian civilians had to flee, and some were forcibly moved to make way for the invaders. Lithuania also suffered extensive war damage. Between August and September 1915, Germany seized Kaunas and Vilnius, which along with other Lithuanian towns had been defended by thousands of Lithuanian soldiers drafted to the Russian army.



Karelia newspaper, 19.09.1915

From the autumn of 1915 until the end of the war, Lithuania was under the German military regime. Germany's goal was either to annex the territories it had conquered or make them politically and economically dependent buffer states against Russia. Various models for implementing this plan were proposed during the war years. In February 1916, Finnish newspapers reported on Emperor Wilhelm's plans to establish a federation of West Slavs, to which Lithuania would belong. In late 1916, Germany established the Kingdom of Poland, and the first news about the Kingdom of Lithuania also appeared in the Finnish newspapers.

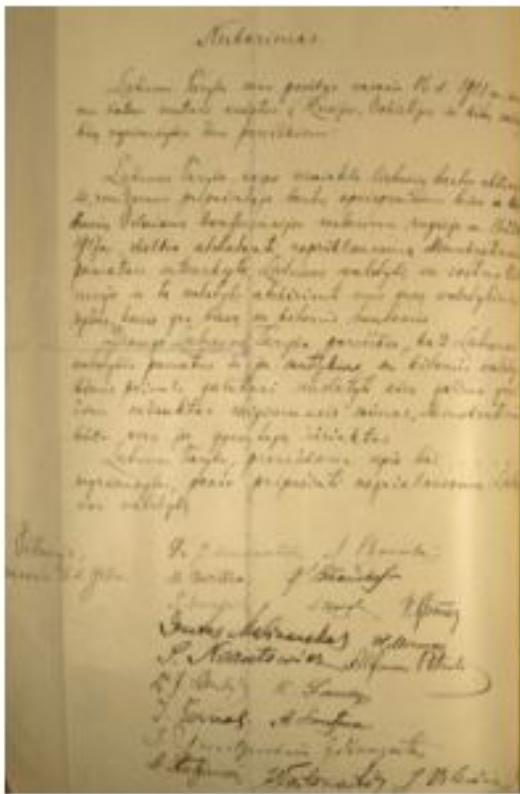
Lithuanians saw Germany as an opportunity to achieve their independence, even though both Germany and the Western Allies had promised sovereignty to the countries on Russia's western border. In particular, Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States, had spoken about the post-war sovereignty of nations. But Russia also made promises to consider the demands which the Empire's peoples had been making. Lithuanian organisations promoting the struggle for independence had been active in Switzerland, the United States and in neutral Scandinavian countries for years. After the outbreak of the war, an information office promoting the cause of independence was opened in Paris and the Stockholm office was established in 1917. Finnish activists had set up information offices in Stockholm and Berlin.

## Declaration of Independence of Lithuania on 16 February 1918

In Russia, the Emperor was forced to abdicate in February 1917. The caretaker interim government expressed its support for the sovereignty of the different peoples. Lithuanian



factions in St. Petersburg established a national council, which called for the establishment of a sovereign Lithuanian state. Expatriate Lithuanians in several European cities and in the United States were promoting the same cause. In Helsinki, the Lithuanian Society met at the beginning of May to discuss the statehood question. Speakers reminded the audience of a new historical era and called for good and confidence-building neighbourly relations between Finland and Lithuania that would last forever. “Long live free Finland, long live free Lithuania” ended the declaration published in the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper, signed by naval doctor Nagevicius and private Satas, representing the army and navy. Many Lithuanians had moved to Helsinki as soldiers and sailors of the Russian army and navy. A week after the meeting, a celebration was held in the ballroom of the University of Helsinki to raise funds to help with Lithuania’s rebuilding after the war. Lithuanian and Finnish music was played at the party, and the keynote speakers were active friends of Lithuania, author Maila Talvio and Dr A.R. Niemi.



### The Declaration of Independence of Lithuania on 16 February 1918

By the late spring of 1917, the Germans had abandoned the idea of annexing Lithuania and began to turn to the establishment of an autonomous state. The military regime agreed to the Lithuanian proposal of holding a conference in Vilnius in September to decide on the future status of Lithuania and its relationship with Germany. The conference elected a 20-member Lithuanian Council, Lietuvos Taryba, to prepare the country for independence through negotiations with the Germans. The Taryba issued a declaration on 11 December 1917, according to which Lithuania was declared a sovereign state which was firmly and permanently in union with Germany. Among Lithuanians, this dependence on Germany caused big disputes and on 16 February 1918 the Taryba issued a new Declaration of Independence, addressed to the governments of Russia and Germany and to other countries. The Declaration abolished all previous state ties with other



states, referred to the preparations made by the Vilnius Conference in September 1917 and declared the country independent. The Declaration stated that Vilnius was the capital of Lithuania and ended with words about the submission of the Declaration to the governments of various countries and the request to recognise the independence. Germany recognised Lithuania's independence on 23 March 1918, as did Lenin's Bolshevik government, which had come to power in Russia. However, the Declaration of Independence had no immediate effect, as Lithuania remained under the command of occupying Germany.

Finland, too, had published its Declaration of Independence a couple of months earlier, calling for recognition of other peoples and a place among the world's civilised nations. While, in the turmoil caused by a civil war, Finland failed to send an official response to Lithuania's Declaration and request for recognition, the events were nevertheless covered in the newspapers of both warring factions in Finland. The pro-German papers of the Whites reported on the new, free kingdom of Lithuania birthed by Germany. The Red faction's analysis was different, accusing Germany of seizing yet another territory.

### **Plotting for the Kingdoms of Lithuania and Finland**

Having already established the Kingdom of Poland in November 1916, Germany sought to form more dependent buffer states on its eastern border. Courland was made into an independent duchy whose crown was offered to the German Emperor. There were also rumours about Lithuania. However, it was not until 1918 before the idea of a monarchy began to take shape. Finland had declared itself an independent republic on 6 December 1917, but the civil war had made the winning factions long for a strong commander, a king. Could such a ruler be found in Germany, to strengthen ties with that great power? From several candidates, the number was whittled down to just Emperor Wilhelm's brother-in-law, Prince Friedrich Karl of Hesse. In October 1918, the Finnish Parliament elected him King of Finland.

In the spring of 1918, Finnish newspapers had speculated about a Lithuanian personal union with the Kingdom of Saxony. The Princes of Prussia and Württemberg had also been mentioned as potential ascenders. Finally, in July 1918, the Council (Taryba) declared the Kingdom of Lithuania and asked Wilhelm, Duke of Urach, to become King of Lithuania, to which he consented. The name for the new ruler was to be Mindaugas II, according to the monarch who had united Lithuania and ruled the country in the 13th century. The choice divided opinion in Lithuania, and the Germans also expressed contrary views about the selection of the Duke of Urach. Since Berlin had not been consulted, the decision was not fully accepted in Germany.

As the matter was also topical in Finland, the press followed the events in Lithuania closely. There were opinions for and against the new kingdoms. The royalist Finns considered that Lithuania, like Finland, needed a king who could rise above the various conflicts of interest and who could become "a strong hand defending the interests of the whole nation, creating order from the Lithuanian mess of nationalities and parties." Whereas a pro-republican newspaper quipped that "such small thrones put together in haste will not remain upright for a day" unless Germany were to win the war.

The choice of German kings, of course, did not please the country's enemies. A couple of weeks after the election of the King of Lithuania, some Members of Parliament in Britain asked: "What are the Germans doing now? They are making their princes monarchs in Lithuania, Courland, Estonia, and Poland, and trying in Finland." In London, Finland's diplomatic representative tried in vain to remind the British that the Finnish people had the right to decide on their own ruler.

The British Foreign Secretary replied that Britain also had the right to decide whether “they wanted to have anything to do with the Emperor Wilhelm’s brother-in-law in Finland or in Germany.” In protest at the election, France withdrew the recognition of independence it had already given to Finland.



Wartenberg Trust Hofatelier Andersen, Stuttgart  
Wilhelm, Duke of Urach

The Finnish Heritage Agency  
Friedrich Karl, Prince of Hesse

Lithuania had elected its king in the summer of 1918, when Germany was still powerful. By the autumn, Germany’s position had changed for the worse. Finland, however, did not consider the potential outcome of the war when the German king was elected in October 1918. A month later, the German Emperor abdicated and Germany had to agree to a ceasefire. Germany became a republic, crushing the royal dreams of Lithuania and Finland. Neither of the chosen kings had time to ascend to his throne.

## II INDEPENDENT LITHUANIA

### Lithuania initiates diplomatic relations

Even before the start of the First World War, expatriate Lithuanians had laboured to promote the independence of their country. In the latter years of the war and after the peace agreements, the leading politicians of the national movement toured the capitals of Europe in search of contacts.

Augustinas Voldemaras and Antanas Smetona (chairman of the Lithuanian Council), who later respectively became the first prime minister and the president of Lithuania, visited



Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden and Germany to seek support for their country and negotiate for recognition. A year earlier, Finland had sent similar delegations to various parts of Europe and the United States to spread news about the new state and speed up its recognition.

Sweden, Denmark and Norway recognised Lithuania's de facto independence at the turn of 1918, followed by the United Kingdom and Latvia in the second half of 1919. On 23 October 1919, Prime Minister Ernestas Galvanauskas inquired about de facto recognition by Finland. It was more of a formality, as practical co-operation between the nations in the eastern Baltic Sea area had already begun (known as the 'peripheral state policy' in Finland), and Lithuania's informal representative had been posted to Helsinki. In addition, many countries important to Finland had already given their de facto recognition to Lithuania. Consequently, at the government session of 14 November 1919, President Ståhlberg "saw fit to recognise the Provisional Government of the Republic of Lithuania on behalf of Finland as the de facto government of that country." The President instructed Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti to forward the decision to the Lithuanian Government.

Germany was important to Lithuania, and the first Lithuanian ambassador was appointed to Berlin in November 1918, soon followed by Switzerland. At the beginning of independence, Berlin was also the most important ally for Finland, and one of the country's first embassies was established there. Actively continuing this work, by the end of 1919 Lithuania had twelve more or less informal missions set up in major European states and their neighbouring countries, as well as in Switzerland, the United States, the Vatican and Russia.

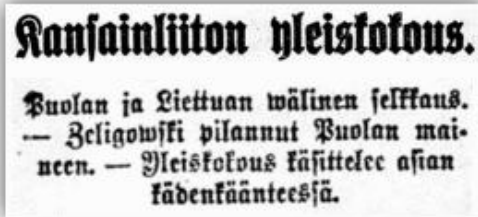
Finland also established informal missions at the beginning of independence. For example, while the United Kingdom, an important ally for Finland, did not grant de jure recognition, it nevertheless received the Informal representative of the Finnish de facto Government in the spring of 1918. At the same time, a semi-official diplomatic mission was established in London.

### **First World War ends and the Lithuanian Wars of Independence begin**

The World War ended in November 1918, but under the Treaty of Versailles, German troops remained in the Baltic countries to protect them from Russian invasion. During the war years, Lenin, along with the leaders of the other warring countries, had spoken of the sovereignty of nations. The collapse of Germany granted Russia new opportunities in the West.

In December 1918, under the leadership of Vincas Mickevičius, the Lithuanian Bolsheviks formed a temporary government of workers and peasants in Vilnius, which assured Soviet Russia of its solidarity. Lenin recognised the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania, as it had done a year earlier with the Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic and its government. As 1918 turned into 1919, German troops withdrew from Vilnius and were soon replaced by Russian troops to support the Lithuanian Bolshevik government. The Lithuanian interim government fled the Russians to Kaunas. However, the Mickiewicz government had to flee Vilnius when it was seized by the Poles in April 1919. At that point, the Lithuanians were fighting against Russia and, later in the autumn of 1919, against Pavel Bermond-Avalov's West Russian Volunteer Army, which consisted mainly of Germans. By the end of the year, the Lithuanians had forced the Bermontians to withdraw across the Lithuanian border. Meanwhile, the first clashes between the Lithuanians and the Poles had taken place in the spring of 1919, and the fighting had only expanded in the summer and autumn. The following year, on 12 July 1920, Lithuania and Russia signed a peace treaty. On the same day, Russia attacked Poland, which then lost Vilnius to the Russians.





Helsingin Sanomat 20.10.1921

Hostilities between Lithuania and Poland ended later in the same year. A ceasefire agreement and the subsequent demarcation line were signed on 7 October 1920. The next day, troops of the Polish insurgent general Lucjan Żeligowski, supported by the Polish government, attacked Vilnius. The Poles recaptured the city and continued their attack deeper into Lithuania. The Lithuanians halted their progress, but Vilnius and the surrounding areas remained under Żeligowski, who went on to form the occupied territories into the Republic of Central Lithuania. The general's rebellion and proactivity prompted Finland's representative in Tallinn, Erkki Reijonen, to write in no uncertain terms: "It's a clear fact that behind Gen. Żeligovsky, pulling the strings on 'Central Lithuania', is Gen. Pilzudski, Z's personal friend, and Poland altogether, even though the venture is run privately under Z's name." The new state of Central Lithuania held parliamentary elections in January 1922, and the following month its parliament passed a law on the Republic's annexation to Poland. The Polish Sejm approved the union in April. The Helsingin Sanomat wrote about the union: "...our sympathy is more on the Lithuanian side than on the Polish side." According to the Helsinki newspaper, Poland's treatment of its neighbour "did not come across as honourable, fair play."

### **Paris Peace Conference in 1919-1920 and the question of recognition of Lithuania**

At the same time as Lithuania was fighting for the preservation of its freedom and establishing bilateral relations with various countries, the Peace Conference was taking place in Paris, outlining the future after the World War and the fate of the nations that had lost it. The United States, the United Kingdom, France and Italy were the leading countries in the Conference. One question was how to deal with the new states. The United States had started in-depth preparations for the Peace Conference while the war was still raging. Already in March 1918, the State Department had examined the situation in Lithuania and Finland and the countries' chances of maintaining their self-proclaimed independence. The Americans pondered Russia's demands on Lithuania, Lithuania's historical and economic relationship with Poland, the German influence, and the country's borders. Their conclusion was that Lithuania's future as a sovereign state might not be entirely certain. In Finland, however, the long tradition of self-government was seen as a strength. It was also noted that many countries had already recognised Finland's independence. However, the Americans were concerned about the excessive influence of Germany in Finland and the country's deteriorating relationship with Sweden due to Åland.

The victorious powers had been invited to the Peace Conference, but not Lithuania, Finland or the other newly independent nations. However, a dozen delegations from across the former Russia had arrived in Paris to push for the independence demands of their nations and territories. Although denied access to the negotiating table, representatives were able to meet the negotiators and lobby on behalf of their countries. The Finnish Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti had a list of countries whose representatives he would meet and persuade to recognise the Republic of Finland. The Baltic countries had prepared joint memoranda to pursue their



goals, reminding the victors of their war-year promises of sovereignty and citing the anti-Bolshevik feeling of the independent nations towards Russia.

Voldemaras, who led the Lithuanian delegation, asked the Conference to remember that Lithuanians had fought with the Allied forces against Germany. He also hoped that Lithuania's historical sovereignty would be an important point for recognising the independence of the new state. The Conference delegates did consider the history of Lithuania, but unfortunately what they saw was a strong connection with Poland. Occupying a special position in the minds of the Allied, Poland had been invited to Paris. The Polish question was debated by a special commission, which heard and reported on the views of the representatives of Poland's neighbouring countries.

The Baltic Commission was established only later in the spring. The Polish representatives attempted to prove that it was still too early to think of Lithuania or Ukraine as independent states and that the wisest course of action would be to unite the whole of Lithuania with Poland. During the Peace Conference in the spring of 1919, Poland occupied Vilnius which, in its view, was an old Polish city. Regarding the Polishness of Vilnius, the Lithuanian leader Voldemaras noted that if the nationality of the city depended on the language of its residents, then "as a matter of fact Helsinki is more Swedish than Vilnius is Polish."

Many Western governments considered it desirable to recognise the de facto interim governments of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Stable governments in the Baltic states would safeguard both against the spread of Bolshevism and the German influence. In principle, governments supported and sympathised with the independence projects. In the Paris Conference, however, the decision-makers still considered it a fair possibility that the Whites would win the Russian Civil War. If that were to be the case, the breakaway regions would have to be considered, above all, as part of a comprehensive solution to the Russian question. Therefore, while the White Russians were asked to recognise the independence of Poland and Finland, they were also told that the settlement of the relations between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and Russia would be better handled through negotiations or with the assistance of the newly-established League of Nations. As far as Lithuania was concerned, the relationship with Poland, and the question of Vilnius in particular, was a problem that could not be resolved in Paris.

The Paris Peace Conference sat from January 1919 to January 1920, but failed to come to a decision on the final recognition of the Baltic states. This allowed individual governments to use the uncertainty as an excuse for their own actions. In August 1919, when Parliament in London asked the British Government about the recognition of the Baltic countries and the launch of the ever-important trade relations, the Government evaded the question by saying that the recognition of Lithuania was something that could only be decided in agreement with the other Allied powers. When, following the Paris Peace Conference, the League of Nations began its work in the early 1920s, the British Government could maintain that "the League of Nations is now dealing with the Polish-Lithuanian dispute."

### **Neighbours of former Russia begin to co-operate**

The Paris Peace Conference was not the only forum where the newly independent countries strove to stabilise their position. Having begun before the outbreak of the First World War, activists representing Russia's minority peoples kept pressing their demands even harder as the war progressed.

Together with Ukrainians and Poles, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Finns gathered in

Helsinki and many other cities, pursuing an agenda of secession from Russia as independent states and engagement in close co-operation with each other. The group of Finnish activists included Herman Gummerus, who called on the Finnish Government to begin co-operation with Ukraine, Estonia and Lithuania. Ties were formed, and the countries continued to work together and seek support from each other as independent states. Unions, even the unification of nations, were planned. What these new states shared was a common external threat from either Russia or Germany, or both, and a fear that rapprochement between the great powers could push smaller nations into their sphere of interest. In Finland, this political agreement between the neighbouring states of former Russia was known as the 'peripheral state policy', *reunavaltio politiikka*, a security policy agenda pursued by Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland had formed active diplomatic relations in 1919. However, each country had its own aims for the political co-operation. Finland, above all, sought safeguards against Russia. According to a memorandum written in August 1919, it was specifically the peripheral states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and the 'Caucasus provinces', especially Georgia, that "were Finland's most natural allies in combating both the Bolshevik threat and the attempts of the newly-formed expansionist Russia to seize power." Lithuania's problem, in contrast, was its relationship with Poland, in which Finland was determined not to get involved. However, from September 1919 onwards, co-operation between the nations began to emerge as a series of conferences. That month, high-level talks took place in Tallinn and Tartu. In addition to the representatives of Estonia and Latvia, Prime Minister J.H. Vennola and Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti arrived in Tallinn from Finland, with Prime Minister Mykolas Sleževičius and Minister of Trade Jonas Šimkus attending from Lithuania. Concerned about the emergence of this anti-Russian alliance, Russia proposed that Finland, Lithuania and Latvia begin peace talks.



Suomen Kuvalehti 4/1920

Representatives of the Baltic bloc in the Helsinki Conference in January 1920

The next conference was held in January 1920 in Helsinki. New to the negotiating table was Poland, which had hoped that Lithuania would be excluded from the talks as the dispute over Vilnius was too tense. The Finnish Ambassador to Warsaw informed Helsinki: "In general, one can notice here the tendency to remove Lithuania from the peripheral state accord." For the Finnish Government, the situation was difficult. Any exclusion of Lithuania from the talks would give the impression that Finland had taken the Polish side in the Vilnius question. In the end, the Finns decided to invite the Lithuanian representatives to Helsinki. From the outset, however, the Baltic bloc accord was disrupted by the tense relations between the Lithuanians



and the Poles. Disagreements reached a critical point when it came to appealing to the great powers and other states for the recognition of the independence of the Baltic states. Eventually, a statement was drawn up, calling for the de jure recognition of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by the Entente Powers and other states as soon as possible.

The series of conferences resumed in Riga in early August 1920. In the memorandum prepared by Foreign Minister Holst, 'Instructions for Finnish Delegates at the Riga Conference', the goals for the unification of the Baltic states were clearly set out: Finland was to accelerate the consolidation of Lithuania's international position and, together with Poland, recognise the independence of Latvia and Lithuania. The Finnish Government, however, was not entirely in line with its Foreign Minister and did not approve the draft treaties of the Riga Conference.

On 25 August 1920, the Government decided that Finland would not recognise Latvia and Lithuania de jure until Poland had done so. When Poland occupied Vilnius in October 1920, all attempts to forge a Baltic bloc on the previous basis came to an end.

### **III OFFICIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN FINLAND AND LITHUANIA**

#### **First representatives in Helsinki and Kaunas in 1919-1921**

The results of the Paris multi-track diplomacy were slow to emerge. The handling of practical matters between Finland and Lithuania and the need for co-operation led to the search for and development of bilateral relations, initially through more informal, lower-level channels.

Back in 1916, the Lithuanians in Helsinki had given their support to the idea of an independent Lithuania, as had the Lithuanian expatriates in other countries. In Helsinki, the meetings supporting independence were transformed in April 1917 into the Lithuanian Association of Finland. After Lithuania's declaration of independence, the Association nominated Vytautas Gylys to represent the new state. Gylys had been living in Finland since 1915 and worked in the Office of the Governor-General in Helsinki. At that point, however, the nomination was not made official, and instead Gylys became the chairman of the committee advocating for the interests of Lithuanians in Finland. The committee was given a semi-official status. For example, it issued identity cards and temporary passports to Lithuanians returning to their homeland, which were also accepted by the Finnish authorities.

On 1 February 1919, the Lithuanian Provisional Government asked the Finnish Government to receive Vytautas Gylys as the country's representative, which Finland agreed to. By mid-February, Gylys had already met with Foreign Minister Carl Enckell, with whom he discussed topics such as the status of the recognition of Lithuanian independence and Bolshevism in Lithuania. The first *délegué ad interim* of Lithuania began his work at Hotel Fennia, soon he moved to Fabriksgatan 21B, and in August on the Corps Diplomatique list, the residence and office of Représentant diplomatique Gylys was given at Hotel Cosmopolite on Vladimirinkatu, now Kalevankatu. In the small circles of Helsinki, the arrival of a diplomat from a new state was always a special occasion. Gylys gave interviews to the press, talking about his country's history, Lithuania's relations with Poland, and the trade and co-operation opportunities between the countries. He also represented his country in many of the Baltic bloc conferences. A year later, in February 1920, Gylys was appointed to represent his country in Tallinn, where he soon moved.



**Vytautas Gyls**

**Office of the Chief Archivist of Lithuania**

Finland was slower to act, and it was not until 2 July 1920 that Reino Sylvander was appointed Finland's first representative to Latvia and Lithuania as *délagué ad interim*. A couple of weeks after the appointment, Gyls informed Kaunas that Sylvander would probably be assigned to Riga, but the new ambassador was particularly interested in Lithuania. Gyls had first-hand knowledge of this, as in June 1920 Sylvander had published a book, 'Lithuania in ancient times and today'. For this richly illustrated work, Sylvander had received some of the pictures from Gyls.

Soon after, in September 1920, Sylvander travelled to Kaunas. The journey from Riga took 17 hours by train, so Sylvander had time to make all sorts of observations. Lithuania's national colours and coats of arms adorned the station buildings, some war damage could be seen, but "The abundance and goodness of bread proves that this is solid grain country." Kaunas, however, did not make any particular impression on Sylvander; the houses were small, often with two floors, and the town had many parks and courtyards, he noted. The city's population had risen sharply, putting pressure on housing and increasing living costs, which were considerably higher than in Helsinki. On 15 September 1920, Sylvander was able to submit his credentials to Foreign Minister Juozas Purickis. The usual compliments were paid in French, and the discussion then continued in German. Sylvander also presented his new book on Lithuania to the Foreign Minister. Purickis introduced Sylvander to his Ministry's officials, with whom Sylvander, a long-time Russian language teacher, could also conduct a conversation in Russian. In the following days, Sylvander had the opportunity to meet with Prime Minister Kazys Grinius and President Aleksandras Stulginskis. Although Sylvander was based in Riga, he followed the events in Lithuania closely, submitting long reports based on several sources to Helsinki and diligently sending telegrams.





Archives of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs

In November 1920, Sylvander, who diligently wrote reports to Helsinki, reminded the Foreign Ministry's chief accountant:

“Besides, getting a typewriter has proven necessary.”



In addition to the diplomatic representative, a consul was in need. In the summer of 1920, the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper expressed concern about the potential trade opportunities that would be lost because, according to the newspaper, Finland had not appointed a consul, even to promote trade relations. “As a result, the vigorous and always vigilant Germans are now taking over the Lithuanian market.” However, improvements were in the pipeline. Sylvander had found out that a Finnish company, Aarnio & Lehtinen, was about to open an office in Kaunas. Sylvander knew the managing director, Väinö Aarnio, who was known as an energetic and reliable man and spoke Finnish, Swedish, German and Russian. In November 1921, Aarnio was appointed a consul in Kaunas. He was invited to submit his credentials to the Lithuanian Foreign Minister on 30 January 1922. Aarnio telegraphed Helsinki: “Reckon that’s the date for my exequatur.” At the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, somebody wrote on the telegram sent by the new consul: “Guess so.” Aarnio also described the conditions during his early days: “I have acted as one can, being alone and living in a small hotel room.” Conditions, however, were soon to improve. A secretary, Mr Palmqvist, was about to take up his post, and two unfurnished rooms were requisitioned for the Finnish consulate. The consul had no shortage of things to do, with his main tasks involving commerce. Finland demanded information on shipping and rail transport costs, on trade statistics, especially with Russia, on customs tariffs and on Lithuanian-Russian agreements. However, the consul’s own business was difficult to get off the ground. In January 1923, Aarnio complained to the Foreign Ministry's Trade Policy Department that business was slow, because Germany was too big a competitor. Though Aarnio suspected that he would have to leave Kaunas, he remained in the



city.

## **Finland recognises Lithuania de jure in 1921**

In September 1919, during the discussions of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, it was stated that establishing co-operation with the Baltic states on a normal diplomatic basis was a priority. The Government was asked to appeal to the Western powers to recognise the independence of these countries de jure without delay, because only then could Finland follow suit. Since the recognition of Lithuania was a difficult issue for the Western powers, Finland also postponed it.

During and after the First World War, numerous new states had emerged. For some, independence was to be short-lived and end with incorporation into stronger neighbouring states. Others were able to retain their independence, but their final recognition and international acceptance could take years. Especially during the post-war instability, no country recognised another country out of sheer kindness. Everyone carefully looked at the pros and cons, as recognition was very difficult to withdraw; in practice, it was final. Nor was it merely an issue between two countries, as each country considered recognitions in the wider context of its foreign policy. In Finland's foreign policy, led by Foreign Minister Holsti, an independent Lithuania was thought to give a major boost to the peripheral state agenda. But, while people felt sympathetic towards the Baltic countries, Finland remained cautious and did not wish to anger a larger and stronger Poland with the Lithuanian question.

Finnish ambassadors in the capitals met with their colleagues and sent information and views to Helsinki. In Warsaw, Boris Gyllenbögél seemed to believe in the assurances of Poles about their country's desire to get on good terms with Lithuania. A Polish colleague asked the Finns to report on the fairness of Poland's demands at the future peace talks. In the summer of 1920, the Polish ambassador in Berlin was still convinced that out of the countries that had seceded from Russia the Western powers would only ever recognise Poland and Finland.

In October 1920, Vytautas Gylys, the Lithuanian representative in Tallinn, telephoned the Finnish Ambassador Erkki Reijonen. Gylys had heard that Finland was about to recognise Latvia de jure. Would Reijonen have anything new to say about the recognition of Lithuania? "Unfortunately I had to answer 'no' to his question," reported Reijonen.

Reijonen's sympathies were with Lithuania: "We should use our influence to curb Poland's intentions and desire to seize the unfortunate Lithuania, because otherwise Lithuania will become a province of Germany or, worse, of a fickle and unstable Poland that is not even sure of itself." Foreign Minister Holsti acknowledged that Poland was "somewhat dangerous as a friend". At the beginning of 1921, the Western powers postponed the de jure recognition of Lithuania, mainly due to the unresolved question of Vilnius and border disputes. However, these factors were not an obstacle to the recognition of Poland. In February 1921, Latvia and Estonia recognised Lithuania. Lithuanians also expected Finland to act. In the spring of 1921, the Finnish Ambassador to Tallinn reported, wrote private letters and even telephoned Foreign Minister Holsti urging him to recognise Lithuania. Reijonen understood that the poor relations between Lithuania and Poland could cause problems for Finland as well, but he trusted his Foreign Minister's abilities: "I have the temerity to urge you to take the Lithuanian de jure recognition to heart... Since you are a master of these matters, you may devise a solution that will satisfy both Poland and Lithuania."

Lithuania's accession to the League of Nations, a sign of the country's full sovereignty, took place on 22 September 1921. Shortly afterwards, Lithuania was recognised by Sweden,

Denmark, and others. Although Finland was lagging behind in recognising Lithuania's international status, the cautious and pro-British Foreign Minister Holsti wished first to find out Britain's views on the matter.

In October, Juozas Eretas, Director of the Lithuanian Government's Information Office, visited Helsinki, where he also met with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Juozas Purickis had authorised Eretas to discuss the de jure recognition. Despite Holsti's opposition, President Ståhlberg decided at the Government session on 14 October 1921 to recognise the "Republic of Lithuania as a de jure independent state" and asked the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to forward this information to the Lithuanian Government. Foreign Minister Holsti was relieved to learn later that Britain had nothing against it.

### **Representation becomes official**



Reino Sylvander  
Archives of the Finnish Ministry  
for Foreign Affairs

On the same day as Lithuania's final recognition, on 14 October 1921, interim representative Reino Sylvander was appointed interim chargé d'affaires to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Sylvander travelled from his post in Riga to Kaunas, where he visited the Ministry for Foreign Affairs on 10 November 1921 to present Minister Puryckis with the de jure recognition of Finland and his new credentials. A few days later, President Aleksandras Stulginskis hosted a dinner in honour of Sylvander and the newly received de jure recognition. From Riga, Sylvander continued to follow Lithuanian events with great interest. He would have liked to be able to visit Kaunas more often and complained that two or three visits a year were not enough.

To give Lithuania more of his time, in 1924 Sylvander asked for additional FIM 5,000 to hold the Finnish Independence Day celebrations in Kaunas. The Foreign Ministry's response was brief and to the point: "5,000 rejected."

Since by then Sylvander had been representing Lithuania for several years, he hoped that "the word 'interim' would be omitted from my mandate, as I am the most senior diplomatic representative in Lithuania and Latvia." That is what happened, and the relations rose to the level of ambassadors when, on 21 May 1926, Sylvander was appointed Ambassador Plenipotentiary to Lithuania. Sylvander presented his credentials in Kaunas to President Kazys Grinius on 14 September 1926. However, Sylvander remained an ambassador for less than a

year, and his successors continued to operate from Riga.

Having served as Lithuania's first representative in Helsinki since 1919, Vytautas Gyls later had a long and brilliant career in the Lithuanian Foreign Service. However, Finnish Foreign Minister Holsti was not satisfied with him. According to the Minister, Gyls visited Helsinki too seldom from Tallinn and, in any case, had a cold attitude towards Finland. In August 1921, Gyls announced that he would move to his next post, and Lithuanian diplomat Jonas Petraitis arrived in Helsinki to appease the offended Holsti. According to press reports, Petraitis would act as an economic representative in Estonia, Latvia and Finland, and temporarily conduct the Lithuanian diplomatic representation in Finland.

Preparations for the appointment of Gyls' successor were well under way. Ignas Jurkūnas-Šeinius, who had already worked for the Lithuanians during the World War in Stockholm and most recently served in his country's embassy in Copenhagen, was assigned to Helsinki, where he presented his credentials to President Ståhlberg on 21 November 1921. The new chargé d'affaires began his work at Hotel Fennia, by Helsinki's Railway Square, where the fourth anniversary celebrations of the Lithuanian Declaration of Independence were also held. In the spring, his office moved to Tokankatu 1 C, nowadays known as Telakkakatu, and then on to Tehtaankatu 4.

After Jurkūnas-Šeinius had taken up his post as the head of the mission, Ragnar Öller, a Finnish Doctor of Philosophy, was hired as his assistant in February 1921. When the chargé d'affaires was away or on his summer holidays, Öller ran the mission. He had the right to stamp passports, and receive notes and respond to them. Jurkūnas-Šeinius' time in Helsinki was not long, and he was appointed to Stockholm in the autumn of 1923. At the turn of the year, he was succeeded by Jurgis Savickis from Copenhagen, who submitted his letter of credence on 29 January 1924.



**Jurgis Savickis**

Chargé d'affaires Savickis defined his main focus as promoting cultural relations and trade between Lithuania and Finland. Savickis received a considerable amount of publicity in the columns of Finnish newspapers, with stories of parties held in his hospitable home, sometimes stretching into the small hours. The guests were diplomats, Foreign Ministry officials and often journalists. A writer himself, Savickis had a few short stories published in a well-known Finnish magazine, Suomen Kuvalehti, while the women's magazine *Våra kvinnor* interviewed the ambassador's wife and published pictures of their children. In the summer of 1925, Savickis organised a trip for Finnish newspaper journalists to Lithuania, which resulted in several articles in the Finnish newspapers. In late 1926, political tensions in Lithuania led to a coup, the dissolution of Parliament, and the gradual centralisation of power to Antanas Smetona, who became president. Kaunas announced that

four missions would be closed down for reasons of austerity. Helsinki and Stockholm were also on the list. In a newspaper interview, Savickis put his words very carefully: “My country is in a very special situation... the fact that Parliament has been dissolved has, of course, both pros and cons - if Parliament had been in session, the mission in Finland would not have been closed.”

Savickis prepared to move back to Kaunas without knowing how long his absence would last. In his farewell speeches and interviews, he thanked the Finns and his various partners. Mentioning him by name, he thanked Ragnar Öller who had worked with him for four years.

In the newspapers, the outgoing Ambassador was described as respected and liked. Years later, the newspapers recalled the time when small Lithuania had “a lively mission and a model minister” who lobbied on behalf of and for the benefit of his country. “In the speed of their communications, no other country's mission could beat the Lithuanians.”



The mission did not return to Helsinki, and roaming ambassadors to Finland were posted to Riga or Tallinn. Ragnar Öller was appointed Honorary Consul of Lithuania in 1925 and Honorary Consul General in 1932. The consulate handled practical matters between the countries: it organised Lithuanian-themed events, assisted in visits, and issued visas and passports to Lithuanians in Finland.

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In 1917 and 1918, in the turbulent aftermath of the First World War, the breakaway and independent states of former Russia sought refuge and safety in each other. Their co-operation was most intense in the early years of the Baltic bloc agenda in 1919-1921. Later on, the status of these countries as sovereign states gained widespread international recognition. They may not have formed good relations with their neighbouring states, but they learned to co-exist. Relations with Russia were consolidated by peace agreements, and by the mid-1920s independence was no longer under threat. As a consequence, the most urgent need for close political or military co-operation between the countries in the eastern Baltic Sea area had gone, and the time for a peripheral state policy was over. Later, Finland's foreign policy focused on the League of Nations and other Nordic countries. This was also reflected in the relations and diplomatic representation between Finland and Lithuania. While relations remained good, the relationship thinned.

By: Jyrki Paloposki, 11 July 2021