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The Expectations of Government Members and Diplomats of Lithuania and the Real Capabilities of the Armed Forces while Fighting the Bolsheviks in 1919

Abstract

After the restoration of Lithuanian independence, the armed forces and diplomatic service played a significant role in expelling the Red Army from the territory of Lithuania in 1919. The text analyses the expectations of diplomats and government members of Lithuania towards the military forces and reveals their limited capabilities to meet political and diplomatic needs. The Lithuanian political, diplomatic and military elite was forced to rely on the German Army, which had real power on the front against Bolsheviks, even after it had left Lithuania in the middle of 1919. The Entente's support for the emerging Lithuanian Army was limited, despite Lithuania's political efforts to balance between Germany and Entente. Balance policy between the Entente and Germany pushed the emerging state into a dead end, forced it to rely on the limited military potential of the emerging state of Lithuania.

Keywords: wars of independence; German Army; Western political and military missions in Baltic states; fighting the Bolsheviks; diplomacy and negotiations

Introduction

On 16 February 1918, the Council of State of Lithuania announced the restoration of Lithuania's independence, but the real functioning of state institutions began on 9 November 1918, after the formation of the first Lithuanian government,¹ and on 23 November 1918, after the formation of the Lithuanian armed forces, which together with the diplomatic service played a significant role in expelling the Red Army from the territory of Lithuania, defeating the military formations of Bermond-Avalov and halting the Polish forces in 1920.

This article will explain the influence of the army's capacity and capabilities on Lithuanian diplomacy, whether it strengthened or weakened the political positions of government members and diplomats. How did the latter factors interact?

Dr Kęstutis Kilinskas, Vilnius University.

1 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 36.

I will try to determine how Lithuanian diplomats assessed the capacity of the Lithuanian armed forces in the fight against the Bolsheviks and clarify their expectations and opportunities for the army in the fight against the Bolsheviks. The chronological boundaries of the article cover the period from the beginning of the establishment of the Lithuanian armed forces on 23 November 1918 until the Bolshevik Russia proposal to negotiate peace on 11 September 1919, after which the fighting against the Bolsheviks ended.

Lithuania's struggles for independence have been analysed in detail in historiography, but the diplomatic perspective on the use of the military to pursue political goals has been explored in a very fragmented way. Regarding this question, two traditions of research have been established in Lithuanian historiography.² The first one may be called military historiography, which examines military actions and battles, but has not been integrated into a more detailed political and diplomatic context. The latter tradition is historiography of diplomacy and foreign policy,³ which only identifies the most important battles and their results, without paying further attention to a more detailed analysis of military action.

Such a historiographical tradition creates preconditions for a thorough study of the political and military factors, and the versions raised in Lithuanian historiography on the limited capabilities of the army during the Wars of Independence call for a more in-depth study of the problem. The interwar military officers accused the first prime minister Augustinas Voldemaras of delaying the formation of the army and repelling the attacking Red Army. Historiography states that Germany's refusal to support the Lithuanian Army's march on Vilnius in March 1919 was fateful, although according to the officers of the German General Staff, who supported the Lithuanian Army and planned the operation to take Vilnius, German support would have been enough to attack the Red Army and occupy Vilnius.⁴ Finally, with only 25,000 troops in the autumn of 1920, the Lithuanian Army was unable to protect Vilnius from Lucjan Żeligowski's march.⁵ Vytautas Jokubauskas stated that about 2.5% of the Lithuanian population (45,314) took part in the struggles for independence, while in Latvia this figure was 5% (76,394) and 7% in Estonia (74,500),⁶ the number of troops was incomparably higher.

2 Lescius 2014; Ališauskas 1972; Rukša 1982; Statkus 1986; Gruzdienė 2011.

3 Laurinavičius 1992; Butkus 2019; Bukaitė 2013.

4 Butkus 2019, pp. 137–138.

5 Norkus 2014, p. 40.

6 Jokubauskas 2013, p. 229.

Fighting the Bolsheviks in 1919 at the Crossroads of the Entente and Germany

The formation of the Lithuanian armed forces began on 23 November 1919, although historiography is dominated by the interwar narration that Augustinas Voldemaras only sought to create a militia and maintained a reserved attitude towards the creation of regular armed forces. However, the diplomatic service documents show that the government, diplomats and officers, after the creation of Lithuanian Army, made considerable efforts to arm and strengthen the army because when the Bolsheviks began to invade Lithuania, Germany ignored Clause XII of the Compiègne Ceasefire Treaty, started to withdraw from Lithuania and on 14 December 1918 began to evacuate the army from Vilnius.⁷

As the Red Army approached, the Lithuanian government appealed to the Entente and Germany with requests for military assistance. The first representative of the Lithuanian government, Konstantinas Olšauskas, was sent to the town of Spa in Belgium, to ask the Entente that the German Army would defend Lithuanian territory and provide weapons.⁸ On 23 December 1918, the Lithuanian delegation went to Liepaja, where, after being disturbed by the German Army, they managed to see Edward Alexander Sinclair, the captain of the English squadron stationed in the Baltic Sea, and stated that Lithuania was in danger and needed weapons.⁹ Balyš Giedraitis, a member of the then Council of State, mentioned in his memoirs a “worked out” memorandum to invite the Entente army.¹⁰

On 23 December 1918, at a meeting of the Lithuanian government, it was decided to hire German volunteers for national defence, although it was suspected that they were “allying” with the Bolsheviks.¹¹ Meanwhile, the Lithuanians requested weapons and the army wherever it was possible, and the Lithuanian Ambassador to Berlin Jurgis Šaulys addressed the Minister Plenipotentiary of Ukraine Julius Lukševič,¹² and Gen. Maximilian Hoffman and Ludwig Zimmerle assured the Minister of National Defence Mykolas Velykis that the Germans would hold the Kaunas–Grodno line and would provide weapons only with the permission of Berlin.¹³

7 Lesčius 2014, p. 24.

8 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, pp. 261–263.

9 Ibid., p. 124.

10 Giedraitis 1925, p. 121–128.

11 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 121.

12 Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (hereinafter: LCVA): sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 35, fol. 54–55: *Lietuvos pasiuntinio Berlyne J. Šaulio laiškas, 28. 12. 1918, Berlin.*

13 Ibid.: sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 2, fols. 153–154: *Krašto apsaugos ministro M. Velyko pokalbio su gen. Hoffmanu ir E. Zimmerle, 28. 12. 1919, Kaunas.*

On 29 December, the Lithuanian Provisional Government decided to demand that the German authorities re-occupy the Baranoviči, Molodečno, Daugavpils (Dyneburg) line in order to supply weapons to the Lithuanian Army, and also to call for volunteers.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the situation did not change significantly. The Red Army continued to push forward and on 4 January in 1919 Mykolas Sleževičius demanded that the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs provide arms, ammunition, artillery, clothing and 6,000–8,000 troops.¹⁵ During his visit to Copenhagen, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Voldemaras was also interested in the issue of hiring volunteers in Sweden and Denmark.¹⁶ During the visit of the Minister of Finance Martynas Yčas to Stockholm, the Lithuanian government realised that recruiting soldiers in Sweden at the cost of 1,000 krona was too expensive; therefore, the Swedish government was asked to appoint 50 officers.¹⁷

On 31 December 1919, the Lithuanian government, lacking sufficient forces to defend Vilnius, decided to retreat to Kaunas, but stated that Vilnius would not be handed over without a shot and a platoon of officers remained in Vilnius, which, under the leadership of Liudas Gira and Kazys Škirpa, were to engage in combat should the need arise, while a government representative needed to issue a protest to the Bolsheviks.¹⁸ Thus, neither the Entente nor Germany agreed to give weapons to the Lithuanian Army and, furthermore, when withdrawing from the east, the German Army handed over territories, weapons and ammunition to the Red Army.¹⁹

The Red Army incursion into the territory of Lithuania was thwarted by a shift in the political position of the German government and army, when a decision was taken to defend the Mitau (Mitawa, Jēglava)-Grodno-Kaunas border after feeling the danger of the Bolshevik revolution in Germany.²⁰ On 30 January 1919, the German representative Ludwig Zimmerle warned that they expected a disturbance among soldiers in one of German battalions, which was agitated by the Bolsheviks and was planning to attack the Lithuanian government.²¹ Lithuanian historiography mentions that a Bolshevik uprising was expected on 2–4 February.²² In such circumstances, at a government meeting, Aleksandras Stulginskis proposed to cut ties with the Germans and rely on the Entente, but the Minister of

14 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, pp. 133–134.

15 Ibid.: sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 140, fol. 465: *M. Sleževičiaus raštas pasiuntiniui Berlyne J. Šauliui, 04.01.1919, Kaunas.*

16 Ibid.: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 63, fols.1–4: *A. Voldemaro pranešimas pasiuntiniui Berlyne J. Šauliui, 11.01.1919, Kaunas.*

17 Ibid.: sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 2, fols. 123–125: *M. Yčo laiškas M. Šleževičiui, 19.02.1919, Stockholm.*

18 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, pp 138–139.

19 Butkus 2019, pp. 129–130.

20 Ibid.

21 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 193.

22 Surgailis 2014, p. 166.

National Defence Mykolas Vėlykis objected to this, as it could “destroy our young military forces”.²³ The government was forced to rely on Germany because it was the only real military force that could stop the Bolshevik invasion at the time.

With the help of German military units on 9–13 February 1919, the Lithuanian Army stopped the Bolsheviks near Kėdainiai, Jieznas and Alytus²⁴ and remained on the border protected by the German Army along the Grodno-Kaunas-Liepaja line. As we shall see shortly, this line was not crossed until May.

Units of German Saxon volunteers were sent to Lithuania and helped to repel the first Red Army attacks.²⁵ At the end of January 1919, these volunteer units were enlisted in the 46th Saxon Division of the 10th Army and replaced the demoralised troops.²⁶ Their arrival was extremely important, since at that time the Lithuanian Army consisted of 4,000 to 4,500 soldiers, but these forces were small, poorly armed and scattered.²⁷ This is obviously evidenced by the battle of Alytus, when the German crew, in which the “Spartacians” operated, withdrew from the defence positions at the beginning of the battle, which led to the departure of the 1st Infantry Regiment, which was defending it, and the city was occupied by the Bolsheviks.²⁸

At the end of February and the beginning of March 1919, the Daugai-Staikliškės-Žašliai-Pagelažiai-Bukonys line was established between the Lithuanian forces, German Army and Bolsheviks.²⁹ The Lithuanian armed forces did not carry out any major operations, except for “expeditions” of individual units of the Panevėžys Battalion in attacking the towns of Šėta, Ramygala, Krekenava and Truskava.³⁰ Meanwhile, German forces were ordered to occupy the Kaunas-Šiauliai-Liepaja railway line at the beginning of March.³¹

The German Army followed this line, and the Lithuanian Army failed to cross it, despite attempts to do so. This is evidenced by the attempt of the Lithuanian Army to march to Vilnius at the end of March 1919. On 28 February 1919, Minister of National Defence Mykolas Vėlykis instructed Kazys Škirpa to prepare a plan for the management of occupied Vilnius. According to Škirpa, two infantry battalions, two hussar squadrons, 300 military policemen and 50 cavalry scouts were needed, but he thought this contingent should take part in the occupation of Vilnius with other forces,³² therefore the military leadership realised that the

23 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 193.

24 Balkelis 2019, pp. 195–196.

25 Lesčius 2014, pp. 39–40.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Lesčius 2014, p. 60.

29 Ibid., p. 61.

30 Surgailis 2014, p. 169.

31 Lesčius 2014, p. 64.

32 Ibid., p. 80.

troops which they were trying to organise, would not suffice to take back Vilnius from the Bolsheviks and additional forces would be needed.

This is also reflected in the protocol of the government meeting on 21 March under the direction of Aleksandras Stulginskis, where it was decided that the Germans should push towards Vilnius, but the city must be taken by the Lithuanians.³³ Therefore, the government turned to Berlin for help, where Jurgis Alekna and Juozas Purickis asked the German government to support the march to Vilnius with two battalions of infantry and two artillery batteries, but at the meeting of the German government on 22 March, they decided not to provide help.³⁴ In historiography, the most important reason for this is the military factor, which states that in the event of the occupation of Vilnius, a front would be left exposed, which would have been inopportune for the German Army due to the threat of being surrounded by the Bolsheviks.³⁵ Although at that time there was only one reserve regiment 153 of the Red Army left in Vilnius.³⁶

Without support, the Lithuanian Army began marching to Vilnius on 24 March with two detachments marching from Kaunas and Alytus, but the first detachment was stopped at Žašliai and the second at Varėna.³⁷ The Bolsheviks halted the march of both detachments and revealed the limited offensive potential of the Lithuanian Army, which was visible to both foreign observers and Lithuanian diplomats.

In March, Allied military missions arrived in Lithuania and the competing influence of political and military factors between the Entente and Germany on the Lithuanian government and military leadership began to become apparent, resulting in Lithuania reaching a dead end in its political efforts to strengthen its army and defend itself against the Bolsheviks. A vicious circle ensued. As stated in the report of the Lithuanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, relations with the Germans deteriorated – particularly with the arrival of the English and French missions – when Pranas Eimutis, a soldier from the Kaunas Commandant's head-quarters, was shot dead by the Germans.³⁸ As may be determined from poor diplomatic sources, Ober Kommando Nord Hauptman Tchunk asked the Minister of National Defence whether the French Army could assist in organising and training the Lithuanian forces. At the same time, if that was the case then the Germans would no longer be able to work “in parallel” and

33 Laurinavičius 2014, p. 163.

34 Butkus 2019, pp. 137–138.

35 Ibid.

36 Laurinavičius 2014, p. 165.

37 Lesčius 2014, p. 84.

38 LCVA: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 11, fols. 31–41: *Lietuvos delegacijos prie Paryžiaus Taikos konferencijos apyskaita, 07.05.1919, Paris.*

help the Lithuanian Army to organise.³⁹ This was a serious warning, as the support of the German Army was important in all the previous battles.

In attempt to counteract the pressure of the German military, the Lithuanian envoy in Berlin, Jurgis Šaulys, suggested addressing the Entente generals Padovani and Dupont in order to take measures against the German threats.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the German Army, instead of merely talking, began to take action. On 11 April 1919, the Lithuanian government learned that the Germans had agreed to sell 400 soldiers of the Lithuanian Army to the Bolsheviks on the front near Kaišiadorys for 9,000,000 marks.⁴¹ The government also received news that the German Army might abandon the front near Kaišiadorys and negotiate with the Bolsheviks “for the occupation of certain places” and send arms and ammunition to the Bolsheviks. According to the Prime Minister Sleževičius, such a situation on the front threatened Kaunas,⁴² as the road to Kaunas was solely guarded by units of Saxon volunteers.

As far as can be determined from the data presented in the Lithuanian military historiography, the 18th and 19th regiments of the Saxon Volunteer Brigade of Southern Lithuania were stationed in Žiežmariai-Kaišiadorys district, and at the end of April, when the Polish Army occupied Grodno, the 20th regiment of Saxon volunteers also left for Žiežmariai.⁴³ One should also note that Vytautas Lesčius claims that at the end of February, soldiers of the 18th Saxon regiment made friends with the Bolsheviks.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, from 10 April, the Lithuanian government left the protection of Ziežmariai to the German Army, and the Separate Vilnius Battalion withdrew to Kaunas after unsuccessful battles in Žasliai and Strošiūnai.⁴⁵ It should also be added that when the Lithuanian Army launched an attack on the Bolsheviks, the Soviet Russian government accused the German units of violating the treaty of 18 January 1919.⁴⁶

Due to the limited capabilities of the army, Lithuania could not stop the actions of the Polish Army in Grodno. On 17 April 1919 at a government meeting it was decided that Grodno could not be handed over to the Poles without resistance and ordered the Minister of National Defence to “take appropriate steps”,⁴⁷ but given the deployment and structure of the Lithuanian armed forces it was not possible to do so, as Poland managed to reach an agreement that the

39 Ibid.: sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 40, fol. 227: *J. Šaulio pranešimas M. Sleževičiui, 25.03.1919, Berlin.*

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.: sig. f. 671, ap. 1, b. 84, fol. 12: *Lietuvos spaudos biuro vadovo A. Rimkos pranešimas, 13.04.1919, Kaunas.*

42 Ibid.: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 54, fol. 327: *M. Sleževičiaus telegrama į Berlyną, 16.04.1919, Kaunas.*

43 Lesčius 2014, p. 40.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 89.

46 Ibid.

47 Gimžauskas 2012, p. 137.

Lithuanian Army Bielorussian Battalion stationed in Grodno would be at Poland's disposition.⁴⁸ Therefore, on 22 April 1919, the Lithuanian government protested the withdrawal of the German Army from Grodno and its handover to the Poles, saying that Lithuania was ready to defend that part of its land, and asked the Entente to intervene in explaining to the Germans that they would help Lithuanians defend Grodno.⁴⁹ In the absence of military forces and after the occupation of Grodno by Poland on 26 April 1919, all that remained for the Lithuanian government was to issue a protest.⁵⁰

Lithuania needed to strengthen its military. Therefore, on 3 April 1919, during the Peace Conference in Paris, Petras Klimas reported that "the Entente was seriously concerned about the danger posed by the Bolsheviks and planned to actively support one front with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland".⁵¹

Representatives of the US and French military missions, who arrived in Lithuania in March, were quite critical of the army's capabilities. For example, the US captains Charles Pain and Hill,⁵² who visited Marijampolė, Kalvarija, Krosna, Simnas, Alytus, Jieznas, Kruonis and Rumšiškės, thought that Lithuania would not be able to defend itself from the "Bolsheviks", that the organisation of the army was too slow, that the Lithuanians and Germans were "comrades", and the Lithuanian Army was characterised by the words "it is a pity it is so small".⁵³ Warwick Green, a spokesman for the US mission, who considered the Germans to be the only anti-Bolshevik force in the Baltic states, thought similarly.⁵⁴

The limited capabilities of the army were also quite obvious for Lithuanian diplomats. Juozas Purickis was even more pessimistic. As he informed the representatives of Lithuania in Berlin in a telegram: "the help in Kaunas is very bad, everything, especially the army, is coming to a standstill and starting to fall apart, so it is necessary to get money by any means possible".⁵⁵ Jurgis Šaulys, who went to Warsaw on a diplomatic mission, called for the bolstering of the army. In his view, the army needed to be mobilised to have at least 40,000 troops by the end of

48 Laurinavičius 2020, p. 229.

49 LCVA: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 9, fol. 131: *J. Purickio protestas dėl Vokietijos kariuomenės pasitraukimo iš Gardino, 22.04.1919, Kaunas.*

50 Ibid.: sig. f. 383, ap. 5, b. 56, fol. 38–39: *Lietuvos ypatingojo įgaliotinio A. Žilinsko protestas lenkų kariuomenės vadui, 26.04.1919, Kaunas.*

51 "Antantė visai rimtai susirūpino dėl bolševikų pavojaus ir sumanė aktyviai remti vieną frontą su Estija, Latvija, Lietuva ir Lenkija" [all translations of quotations by the author], *ibid.*: sig. f. 671, ap. 1, b. 95, fol. 1–4: *P. Klimo raštas Lietuvos atstovybei Vokietijoje, 03.04.1919, Kaunas.*

52 Name unidentified.

53 "[...] gaila, jog jos taip maža yra", LCVA: sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 12: *Lietuvos valdžios atstovo M. Šalčiaus raportas apie Amerikos Raudonojo Kryžiaus Misijos kelionę, Kaunas.*

54 Laurinavičius 2020, p. 204.

55 "[...] padėjimas Kaune labai blogas, viskas ypač kariuomenė labai stoja ir pradeda irti, tai pinigų reikia nors iš po žemės iškasti", LCVA: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 9, fol. 1–2: *J. Purickio telegrama Lietuvos atstovams Berlyne, 20.04.1919, Kaunas.*

the year.⁵⁶ Purickis called for an offensive against the Bolsheviks (using the panic at the Bolshevik front) from Varėna to Courland (Kurzeme) at the end of April, but realised that success could only be real with the support of the German Army, which was angry at the Lithuanians, that the French mission was welcomed too friendly.⁵⁷ On 26 April 1919, Gen. Silvestras Žukauskas was appointed Chief of the General Staff and he concluded that the Lithuanian military forces were too weak to carry out larger-scale operations.⁵⁸

The situation in the army was bad. There was a lack of weapons, shoes and food; the requisitions were slow, as stated at a government meeting, and there was no backbone to rely on.⁵⁹ Mykolas Sleževičius instructed the Lithuanian delegation at the Peace Conference in Paris to put pressure on England and America to provide weapons, ammunition and clothing as soon as possible.⁶⁰ On 25 April 1919, the Minister of Industry and Trade Jonas Šimkus announced that he addressed the French Admiral Briten, who was in Liepaja at the time, to provide weapons and ammunition.⁶¹ In the absence of forces, the recruitment of 5,000 German soldiers was considered, although the recruitment of volunteers in Sweden, Denmark and England was unsuccessful. As the government meeting shows, Sleževičius was well aware that without military force it would not be possible to resist the Bolsheviks, and without stopping the Bolsheviks it would not be possible to expect the Entente's military assistance.⁶²

The situation was complicated because the Entente linked the issue of support for Lithuania with the German loan and the presence of the German Army in Lithuania,⁶³ and the government's actions did not offer much hope. In April, Prime Minister Mykolas Sleževičius and Minister of National Defence Antanas Merkys appealed to the Provisional Government of Latvia to allow Latvians who considered themselves Lithuanian citizens and spoke the Lithuanian language to join the Lithuanian Army.⁶⁴ The visit of Foreign Office representative in the Baltic states Herbert Grant Watson to Kaunas – who, according to Sleževičius, was very kindly disposed and promised to provide Lithuania with loans, weapons, am-

56 Ibid.: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 64, fol. 209–210: *Misijos Lenkijoje vadovo J. Šaulio pranešimas, 22. 04. 1919, Vašuva.*

57 Butkus 2004, p. 141.

58 Aničas 2006, p. 68.

59 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 308.

60 LCVA: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 23, fol. 1–3: *M. Sleževičiaus laiškas delegacijai prie Taikos konferencijos, 22. 04. 1919, Kaunas.*

61 Gimžauskas 2012, pp. 138–139.

62 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 308.

63 LCVA: sig. f. 383, ap. 7, b. 24, fols. 24–28: *Lietuvos delegacijos prie Paryžiaus Taikos konferencijos apyskaita, 25. 04. 1919, Paris.*

64 Ibid.: sig. f. 923, ap. 1, b. 29, l. 21: *M. Sleževičiaus ir A. Merkio kreipimasis į Latvijos laikinąją vyriausybę, 14. 04. 1919, Kaunas.*

munition and clothes – did not offer much hope. However, Watson's report, which describes his impressions upon his arrival in Lithuania on 6 April 1919, does not mention any military promises to the Lithuanian authorities.⁶⁵ Therefore, we assume that his words were only diplomatic gestures of diplomatic courtesy, and the government was at a dead end and dependent on German forces.

This is also noted in Watson's report, which states that at the end of March, the Germans, who had about 30,000 troops in Lithuania, stated that they would not march beyond the line south of Bauska, as it was the most convenient line of defence, and when the French military mission arrived in Lithuania he threatened to leave the country and hand Lithuania over to the Bolsheviks. Relations between the Lithuanian and German armies were described as strained.⁶⁶ He also emphasised that the Lithuanian Army tried to cross the line, but had to withdraw.⁶⁷

The only wider operation carried out by the Lithuanian Army at the end of April and the beginning of May was the occupation of Ukmergė, when – in response to the fact that on the 19–21 April 1919 the Polish Army occupied Vilnius and while routing the Bolsheviks broke through in the direction of Trakai, Maišiagala and Ukmergė – the Panevėžys Battalion, on 3 May, supported by the 18th Regiment of Saxon Volunteers, occupied Ukmergė, and on the 7–9 May together attacked Širvintos and Giedraičiai with the Poles.⁶⁸

Fighting the Bolsheviks after the Loss of German Support in the Summer of 1919

It seems that our previously mentioned Kaunas-Šiauliai-Liepāja line of defence only moved in May, when Landwehr and the Iron Division occupied Riga. As the historiography indicates, the loss of Vilnius and Riga was a major blow to the expansion of the Bolsheviks in the Baltic states.⁶⁹ Another important aspect was that after the occupation of Vilnius by the Polish Army, the Bolsheviks moved beyond the Neris river and concentrated in north-eastern Lithuania. Therefore, the Saxon and Lithuanian forces located in Alytus and Žiežmariai lost their strategic significance.⁷⁰ After the narrowing of the front, the Lithuanian Army was redeployed and concentrated in two directions of attack: Ukmergė-Utena-Zarasai and Kėdainiai-Panevėžys-Rokiškis. The forces that attacked in these

65 Gruzdienė 2011, pp. 43–44.

66 Grodis 2019, p. 183.

67 Ibid.

68 Lesčius 2014, p. 93; Aničas 2005, p. 8.

69 Butkus 2019, p. 143.

70 Lesčius 2014, p. 97.

directions were the Ukmergė (1st Infantry Regiment, 4th Artillery Regiment, Saxon Volunteer Battalion) and Panevėžys (Panevėžys Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Light Artillery Battery) detachments, respectively.⁷¹

The Panevėžys detachment together with one battalion from the 18th Saxon volunteers regiment on 24 May occupied Panevėžys, and on the 28–30 May failed to occupy Kupiškis. The attack in this direction was rescued by the partisans of Joniškėlis who, with a team of German riders detachment, occupied Rokiškis on 31 May. The detachment successfully continued to attack and on 30 June 1919 fortified its position along the Kukliai-Suviekas-Vaidminai-Gudai-Kovenka-Eglainė railway station – Kalnaberžiai-Bebrinė line.⁷²

Meanwhile, the Ukmergė detachment supported by the Saxon battalion occupied Utena on 2 June and at the end of June fortified its position on the Dusetos Lakes front. The attacks on the Lithuanian armed forces in May and June were painful. The front line practically did not move. The ranks of the armed forces were severely dispersed. Only 1,100 soldiers remained in the Panevėžys detachment, and the lack of weapons and ammunition complicated the situation. Therefore, the Lithuanian military leadership asked Germany to allocate five million pieces of ammunition, 10,000 rifles, 200 carbines and 100 machine guns.⁷³ However, it was impossible to expect help as the German Army had ceased taking part in the military action against the Red Army, since Germany was furious with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles imposed upon it.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the German Ministry of Defence instructed the military leadership to take “immediate” action to reach an agreement with Russia regarding a ceasefire.⁷⁵ At the same time, it shows that the Lithuanian government’s disappointment with German support⁷⁶ was not general, as the officers believed in German support despite the withdrawal of its army.

The limited capabilities of the army were revealed by Col. Warwick Green on 30 June 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference, stating that the Allied mission would help the Baltic states to defend themselves from the Bolsheviks and support the Baltic states with military materials, ammunition, weapons as well as grant a loan.⁷⁷ However, the report by Col. Ernest Dawley, member of the USA mission, not only includes exhortation for military support to be provided to Lithuania until it was able to defend itself, but also doubts as to whether the support would

71 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

72 *Ibid.*, pp. 132–134.

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 134–135.

74 Butkus 2019, p. 147.

75 *Ibid.*

76 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

77 Gruzdienė 2011, pp. 136–142.

be used against Poland.⁷⁸ The opinion of the head of the Polish mission in Lithuania Stanisław Staniszewski was even more categorical, according to whom “in the fight against the Bolsheviks, the Lithuanians are being assisted by Germany, without which they would not succeed”.⁷⁹

The first attacks without German support were difficult, for example during 6–12 July, the Panevėžys detachment suffered heavy losses, because it failed to reach the shores of the Daugava river.⁸⁰ This loss was agonising, since at a government meeting on 15 July, Mykolas Sleževičius explained that the left wing of the Lithuanian Army had overextended and after suffering heavy losses (about 300 killed and wounded) had to withdraw.⁸¹ Thus, the issue of the army’s capabilities was again relevant; therefore, the issue of inviting French, English and Swedish military instructors to the Lithuanian Army was repeatedly discussed in the government in June and July.⁸² The government also decided to send a mission to the United States, and Prime Minister Sleževičius claimed that the creation of an army must be the mission’s first task.⁸³ In June and July 1919, the Lithuanian military mission to the Lithuanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference actively organised the American Lithuanian Brigade, which consisted of about 6,000 American Lithuanians,⁸⁴ and also addressed Gen. Henry Alby on the return to Lithuania of Lithuanian officers who served in Polish, Ukrainian, Armenian, Denikin’s, Kolchak’s and Judenich’s armies.⁸⁵ This was meant to substantially strengthen the Lithuanian Army and practically double its combat power.

In the context of Lithuania’s limited military potential, the Polish military factor became clear. After the occupation of Vilnius by the Polish Army, it began to invade the territory of Lithuania and encountered Lithuanian units in Širvintos, Vievis, Ukmergė and Merkinė. After the Lithuanian and Polish military representatives failed to agree on a demarcation line separating the armies in May,⁸⁶ Augustinas Voldemaras appealed to the Entente Conference on 13 June to define the line. On 18 June 1919, the Supreme War Council of the Entente determined a demarcation line between the Polish and Lithuanian armies, leaving the entire Suwałki province with Augustów on the Lithuanian side and extending 5 km to the west of the Varėna-Vilnius-Daugavpils railway.⁸⁷ It was

78 Ibid.

79 “[...] kovoje su bolševikais lietuviams padeda Vokietija, be kurios jie neišsiverstų”, Gimžauskas 2012, pp. 195–197.

80 Lesčius 2014, p. 139.

81 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 451.

82 Ibid., p. 488.

83 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 411.

84 Lesčius 1999, pp. 16–17.

85 Gimžauskas 2012, p. 223.

86 Ibid. pp. 179–180.

87 Laurinavičius 2014, pp. 187–188.

Lithuania's victory, but Poland was not satisfied and a second line was approved on 26 July, which assigned Augustów, Sejny, Suwałki and Puńsk to the Polish side and pushed the line 10–12 km west of the Varėna-Vilnius-Daugavpils railway.⁸⁸ Kaunas refused to recognise this line, and at the beginning of July, the Polish Army occupied Žiezmariai, Stakliškės, Butrimonys, and Daugai.⁸⁹ According to the opinion of commanders of the Lithuanian military units guarding the southern front, the Lithuanian Army was not able to repel the invasion of the Polish units. Commander of the Separate Battalion Capt. Kazys Škirpa reported that he would not be able to stop the Polish Army with 19 horsemen and two companies.⁹⁰ “If we have to fight the Poles, we will not withstand them with our current forces”,⁹¹ said the commander of the Suwałki Front, Col. Konstantinas Žukas.⁹² Diplomatic signals showed that Poland would respect the demarcation line, at least that was the promise made by the representative of the British mission Gen. Watson to the Minister of Trade and Industry Jonas Šimkus.⁹³

At the government meeting on 16 August 1919, it was decided to follow the demarcation line established by the Entente, as the Minister of National Defence Mykolas Velykis stated that only a “temporary line between the Poles and our armies”⁹⁴ had been determined rather than a demarcation line and the Prime Minister argued that “we have too few weapons, we’re wasting our last shots and we will not be able to hold out against the Poles.”⁹⁵ At the same time, it was decided to strengthen the armed forces in Seinai (Sejny) in order to show the public their aspirations, and to return Škirpa's Battalion to Žiezmariai.⁹⁶

Because of the growing threat posed by Poland, the military aspect made the position of the chief of war untenable, as Minister of Trade and Industry Šimkus accused the supreme commander Gen. Žukauskas of systematically failing to comply with government resolutions and patronising people of Polish nationality, and proposed to relieve him of his duties.⁹⁷

Later, Steponas Kairys, Aleksandras Stulginskis, Petras Leonas, Jonas Noreika also suggested removing the military commander. Their attitude was serious, as only Minister of Defence Pranas Žadeikis defended the supreme commander, who stated that the Cabinet of Ministers had no right to do so, and the supreme

88 Ibid. p. 197.

89 Gimžauskas 2012, p. 236.

90 Ibid. p. 229.

91 “Jeigu mes turėsime kariauti su lenkais, tai dabartinėmis jėgomis neatsilaikysim”, *ibid.*, p. 294.

92 *Ibid.*

93 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 465.

94 “[...] laikina linija tarp lenkų ir mūsų kariuomenių”, *ibid.*, p. 514.

95 “[...] mes maža ginklų turime, eikvojame paskutinius patronus ir lenkams negalėsime pri-
taikyti”, *ibid.*, p. 514.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 514.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 521.

commander was subordinate to the President.⁹⁸ The pressure on the military commander also increased during the next government meeting,⁹⁹ until finally on 26 August the Cabinet of Ministers handed over a letter to the supreme commander demanding that enough forces be mobilised along the demarcation line to repel the Polish invasion.¹⁰⁰ However, the supreme commander ignored the decision, as the most significant forces were concentrated in Aukštaitija, and refused to send troops due to a lack of men.¹⁰¹ It should be noted that the military situation in the north and south of Lithuania was difficult. On 16 August, the government was informed that there were four German sections and 1,500 Kolchak's soldiers in Radviliškis, while the Lithuanian Army had only 1,000 soldiers on the front.¹⁰² In addition, the current situation forced the Lithuanian government to refrain from a conflict with the Germans, as a German transport with weapons and ammunition was expected.¹⁰³

Despite the conflict between the government and the supreme commander, on 24–30 August 1919, the Lithuanian Army carried out a successful attack on the Bolsheviks, during which the 1st Brigade approached the Ilzė-Medumas-Smalvairgis-Luokesa lakes line, the Ilze manors, the Didžiosios Samanės, Smėlynė villages, and the 2nd Brigade Aleksandravėlė-Šapeliai-Subatė-Obeliai line.¹⁰⁴ Regiments of Saxon volunteers were no longer involved in this attack.¹⁰⁵ Finally on 30 August, the forces of the Lithuanian armed forces approaching in the direction of Daugavpils aligned with the forces of the Polish armed forces, reached Turmantas and approached Daugavpils.¹⁰⁶ The successful attack explains why on 11 September, Georgy Chicherin, Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of Bolshevik Russia, addressed the governments of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with a proposal to start peace talks.¹⁰⁷

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., pp. 530–531.

100 LCVA: sig. f. 929, ap. 1, b. 3, fol. 46: *M. Sleževičiaus raštas, 26.08.1919, Kaunas.*

101 Ibid.: sig. f. 384, ap. 3, b. 24, fol. 26: *Generalinio štabo viršininko pranešimas, 22.08.1919, Kaunas.*

102 Eidintas / Lopata 2018, p. 514.

103 Ibid.

104 Lesčius 2014, p. 139.

105 Ibid., p. 162.

106 Ibid., p. 168.

107 Laurinavičius 2014, p. 212.

Conclusions

The territorial ambitions of the Lithuanian state (which restored independence after the First World War) surpassed the capabilities and possibilities of its army to operate effectively in the geographical area designed by politicians and diplomats. This problem became worse due to Lithuania's geopolitical situation and geographical borders – it had to contend with the armies and military formations of Russia, Poland and Germany on several fronts. The Lithuanian political, diplomatic and military elite was forced to rely on the German Army which had real power, even after the German Army left Lithuania. The Entente's support for the emerging Lithuanian Army was limited, despite Lithuania's political efforts, and the balancing act between the Entente and Germany pushed the emerging state into a dead end – forced to rely on the limited military potential of the emerging state.

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