

Senn, Alfred Erich, *Lithuania 1940: Revolution from Above. On the Boundary of Two Worlds. Identity, Freedom and Moral Imagination in the Baltics. Vol.9, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2007, 290 pp., Notes, Index*

Over a long writing career Professor Senn has produced many books and articles on twentieth-century Lithuanian history, both in English and Lithuanian. This latest book was prompted in part by the continuing attempts by Russian historians and politicians to claim that the Soviet take-over of Lithuania in 1940 was the outcome of a democratic process. Senn could not allow this ‘manipulation of historical evidence’, which has had some influence on Western views, to remain unchallenged. The subtitle of his book summarises his argument which he admits is more or less conventional among Lithuanian historians, namely that the Sovietisation of Lithuania was ‘the work of foreign forces that smothered the Lithuanian state’. Since the major landmarks in the process of the Soviet incorporation of Lithuania have already been established he resists recounting in great detail the available evidence. Yet a book of almost 300 pages on the events of one year inevitably contains a great deal of detail. For a Lithuanian readership such detail may be redundant, but for Western readers without access to the Lithuanian language this is an extremely valuable and judicious restatement of a long-accepted thesis among Lithuanian historians. Occasionally one wishes that some of his judgments were less judicious and more robust as, given the evidence, they are entitled to be. Whatever one’s minor doubts on that score, the timing of this book is impeccable in the light of a current Russian campaign of disinformation.

The particular value of this book stems from three elements. First, Senn has studied many of the documents which have become available since the fall of communism. He is also familiar with the substantial number of books and articles produced by Lithuanian historians in the same period. As a result he is able to present the English-speaking world with the latest fruits of Lithuanian historiography. These buttress, though in some cases modifying in detail, the basic interpretation of Lithuanian émigré scholars, that the events of 1940 did indeed constitute a 'revolution from above'. Second, he admits he is less interested in recounting the events of that year than in discussing the contrasting interpretations of those events, not only between Lithuanian and Russian historians, but between Lithuanian scholars themselves. These interpretative insertions are interspersed within the basic narrative format. Where there are lacunae in the evidence or contrasting interpretations Senn allows himself to engage in speculation, with the intention of encouraging further research.

Third, the book is to some extent a personal document. Senn recounts his, or his father's, conversations with some leading Lithuanian political figures from 1940 who lived in exile in the United States. He combines these recollections with biographies written by recent Lithuanian historians to give substance to the rather shadowy personae of politicians such as Antanas Smetona and Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius. Again, for English-speaking historians, a summary, however brief, of the two biographies of Smetona published since 1990 by Alfonsas Eidintas and Liudas Truska, and the reference to an edition of Smetona's correspondence edited by Daiva Dapkutė, whet the appetite for a translation of these books into English.

Discussion of Smetona's character and policies, and his role during the tragic year of 1940, leads Senn, in two introductory chapters, to the background to the events of that year, including the role of Smetona as *tautos vadas*, leader of the nation, during the years of authoritarian rule from 1926 until his flight in 1940. His sudden departure in the face of the Soviet ultimatum in June 1940 has been subject to various interpretations. Did he abandon the nation through a desire to save his skin, was his willingness to resist the Soviets by military means genuine, was he afraid 'of the people's justice'? According to Smetona himself, he did not wish as President to give his written approval of the ultimatum, which would have wounded national pride more deeply. By this means he escaped the trap of being forced to collaborate and, at the same time, could maintain the continuity of the constitutional order from abroad.

Senn also raises the question of Smetona's role during the events of 1939. Should he, as some of his critics such as Kazys Škirpa asserted, have avoided the stationing of Soviet troops in Lithuania in October by sending the Lithuanian army into Vilnius at the beginning of September, as the Germans wanted. This would have meant that the Kremlin could not have used Vilnius as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Lithuania for a mutual assistance pact. If the Soviets had not moved in in 1939, would the hatred of Jews which manifested itself among the Lithuanian population, have reached such extreme proportions in 1941 when the Soviets withdrew in face of Operation Barbarossa? These counterfactuals fail to convince this reviewer, at any rate, that the ultimate outcome would have been very different from what it was. The Soviets had not needed a Vilnius to force a mutual assistance pact on the other two Baltic states. And even if Moscow had not moved troops into

Lithuania in 1939 it would have done so in the summer of 1940 and the savage violence against the Jews in 1941 would not have been avoided.

Senn deals even-handedly with the sensitive topic of the Jewish population of Lithuania which constituted a significant part of the inhabitants of Vilnius and Kaunas, as well as of smaller cities and towns. Many non-communist and anti-communist Lithuanians thought the Jews were agents of Soviet communism. As Senn remarks, among the pro-communist activists the Jews were probably the most visible in public. According to contemporary reports the Jews were heavily represented in pro-Soviet rallies in Lithuania in 1939 and 1940. Lithuanian popular opinion increasingly identified the new order with the rise of Jews into prominent political, administrative and police roles which, as agents of the regime, they used to weaken the power of ethnic Lithuanians in the state. Senn is careful to distance himself from the traditional interpretation of some Lithuanian exile historians, that the Jews directed the policies of the Lithuanian Soviet government. He concludes, in line with more recent historical interpretations, that the Jews did not constitute an exceptionally large proportion of the regime's administrative personnel and did not dominate the Lithuanian security agency, the equivalent of the Soviet NKVD.

Senn contrasts the successful Soviet absorption of Lithuania in 1940 with Moscow's failure in Finland in 1939/40, from which Stalin and his henchmen learned important lessons. The most important of these was not to impose a communist government immediately but to work through a nominated 'popular front' government led by a left wing journalist Justas Paleckis and a leftist academic and novelist, Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius. This 'people's government' was designed to avoid the emergence of popular opposition to the take-over before Stalin's

representative Dekanozov had established a functioning control apparatus. But right from the beginning the ‘power ministries’ of the people’s government, the Interior Ministry and the secret police, were in the hands of communists such as Antanas Sniečkus, and the other ministers yielded to Dekanozov’s orders. For Senn, real power never passed into the hands of the people’s government; its purpose was to mislead and neutralise real or potential opposition, preparing the way for a communist regime before stepping aside when the time was right.

The key to the difference in interpretation between Lithuanian and Russian historians lies in the election to the ‘People’s Seimas’, which Soviet propaganda claimed as an overwhelming victory for the Lithuanian Working People’s list, that is for the communists. Senn confirms the conclusion of Lithuanian historians that the election was fraudulent in every respect and produced a puppet parliament which obediently voted for incorporation in the Soviet Union. What is new for an English speaking readership probably is the careful re-calculation of the votes by Truska which concluded that 52 per cent of the estimated population had the right to vote, that 85 per cent of these eligible voters had cast ballots and that about 55 per cent of these had supported the official candidates. The conclusion from these figures is that around 24 per cent of the population voted for the official candidates. The contrast with the Soviet figures, which claimed that 99.2 per cent of the 95.51 per cent of eligible voters had voted for the official candidates, is stark.

Senn’s book is a welcome addition to the English language histories of twentieth-century Lithuania and should be very valuable to students of Baltic history. If widely-read, as it deserves to be, it should counter the recent waves of anti-Baltic propaganda emanating from Moscow. Some 27 typographical errors detracted

slightly from the overall quality of the work, suggesting that the editors at Rodopi need to pay more attention.

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