

## INTRODUCTORY WORD

The annexation of Klaipeda Region was the last territorial expansion of the Third Reich, completed without a single shot fired. Merely a few months after Hitler had received a triumphal welcome in Klaipeda on 23 March 1939, he started World War 2 by Wehrmacht invasion to Poland. For the understanding of the that time developments in Klaipeda Region and the position of Lithuania, it is important to consider the European context of Klaipeda Region as it had formed by 1939.

The backstage of Germany's activity in March 1939 has been sufficiently well researched, as well as a major part of the history of Klaipeda Region in 1919-1939. After the restoration of Lithuania's Independence in 1990, Lithuanian and German historians collaborated in reconstruction and critical assessment of the events in Klaipeda and the related tensions in the Lithuanian-German relationships, and they also disclosed the impact of Berlin and Kaunas policies on Klaipeda Region.

Due to the latter circumstance, the issue of Klaipeda and its possible significance under the conditions of the ripening war has never been viewed from the positions of the European perspective. Therefore, what were the consequences of the Germans marching into Klaipeda in March 1939? Did it play any prominent role in Hitler's subsequent decisions and did it make any impact on the relationships of Germany and other states? Or can we presume that the fate of the city on the Dane River had no effect on the subsequent goals of the National Socialist Germany? On the other hand, from the Lithuanian viewpoint, the question should be formulated in the following way: did Lithuania have a single chance of maintaining the independence after the loss of Klaipeda Region?

A look into the National-Socialist foreign policy after 1933 brought out the fact that, simultaneously with Hitler coming to power, a new stage in Germany's foreign policy had started in January 1933. Hitler's goals were not limited to the revision of the Treaty of Versailles and border restoration in compliance with the maps of 1914. In his book "Mein Kampf", the failed putchist wrote: "The boundaries of the year 1914 mean nothing at all"<sup>1</sup>. The National Socialist policy, as a mixture of the provisions of power policy and racist motifs, aimed at winning the dominant position in Europe; as Hitler well understood and knew that the aim could not be attained in a peaceful, non-military way. Essentially, it was not an issue of war and peace; it was a tactical issue: when and with what allies the dominance in Europe was to be usurped. Therefore, in seeking to get Germany involved in the fight, the revision of the Treaty of Versailles was just a first, however, necessary step. For that reason, in the discussions of Hitler's programme by German researchers, the breaking of the Treaty of Versailles was frequently identified as a starting point, but not the ultimate goal.

What did Hitler's conception look like? His position, formulated in the 20s in the Landsberg prison and modified in "Mein Kampf", could be defined in the following way: reconciliation with England was to provide the German Reich with an opportunity of gaining new territories in Eastern Europe, primarily at the expense of the USSR. "The colossal empire in the East is ripe for dissolution, and the end of the Jewish domination in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state"<sup>2</sup>: that was the principal emotionless formulation of the expansionist delirium.

The fact that Hitler's ambitions far exceeded the general mood of the time which was limited to the revision of the Treaty of Versailles was proved by his note to the effect that the boundaries of the year 1914 meant nothing at all. After a shameful failure, the putschists did not care about regaining the territories of the times of Wilhelm Empire; to quote a popular saying of that time, they sought

<sup>1</sup> HITLER, A. *Mein Kampf. Jubiläumsausgabe*. München, 1939, S. 651.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, S. 651.

“living space in the East” (“Lebensraum im Osten”): “We stop the endless German movement to the south and west, and turn our gaze toward the land in the east”<sup>3</sup>. The essence of the view is better explained by “Bormann-dictated texts”, written in February-April 1945, when the “Great Germany” was compressed between the Oder and the Rhine, and when Hitler in Berlin, the capital of the Reich badly damaged by bombing, called “the destruction of Bolshevism, and hence ensuring the future of our nation in the vast areas in the East”<sup>4</sup> “the mission of National- Socialism and of his own life”.

The double motif in the above quoted declarations, consisting of anti-communism and the living space (*Lebensraum*), asks for a brief comment. One can state that the anti-socialist components were to stronger emphasize the content of Hitler’s anti-semitism. The racist insanity, perceived through the phrases “the Aryan race of Lords” and “the international Jewry”, turned into the frightful reality of German occupational policy in the East responsible for the massacre of millions Jews and Gypsies. All that is key to understanding Hitler’s policy. For that reason, Hitler’s policy was considered to be oversaturated with the racist emotions against which the motif of anticommunism played a very insignificant role. The thesis was further highlighted by Hitler’s definition of socialism as a Jewish invention. Jewry and Bolshevism were synonyms for him, with the latter being a political form of racist degeneration.

In the context of the said views, the role assigned to the Soviet Union becomes evident. It was considered to be the object of Hitler’s predatory policy; the German master race was to settle down on its territory, since the Slavic Untermensch (sub-humans), as an inferior race, had already been deprived of any traits of culture by the Jewish-Bolshevik parasites. The language alone witnesses that the gaining of the living space (*Lebensraum*) was seen not as mere territorial gains at the expense of the USSR, but as implied eradication of population from the very beginning. Those programmatic statements of Hitler were formulated before 30 January 1933, i.e. before his coming into power. Afterwards, he was free to start implementing his ideas.

To attain his strategic goals, Hitler was determined to provisionally collaborate with potential adversaries for tactical considerations. The Hitler-Stalin pact was the best example of Hitler’s tactical mobility. His goal was to dominate Europe; the grandiose war with territory occupation and enslaving was to provide the German Reich with power equal to that held by Napoleon’s France for several years in the modern times.

The above presented thoughts about Hitler’s conception presuppose the answer to the question about the significance of the Klaipeda issue: within the boundaries of Hitler’s expansionist and predatory policy, it did not play any significant role. Compared to other successes of Hitler in violating the Treaty of Versailles (his entry into the demilitarized Rheinland, the Austrian annexation (*Anschluss*), the Munich Agreement, and Czechoslovakia liquidation), the issue of Klaipeda was not among the essential ones.

It was the position accepted by the Western countries. Indeed, who, after the Munich Agreement, would have expected the Klaipeda Region Convention signatory states to make effort to protect the sovereignty of Lithuania? In the case of the Klaipeda issue, it was not even considered necessary to agree on a common decision making, as it had been done in Munich in the case of Sudeten Germans. The issue of Klaipeda was not that significant to other European powers as to compare it to the Sudeten crisis. Moreover, Poland discredited itself as an accomplice of the Munich Agreement, thus, Warsaw’s hands were tied.

Under such circumstances, the only state to express protest was the one soon to become a major and significant ally of the Third Reich in waging World War 2. The protest of the Soviet Union against the manner of the German-initiated settlement of Klaipeda issue witnessed that in March 1939 the Hitler-

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., S. 650 et al.

<sup>4</sup> *Hitlers politisches Testament – Die Bormann-Diktate vom Februar und April 1945*. o. O., 1981, S. 46.

Stalin Pact was still far away. That may be the most important conclusion to be drawn in the context of Klaipeda Region's "return to the Reich" in March 1939. The constellation for August 23 that was to lead directly to the war and the attack on Poland on September 1 did not exist yet. The instruction to develop the "White Plan" (*Fall Weiss*) of an attack on Poland was dated by 1 April 1939, a week after the pompous welcome to Hitler in Klaipeda, when the signs of the inevitability of war in Europe were already evident.

The common European background provides an opportunity to deeper look into the situation of Klaipeda Region in the context of war and peace and of the relationships of Lithuania and Germany. Volume XXI of *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* presently in your hands is devoted to the annexation of Klaipeda Region. The articles of the researchers analyse the political, ideological, social, and military aspects of the event that have not yet received sufficient attention in historiography.

In his article "What is the Significance of Klaipeda to Lithuania?", Česlovas Laurinavičius looks into the historical background and the reasons that predetermined Klaipeda Region's annexation to Lithuania after WWI and focuses on the analysis of the Versailles system. The ideological preparation of the annexation of Klaipeda Region in 1939 is reviewed by Vasilijus Safronovas who discloses the processes of the formation and transformation of the identity of the local population. Vygantas Vareikis analyzes the political and military aspects of the loss of Klaipeda Region in 1938–1939; he introduces the political environment of Lithuania and Germany in March 1939, the scarcely examined dynamics of the retreat of Lithuanian military unions from Klaipeda Region, and the marching of Germans into it. The article of Vytautas Jokubauskas is also devoted to military issues: it presents the plans of defence of the City and Region of Klaipeda developed by the Headquarters of the Lithuanian Army in the 1930s, as well as defence plans against Germany, and discusses the Lithuanian armed forces in 1939 and their capacity of protecting Klaipeda Region. The theme is further developed by Šarūnas Liekis who analyzes the possibilities of Lithuania to manage a military crisis in the face of German military aggression.

Zenonas Butkus presents the international context of the tear-away of Klaipeda from Lithuania in 1939 and discloses the USSR view of the case. Arūnė Arbušauskaite examines the Klaipeda Region refugee situation in Lithuania Major and the actions of the Lithuanian Government in the face of the humanitarian crisis. Arūnas Bubnys discusses the efforts and activities of Lithuania aimed at protecting the interests of the state of Lithuania and its citizens in the annexed Klaipeda Region. The article of Arminas Štuopys focuses on the construction of military fortifications in Klaipeda carried out by Germans after the annexation in March 1939.

The minutes of the last meetings of the Committee of Lithuanian Organizations on the eve of the Anschluss published in the chapter of historical sources reveal the aspirations of the Lietuvininkai/ Klaipeda Region dwellers to put an end to the German influence and the interwar tensions between the Lietuvininkai and Lithuanians from Lithuania Major. Another document - Report of A. Breimeris, Colonel of General Staff, Commander of the 6th Pilenai Duke Margis Infantry Regiment, to Commander of the 3rd Infantry Division - illustrates the complex conditions of the Lithuanian Army retreat from Klaipeda Region in March 1939.

The compilers of the volume and the authors of the articles expect readers' attention to the publication and trust it will contribute to the enrichment of the knowledge of the complex and painful period in the history of Klaipeda Region.

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