

“Fight!”: Kazys Škirpa and the Destiny of Lithuania During the Second World War

Summary

WWII was an immense tragedy for humanity that still catches the imagination of researchers and a large part of society. Lithuania also experienced huge losses: it lost its statehood, and hundreds of thousands of its citizens were killed or lost their homes, property, and relatives. The unfavorable geopolitical situation of Lithuania also contributed to this situation: according to the classical realist theory of geopolitics, the geographical position of a state inevitably determines its fate. Even though WWII ended a long time ago, it is still exploited in political conflicts. According to the Lithuanian historians Vytautas Jokubauskas, Jonas Vaičėnionis, Vygantas Vareikis, and Hektoras Vitkus, a hybrid war that has been steadily strengthening since 2000 and is part of the official historical policy of the Russian Federation is being waged against Lithuania, especially in the field of history. According to Zenonas Butkus, the roots of this process can be traced to history: first of all, to the idea of a Third Rome, which justifies messianic and imperial ambitions toward the West and has been popular in Russia since the end of the 15th century. The geopolitical expert George Friedmann states that Lithuania, together with Estonia, Latvia, and Poland, is in a situation where it is vital to counterbalance Russia's influence, which has constant geopolitical ambitions in this region, which become more pronounced when the state becomes stronger. It grew even stronger after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and increased the geopolitical insecurity of these countries. Nowadays, it has become even more important in the context of a new stage of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. In this context, society seeks support in history and researches the biographies of the people who fought for Lithuania's independence. One of the people whose assessment is very ambiguous is the first volunteer of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, a member of the Constituent Seimas, Colonel of the General Staff, and later a diplomat Kazys Škirpa. During the period from 1938 to 1945, he was at the center of the events that befell Lithuania and tried to preserve/regain its statehood. His geopolitical vision was based on the idea that aggression by one neighbor against Lithuania could be counterbalanced by another neighbor. After the occupation by the USSR in 1940, Germany, ruled by the National Socialists, became this neighbor, which lost WWII and was condemned by the victors at the Nuremberg Tribunal. In this way, K. Škirpa's ideas, somewhat naturally, were on the losing side.

K. Škirpa's personality helps reveal the tragedy and choices of the defenders of Lithuanian statehood in the 20th century. He was the person who participated in the creation of this state and its armed forces; later, he contributed to strengthening Lithuania and tried to protect its fragile independence. In the cataclysms of the 20th century, he actively opposed the totalitarian regime that occupied his country and made a significant contribution to the struggle for the freedom of Lithuania. On the other hand, in order to achieve Lithuania's independence and liberation from one totalitarian regime, he made concessions to another totalitarian regime, expecting to find some possibilities for coexistence. K. Škirpa was a man of action, and with his actions he did not avoid making mistakes; also, he symbolized a man who did not succumb to historical processes, who tried to take fate into his own hands and behave in a way that he thought was appropriate in order to preserve the state.

After regaining independence, Lithuania's geopolitical integration into the European Union and NATO has strengthened Lithuania's security, but under the conditions of a hybrid war society experiences difficulties seeing nuances and avoiding categorical and politicized assessments hardly related to history.

For this reason, assessments of K. Škirpa also vary in Lithuania. In 1995, during the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of his birth, K. Škirpa was reburied in the prestigious Kaunas Petrašiūnai Cemetery, and representatives of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, Minister of National Defense Linas Linkevičius, and Prime Minister Adolfo Sleževičius attended his funeral. However, twenty years later, in 2015, Svaigėdas Stoškus, the head of the Kaunas branch of the Cultural Heritage Department, questioned the appropriateness of K. Škirpa Street in Kaunas. Teresė Birutė Burauskaitė, the Director of the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Center, responded to the emerging discussions with a letter addressed to the Kaunas Municipality. She ended her letter thus:

K. Škirpa and the organization that he led can be blamed for the fact that anti-Semitism was raised to a political level in the activities of the LAF organization in Berlin, and this could have encouraged some Lithuanians to get involved in the Holocaust. On the other hand, it should be noted that the LAF organization in Berlin proposed to address the "Jewish question" with the expulsion of the Jews from Lithuania rather than with genocide. It should also be noted that the members of the Berlin LAF were unaware that the Nazis planned to carry out a total genocide of the Jews.

This discussion moved to the capital. At the request of the Vilnius Municipality, a discussion of this question by historians and public figures was held at the end of 2016. The historians Rimantas Miknys, Antanas Kulakauskas, Alfredas Rukšėnas, and the author of these lines as well as the public figures Sergėjus Kanovičius, Mark Adam Harold, Darius Udryš, and Vidmantas Valiušaitis participated in a discussion that was moderated by Darius Kuolys. Even though no decision was reached at that time, a few years later, in the summer of 2019, the Vilnius Municipality decided to change the name of K. Škirpa Avenue. Arguments were presented to the public by the mayor of the city Remigijus Šimašius himself, who mentioned texts by the historians Norbertas Černiauskas and the author of these lines, which created for him an impression that “the city will not be respected and open if it glorifies the personalities who contributed to the flourishing of totalitarian regimes in our country.” After a vote in the municipality, during which some council members expressed a different opinion, a decision was made to change the name of K. Škirpa Avenue into Tricolor Avenue, but this position was criticized in a joint letter by nine members of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. A petition opposing such a municipal decision was distributed to the public. Until this day, public opinion in Lithuania has remained divided.

Many different assessments of K. Škirpa can be found in the public space. In an article in 2010, the philosopher Leonidas Donskis was one of the first to refer to K. Škirpa as having “Nazi views.” Since then, the poet Tomas Venclova, the writer Grigorijus Kanovičius, the philosopher Viktoras Bachmetjevas, the playwright Marius Ivaškevičius, and many others have shared similar insights. The above-mentioned publicist V. Valiušaitis, the leader of the youth organization “Pro Patria” Vytautas Sinica, the political scientist Kęstutis Girnius, and others supported the opposing position.

It is worth mentioning that similar disputes exist in many European countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, whose people suffered from both totalitarian regimes. The case of Lithuania is complicated because in the West the struggle for statehood is often viewed from the perspective of the Holocaust. It is impossible to answer the question of what would have happened in Lithuania if it had managed to maintain its statehood at the beginning of the war, and this is what K. Škirpa consistently sought in his geopolitical vision. All this raises the questions that are discussed in this present dissertation. Could K. Škirpa’s activities have changed Lithuania’s geopolitical situation? For example, could they have stimulated greater geopolitical interest by Germany in Lithuania? How would life in Lithuania have changed if K. Škirpa had managed to achieve autonomy, at least, during WWII?

To what extent did K. Škirpa's activities influence the anti-Soviet underground? Were the features of National Socialist ideology and anti-Semitic statements significant in the organization that he was chairing? In addition to all this, the situation in Lithuania during WWII is compared to the ones in Slovakia and Ukraine, the participation of K. Škirpa in international diplomatic activities is analyzed, and the changes in Lithuanian foreign policy that determined the situation in 1939 are investigated; the author of this dissertation has written a number of articles on this topic.

This monograph is divided into an introduction, three chapters, each of which has six sections, and conclusions. Chapter 1 highlights the period of change between 1938 and 1940, covering the phase between the Polish ultimatum for the establishment of diplomatic relations in March 1938 and the USSR ultimatum on stationing its army in Lithuania. During this crisis period, K. Škirpa's vision of focusing on neighboring Germany matured, with the hope of preserving Lithuania's independence. Chapter 2 covers the period from the occupation of Lithuania by the USSR in June 1940 to the beginning of the German-USSR war in June 1941. During this period, K. Škirpa was convinced of his rightness and organized the LAF, which had to prepare an uprising against the USSR in Lithuania as soon as the German army crossed the border. At that time, a great number of other Lithuanian diplomats as well as politicians, public figures, academics, and military men agreed with K. Škirpa's geopolitical vision. Chapter 3 covers the period from the summer of 1941, when it became clear that Germany would not recognize Lithuania's independence and end its occupation rule here, to the withdrawal of that country's military and occupation structures from Lithuania and its reoccupation by the USSR. During that period, many of the people who had supported K. Škirpa's vision turned away from it, but the diplomat himself made efforts to continue following his political line.

In September 1938, after the Munich Agreements, K. Škirpa was convinced that Germany had become the most powerful European state. This Lithuanian official considered Germany to be the closest and strongest neighbor; therefore, he considered it to be the only country that could ensure the security of Lithuania geopolitically and help get back the historical capital Vilnius. Among diplomats, Škirpa's views were an exception: at this time, President A. Smetona and the political elite saw a Germany ruled by the National Socialist regime as a serious threat to Lithuania. Therefore, they pursued a cautious policy toward this country, seeking contacts with Poland, the USSR, and Western countries. This situation led to K. Škirpa's independent actions, when instead of following the instructions of the leaders he sought to shape Lithuanian foreign policy himself and consistently searched for contacts in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in its military structures and intelli-

gence, and among foreign diplomats. P. Kleist, an informal adviser to the Minister of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a specialist on Eastern Europe, and H. Oshima, the Japanese Ambassador, became the most important people. Their shared view was that politics is like nature: you are always either predator or prey.

At the beginning of 1939, Germany expected to include Lithuania in its zone of geopolitical influence and in the Anti-Comintern Pact. At that time, K. Škirpa established active contacts with G. Leibbrandt and P. Kleist, who had considerable informal influence in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the clearest ways to implement this policy was to influence envoy K. Škirpa. He communicated with German officials, politicians, and officers and sought their favor for Lithuania, especially by encouraging talks about Vilnius as part of Lithuania, and he wanted to ensure the security of Lithuanians living in the Klaipėda and Suwałki regions. K. Škirpa's most important action was the attempt to get Vilnius back by taking advantage of supposedly favorable geopolitical changes, i.e. the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement. Having extensive contacts with other diplomats residing in Berlin, K. Škirpa believed that the geopolitical situation of Lithuania was different from that of Latvia and Estonia and that Germany itself was primarily interested in its survival. For this reason, it was even more difficult for him to come to terms with the idea that the people in charge of foreign policy, such as President A. Smetona and Minister J. Urbšys, categorically rejected his ideas. He felt that his country's political elite was betraying Lithuania.

Many Lithuanians were frightened by the Soviet occupation, especially by the repressions that had begun during 1940-1941. Seeing no other way out, they hoped to receive salvation from the only remaining neighbor, Germany, which was famous for its successful military marches across Europe at that time and had created the impression that its military forces were invincible. K. Škirpa stood out among other more active Lithuanian political figures as he had long-term and, as it seemed to him, reliable contacts with German politicians and officers; therefore, he could hope that he could at least partially control the processes and would be able to use the German geopolitical factor in Lithuania's favor. This course of events forced him to believe that he was right and to gather a group of supporters, whose numbers were growing as the German-USSR war was approaching. This vision was opposed by those who tended to distrust National Socialist Germany (e.g. the diplomats J. Šaulys, B. K. Balutis, and P. Žadeikis and former President A. Smetona) and hoped for the intervention of the Anglo-Saxon countries. An analysis of the differences between these groups has revealed that K. Škirpa and his followers were able to organize themselves and that their activities were based on a tangible, yet naive hope

that Germany had an interest in recognizing Lithuania's independence, while the critics of this geopolitical vision disagreed among themselves and did not suggest any reasonable alternatives; they tended to remain neutral and wait for events to change naturally. Therefore, K. Škirpa and his supporters, who were active, were even more noticeable and could be distinguished from other Lithuanian diplomats as they seemed to express the will of the occupied country, and most importantly, they tended to attribute such a role to themselves.

K. Škirpa's main way of implementing his geopolitical vision was to establish the Lithuanian Activist Front on November 17, 1940, in Berlin. This organization united many influential personalities of the Lithuanian army, politics, and society, but it was K. Škirpa, who was the clear leader uniting the organization. The main goal of the LAF was to liberate Lithuania from the Soviet occupation; however, its activities demonstrated a strong geopolitical orientation toward Germany and a number of the features of National Socialist ideology. Nevertheless, most of the LAF proclamations remained only as projects, and the ideas were not made public in occupied Lithuania. The only exception is the anti-Semitic proclamation "Let's Liberate Lithuania from the Jewish Yoke Forever," published in 500 copies in early June 1941 and distributed at the border with Germany. Another example is the proclamation "From Bolshevik Slavery to the New Lithuania," published in Berlin (3,000 copies) with the help of A. Gerutis. Despite the low availability of these proclamations, the people of the LAF in Berlin communicated with the representatives of the rebels operating in occupied Lithuania and spread their views more widely. Although the people of the LAF were not collectively responsible for the actions of the rebels, just as the rebels were not collectively responsible for the actions or views of the LAF, the LAF in Berlin and its leader K. Škirpa were considered to be an authority for the people in Lithuania who participated in the June Uprising; therefore, he, as a leader, was responsible for the organization that he had created.

K. Škirpa's geopolitical vision was based on the premise that Germany would need the Lithuanian state as a certain protection for the strategically vulnerable region of East Prussia and, in one form or another, as a buffer state between it and the Russian state. The anti-Soviet attitudes of Lithuanians could be used to destroy the USSR. This correlated with the ideas of important German officials, with whom K. Škirpa himself maintained a relationship. The most important contacts were considered to be P. Kleist and G. Leibbrandt, who were regarded as experts on Eastern Europe and who claimed that the war against the USSR would be most successful for Germany if the liberation of nations from communist slavery were announced and a group of satellite states, the "New Europe," were established. At the organiza-

tional level, these ideas were supported by the Wehrmacht and its military intelligence unit, the Abwehr, which employed a number of Lithuanians associated with K. Škirpa. However, most leaders of the Third Reich and the Führer A. Hitler himself had different intentions: Lithuania, like its neighbors of a similar fate, Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine, would not become a nominally independent state, as was the case with Slovakia in 1939, because German ideological plans had been replaced by the ideology of “living space”: the region had to be Germanized, the mass extermination of Jews had to be performed, and other people regarded as the enemies of National Socialist ideology had to be killed, while the tradition of statehood among the countries of this region had to be suppressed in various ways. K. Škirpa hoped that failures on the front would force Germany to change its policy and recognize Lithuania’s independence, but there was no real basis for such a belief: Germany did not recognize Lithuania’s independence even in the second half of 1944, when Lithuania was occupied once again by USSR forces.

After the occupation of Lithuania, the Germans started the massacre of the Jews and attempted to involve some Lithuanians, who had various motivations; however, no such severe repressions were carried out against ethnic Lithuanians as they had been under the USSR occupation during 1940–1941. Moreover, the struggle of the German army against the USSR was regarded as a major barrier against a possible reoccupation and even more cruel atrocities. Therefore, even when a growing number of diplomats and other people in Lithuania and abroad began to express hope for a US-British alliance, the possibility of a faster return of the Red Army seemed to be risky and, therefore, unacceptable. In this case, K. Škirpa again distinguished himself from both diplomats and other politicians, as he categorically opposed resistance to the Germans, hoping for a change in the policy of the Third Reich. However, this diplomat did not support the idea of Lithuanian participation in the SS legions as well as self-defense units; in his opinion, even the establishment of the Local Detachment was too big a compromise. According to K. Škirpa, Lithuanian soldiers would be able to fight on the German side only if Lithuania were granted full independence. This demonstrates that he cannot be considered a German collaborator, as acknowledged by Gestapo officials in their documents. He actively promoted these ideas in 1944, hoping that Germany would recognize Lithuania as an independent state and end the country’s occupation, forced by the geopolitical situation. During this period, he prepared several memoranda for Third Reich authorities, in which he stated that after A. Smetona’s death he remained the highest official in Lithuania; therefore, after the recognition of Lithuania’s independence by Germany, he would prepare 200,000 soldiers for the fight against the USSR. This did

not satisfy the interests of the Reich, and K. Škirpa himself was arrested; even the attempts of the highest Wehrmacht generals to intercede for him were not effective. At that time, K. Škirpa's ideas were viewed negatively by both the Lithuanian anti-Nazi resistance and other diplomats. His authority had diminished because at that time even German allies, such as Finland and Romania, had switched to the anti-Hitler coalition.

The geopolitical vision that Lithuania's statehood could be saved with the help of Germany collapsed in 1945, as the end of WWII led to important geopolitical changes: Lithuania remained under USSR occupation, Germany lost the war, and after the victors had cut up its territory, it was not Lithuania's neighbor even physically. K. Škirpa could not return to his homeland, as he would undoubtedly be repressed by the USSR occupying forces. His position was criticized by some Lithuanian exiles, but the Western countries that had won the war (i.e. the USA, Great Britain, and France) took an understanding view of K. Škirpa's activities during the war and did not consider him a German collaborator. Even after the war, he continued to believe only in his own ideas, did not support the activities for Lithuania's liberation, and did not even believe in the possibilities of an actively developing partisan war, as no foreign state supported Lithuania. In Washington, as a military expert, he assisted the US offices that aimed to find out more about USSR military forces during the Cold War: he worked as a high-ranking research associate. Until his death in 1979, K. Škirpa believed that his ideas and activities were absolutely correct and hoped that Germany would become the dominant European state once again at a certain time and that this would guarantee Lithuania's survival. All this having been said, even the word "controversial" is today inadequate to describe K. Škirpa's difficult but interesting personality and to help understand his activities during the most tragic period of Lithuania's history – the Second World War.

Translated by Dr. Teresė Ringailienė