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## Lithuanian Statemen in the USA – Their Writings and Fates. Rethinking the Legacy of President Antanas Smetona

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Lithuanian historical research shapes cultural and literary narratives, yet these accounts are often incomplete, inaccurate, or biased – especially regarding statesmen who fled to the United States and continued working to defend Lithuania’s survival. This is evident in the legacy of Lithuania’s first President, Antanas Smetona (1874–1944), who left for America at the start of Soviet occupation. His writings express principled political resolve amid national collapse. Revisiting his and other exiled leaders’ experiences of lost independence, aggression, and betrayal restores moral clarity, sustains existential questions of statehood, and helps literature remain grounded in historical change rather than drifting into detached modernist self-expression.

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The occupation of Lithuania, which the treacherous Stalinist Soviet Union carried out on 15 June 1940, suddenly underscored the historical significance of the president, ministers, heads of state institutions, and those responsible for the country’s security. After receiving Stalin’s ultimatum, the Lithuanian government and president held a midnight meeting to make a decisive decision. The situation was akin to a deadlock. President Antanas Smetona (1874–1944) recognised the gravity of the situation and supported resistance to the Soviets. However, other members of the government, including his newly appointed army commander, General Vincas Vitkauskas (1890–1965), who is now regarded as the greatest traitor to the state of all time (Milašius 2017), a devoted Russian agent at heart (his brother was a Bolshevik, executed in 1919), preferred accepting the ultimatum and welcoming the Red Army on friendly terms. The later consequences of this are well known: at the last minute, the president managed to escape the country across the border to Germany, unwilling to be used as a puppet, thus handing Lithuania over to Stalin. The Soviets hated this decision, ridiculed and despised it in every way, but nevertheless, it was the right one. The president’s biggest mistake was not the escape itself, but the appointment of the army commander V. Vitkauskas, who later spoke and wrote only in Russian and took pride in having destroyed the Lithuanian army and state.

The occupation of Lithuania, which occurred amidst such difficult circumstances and controversies, and its subsequent integration into the Soviet *prison of nations*, had already gathered its true statesmen in America. President Antanas Smetona appeared there after leaving Germany and Switzerland, along with Juozas Brazaitis (1903–1974), the leader of the Provisional Government, which resisted the Soviets from early WWII, beginning in June 1941 when the Nazi German army entered, and attempted to restore independence under such conditions (when the Holocaust was already underway). This also includes the later tragic fate of the *President of Hope*, who ran for this post in 1992, Stasys Lozoraitis (1924–1994), the ambassador of independent Lithuania for 50 years during the Cold War and the non-recognition of occupation and Valdas Adamkus (\*1926), who was finally successfully elected in 1999 and 2004 and who became the President of Lithuania, led the country into the free world and the Western Alliance during his

two terms. It can be said that the greatest strength of this Alliance, the United States, honourably supported Lithuanian Freedom throughout this half-century of the Cold War, defending, nurturing, preserving, and promoting the values of statehood in the part of Europe beyond the Iron Curtain left behind, *utterly alone* and separated from the policies of the Free World.

However, this process is highly complex, painful, potentially fatal, and significant, often tragic, highlighting the crucial role of the personalities embodying the idea of the state in their actions and writings. Their writings are especially worthy and have an actual and long-lasting influence on the future of the State. These must be revisited repeatedly, aiming to illuminate unresolved questions, errors, or misleading narratives.

Speaking on this subject, it is important to recognise the personal significance of statehood within the cultural-historical *theatre* of national self-awareness. It resembles a leitmotif guiding the entire opera score according to its melodic contour. Consequently, the name of the nation resonates in various ways. Therefore, for an adversarial force aiming to dismantle the state not only from outside but also from within, to diminish it, this personal destruction of presidents, prime ministers, and heads of state becomes crucial, as it gradually erodes the nation's self-awareness, trust in government structures, resilience, and capacity to resist.

This awareness must possess its own archetypal impulses – signs of greatness embodied by personalities symbolising statehood. Therefore, it was necessary for the Soviet Union to destroy, or at least suppress and remove from the global stage, the most important Lithuanian statesmen (who would ensure the continuation of the State) who emigrated to the USA. Consequently, when discussing the destinies of statesmen, we inevitably consider the tragic sunsets of history, the vanishing points of collapsing lines on their horizons. But we keep returning to them like detectives to an unresolved crime. The mistake of undermining self-awareness exerts the strongest influence on the development of culture. The fates of statesmen shape the paradigm of the possible *deep state*, which consolidates the legend of national heroism and state continuity. It also influences perceptions of historical truth and identity, which are essential to preventing culture from degenerating, as the French philosopher Rancière states, into a 'simulacra carnival' (Rancière, 2007, p. 23).

Therefore, the drama of losing statehood, being washed out of Lithuanian culture and then re-emerging clearly revolves around the figure of the First President, Antanas Smetona. The president occupies a special position in this context, as the author of texts on Lithuanian national ideology, such as "*Lithuanian Nation and Its Purpose*" (Vairas, 1936, vol. XVI); *Die litauische Frage* (Berlin, 1917); "*Vienybės gairėmis*" (Kaunas, 1930) and memoirs *Tremtinio dalia nuo Mozūrų ežerų ligi Šveicarijos* [The exilee's destiny from the Masurian Lakes to Switzerland] about the start and reasons of exile (1940, July); and as *Pro Memoria* (Smetona 2000) his comments on the manuscript of Owen J. C. Norem's book *Timeless Lithuania* written in 1943 (Merkelys, 2017, p. 726).

### **Saving the state's legacy**

This historical tension endures today, highlighting the dangers faced by the real life of an independent state, especially regarding the subtle deception of its institutions' activities, which conceal disastrous self-destruction. These are Smetona's memoirs, written immediately after leaving Lithuania, having retreated in time, and emphasising the crucial role of statehood, insight, willpower, and resilience. Regrettably, many individuals in positions of power lack this quality, repeatedly choosing a seemingly more convenient yet ultimately unforeseen and unnoticed path of betrayal that proves disastrous for them, as in the case of Prime Minister Antanas Merkys (1887-1955). Unfortunately, this occurs repeatedly, and the risk persists even in today's context. Therefore, Smetona's role in the drama of the state's survival remains of ongoing importance. Its meanings and motives, long overshadowed by dismissive Soviet narratives, are now revealed in the memoirs of the First President: *Pro Memoria. Lithuania Before the Mortal Danger*. The memoirs of President Antanas Smetona, written in Switzerland on 1–25 July 1940. (Margutis, 1995, No. 7–8, Smetona 2000). The memoir's text is significant for understanding what actually happened because, during the Soviet

occupation, the army's main goal in entering was to conceal what was taking place, making it seem as if *nothing was happening*. This was chanted from all the stands; the message was conveyed through General V. Vitkauskas' speech to the army and the Prime Minister A. Merkys' address to the nation, both orchestrated by Stalin's emissaries. Only Smetona's departure was the sign, indicating that something was wrong. As a result, the Soviets, through other confused and obediently cooperating heads of state and ministers such as Anatanas Merkys and Ernestas Galvanauskas, along with the chief of cavalry, Gen. Kazys Tallat-Kelpša, and the commander of the Riflemen's Union, Col. Pranas Saladžius, desperately attempted to bring Smetona back to Lithuania. He had already managed to cross the German border amid the dramatic confusion of the night. It was very inconvenient for the Soviets to face such a situation, which prevented them from legalising the occupation. Therefore, they attempted to send more than one delegation to persuade the president somehow to return. However, they failed; Smetona did not make a mistake here; he understood the Soviet trick, which involved swiftly occupying Lithuania through a complete misunderstanding.

The President wrote:

'I noticed that those people, especially Gen. Kelpša, could not understand why I was so stubborn. Because, as we know, Minister Galvanauskas was not present and did not participate in the Council of Ministers' last meeting on June 15; perhaps that is why he did not consider it inappropriate for the President to remain in Lithuania when he was forced to cede his country. Something was strange during my dialogue with the delegation.

It seemed to me that it was sent after someone had strongly pressured the Prime Minister. In conclusion, I told them that I would not return to Kaunas. Very upset, all three of them said farewell and left. I felt very sorry for them because they did not understand the current situation Lithuania is now in.

<...> The delegation tried to persuade me that my return would calm the public. I said it might soothe them for an hour, but soon they would be convinced that the president was powerless against Moscow's violence. The Bolsheviks would compel him to sign acts gradually eroding Lithuania's independence and to undertake other measures contrary to our Constitution,' writes Antanas Smetona in *Pro memoria. The Annexation of Lithuania, 1940* (in: Smetona, 2000, p. 22).

Smetona's departure was particularly inconvenient for the Soviets, as it undermined the legitimacy of Lithuania's voluntary accession to the Soviet Union.

'They were concerned with a certain staging of the smooth process of the Republic of Lithuania, of which they are true experienced masters and who must transform brutal acts of violence and aggression into impressive promotional acts of supposed freedom for the sake of communist propaganda,' writes Professor Mykolas Römeris in his study *The Sovietisation of Lithuania 1940-1941 (Lietuvos sovietizacija 1940-1941)* (Römeris, 1989, 17).

Indeed, the crucial action and foresight of the president determined the ongoing legal status of the state. As the historian notes, 'even after leaving, A. Smetona remained the President of Lithuania *in exile*, because according to the 1938 Constitution, the Prime Minister assumes the duties of the head of state only in the event when the President dies or resigns. Thus, A. Smetona's departure complicated the legal incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union' (Jakubavičienė, 202, p. 365).

Further events developed at a rapid Stalinist pace.

'It is clear that the new planned campaigns required the removal of the President of the Republic, A. Smetona, who had gone abroad and **was therefore not at the disposal of the Soviets**. <...> A. Merkys could not hold the office of President of the Republic' (Merkelys, 2017, pp. 632-633). In the words of Prof. Römeris, 'Lithuania had already fallen under the military and political control of a foreign state; due to military occupation, it was neither independent nor sovereign <...> it and its acts

were led by the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Dekanozov, sent from Moscow' (Römeris, 1989, p. 28).

'Antanas Merkys, who was acting Prime Minister, served as the President of the Republic for only about two days, but even in that short time, he carried out many harmful actions for Lithuania. Of course, he did this not out of his own free will, but under the pressure of Dekanozov. <...> Only A. Merkys perhaps realised what a fatal mistake he and the entire government had made by not leaving abroad together with the President of the Republic' (Merkelys, 2017, p. 633).

On 17 June, A. Merkys' speech called for understanding in meeting the 'friendly allied troops' and ensuring 'the maintenance of order and calm, which was the concern of the regional leadership, and the actual absence of even the slightest disruption to normal work in all state institutions and enterprises and private farms' <...> further disoriented the public, which in general did not understand the events' (Merkelys, 2017, pp. 633-644).

Thus, Merkys willingly or unwillingly participated in the liquidation of the state: he was the one on whose recommendation General Vincas Vitkauskas was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Lithuanian Army in April 1940; he was the one who proposed accepting the Soviet Union's ultimatum on 14 June 1940; he, in violation of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, appointed the communist Justas Paleckis as Prime Minister on 17 June 1940 and approved his government, dictated by the USSR emissaries. It was Merkys, humbly following Soviet demands, who ordered the arrest of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Gen. Kazimieras Skučas, and the Director of the State Security Department, Augustinas Povilaitis, who were the first to be killed by the NKVD<sup>1</sup>.

Despite his many services to the Soviets, on 17 July 1940, he and his family were exiled deep into Russia. On 26 June 1941, he was arrested and held in various Russian prisons, including Butyrka in Moscow and Vladimir in Vladimir Oblast, without the right to return to Lithuania. After his release following Stalin's death in 1954, he died shortly afterwards in 1955 at the Melenkai Home for the Disabled. At best, he simply vanished from history, serving as a reminder of the constant shame associated with the betrayal of 1940. Meanwhile, the legacy of Antanas Smetona's statehood ideology persisted, even after he and his family moved across the Atlantic (though without the right to participate in political life). During this period, the Soviets launched a propaganda campaign demeaning him in Lithuania.

### **The continuation of the state in writings**

A very important document that records the occupation of the State and the legitimisation of the government abroad is the **Kybartai Acts** (a small town on the then Lithuanian-German border), signed by Antanas Smetona.

'Based on the Constitution of Lithuania (Article 71), I instruct Prime Minister Stanislovas Lozoraitis to replace me'.

Kybartai, 15 June 1940.

A. Smetona

President of the Republic (ibid., pp. 638-639).

This document and its copy, later created in Rome in 1944, where the Lozoraitis family lived, represented an insightful continuation of Lithuanian statehood and its legitimisation in the style of Smetona – like a faint yet enduring light in the distance of a tunnel, providing a foundation for the dramaturgy of archetypes within *unburned archives*. Here, we refer to another *mystery* of the President – his death on 9 January 1944, in America, in a house fire in Cleveland, occurring just at the critical moment before Stalin's

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<sup>1</sup> NKVD stands for **Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs** (in Russian: Narodni Kommissariat Vnutrenikh Del), which was the Soviet Union's interior ministry and law enforcement agency from 1934 to 1946.

alliance needed it, prior to the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, when the end of the war and the division of Europe already loomed in the direction favoured by the Soviets. The three valuable years the president spent in the countries that sheltered him – Germany, Switzerland, and the USA – are reflected in his most significant texts and political insights.

The president's writings, letters, and memoirs emphasise the dilemmas faced on the nation's sinuous path and the uncertain future. One challenge was to recognise the treachery of the occupation and to make the right decision. Gradually, other Lithuanian statesmen, who had initially been *unaware*, began to grasp the situation. Those who quietly and secretly left Lithuania included individuals such as the former Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance of the so-called People's Government, Ernestas Galvanauskas (1882–1967, France), who initially tried desperately to persuade Smetona to return. The situation became clearer, and an increasing number of statesmen fled or retreated from Lithuania. The realisation that Lithuania had suffered a painful disaster gradually sank in. Interestingly, Germany, which was then an ally of Stalin's Soviet Union and where it was forbidden to criticise Russia's actions, nevertheless granted the outgoing Lithuanian President temporary protection, enabling him to continue his activities in America. Smetona's family was not betrayed.

Upon arriving in Berlin, the president first met with the Lithuanian diplomat and envoy to Berlin, Colonel Kazys Škirpa (1895–1979). The latter, a fiery statesman who also later fled to America, convinced the president that

'Lithuanians do not need to withdraw from Germany or at least Europe at all, but stay here to suffer, and somehow make a living, because a conflict could soon arise between the Soviet Union and Germany. Therefore, it is correct to consider the future Lithuanian government as a responsibility. <...> The President of the Republic must definitely stay in Europe because his signature may be needed when forming a new government' (Merkelys, 2017, p. 655).

Škirpa's stance on Germany was clear and unambiguous: Lithuania had to choose its side, retake Vilnius with the German army, and become a member of Hitler's alliance. The President never agreed to this.

However, as the occupation continued and Smetona retreated to Germany, Škirpa criticised him and condemned the previous government for not taking up arms against Bolshevik violence.

'Had this been done, both Germany and other countries would have valued Lithuania more, and more of the intelligentsia would have been saved.

Smetona agreed with Škirpa's view and explained why there was no resistance. However, this did not persuade K. Škirpa. From further conversation with A. Smetona, it became clear that K. Škirpa also blames the president for failing to prepare the government in time to resist violence' (*ibid.*, p. 655).

Later, K. Škirpa would face accusations in America of supporting Hitler's views on the Jewish question, even inspiring the Holocaust in Lithuania with anti-Semitic statements in the press, although he could not contribute to any real actions because he was interned by the Germans in Berlin during the war. Many Lithuanian statesmen will face this fate, for instance, Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis (1903–1974), who led the Provisional Government (June–August 1941). He was accused of failing to prevent the Holocaust that began with the Nazis' arrival, and although he was acquitted by the American House of Representatives, he remained unaware of this because he passed away. He is still condemned to this day, many years later. This reflects an ongoing post-war, posthumous effort to diminish Lithuanian statesmen, which is of great significance to the nation's self-esteem. Meanwhile, A. Smetona's years in America are filled with his writings, letters, and other testimonies about his ongoing, in every way, pursuit of the truth and justice in the matter of the Lithuanian state's continuation. The president conducted himself honourably; he had to respond to accusations of fascism, and he defended ministers falsely accused in the American press, such as Gen. Kazys

Musteikis, who was called a Nazi quisling (*Correspondence of Antanas Smetona 1940–1944*, in Smetona, 1999, pp. 599–600).

In response to accusations that Lithuania was governed by fascists after the officers' coup in 1926, Smetona states:

‘Nowhere in fascist countries are there more than one party in power; there is no place for fascism there. There has never been a shortage of individuals with different views in the Lithuanian government. In 1939 and 1940, all the major Lithuanian parties (nationalists, socialists, people's parties and Christian Democrats) were represented in the government.’

‘The Lithuanian governing system evolved and matured based on the real needs of its people. It was the first European country that, while fighting communism, also bravely opposed National Socialism...’ (ibid., p. 599).

Smetona's most significant activity in exile in the USA gradually strengthened and became more focused on maintaining Lithuanian statehood. This is especially clear in his letters to the Lithuanian Minister Plenipotentiary in Washington, Povilas Žadeikis (1887–1957). The goal was to support Lithuania's case for independence, with the Union formed to lead Lithuania; this later evolved into the Lithuanian Liberation Committee. Clearly, from his letters to Žadeikis, Smetona was actively involved in this effort.

He writes:

‘Your statement on the Moscow Conference <...> does not lack optimism towards Lithuania. <...> I became pessimistic after just reading the report of the Moscow Conference. But we must not give up; we must continue to defend Lithuania's cause persistently. The ethics of a doctor require treating the sick, even when there is little hope of a cure. And our great duty is to protect the Motherland from death, although the gravediggers are trying to kill it. Therefore, it is highly advisable that all Lithuanian organisations, especially the Council and the Union for the Liberation of Lithuania, should once again mobilise and submit timely statements advocating for Lithuanian independence, at least to President Roosevelt and both houses of Congress, before it is too late – before the meeting of the three great leaders of the Allies has not yet taken place. You, in principle, agree with my idea to address President Roosevelt, but you leave the question of the occasion open. I will wait for your confirmation when such an occasion arises. I am only concerned that I should have enough time to prepare such a report, so that an expected message will not reach me too late’ (A. Smetona's letter to P. Žadeikis, 7 November 1943, Cleveland, Ohio, ibid., pp. 646–647).

In fact, the president at that time had very little time left, although he could not have known it. An active head of state, who genuinely continued the line of Lithuanian statehood, was an extremely unnecessary obstacle for Stalin before the meeting of the three *great allies*. This is understood not only from history, but also from the fact that a statesman, and even more so a president, is someone who could be eliminated. Time passed, but the struggle persisted. On 12 November, Smetona wrote to Žadeikis:

‘I will attempt to write an article for the Annals and present it to you around the 20th of this month. Its entire text will probably be about 4-5 pages written by my hand. That amounts to approximately 1,000 words, or a little more. When editing the article in English, you will be able to give it the appropriate form of the Important Memorandum, and you will refine it and add to it if necessary to address any missing elements. Let it go without a signature. If the editor wishes to know the author's surname, please provide it. However, if he does not ask, there is no need to disclose it. After I finish my article, I will prepare a letter to President Roosevelt. I am concerned I might be late. I will have the revised draft of the letter ready by the end of this month. When you are in Cle-

veland, as you have promised, I will hand it over to you. I would ask you to translate it into English and to include the necessary formalities and courtesies in the process.

<...>

Wishing you happier days, A. Smetona' (ibid., p. 649).

The president's actions pursued a single clear goal – restoring the status of Lithuanian statehood within the post-war world order, challenging the foundations of the deep state within the self-awareness of the world's democracies, and asserting that weaker, smaller nations cannot be betrayed and should feel secure, *untouchable* by the axis of evil. Such a course of action by the president could not go unnoticed at the highest levels. Only after his arrival in Chicago, on 4 May 1941, were celebrations held.

It was the *Reception and Dinner in honour of His Excellency Antanas Smetona*, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, where the president delivered a speech, affirming America's unparalleled role in the cause of the freedom of nations. The most important thing for him was to mobilise American Lithuanians to help their homeland under attack.

'It is almost a year since the abnormal giant, the Eastern neighbour of the Baltic countries, suddenly invaded Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. <...> Soviet Russia deceived the Baltic nations and suddenly attached them with armed forces. Soviet Russia chose Lithuania as its first victim. On June 15, 1940, it announced the violation of the solemn word it had given less than a year before, and on that very day, it invaded Lithuania with a huge Red army. A day or two later, she invaded Latvia and Estonia. <...> the eyes of all peoples are at present directed towards the United States as the true guardians of peace and the protector of small nations (underlined by J.L-B). Therefore, the greater America's security, the more courageous its citizens, the more hope there is for the countries that fell victim to aggressors. The time will come when these countries will free themselves from terrible enslavement.

It seems to me that all Americans, and especially those whose parents and ancestors came from Europe, where enslavement, at present, has the upper hand, should think of their beloved country' (by Antanas Smetona, speech on May 4, 1941, Chicago. In: Merkelys, 2017, pp. 692-693).

Here are some significant highlights of the *case*:

- The aggressor is called Russia, Soviet Russia; there is no such term as the Soviet Union, which obscures the historical character of Russian imperialism.
- The critical moment where the predator meets his victim is highlighted, emphasising the need for survival, the dominance of suffering, and the nation's descent into a realm of *bloodland*, chaos, diplomatic treachery, and the erosion of intellectual values.
  - Danger to neighbouring countries.
  - The invasion's suddenness and surprise are emphasised.
  - Deception of diplomatic treaties.
  - The emphasis is placed on the democratic structure and cultural maturity of the Lithuanian state.
  - And finally, the need for all kinds of **help**, primarily diplomatic, from the Free World to ensure the survival of the attacked nations in the name of restoring historical truth and legal justice.

To undertake the restoration of the Independence of the Baltic States in America, it was necessary to involve Poland. Here, Smetona once again proved to be very insightful. In his last letter to P. Žadeikis (6 January 1944, and he died in an *accidental* fire on 9 January), he wrote: 'Now the Baltic States and Poland are threatened by a common Russian danger' (*Smetona's correspondence*, Smetona, 1999, p. 656).

'It is evident from the press that England, and subsequently America, will not accept the truth; neither will they sever their friendly relations with Russia in regard to Poland or the Baltics. Presently, the Union of the Big Three exercises force over law and legitimacy. Articles in the press

frequently assert that if the Russians occupy the lands of the Eastern Front that they have seized by force, neither the British nor the Americans will oppose these Russian acquisitions by force. This serves as a warning to public opinion to accept Russia's arbitrary territorial decisions. <...> The Germans may have deliberately retreated to Poland in order <...> to finally compromise the Atlantic Declaration and its authors' (ibid., p. 656).

Smetona's insight was confirmed entirely. It is now understood that even British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) was willing to betray Poland, not just the Baltic states, to Stalin and openly resented the Poles' ingratitude and stubbornness in trying to preserve independence. Unfortunately, this continues to shock us time and again, according to Gabrielius Landsbergis, the former Foreign Minister of Lithuania (Landsbergis, 2025). Today, heroic Ukraine, fighting for its right to exist and the freedom to choose its alliances, faces a problem – perhaps not so directly, but hesitantly and inconsistently. It is only thanks to Ukraine that Lithuania can feel stronger and optimistic about its future, which ultimately bolsters Western democracies, enabling them to rely on the right choices and a successful destiny. How vital it is to believe in the resilience of the state! The front line established by President Smetona in America embodies this principle of resilience, as evidenced by his writings.

The final paragraph of his last letter conveys a clear understanding of the situation and warns of an impending historical catastrophe.

‘...if the Russians return to Lithuania, all non-communists will become traitors to the *Russian homeland*. As a result, there will be endless executions, shootings, and the burning of innocent people's homes, along with the mass deportations to Siberia. The Red Army will attempt to finish what it began in 1940–1941. If this occurs, the Lithuanian issue will be finally settled. There would be no point in declaring the Atlantic Declaration. Therefore, it would be wise now to coordinate with the Estonians, Latvians, and possibly the Poles to take some steps within Washington's sphere of influence to safeguard these nations' lives. It is frightening to consider what atrocities those barbaric Russians might commit if they return to Lithuania.

I would be happy if you would send me the last two typed sheets of my article. I would like to have all of them.

I was ill with the flu over the holidays. Now I'm walking around my room, but I haven't gone out yet. This illness has wasted my time. I still have work to do. I'm reading and writing notes. In spring, I plan to publish *Lithuania Propria*, which I previously conceived. It was first written in Lithuanian, then perhaps translated into English and slightly revised.

Wishing you success and endurance, A. Smetona' (A. Smetona's letter to P. Žadeikis, 6 January 1944, Cleveland, Ohio, Smetona, 1999, p. 656-657).

The president's most important message to Lithuanians in America was conveyed clearly:

‘We must strive for Lithuania to regain its independence. <...> The nation itself will create and decide on the form of its renewed life, and will determine the framework of its state system. This view also aligns with Article 3 of the Atlantic Charter,<sup>1</sup> which states: “All peoples have the right to choose the form of government they wish”’ (Merkelys, 2017, pp. 706-707).

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Atlantic Charter’. Declaration of Principles issued by the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. 14 August 1941 “Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them;” Available in <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1941/08/14/the-atlantic-charter>

## Unanswered questions

On Sunday, 9 January 1944, preparations were underway for the Lithuanian American Seimas (to be held on 4–5 February), which the president was expected to attend. While the committee was discussing the affairs of the upcoming Seimas, the telephone rang. The news arrived: ‘The house where the Smetona family lives has caught fire, and the president may have died in the fire’ (ibid., p. 707).

Everyone hurried to the accident scene anxiously. On the way, they encountered an ambulance, which <...> was transporting the dying Smetona to the hospital.

‘The fire started in the basement, and according to fire chief Thomas O’Brien, the cause was an *overheated furnace*. <...> Sofija Smetonienė, wearing a bathrobe and barefoot, suffocated from the smoke as she struggled downstairs. Antanas Smetona was unwell at the time and wanted to put on warmer clothing. After only a moment, he could no longer break through the thick smoke: the firefighters who arrived quickly found him slumped at the table in the kitchen, unconscious and with his fur coat wrapped around his head. When the hospital was asked about his condition, they received a sad and brief answer.

–*The President passed away..?* (ibid. p. 707).

Smetona’s death, on 9 January 1944, came to symbolise the fate of the Lithuanian state. It was widely and emphatically reported in the American press. *The New York Times* deliberately highlighted the value and continuation of his fight for Lithuania, his vital role for the nation and the state, and his influence even in the most challenging circumstances of occupation:

‘He had been leading the fight for Lithuania’s freedom. He was writing his memoirs and a book entitled *Boundaries of Lithuania*.

He delivered frequent speeches in this country, calling for an end to the kind of aggression in Europe that suffocated Lithuania. He was a strong supporter of the Atlantic Charter. <...> Atlantic Charter liberty is to Nations, especially small Nations’ (ibid., p. 710).

However, the greatest intrigue surrounding Smetona’s death remained open to questions that fundamentally alter the value trajectory of history, while the assessments of his actions were made hastily and confused. The timing of his death did not seem to be *coincidental*; it coincided with the decisive decisions of Lithuania and the state’s will to remain an obstacle to the great aggressor. Before the Yalta Conference, Stalin needed to eliminate the most significant statesman to maintain the clean appearance of legitimate annexation. The greatest obstacle was Smetona, and his death had to appear as *natural* as possible. Only many years later did the drunken KGB officer Povilas Rostomskis *accidentally* confess that he had ‘done the job perfectly’ (Skučaitė 2024:5).

It is worth noting that this dark line of *coincidence* later repeated itself in the fate of another, already “President of Hope” in America, Stasys Lozoraitis (1924–1994). He decided to run for president in Lithuania’s first presidential elections, held just after Lithuania regained independence (11 March 1990). His opponent was the former chairman of the Communist Party, Algirdas Brazauskas (1932–2010), and Lozoraitis was therefore regarded as the historical *President of Hope*. While staying at the future Mrs Brazauskienė’s hotel “Draugystė”, he was poisoned with something that later caused sudden liver cancer, and Lozoraitis left Lithuania unwell. Although he lost, he managed to gather an incredible share of the votes, over 47 per cent. Hope was raised like a returned tricolour flag, awakened to the light of the free world. Even before the elections, Stasys Lozoraitis had become a symbol of a free Lithuania, embodying a hope that had already materialised – that Lithuania would one day be independent. That hope, which the entire Lithuanian diplomatic service believed in, had endured for 50 years (!) from the occupation of Lithuania in the 1940s until the country’s liberation in the 1990s. <...> The title, *The President of Hope*,

given to him is very fitting because of his life-long exceptional dedication to Lithuanian statehood (Gyvenimas – Lietuva [Life – Lithuania]. Vilnius: Versus aureus 2015:135). After his death, all documents related to Lozoraitis' illness vanished from hospital archives, as his wife Daniela reported, having begun an investigation into this mysterious sequence of events surrounding his rapid death. However, no records remain; they simply disappeared.

Such is the tragic ellipsis of Lithuanian presidents in America, as if leading to emptiness. Unanswered questions remain. Burnt archives, deleted documents marked with the words '*Utterly alone*' [*Vienui vieni*] (Brazaitis, 1985, p. 9). At the same time, there was support – the unbroken line of statehood, the deeply embedded paradigm of resistance, the undestroyed *timeless* Lithuania – the will of the deep state. In the outcomes of its processes, an Independent Lithuania is once again present in the world, as it was under President Smetona.

## Conclusions

President Antanas Smetona, along with his egress and the three years he spent in the USA, provided Lithuania with a legal continuation of its statehood. He revitalised and reinforced this through his activities, writings such as the *Important Memorandum*, as well as memoirs and letters initiating the restoration of the state, written to diplomat P. Žadeikis, who held the appropriate ministerial powers, and which became the foundation of his legacy. Such legitimisation of Lithuania contributed to the non-recognition of the occupation and the survival of the diplomatic service for all fifty years until the collapse of the Russian Empire, which was called the Soviet Union, into separate states.

The fate of Smetona, like that of other statesmen (such as S. Lozoraitis), was determined by their activities and roles: they were to be eliminated as obstacles to consolidating the expansion of the *Russian world* through occupation and Sovietism. This paradigm is evident today, as Ukraine defends its right to freedom and its aspiration not to be left *utterly alone* in the face of aggression.

Smetona also aimed to shield Lithuania from such a fate by rallying support from the Free World.

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