

Vytautas Landsbergis. *Lithuania Independent Again: The Autobiography of Vytautas Landsbergis*. Trans Anthony Packer and Eimutis Sova. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. xii + 387 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-97959-5.

Reviewed by Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius (Department of History, University of Tennessee)
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Soviet Decolonization in the Baltics

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Ten years have now passed since the dramatic events in the Baltic Republics which led to their regained independence. The whole point of the popular movements organized in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia was to underline for the world that these states were not, and never had been, legally parts of the Soviet Union (having been forcibly occupied in 1940). Readers of H-Russia will nonetheless find the memoir of a leading Baltic politician interesting for the insights it offers into the process of decolonization and resistance, which marked the last stages of the Soviet Union's decomposition in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

With the distance that a decade allows, one of the main players in these political upheavals offers his memories and assessments of the momentous events that marked the road to full independence. Vytautas Landsbergis, as the leader of the Lithuanian popular independence movement *Sajudis* and later Chairman of the Lithuanian parliament, steered that republic towards its declaration of the restoration of independence on March 11, 1990. In the following months, he led efforts to find international recognition for this political act, while dealing at the same time with Gorbachev's imposition of economic blockade on the country, the cool reaction of the Western diplomatic establishment, and an unsettled society at home.

Yet on January 13, 1991, matters came to a head when Soviet security forces moved to reimpose their control

on the country and killed unarmed protestors in Vilnius, the capital. That night saw remarkable reactions among the population. Instead of fleeing the killing, away from the guns and tanks of the stormtroopers, and scrambling to safety, ordinary citizens ran to the places where danger was most extreme, to the spots where the violence had occurred and especially to surround and protect the embattled parliament. There, parliamentary deputies and Landsbergis braced themselves for what seemed the imminent assault on this center of government. Crowds of unarmed supporters – masses of men, women, and children – stood around the barricaded building and sang old songs in defiance of the threat they were facing. In the standoff that followed, further violence by the Soviet forces was avoided, partially due to the effect on international opinion of these scenes of undisguised deadly force deployed against civilians and their elected representatives.

Looking back on this moment of crisis, Landsbergis reflects, "We can truly say that this was the night when Lithuania was reborn, to become a nation again...It is difficult to express in words the moral force of the occasion; it was as if the crowd, as it sang, became invincible" (p. 3). Only after months of standoff, uncertainty, and political impasse would Lithuania find itself fully free, after the failed putsch in Moscow in August 1991.

The experience of that remarkable night of January 13, 1991 stands at the center of Landsbergis' narrative of the path to the recovery of independence. It is fas-

cinating to observe how that night is today taking on a unique status in popular historical memory in contemporary Lithuania, as a touchstone of promise and determination. In the currently popular song, “Trys Milijonai” (“Three Million”) by Marijonas Mikutavicius, the techno strains combine with poetic words to urge a renewed sense of common resolve and solidarity for a small community of some three million people. The memory of that night is presented by the song as an unalloyed instance of heroism, an existential moment in which national identity was fortified once and for all, in absolute commitment. Landsbergis’ autobiography, which opens with a recollection of the scenes of that night, works outwards from that pivotal event, to show how it came to pass, and to illuminate the consequences that followed, both in the short and long term, for Lithuania and for the world at large. Landsbergis insists that “the recovery of our national independence is not an achievement for Lithuania alone...What we have achieved in Lithuania is something which we must share urgently with all humankind” (p. 5), a recognition of the precedence of human rights and the self-determination, even of small, nations over the claims of realpolitik and imperial centers.

Landsbergis’ approach is not strictly chronological, as the memoir often moves to a thematic consideration of discrete issues before returning to the narrative of political events. His personal background and genealogy make clear some characteristic features of the role of intellectuals in the countries of Eastern Europe. His grandparents and parents had belonged to the often small circles most identified with the movement of “national rebirth” at the turn of the century, as well as with the state-building of the Lithuanian Republic of the interwar years. A sense of social responsibility seemed to be already pre-programmed into this ancestry and lineage. Landsbergis’ family history and his own childhood underline how the profound political cataclysms of the twentieth century caught up individual destinies in their blasts. Landsbergis’ family was separated by the Second World War, as his father set off in search of a missing son arrested by the Nazis, while the author and his mother remained in Lithuania when the Soviet army moved back in. Running as a *leitmotiv* through the recollections of childhood and youth in Stalin-era Lithuania is Landsbergis’ devotion to music, leading him to a professional career as a musicologist.

For students of the Soviet system, the rich descriptions of his education and career prospects in the milieu of the intelligentsia of a non-Russian republic will be instructive. The uneasy interplay of ethnic self-assertion

with the ideological demands of the political leadership and deference to the supposed primacy of Russian culture; the wary atmosphere of the tentative thaws following on the death of Stalin; the challenge of opening zones of freer intellectual community in an edifice of conformity (and the conspicuous over-exertion of some opportunists in this system, seeking status as members of a privileged *nomenklatura*) are evoked in Landsbergis’ accounts of the debates and intrigues of the Vilnius conservatory and other institutions. It is in this intellectual and cultural context that Landsbergis locates some of the “tributaries” and currents which fed into the establishment of the popular front, called *Sajudis* (“The Movement”) in 1988. Landsbergis was elected its chairman, and when it won the 1990 elections for the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, he became that body’s chairman and the head of state.

In spite of the placid tone of philosophical acceptance which Landsbergis often assumes, there are recurring moments of strong emotional charge in this narrative. These include his sense of fervent involvement in the *Sajudis* movement which he led and the passion for his music. There are also bitter emotions concerning the reactions of the West during the endgame with the Soviet Union and the startling return of the ex-communists to power in Lithuania after the elections of 1992. Landsbergis has caustic, unsparing observations of the way in which Western diplomats denied his government recognition, misunderstood Gorbachev’s true motives or changing strategy, and failed to comprehend the nature of Soviet politics.

His attitude towards the West and Europe represents something broader, however, than his personal opinions. It also represents an important and conflicted tradition in Lithuanian culture: an idealized identification with the West, coupled with reproachful notice of its shortcomings or amoral compromises. In reflecting on the results of the elections of 1992, Landsbergis acknowledges (from this distance) that the failures of land reform and the restoration of property (stymied by the *nomenklatura* classes at the local level and indeed not fully complete even today) produced the conditions for the return of the ex-communists, until they in turn were ejected in the elections of 1996. Landsbergis consoles himself that in this seeming reversal, Lithuania was a pacesetter, as it had been before, as similar results followed in Estonia, Poland, and other post-communist countries.

This autobiography offers some glimpses into the motivations of this political personality. In his 1993

study, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*, Anatol Lieven made the claim that Landsbergis' ambition was to emulate his supposed model, Antanas Smetona, the dictator of interwar Lithuania after the coup of 1926. Nowhere in this text does Landsbergis allude to such an ambition, so the evidence is dubious. In fact, one might make a better case that Landsbergis cherished a far vaster ambition, to equal his namesake, the Grand Duke Vytautas the Great of Lithuania's medieval glory days.

Less extravagantly, another figure seems to play an important role in Landsbergis' thought and development, that of Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis (1875-1911), the symbolist painter, composer, and graphic artist whose work Landsbergis has made his life's academic study and whose reputation he helped to revive by these efforts. What appeals to him in this singular man is the way in which the multifaceted Ciurlionis insisted on "the parallelism of the branches of Art' and made purposeful use of this understanding, which was the conscious source from which his greatest works poured out" (p. 71). This Romanticism in action, the insistence on the continuity of all striving, could have a political expression as well, and this remained for Landsbergis to work out. Indeed, he quotes a saying of the sister of the artist, Jadvyga Ciurlionyte, a former teacher of his at the Vilnius Conservatory, who laconically suggested that cultural work could prepare political results. As she repeated, "many things can be achieved through music" (p. 66). Landsbergis in turn ends his memoir with words that show how he turned this maxim into action. The musicologist concludes with the avowal, "I am still a politician," (p. 350).

Apart from its documentary value and the insights it affords into the personality of the author, this book is also significant because it prompts suggestions for further research into some of the themes or problems raised here. These issues are not resolved in the text, but demand further historical inquiry. Landsbergis stresses at intervals the wide-ranging influence of the model of *Sajudis* inter-

nationally, the ties which were established with Russian democrats, Ukrainians and other nationalities. In fact, even the project of translating these memoirs into English testifies to that wider resonance, as it grew out of the urgings of the Wales Baltic Society. In the editor's preface, Anthony Packer, Lecturer in Education at the University of Wales in Cardiff, draws parallels between the Lithuanian experience and the lessons of *Sajudis*, and the experience of Wales and the Plaid Cymru party there. A historical exploration of the transnational impact of the *Sajudis* model would be valuable.

A second question which remains by and large a mystery in Landsbergis' account, though it is a crucial element of the whole, concerns how violence was avoided by the *Sajudis* movement, even in the face of explosive provocations orchestrated by the Soviet intelligence and security forces. How was a response in kind avoided? This is a problem which fairly cries out for social analysis: how was such restraint organized among tens of thousands, when a single incident could have sparked a disastrous conflagration? Are there parallels in contemporary history for this phenomenon, or is it in a class by itself? What psychological mechanisms, what institutions or personalities were instrumental here?

The book includes maps and photographs, and a useful historical appendix prepared by Darius Furmonavicius and Anthony Packer. The translation, by the late Eimutis Sova, is ably done and has met the imposing challenge of communicating something of the spirit and character of Landsbergis' often allusive language. This work is an important document, and one hopes that more such memoirs of these tumultuous events will follow.

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