

THE VIEW OF LITHUANIA BY THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY NEWSPAPER *L'HUMANITÉ* (1944–1948)

AKVILĒ KABAŠINSKAITĒ

PHD student at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and Vytautas Magnus University

E-mail: akvile.kabasinskaite@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

ABSTRACT

The article examines the attitude of the French Communist Party towards Lithuania in 1944–1948, when the party was at the height of its popularity. The analysis of their press also reveals Soviet propaganda against Lithuania in France during this period. Mostly through a series of party newspaper *L'Humanité* articles and French diplomatic archives, it seeks to uncover the ways in which the French Communists supported the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in the information war in France and the impact this had on French politics.

Keywords: French Communist Party, Lithuania, Baltic states, Cold War, French politics.

INTRODUCTION

Researching French perception of Lithuania after World War II, I aim to shed light on the French Communist Party's (FCP) attitude and the influence of it on French political actions towards Lithuania. Although I analyse the publicly expressed views of the FCP only on the issue of Lithuania, similar conclusions apply to all three Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), since most of the time they are mentioned together.

Although the FCP still exists today, I have chosen the period from 1944 to 1948, since the Second World War ended with the annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union and the liberation of France. The end of the war meant that the Lithuanians were forced to join the USSR, while the French considered Soviets to be the ones who had made their freedom possible. It is at this moment

that the FCP reached an unprecedented popularity and became the first party in France and remained on the peak until 1948. After, its popularity progressively decreased and never reached such a height of influence again.

There have been no previous articles on this topic, but historians have written about French policy towards the Baltic states during this period. Suzanne Champonnois, in her article “French policy towards the Baltic states, 1939–1991: From abandonment to reunion” (*The Baltic Question during the Cold War* 2008, 84–99), summarises the French policy towards the Baltic countries throughout World War II and Cold War, and I myself have written an article on the representation of Lithuania during a similar period (1944–1953) in another, independent, French newspaper, *Le Monde* (Oikos 2021, 65–77), in which I show what kind of information was available in France regarding Lithuania, and how it was portrayed in the public eye by this newspaper.

As far as the French Communist Party is concerned, historians are aware of its unreserved loyalty to the Soviet Union and even the FCP today recognize the unconditional loyalty of the party’s head at the time – Maurice Thorez – to Stalin. Therefore, the views expressed regarding the issue of Soviet-annexed countries are not surprising, whereas the influence this had on French politics is much less explored.

In writing this article, I mainly have referred to and contextualized the articles published in the official party newspaper *L’Humanité*. After reading all of the articles that mention Lithuania at that period, amounting to less than ten in a year¹, I proceeded to select the ones that were the most representative examples. It is important to note, that most of the articles about the events in Lithuania are translated from Soviet news and indicated as such in the introductions. I also looked at the history books concerning the party and its newspaper, knowing that many of them were, likewise, written by the Communist Party members and supporters. I linked those sources to the political context of both countries and consulted all the French diplomatic archives concerning Lithuania at that period to understand the influence of the FCP on French politics.

GERMANS AS THE ONLY WAR CRIMINALS SOVIETS SAVED THE WORLD FROM

To justify their actions, the Soviets from the beginning of the Second World War used the argument of fighting the Germans as the only evil party. At the end of 1944, *L’Humanité* relied the information from Moscow about the discovery by the Soviets in Lithuania of “a huge mass grave containing 2 000 Lithuanians, among them many women and children killed by

the retreating Germans” (L’Humanité 1944 November 26, 2). Later that year, it published another report from Moscow on the 500 000 Soviet citizens killed by the Germans in the Baltic states (L’Humanité 1944 December 21, 2). In 1946, an article “Extermination of Soviet prisoners” returns to the subject describing the 165 000 bodies found in Lithuania (L’Humanité 1946 February 14, 2).

In February of 1948, two long articles entitled “The Falsifiers of History” appeared in party’s newspaper defending Soviet Union. The first one had an illustration of Stalin’s portrait accompanied by the caption “Joseph Stalin, under whose leadership the policies of the Soviet Union were, and still are, exemplarily correct” (L’Humanité 1948 February 15, 2). The author of the article suggests that the British and French unfairly decline to support the Soviet policy regarding the Baltic countries, since the Soviets had supported them during the war against the Germans. The second part (L’Humanité 1948 February 17, 2) claimed that “all Soviet actions were and are intended to protect the Baltic states”, and added that, although there was a treaty between the Soviets and the Finns, it was not enough to protect the West², and the Soviets “had to” penetrate the Baltic territory.

Although *L’Humanité* systematically reported on German war crimes, it never once mentioned Soviet repressions, although other French newspapers did. It can therefore be considered that this was not due to a lack of information, but to systematic support of the Soviet regime.

THE “JOY” OF LITHUANIANS TO BE PART OF THE SOVIET UNION

The Soviets also spread stories about the incredible economy and about Lithuanians being ‘free’ and enjoying the changes, and *L’Humanité* often shared these pieces. In 1945, the newspaper published articles claiming that Lithuania’s budget had increased by 350% (L’Humanité 1945 April 28, 2). After the February 1947 elections, *L’Humanité* quoted a statement from *Radio Moscow* describing “an atmosphere of great patriotic enthusiasm” and closed with a sentence taken from the Soviet propaganda newspaper *Pravda*: “The citizens of the USSR have proved to the whole world that the policies of the Soviet government have the support of the people in absolute terms” (L’Humanité 1947 February 12, 3).

Intentional disinformation by the Soviets relayed by the FCP did not cease even after the mass deportations of May 22 and 23, 1948, during which about 40 000 people were deported from Lithuania. Only a few months after these events, *L’Humanité* announced that Lithuanians “have freely chosen the path of freedom, socialism, true independence, progress...” by joining the great family of the Soviet Union (L’Humanité 1948 July 25, 3).

L'HUMANITÉ CLAIMS TO BE THE ONLY SOURCE OF THE TRUTH

Although France did not immediately make a full recovery after the liberation, by 1946 many journalists already had access to different sources of information about the practices of Stalin's regime. This made it more difficult for Soviet propaganda to spread freely, and a strategy of attack was therefore necessary.

When the 1946 elections took place in the Soviet Union, many newspapers were sceptical about the results, but *L'Humanité* held the opposite view. In the article on the elections (*L'Humanité* 1946 February 15, 1–2), it stated that 91.78% of the participants voted in Lithuania. The aim of this article was also to discredit other newspapers, in particular *Le Monde*, a newspaper known for its sceptical attitude towards the Soviets and its journalistic independence. To their doubts about such a radical change in voter opinion since 1937, *L'Humanité* replied that “*Le Monde* forgets that there was a war going on, that the unity of all those who surrounded the party and the government to defend the motherland, to win, was growing”.

Later that year, when there were talks that because of the paper shortage, French newspapers should only be allowed to print four page issues, *L'Humanité* again attacked its competitors (*L'Humanité* 1946 June 7, 1), claiming that the reason for the paper shortage is the multiplication of weeklies, especially those intended to influence opinion, and this wasted paper. To prove their point, it also gave the example of the newspaper *Voir*, which, according to them, published “an undated, lavish and expensive special issue, whose editor's name is an enigma in itself, and which contains a map of Europe in which Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are identified as independent states”.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE IDEA THAT LITHUANIANS WISHED TO BE BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

Another Soviet problem that emerged from the FCP's struggles over Lithuanian issues was the emigrants and refugees who remained outside the Soviet Union. Since September 1945, *L'Humanité* was publishing articles about Soviet citizens from the Baltic states, which were still in camps in the British and American zones and claimed that these camps were run by men who served in the German army (*L'Humanité* 1945 September 8, 2). The newspaper uses headlines such as “French authorities in Germany oppose repatriation of Soviet citizens” (*L'Humanité* 1947 September 28, 3) and portrays Lithuanians who want to return to the Soviet Union but are prevented from doing so. They also attacked the American position as

“ridiculous and embarrassing”, because it did not recognise the Baltic states as part of the Soviet Union.

Despite this constant propaganda, French diplomatic records show that the politicians were little or not at all influenced by this information and that they were well aware of the position of the Lithuanians. As early as June 1945, the Lithuanian ambassador to France before war, Stasys Antanas Bačkis, as well as the ministers of Latvia and Estonia, drafted a memorandum (Vasiliauskienė 1996, 38) asking not to hand over their compatriots to the Soviets, and according to S. A. Bačkis, they received a positive response from the French authorities on the condition, that they would not speak about it in public. At the same period, the French ambassador to the United States sent a letter (Diplomatic Archives Centre of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1945) to French Prime Minister Georges Bidault describing the resistance of Lithuanian diaspora in the United States against the Soviets. In his letter, he mentioned the support Lithuanians received from the Catholic Church and, most importantly, their requests made to the French authorities not to recognise the Balts as Soviets in order to protect the refugees from being returned to the occupied territories.

Following all those initiatives, an official confidential document (Diplomatic Archives Centre of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1945) was approved by the French government for the French army, indicating that, although during the Nazi occupation attempts had been made to integrate Lithuanians into the German army, they were strongly resisted, and even if the Germans had succeeded in integrating a few thousand Lithuanians, there was no Lithuanian battalion, and that all of them were in favour of Western policy. The document ended with a reminder that Lithuania had always had good relations with France and that more Lithuanians had died for France than there were prisoners of war.

This particular situation perfectly reflected the efforts and possibilities of the diaspora to reach the French political institutions and highlighted the reasons why they were presented in a negative light in the Communist press. It also explained the strong attempts to reduce the number of Lithuanians outside the Soviet Union at all costs.

REFLECTION OF SOVIETS' WAR AGAINST RELIGION

Since the Soviets were fundamentally opposed to any form of religion, when they occupied Lithuania, which was largely Catholic, they quickly began persecuting the population of adherents. The Church immediately began to defend its faithful, to the indignation of the Soviets and their representatives in France.

On April 17, 1945, an article was published in *L'Humanité* expressing dissatisfaction with that attitude of the Catholics (*L'Humanité* 1945 April 17, 2). Its author asked how, after Togliatti's³ speech to the Italian Communist Party Congress, in which he asked the leaders of the Catholic Church to stop meddling in politics, the Vatican dared to say that "its activities were aimed only at diverting souls". Likewise, the author was irritated by the fact that, at the same time, a dispatch from the United States was sent by the American Catholic bishops, who "interfered in politics" and even described it as the worst kind of politics. To him, the statement about the Baltic countries, in which the bishops are concerned that "the countries that seem to have been absorbed have not been able to express their opinion" is "simply striking" and he wonders whether the bishops have not gone too far to hear the citizens of the Baltic countries, who are very happy to have joined the Soviet Union.

As one of the proofs of the happiness of Christians in the Soviet Union, in March 1947, the newspaper announced that the Archbishop of Vilnius Atinis, on behalf of the Baltic states, had thanked the Soviet authorities for "the help given after the liberation". Although the Vatican did not immediately respond to this information, in May 1948, a French newspaper directly dependent on the Vatican, *La Croix*, published a statement (*La Croix*, 1948 May 14, 2) denying another propaganda report by the *Tass* agency on the full functioning of 700 churches and convents in Lithuania announced by the Archbishop of Vilnius, Mgr. Edmond Basis. *La Croix* points out that the only person in this position is Romualdas Jalbžikovskis, but he is not on Lithuanian territory. *La Croix* wonders whether he is not one of the Kremlin's "bishops", whose aim is to create a "Catholic" Church separated from Rome. This allows me to suggest that they were already used to the various names of the fake bishops of Vilnius.

Although *L'Humanité* attacked the Church institutions and spread Soviet propaganda using fake information about the excellent living conditions of Catholics, it seems that the Church had a much stronger position, if not on the information front, at least on the political one.

CONCLUSIONS

The newspaper *L'Humanité* reflected the position of the French Communist Party, which was clearly and openly pro-Soviet, and this party newspaper served as a Soviet propaganda tool. As far as Lithuania was concerned, it described Lithuanians as happy to be integrated into the Soviet Union and attacked all those who said otherwise – the organs of the Catholic Church, Lithuanian diaspora, the French press and others. It relied exclusively on Moscow's propaganda tools – *Tass*, Kremlin reports, *Pravda*, etc. While it

is clear that the Communist Party, at the height of its popularity, had a big influence on the French society, the political documents do not reflect their impact on the country's foreign policy and so we can assume that after 1948, the little influence they had also decreased with their popularity.

SOURCES

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- ¹ The number of articles about Lithuania is not exact, because Soviets did not consider Lithuania to be a country, so sometimes it mentioned all Baltic countries together, just a city in Lithuania, etc.
- ² Reference to the Western Bloc, also known as the Free Bloc – countries in coalition with the United States during the Cold War.
- ³ Palmiro Togliatti was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party and, at the time, a member of the Constituent Assembly of the Italian Republic.

FRANCIJAS KOMUNISTISKĀS PARTIJAS LAIKRAKSTA *L'HUMANITÉ* VIEDOKLIS PAR LIETUVU 1944.–1948. GADĀ

AKVILĒ KABAŠINSKAITĒ

Doktorantūras studente Jaunajā Sorbonnas Universitātē un Vītauta Dižā Universitātē

E-pasts: akvile.kabasinskaite@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

ANOTĀCIJA

Rakstā aplūkota Francijas Komunistiskās partijas nostāja pret Lietuvu 1944.–1948. gadā, kad partija atradās popularitātes virsotnē. Šī perioda preses analīze atklāj arī Francijā pastāvējušo padomju propagandu pret Lietuvu. Galvenokārt izmantojot partijas laikraksta *L'Humanité* rakstu sēriju un Francijas diplomātiskos arhīvus, raksta autore centusies atklāt, kā Francijas komunisti Francijā notiekošajā informatīvajā karā atbalstījuši Padomju Savienības veikto Lietuvas aneksiju un kā šīs norises ietekmēja Francijas politiku.

Atslēgvārdi: Francijas Komunistiskā partija, Lietuva, Baltijas valstis, aukstais karš, Francijas politika.

KOPSAVILKUMS

1944. gadā Padomju Savienība reokupēja Lietuvu, savukārt Francija atguva brīvību. Rezultātā Lietuvā padomju varu uzskatīja par okupantiem, bet Francijā daudzi to uztvēra kā glābēju karā ar vāciešiem. Tieši šajā laikā Francijas Komunistiskā partija kļuva par populārāko partiju, un šī popularitāte saglabājās līdz 1948. gadam, bet vēlāk pakāpeniski samazinājās. Rakstā šis periods analizēts, galvenokārt balstoties uz rakstiem, kas publicēti oficiālajā partijas laikrakstā *L'Humanité*, īpašu uzmanību pievēršot partijas nostājai pret Lietuvu tajā laikā, kā arī apskatīta šīs nostājas ietekme uz Francijas politiku pret Lietuvu.