

*Gennady Kretinin*

**SCHOOL EDUCATION  
IN LITHUANIA  
AND THE LITHUANIAN SSR  
(1920s—1950s)**



*The author considers the problems of schooling in the bourgeois Lithuania and later, in the Lithuanian SSR. On the basis of archival documents and statistical data that were unavailable in the Soviet period, the author analyses historiographical materials and studies the peculiarities of the education system, as well as evaluates the attitude of the state, the national authorities and the republic's population towards this issue.*

**Key words:** Lithuania, economics, education, schools, population, students, Lithuanian SSR, territory, laws, age, literacy, compulsory education, the eight-year education, secondary education.

During most of the twentieth century, Lithuania had to solve two critical problems for the establishment of the state: the territorial and national demographic ones.

The territorial question had two aspects: the problems of Vilna and Memel. Both were resolved in the framework of the USSR. Vilnius was returned to Lithuania in January 1945, and the Soviet Union *de facto* gave the Memel region of Eastern Prussia to the Lithuanian SSR as the Klaipeda region. The state border of Lithuania fixing these territorial changes was set in the post-Soviet period.

Together with the formation of the modern territory of Lithuania, it was the time when the population of Lithuania was being shaped. Studies show that the ethnogenesis of Lithuania at the turn of the XIX — XX centuries were not completed. Lithuanians accounted for just over three fifths of the population residing in the territory of modern Lithuania. Other nationalities were the Jews (13.1 %), the Poles (9.7 %), Russian (4.8 %), Belarusians (4.7 %), Germans (4.4 %), etc. The share of Lithuanians in the subsequent years fluctuated: before the World War I it was 54 %, and according to the 1923 census — 84 %. The entire population of Lithuania in 1923 was 2 029 000 people, in 1940—2 925 000, at the beginning of 1946 in Lithuania lived 2 296 000 people, of whom 82, 1 % resided in rural areas [1, c. 22—24].

Lithuania's economy as part of Tsarist Russia and the bourgeois state in the pre-war period was characterized by its predominantly agrarian character. Researchers have noted low levels of development and low energy resources available for the development of agriculture; they also mentioned the semi-feudal relations existing in the bourgeois Lithuania. With the agricultural sector prevailing in the economy, the industry was weakly developed.

According to modern scholars, the concept of "life quality" includes economic, social, cultural, environmental and other conditions of life [2].

One of the most important characteristics of this concept — the level of education — is often reduced to pure literacy.

The first data on educational attainment of Lithuanian residents go back to the 1923 census. Two-thirds of the population (excluding Vilnius and Klaipeda) were literate and semi-literate, and 32.6 % of Lithuanians were illiterate.

It should be noted that Lithuanian educational system since the time of its independence has included free primary school for children aged 7 to 14 years and tuition paid middle and high school. Figures of the number of schools in the education system show significant differences. In particular, in 1924 in Lithuania, there were 2,000 primary schools, in 1929—2431, and in 1939—2716 [4, ap. 2, b. 143, l. 58].

High school was a two-tier one and consisted of pre-gymnasium (incomplete education) and gymnasium (complete secondary school education). The number of schoolchildren was small. In the 1938/39 academic year, 69 high schools and 27 pre-gymnasium schools enrolled a total of about 20 000 children (in elementary schools — 338 K) [6. 87].

Tuition paid forms of secondary (lower secondary) education made it inaccessible to the poor. Almost half of secondary schools were maintained and controlled by the clerical institutions. Strictly speaking, this situation was determined by the requirements of the Constitution of Lithuania of 1922, which defined the national character of the school as a clerical one. In accordance with the Constitution schools taught compulsory courses in theology, confessional schools had the same rights as the public ones. The government of Augustinas Voldemaras which came to power in 1926 paid special attention to the implementation of the principles of the national (if not — nationalist) politics in Lithuanian schools.

State school policy was ambiguous. On the one hand, the Concordat of 1927, signed by President Smetona and Pope Pius XI, officially permitted the church to strengthen its position in school education; on the other hand, efforts were made for the gradual introduction of universal education in the country. This was a requirement of life: in 1928, 60 % of school-age children stayed outside school [5. 18]. In 1930, Lithuania introduced compulsory universal primary education. But it was largely declarative. The economic situation in the country was difficult, the funds were scarce, the major tendency in the national economy and education was to save money.

This tendency affected schools in a peculiar way: the classical one-year term of study in Lithuania was abolished. The academic year for the first and second grades of primary school lasted from May 1 to July 1 and September 1 to November 1. During the following two years the academic year lasted from November 1 to May 1. Thus, instead of a nine months academic year students of the first two grades had a 4 months academic year and students of the two senior grades — only a 6 months academic year. Later the so-called "winter" first grade system was introduced. Very often same students attended same grade classes. The annual statistics shows that they did not always complete their study, but significantly improved their overall performance. In reality, the number of students who

completed their primary school course did not exceed 9—10 %. Lithuanian researchers of the Soviet period referred to the magazine "School and Life" that wrote that in 1938 in 90 schools of the Šiauliai county only 9 % of the initial number of school children completed their primary school course. Even in Kaunas, the capital city, only 9.7 % of pupils of the fourth grade completed their studies [5. 18—19].

Such a course on "general" education matched the vision of "oversupply" of the intelligentsia in the country at that time. Back in 1933, the "Lietuvos Aidas" wrote: "Still, it seems that in education we have come to such a stage, which... should be considered as an unpleasant situation and we must find ways to limit the growth of the intelligentsia". The debate in the country continued during the mid-1930s. In particular, the newspaper "Vayris" in 1935, wrote that "there were so many schools that some people start wondering if such number of schools is needed and that an excess of intellectuals inspires fear in some people to " [5. 20].

As if responding to such concerns, in 1936 Lithuania reformed its education system; and secondary education was extended to 13 years: 6 years of primary school plus 7 years of high school. At the same time there was a quantitative reduction in teacher training. For 10 years (from 1928 to 1937) the number of teacher training institutions had fallen from 10 to 3, and the number of students in them decreased from 1,543 to 331 people [4, 1.52; 8., 8, 5., 21].

In 1939, the proportion of illiterates in the country was estimated at 15 % [6. 87]. According to the statistics offices (and in 1960 even these data were forbidden to be published by the media), in pre-war Lithuania there were only 2 people having higher education per 1,000 population, 64 people — middle-and lower secondary education and almost 30 % of the age of 9 and older were illiterate (including the Vilnius region, where illiteracy was higher than in the rest of Lithuania). At the same time in the neighbouring Baltic countries the corresponding figures were significantly higher: in Latvia 7 people per 1000 had higher education and 140 — middle-and lower secondary, in Estonia, respectively, 8 and 129 [9, 1. 69].

Political events in the country in 1939—1940 led to drastic changes in all branches and spheres of the national economy of Lithuania. A significant transformation occurred in school education. The Lithuanian population was informed about one of the provisions of the Stalinist constitution of 1936, according to which every Soviet citizen had the right to education. Moreover, schools in Lithuania became free (tuition fees in pre-gymnasium and gymnasiums were cancelled).

The interest in getting an education was felt immediately, so it required expanding the school network. In 1940, the total number of schools was about to increase up to 48, and in 1941 — to 98. It was the first time Lithuania had set a task to open secondary schools for adults. In 1940, 11 schools for adults were opened, in 1941 their number did not increase, but it was planned to increase the number of classes in these schools. In addition, it was proposed to organize literacy courses [4, 1. 53].

A shift to the Soviet school system was officially declared by the National Teachers' Congress in August 14—15, 1940. The decisions it took were mostly radical ones. In particular, one of the main objectives was "re-education of the older generation and create a new spirit of proletarian dictatorship and socialism. Old habits and customs, traditions and prejudices inherited from the old society are the most dangerous enemies of socialism. Therefore, control of these traditions and customs, the need to eradicate them in all areas of life, and finally, the training of new employees in the spirit of proletarian socialism are the most immediate tasks for the victory of socialism" [10].

In accordance with these directives, new curricula, new temporary programs were worked out; schools removed all the disciplines from their curricula which might have seemed reactionary or prejudicial etc. There were some changes in the very structure of the school and in the terms of training. Elementary school remained a four-year education, and secondary education was planned to be a 10 years course as in other schools in the USSR.

The occupation of the Lithuanian SSR by German troops led to the demise of the Soviet school system. Some schools were closed, the remaining ones provided irregular classes, all studies were interrupted, and because of financial difficulties, many children did not attend primary school. According to Lithuanian researchers, during the 3 years of German occupation 682 schools were destroyed [8. 9].

In the liberated territory of the Lithuanian SSR, the academic year began in October 1944, though the battle front was still near.

On January 1, 1945 there were 2,393 primary schools with 200 thousand students, 157 pre-gymnasiums with 21 thousand students and 75 high schools with 32.5 thousand students in the republic [11, l. 60]. Despite difficult conditions, after the liberation of the whole territory of Lithuania, the number of schools reached the pre-war level, while the number of students they had was 100 thousand smaller.

As a result of the implementation of the economic plan of the Lithuanian SSR, in 1946 the number of schools exceeded the pre-war level by 20 %, and the number of secondary schools (gymnasiums and pre-gymnasiums) increased 3-fold compared to the pre-war level [12, l. 13]. Lithuanian researchers argue that the recovery of the economy and culture of the Soviet Lithuania was provided by a five-year plan for the restoration and development of the national economy of the USSR (1946—1950). In accordance with this plan the school system of the country was to significantly expand, and it was not just compulsory primary education of children, but also the expansion of secondary education to prepare more young people for entering vocational secondary and higher education institutions. Achieving these goals required the reorganization of the whole structure of education and the inclusion of Lithuanian schools into a single system of public education of the USSR.

Before the war and immediately after it, Lithuania had the following structure of education — four years of primary school education, four-year of pre-gymnasium and eight-year of high school. So, secondary education

took 12 years. Since the 1949—1950, all pre-gymnasiums were reorganized into seven-year schools, high schools — into comprehensive ones with eleven years of training, and their network expanded considerably. A one year reduction in the secondary education course time reduced government spending and affected the training of the Soviet intelligentsia [8. 10].

The 1950s were marked by the struggle for the introduction of compulsory general education and the beginning of a seven-year transition to general secondary education.

The first attempt to introduce a seven-year general education was made in the late 1940s, but the hard post-war times, the political and armed resistance of the Lithuanian population to the Soviet authorities (according to Bendzhyusu: "...traces of the bourgeoisie and the Nazi occupation" [8. 9]) significantly complicated the scope of such form of education for young people.

In the early 1950s, the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian Socialist Republic was seriously concerned about the situation not only with school attendance, but in general, about counting the number of children in the country. The documents report that the number of children out of school was quite significant. Thus, in three districts of the Anikshchylai region 15.6 % of children did not attend school. In one of the districts of the Trakai region 56 out of 192 school-age children did not go to school. All these children completed 2—3 grades of elementary school and their parents thought it was sufficient for their education. Almost everywhere, the mechanism of registration of children was launched. The registration was done both by the local councils and schools. The audit of a small number of schools showed that, according to the official data, there was a number of children who had been registered, but still did not attend school for various reasons. But in some cases a significant number of school-age children generally were not contacted by education authorities (see table below). Moreover, sometimes the school administration received instructions not to include children aged 14 and 15 into the number of school-age children [13, 70—71].

#### Number of children out of school

District	Number of schools in the region	Inspected schools	Number of children aged 7—15, who stay out of school	
			Regional administration data	Survey data
Simnas	34	2	9	45
Eznas	38	2	29	68
Vilcaviskis	44	6	17	46
Kibartai	31	4	21	51
Ladzijai	39	3	17	86
Naumiestis	34	2	45	43
Kaisiadorys	34	4	49	46
Alitus	42	2	36	38

It was worth mentioning that almost no attempt was made to take effective measures to implement compulsory education of children of school age. On February 12, 1951 a decree of the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR № 11—8 on "The census of children aged 7—15 and the procedure of monitoring the implementation of the law on compulsory general education" was issued. But neither education authorities, nor local councils started working on it, and the Ministry of Education of the Republic did not control its implementation.

In fact, there was an unofficial boycott of all legislative acts of the Soviet authorities in the field of education in the republic. Parents, schools and authorities were reluctant to implement the adopted decisions. Lithuanians still showed a stronger opposition to the Soviet power, which was expressed not only in an open armed confrontation, but also in other, more subtle forms of resistance. A large part of the Lithuanian population in 1940 and the first half of 1950 still hoped for a change in the social system of the country. Sending children to the Soviet school meant parting with such hopes, as students would not share many beliefs of their parents. It was a tragedy for the majority of the population. Children should get an education, but, according to their parents, there was nowhere to educate them. The better option was not to educate them at all, or at least to give them a required minimum of literacy. Because of such attitudes, in the 1954—55 academic year 37,000 children (8.2 %) stayed out of school, in the next academic year the number was 49,500 (10.9 %) [14, l. 120].

Given the fact that the pre-war Lithuania had a high illiteracy rate, and the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic had a significant number of illiterate people (according to the 1959 census, out of 2711 400 people 183 900 were illiterate (about 7 % of the population) [9, l. 4—5]), and there was a certain resilience to educating children in the post-war years. We can conclude that general education and the cultural level of the Lithuanian population remained very low, especially in rural areas.

However, during the years of the Soviet regime in Lithuania, several major actions aimed at raising the educational level of inhabitants were taken: the network of secondary schools, universities, colleges and other education institutions was expanded; high school graduates got the opportunity to study at universities in other republics of the Soviet Union. Such improved framework conditions had a positive effect on the educational level in the republic.

The first "revision" of the educational system of Lithuania referred to the first USSR census of 1959. Its data allowed us to estimate the educational level of the population of all the republics, including the Lithuanian SSR.

By the beginning of the 1960—1961 academic year, the number of secondary schools in Lithuania amounted to 4,044 (including primary schools — 2,667, seven- and eight-year — 913, secondary — 449), with an enrollment of more than 415 thousand students [9, l. 3]. It is interesting to note that the social attitude of being resilient to school education both continued to prevail, and even got stronger. The population census reported that out of 415 thousand children and adolescents aged 7—15 years, 56,000 (13.5 %)

never attended school. Still the highest rate was registered in the rural areas of the republic: 44 thousand children did not attend schools [9, l. 8—9].

The efforts of the Soviet authorities to eradicate illiteracy (as compared with the pre-war data) brought positive results. But the socio-political characteristics of the republic in the 1940s — early 1950s continued to influence the country negatively, as it is reflected in the census. The statistical data indicate that in Lithuania, the number of people with secondary and incomplete secondary education per 1000 inhabitants in 1959 amounted to 303 people in urban areas. According to this indicator, Lithuania was only ahead of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, the Tajik SSR and Turkmen SSR out of all Soviet Socialist republics. In rural settlements, this indicator was especially disastrous — only 96 people per 1,000 population and 15th (last) among all the republics (in the Moldavian SSR, which occupied the 14th place, the figure was 145 people, in the Latvian SSR — 241, in Estonia — 191) [9, l. 10].

In the early 1960s, the Soviet authorities announced an ambitious goal of building a communist state. The political course proved to be utopian, but the activities that were planned to be implemented to achieve the goal, were important for the development of the state. The Soviet society had the task to fully grow its productive forces, raise the cultural level of the Soviet people develop science and technology.

Thus, public education of the USSR entered a new phase of its development: in 1959 the Soviet schools began the transition to compulsory eight-year education with a subsequent transition to compulsory secondary education.

According to this, the school system of Lithuania faced a particularly difficult task. It was necessary to radically change social attitudes to public education. There was a significant increase in allocations to public education, new education facilities were built, and active work aimed at raising people's awareness of the need for education was done. There were structural changes of the school network.

The first results of this work were reported in the 1970s, when Lithuanian school indicators caught up with the average USSR level. In particular, in 1970, 86.2 % of students (average national rate — 85.5 %) completed the eight-year school course; 81.9 % (average national level — 82.1 %) of the total number of students who completed the eight-year school course, continued their education (in its various forms)[8. 12].

According to Lithuanian researchers, most of the inhabitants of the republic at that time recognized the need for more comprehensive education, when all the required conditions were created [8. 11].

The development of the education system in the Soviet Lithuania greatly contributed to the background when in a relatively short historical period a backward agrarian country was turned into an industrial-agrarian republic with a developed agriculture, modern industry, the main sectors of which manufactured products used in nuclear and space technology, aviation and shipping. And the driving force behind this progress is graduates of post-war Lithuanian schools.

### References

1. *Kretinin, G. V.* 2008. Gosudarstvenno-pravovye aspekty formirovanija territorii i naselenija Litvy: istoricheskij ocherk. Kaliningrad, pp. 22—24.
2. *Kachestvo* naselenija kak novoe kompleksnoe ponjatie // Geografija jekonomicheskaja. Shkola. LV. [online]. Available at: <<http://shkola.lv/index.php?mode=lsntheme&themeid=190&subid=197>> [Accessed 09 Juli 2011].
3. *Lietuvos* centrinės valstybės archyvas (далее — LCVA). F. R-363.
4. *LCVA*. F. R-755. Ap. 2. B. 143.
5. *Kniva, A., Zhjugzhda, Ju.* 1950. Prosvevlenie v Sovetskoj Litve. Vilnius.
6. *Rubinshtein, K. I.* 1940. Litva. Moscow.
7. *Paleckis, Ju.* 1949. Sovetskaja Litva. Moscow.
8. *Bendzhjus, A. I.* 1972. Narodnoe obrazovanie v Sovetskoj Litve v 1940—1970 gg. (obweobrazovatel'naja, srednjaja, special'naja i vysshaja shkola): avto-ref. dis. ... d-ra ist. nauk. Vilnius.
9. *LCVA*. F. R-363. Ap. 4. B. 4707.
10. *Tiesa*. 1940. № 53.
11. *LCVA*. F. R-755. Ap. 2. B. 36.