

UDC 78.01

## LITHUANIAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS: THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND THE SINGING TRADITION

Austė Nakienė

Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Antakalnio 6, Vilnius, Lithuania

**Abstract:** *This article is focused on the historical narrative, armed and spiritual resistance, as well as on partisan songs, the most emotionally charged genre of Lithuanian folklore. The Second World War remains one of the most painful and conflicting episodes in the memories of the European nations. However, one could notice that historical narratives vary: every nation commemorates a different war. Every nation speaks and writes about its enemies and freedom fighters, brutal executioners and innocent victims. Every nation feels a guilt for some unforgivable actions or for inactivity. The heroes of independent Lithuania are brave politicians, soldiers, volunteers, rescuers of Jews who helped them to escape the Holocaust, partisans and their supporters, and dissidents who challenged the Soviet regime. Earlier, in Soviet times, freedom fighters were called ‘enemies’; now they are heroes. Commemoration of freedom fighters in contemporary Lithuania is elevated to the level of a political, cultural, and moral mission.*

**Key words:** *The Second World War, Soviet regime, deportation, Lithuanians in Siberia, anti-Soviet resistance, partisan songs, historical narrative, collective memory.*

In 1939 Lithuania saw the outburst of war, the western part of country – the Klaipėda region – was annexed by Germany. In 1940, Soviet tanks crossed the eastern border of Lithuania. After the Soviet occupation, persecutions, executions, and deportations followed. In 1941 thousands of Lithuanians were deported to the Altai region in Siberia, and even further to the Arctic region. People were unprepared, they did not know what to expect and what they should take with them.<sup>1</sup> Some were not allowed to take even most essential necessities with them.

“Deportations were carried out without any consideration for age or condition of health. People were shut blindly in cattle freight cars and transported into the unknown, into forced slavery and death outside their homeland. [...] The Nazis used to shoot their victims and, for purposes of massive extermination, devised the system of gas chambers. [...] Methods of massive annihilation of population employed by the USSR were slavery and driving people to exhaustion, while cold and starvation ‘chambers’ were used amidst the vast areas of concentration camps. These sufferings would last longer than in the case of gas chambers, however, some of those condemned by the Soviets managed to survive starving even beyond the polar circle” [1].

---

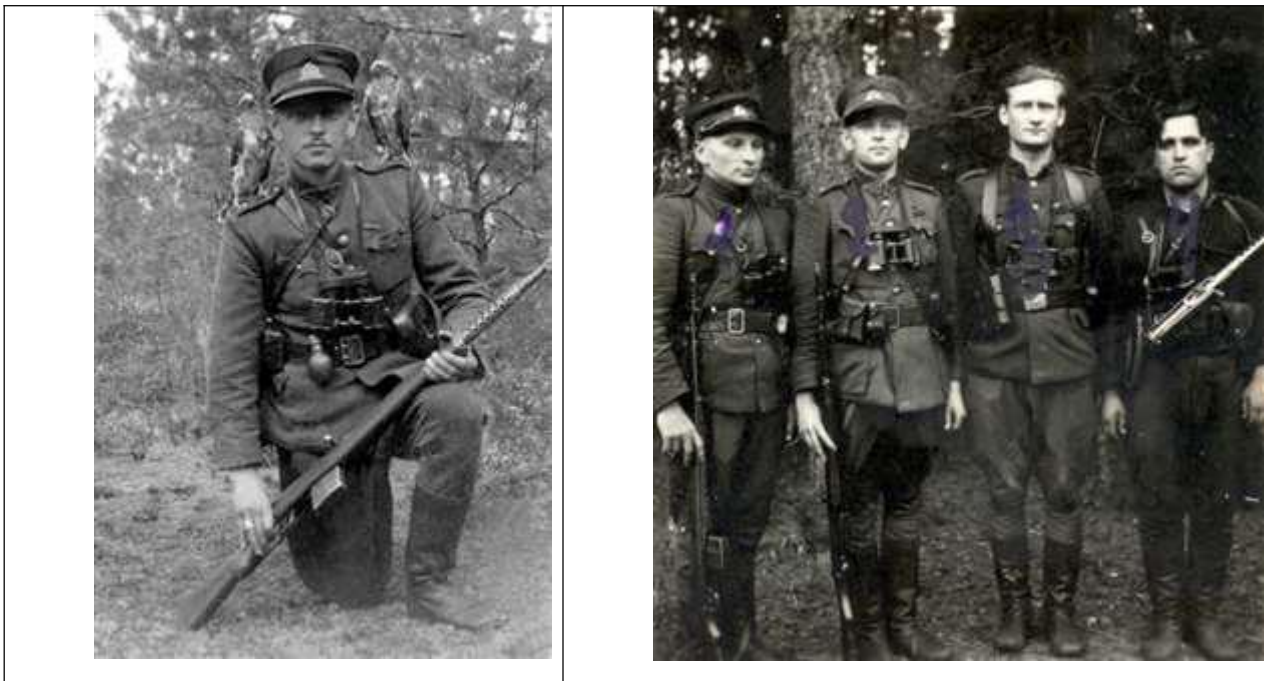
<sup>1</sup>*14th of June was the first day of mass deportation which took place in 1941, it is Day of Mourning and Hope in Lithuania. People gather at the train stations, in the museums and churches to commemorate thousands of innocent people repressed and killed by the regime. 22,000 names of deportees were read aloud beside the former KGB prison in Vilnius during the event (held in 2016) which featured more than 300 readers and lasted about 24 hours.*

Almost all Lithuanian families suffered a loss of some kind during the years of the Soviet occupation. Their only guilt was their patriotism and a lack of loyalty to the new regime. In 1941, Lithuania was occupied by the Nazis. Both aggressors were depicted in the same words in folk songs:

*Two pipes play the same tune: be it Moscow or Berlin.  
Neither of them is a friend, both are trying to subdue us.  
Their temper is that of colour:  
One is red like a devil, the other is brown like a dog.*

*(LLD XIX, Nr. 39)*

The summer of 1944 saw the second onset of the Soviet occupation in Lithuania, and the post-war Stalinist totalitarian regime was even harder to bear. Thousands of patriots joined up to the resistance movement for the restoration of the statehood of the Homeland. The attempts of the Lithuanian nation to resist the brutal occupation without any outside support extended over an entire decade until 1953. In the course of this movement, more than 20,000 freedom fighters perished or were tortured to death.



Illustrations: 1) Lithuanian partisan Adolfas Ramanauskas -Vanagas; 2) Partisans of Dainava military district.

The Baltic armed anti-Soviet resistance of 1944–1953 was one of the biggest guerrilla wars in Europe in the twentieth century, but it was unknown for a long time. As many historians in the Western Europe seemed to be Moscow-centric, the topic never gained much publicity in the West. The negligence toward what happened in the Baltics after the Second World War allows calling the partisan fights an ‘invisible front’, ‘an unknown war’ or ‘a war after a war’.

According to historians Dalia Kuodytė and Rokas Tracevskis, there were three stages of the armed resistance. The first stage (1944–1946) constitutes the years of the fiercest fighting against the occupying army; these years were full of determination, belief in victory, and romanticism. However,

tremendous losses forced the partisans to change the tactics of their struggle. During the second period of guerrilla war (1946–1948) open battles were avoided and partisan detachments were divided into smaller groups. Instead of camps set up in the forests partisans built well-camouflaged bunkers. During the third stage (1948–1953) guerrilla war lost its strength. The greatest attention was devoted to publishing underground newspapers, books, and leaflets [2].

Thousands of men gathered in the forests in the hope that they would not have to hold long. Some of them escaped to the forests to avoid induction to the Red Army, others were afraid of being deported as they had witnessed mass deportations to Siberia in 1941. The younger generation of Lithuanians had to choose: to emigrate, to suffer ‘red terror’, or to go to the forest and defend their Homeland. Free people brave enough to defend their ideals chose the third way:

*Be well, my dear girl, dream about sweet love,  
While the fate of a partisan awaits me.  
Give me your hand, let me gaze into your eyes –  
This moment will be my most treasured memory.  
I will slip out of the house like a shadow,  
And the dark night will embrace me. /.../*

*(LLD XXI, Nr. 17)*

*Darkness enveloped the fields and forests,  
A mother swept seeing off her son.  
– Goodbye, dear mother, I don't know, if I'll return...  
Having left our homes, when we walked through the forest,  
Oaks swayed and birds sung to us.  
We will return once there are no more enemies in Lithuania,  
When our tri-coloured flag will fly above us.*

*(LLD XXI, Nr. 2)*

Local people called partisans ‘forest brothers’. The partisans spent long years hiding in the woods of Lithuania. They lived carefully covering their tracks, sleeping in the clammy bunkers set up underground, they fought protected by the darkness of the night. ‘Forest brothers’ believed they would not defeat occupation forces alone. They expected Western politicians to support the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they would live – the principle of self-determination. They did not know that nobody was going to demand freedom for occupied nations, that Roosevelt and Churchill did not question the occupation of the Baltics by USSR at the Yalta summit in 1945. Their expectations did not come true:

*Wild animals hide in the caves, birds have nests,  
Only a Lithuanian cannot find a safe place to rest.  
Both at home and in the woods he tries to hide,  
But the brutal invader always finds him.  
A mother is weeping in the cemetery: embracing a grave,  
She calls her son by name. Invader's bullet took him away from her.  
A father is mourning in the garden, under the sycamore tree:  
The invaders buried three of his sons somewhere without a coffin. /.../*

(LLD XXI, Nr. 409)

The chance of the resistance for victory was slim, yet the partisans tried to make life difficult for Soviet invaders. The partisans were attacked by NKVD forces much bigger in size of their own. One of the battles, which took place in the Kalniškės forest made its way to folksongs. In this battle, courage was shown by the the men and the women who fought it. Many partisans, the commander called Lakūnas (a partisan code name which means ‘Pilot’) and his wife called Pušėlė (‘Pine’), were shot in the forest. The Soviets and their collaborators reacted to the resistance movement with extreme brutality. Partisans who were killed in action would not rest in peace: Their bodies were dumped in public squares in towns and villages in order to frighten other people.

*Oh spruce tree, hide me from the enemy:  
The NKVD go through the woods.  
The forest buzzed – a bullet pierced my chest.  
They will lay me near the street.  
My girl will not press close to me: my chest is bloody.  
My mother will not recognise me: my face is covered by sand.  
My friends will bury me.  
While putting me in the coffin, they will sing a hymn of freedom.*

(LLD XXI, Nr. 163)

The fate of captured partisans was also horrible: they were imprisoned and tortured. Because of this savageness freedom fighters used to choose death instead of captivity. Their last bullets in the battle were reserved for themselves.

Freedom fighters were called ‘bandits’ in Soviet times, but it was not true. According to historians, there was some spontaneity at the beginning of the movement, but later a structure based on the military-territorial principle was established: the platoons formed a brigade and the latter was part of a district; two or three districts formed a region. Continuing traditions of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, partisans functioned as a military structure. They wore military uniforms and appropriate recognition badges (Kuodytė Dalia, Tracevskis Rokas, 2013: 28). When joining the resistance, a partisan would receive a secret name: Ažuolas (‘Oak’), Jovaras (‘Sycamore’), Žaibas (‘Lightning Bolt’), Vanagas (‘Hawk’), Milžinas (‘Giant’), etc. These pseudonyms are mentioned in the folk songs about their battles and deaths.

The last partisans were idealists who were aware they had no chance of survival. Lionginas Baliukevičius, who perished in 1950, wrote in his diary: “I would not go to America if somebody offered me freedom there. I’d rather die fighting than waiting for something doing nothing. Our blood will not be spilt in vain. We will be able to look people straight in the eyes because we did not abandon our Homeland” [3].



Illustration 3) Author of *The Diary of a Partisan* Lionginas Baliukevičius-Dzūkas.

During the Soviet occupation, Lithuania and other occupied Baltic countries experienced the replacement of the general narrative. The nations, whose statehood was based on the European Christian tradition, were forced to adopt an alternative narrative according to which the ‘evil’ history of the past ended to give way to a new, better and brighter, era of communism. After becoming part of the USSR, the Lithuanian nation was reduced to nothing as a subject of the political process. Monuments to freedom and independence were destroyed and replaced with statues of Lenin and tanks on pedestals in city squares.

According to Isaiah Berlin, “fascism and communism caused a havoc in Europe – less so by their doctrines but primarily through actions of their followers who tried to stamp out genuine values which nevertheless proved viable even as outcasts only to come back as invalids of war in order to disturb the European conscience” [4]. As the history of the twentieth century showed, totalitarian regimes destroyed cultural values by erasing them from human memory and burying them in secret vaults. But sooner or later they returned like soldiers from war, like travellers from long voyages.

The imposed general narrative was rejected by the Lithuanian society who wished to reconstruct fragments of its authentic narrative. A closer look at Lithuanian literature, painting, music, films, and the folklore movement suggests that the nation transformed into a post-totalitarian society in the 1960s leaving behind its totalitarian past. According to the researcher Audinga Peluritytė-Tikuišienė, many artists tried to escape totalitarian and military themes as best as they could and as far as the regime would tolerate. As a form of personal resistance, they would choose free people – daydreaming girls and boys or contemplating old men – as their subject matter instead of stern soldiers and factory workers. “The emergence of images of women was also a symbolic sign of liberation of art, because female fighters with guns eventually gave way to mothers with babies in their arms; the motives of life and fertility, which abounded in the world of Lithuanian art, had almost replaced dogmatism of socialist realism” [5]. It was obvious that Lithuanian society became post-totalitarian in the 1960s, but it could return to the genuine historic narrative only in the late 1980s, when the national awakening started.

During the Soviet occupation, no one was allowed to speak openly about the atrocities Lithuanians had experienced during the Second World War and after it as the official history was based on the glorious victories of the Red Army. No one spoke of the actual history: hundreds of thousands

murdered and deported to Siberia, tens of thousands refugees and those fighting a guerrilla war for independence. Only in 1988, with the rise of national revival in Lithuania, the desire to speak about the crimes of the occupying regimes and about anti-Soviet and anti-Facist resistance was shown. Memoirs of people who had survived the Holocaust, the deportations, and Soviet gulags began to appear. It was a time when a number of politically-charged books were published to bring the names, images, and experiences of the victims back into the nation's historic narrative. The book by Dalia Grinkevičiūtė about Lithuanians deported to the Laptev Sea (1988) was particularly moving. The memories of a young deportee were translated into other European languages.<sup>2</sup>



Illustrations: 4) Lithuanian deportees: wife and children of partisan; 5) Settlement in Siberia, Irkutsk region.

When Lithuania became an independent state again, various public institutions and non-governmental organizations collected information about the crimes of Fascism and Stalinism. In 1992, the State Residents Genocide Centre of Lithuania was established by a resolution of the Parliament. In 1993, the institution was reorganized into the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania. This centre coordinates research and commemoration activities in order to warn future generations against the evil of totalitarian regimes.

Lithuanian folklorists recorded numerous folksongs of the Second World War and the post-war period during the first decade of independence: Two new volumes from the series of military-historical songs were published by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (both compiled by Kostas Aleksynas). One volume (LLD XIX, published in 2005) comprised 410 songs of soldiers, deportees, and political prisoners; another (LLD XXI, published in 2009) consisted of 520 songs of partisans. "Created by the partisans themselves or by others about partisans, these songs reflect not only the

<sup>2</sup> [Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. \*Lietuviai prie Laptevų jūros\*. Vilnius, 1988.](#)

Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. *A Stolen Youth, a Stolen Homeland*. [Translated by](#) Izolda Geniušienė. Vilnius, 2002.

Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. *I lituani al Mar di Laptev. L'inferno di ghiaccio nei lager comunisti*. Tradotto da Ieva Musteikytė. Roma, 2009.

Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. *Aber der Himmel – grandios*. Übersetzung: Vytene Muschick. Berlin, 2014.

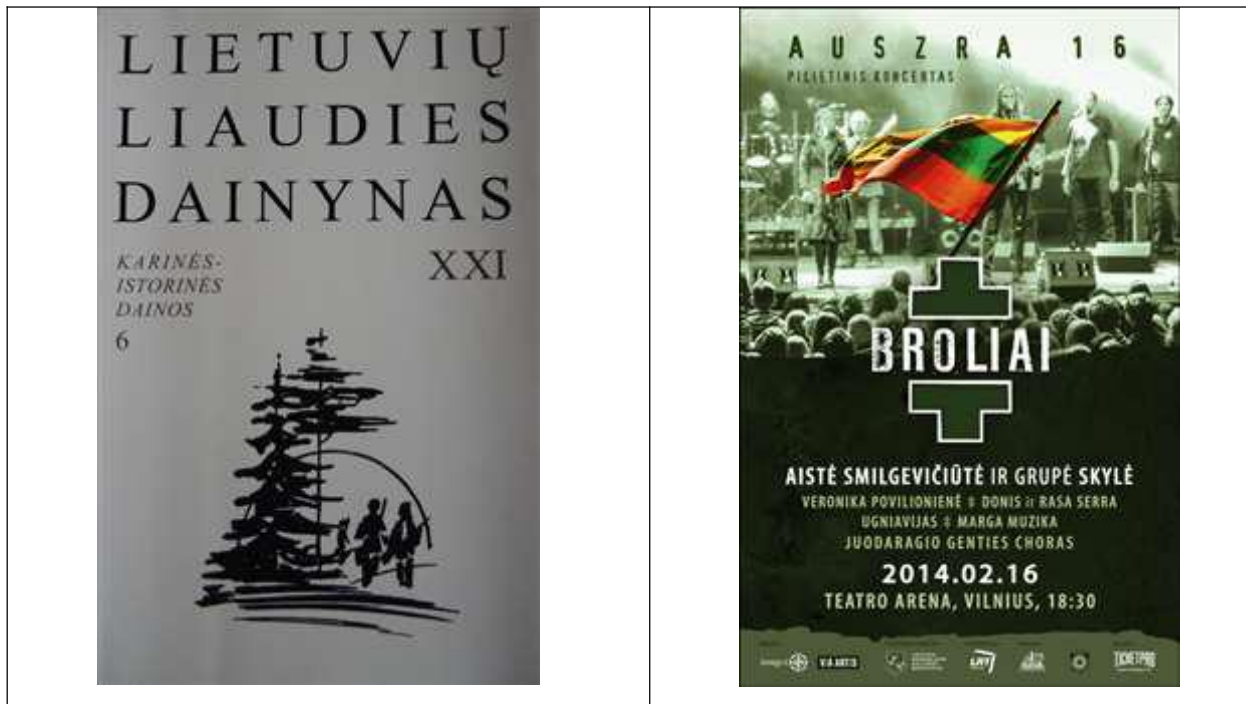
Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. *Prisonnière de l'île glacée de Trofimovsk: Mémoires d'une déportée dans les camps sibériens*. Juratė Terleckaitė (Traduction). Monaco, 2017.



hardships endured throughout the first decade of the new occupation, especially in the early years, but also the hope of the partisans and the general population of regaining Lithuania's freedom, and the eventual loss of that hope" [6]. One can find both heroic and very sad songs in these volumes. These songs can give an answer to the young people who raise the question, if the freedom fighters won the battle or lost it, whether the partisan resistance was meaningful or pointless:

*Having served your duty to the motherland,  
You died in the battle field. [...]  
Your eyes were closed not by your mother,  
Your sister did not weep by your grave.  
In the battlefield cannons tolled,  
Misty autumn mourned. [...]  
You extinguished when the freedom dawned,  
You won the battle, but not for yourself.*

(LLD XXI: Nr. 510)



Illustrations: 6) The volume of partisan songs; 7) Announcement of the concert of partisan songs.

Partisan songs are more and more often sung by folklore groups, while their lyrics inspire some songwriters to compose new songs. In 2009, Rokas Radzevičius and the rock group 'Skylė' decided to spend some time in the forest living in conditions similar to those of freedom fighters. They left their comfort zone and composed more than ten patriotic songs. After a creative workshop their highly acclaimed album *Broliai* (Brothers) was released.<sup>3</sup> Young historians who chose resistance movement as

<sup>3</sup> Skylė. *Broliai*. CD, Via Artis, 2010. When the war in Ukraine began in 2014, this band performed for the Ukrainian soldiers in the camps near the front line. By singing partisan songs they supported Ukrainian brothers fighting against the aggression that had descended on them from the neighbouring country.

a research topic organised several fieldwork looking for partisans' hideouts and for their hidden documents. They managed to find some 'lost archives' of the partisans and these documents are currently being restored. They will be instrumental in writing a more detailed history of the resistance movement in the future. The researchers share their knowledge with school children and encourage them to walk along the paths of partisans. In the internet site [www.partizanutakais.lt](http://www.partizanutakais.lt) one can read about the most important memorial places and find the paths to them. The young enthusiasts have the opportunity of joining the researchers and taking part in the fieldworks.

In 2013, a long-term research by the musicologists Jūratė Vyliūtė and Gaila Kirdienė culminated in the book *Lietuviai ir muzika Sibire* (Lithuanians and Music in Siberia). It revealed that Soviet terror, which most severely hit state officials, businessmen and officers, did not bypass musicians, especially music students, teachers, and parish organists. Young people, like conservatory and music school students, were coerced into manual labourers to work at agricultural farms, in industrial companies, and on building sites. Their professionalism was on a gradual and irreversible decline, but some of them managed to finish their music studies. According to the authors, musicians were needed as music making served as an important part of social and cultural life. "But the most important was the immense and multi-faceted psychological benefits afforded for the deportee's communities and musicians themselves: spiritual resistance, tenacity, exhilaration, an offer of lifeblood and hope, a discharge of all their negative emotions, deprivation and yearning (what they were forced to experience much more than everyone else), a kind of meditation and even musical therapy" [7]. Traditional music played one of the greatest roles in representing Lithuanian national, cultural, and religious identity.

Collective memory of deportations is nurtured both by the repressed families and the young people who have not lived under the totalitarian regime. The families that suffered losses feel comfort and support, while younger generations commit to doing all they can to avoid disasters of that scale. Every summer a group of young people from Lithuania take a journey to Russia as participants of the initiative 'Misija Sibiras' (Mission Siberia). Each year they cover big distances to see the remote locations where thousands of Lithuanian deportees perished and where some of their descendants still live. Participants of the project tend old cemeteries, repair and rebuild wooden crosses. For most of them, 'Mission Siberia' is more than just a journey. The most important part of project – dissemination of information – begins upon their return to Lithuania. Then the participants of the mission meet brotherhoods of deportees and other audiences, show documentary films, and organise photography exhibitions. This is their contribution to the strengthening of the nation's historical memory.

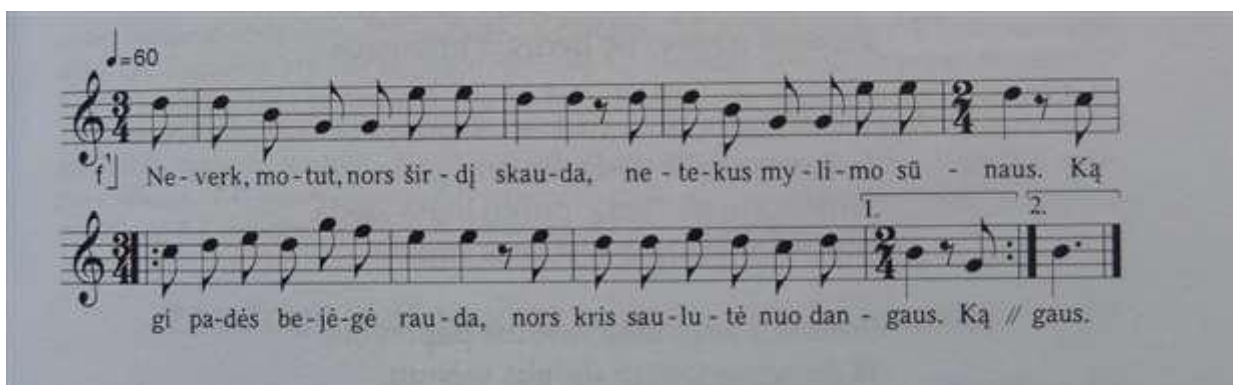




Illustration 8) Participants of the project 'Mission Siberia' at the cemetery of Lithuanian deportees.

In 2018, all Baltic countries celebrate the 100th anniversary of their Independence, as it was in 1918 that the independent republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were declared. The building of the modern states in 1918 was based on the principles of democracy, all citizen became the creators of their states, and later on, during the years of the occupations, the guardians of statehood traditions. While celebrating the 100th anniversary, Lithuanians commemorate both world wars, and rethink the significance of the historical past for the present. The heroes of independent Lithuania are brave politicians, soldiers, volunteers, rescuers of Jews who helped them to escape the Holocaust, freedom fighters and their supporters, and dissidents who challenged the Soviet regime. Earlier, in Soviet times, freedom fighters were called 'enemies'; now they are heroes. Commemoration of freedom fighters in contemporary Lithuania is elevated to the level of a political, cultural, and moral mission.

Some examples of melodies of partisan songs (LLD XXI, Nr. 397, 509, 308):



♩=88

Pa - lin - kę gluos-niai ty-liai ver-kė, kai, par-ti - za - ne, tu žu-vai. Kai ta-vo

a - kys už-si - mer-kė, su-stin-go siel - var-te lau - kai. Kai ta-vo // kai.

♩=68

Tu iš-ė - jai iš pa-šau-ki-mo, pra-ei-tis ta-vo ne-bai - si. Tu iš-ė -

jai par-neš-ti lais-vės ir jau dau-giau ne-su-grį - ši. Tu iš-ė - // si.

### Abbreviations:

LLD XIX – *Lietuvių liaudies dainynas*, vol. XIX. *Karinės istorinės dainos*, vol. 5 – *Antrojo pasaulinio karo ir pokario dainos*. Parengė Kostas Aleksynas. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2005.

LLD XXI – *Lietuvių liaudies dainynas*, vol. XXI. *Karinės istorinės dainos*, vol. 6 – *Partizanų dainos*. Parengė Kostas Aleksynas. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009.

**References:**

1. Landsbergis Vytautas. *Condemned to no return. In: Lithuanians in the Arctic.* Compiled by Jonas Markauskas and Jonas Rytis Puodžius. Vilnius: Brotherhood of the Laptev Sea Exiles 'Lapteviečiai', 2010, p. 9.
2. Kuodytė Dalia, Tracevskis Rokas. *The Unknown War: Armed Anti-Soviet Resistance in Lithuania in 1944–1953.* Vilnius: The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2013, p. 35.
3. Baliukevičius Lionginas. *The Diary of a Partisan.* Vilnius: The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2008.
4. Berlin Isaiah. 'European Unity and Its Vicissitudes' (1959). *Europos santarvė ir jos pokyčiai* in: Berlin Isaiah. *Vienovė ir įvairovė: žvilgsniai į idėjų istoriją*, Vilnius: Amžius, 1995, 127 p.
5. Peluritytė-Tikuišienė Audinga. Didysis pasakojimas sovietmečiu: keli panoraminiai problemos štrichai in *Literatūra*, 2015, Nr. 57 (1), p. 41.
6. Aleksynas Kostas. Summary in: *Lietuvių liaudies dainynas*, vol. XXI. *Karinės istorinės dainos*, vol. 6 – *Partizanų dainos*. Parengė Kostas Aleksynas. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009, p. 717.
7. Vyliūtė Jūratė, Kirdienė Gaila. *Lietuviai ir muzika Sibire.* Vilnius: Lietuvos kompozitorių sąjunga, 2013, p. 644.

---

**Article received: 2019-10-30**