

# Defending Memory in Global Politics

Mnemonic In/Security and Crisis

Edited by

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First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-37816-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-37822-0 (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-34208-3 (ebk)

## Chapter 11

### **Gender, war and remembrance: ‘Heroic subjects’ in Lithuania’s memory regime of fighting and suffering**

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003342083-14

The funder for this chapter is European Union under the WIDERA programme (EUROPAST project, grant agreement No. 101079466). The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# 11 Gender, war and remembrance

## ‘Heroic subjects’ in Lithuania’s memory regime of fighting and suffering

*Dovilė Budrytė*

### Introduction

During the past several decades, there has been a growing understanding that women play an active role in wars, not only in supporting roles, but also as fighters. A growing body of feminist scholarship on women and war argues that women are likely to participate actively in political violence and that it is detrimental to link women to peace on the assumption that they are more peace-loving than men. Furthermore, once war is over, the ensuing commemorative landscapes tend to be masculinized, while the portrayals of women in war-related memory regimes tend to be stereotypically gendered (McDowell, 2008). As described by Linda Åhäll (2015), women who participate in war are likely to be portrayed as either ‘victimized objects’ (‘womenandchildren’) who need special protection, ‘heroic subjects’, especially if they fight on the ‘right’ side, or ‘monstrous abjects’, especially if their participation in violence is not endorsed by state governments.

When states and societies are creating historical narratives about war, they tend to be selective of whom to include. For example, in their study of Latvian women in the Red Army and their memorialization, Daina Eglitis and Vita Zelče (2013, p. 989) argue that the construction of national and state narratives ‘selects actors and events consistent with contemporary needs and norms and excludes that which fails to fit’. Alongside gender, other factors, such as geopolitics, also shape the construction of war narratives and the decisions about whose stories to include in them. It appears that women who fight on the ‘wrong’ side (such as the Latvian women who fought in the Red Army) or who are seen as having betrayed the national cause are likely to be excluded from heroic narratives.

Drawing on this line of argumentation, this chapter sets out to explore the gendered dimensions of the memory regime of fighting and suffering in Lithuania, which focuses on anti-Soviet partisan warfare and deportations under Stalin. Drawing on feminist perspectives on women and war, I am interested in the ways in which women are portrayed in the memories of fighting and suffering. How are they represented? Are they included in the heroic narratives? Which women are included? Which experiences are

DOI: 10.4324/9781003342083-14

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silenced? Furthermore, I am interested in retrieving the voices of women who were active in the partisan war and who made conscious decisions to shape historical narratives and engage in the creation of the memory regime of fighting and suffering. How did they talk and write about the anti-Soviet partisan war? Did they engage in attempts to 'defend' memory? Finally, as most women who participated actively in the war are already dead, this begs questions as to how their stories have been integrated into the memory regime.

To gain insights into these questions, I will focus on the case of Lithuania, a state in Central Eastern Europe where anti-Soviet partisan resistance after World War II was especially strong. In addition, since regaining its independence in 1991, Lithuania has created a strong memory regime of fighting and suffering which is supported by state institutions, such as the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (previously known as the Museum of Genocide Victims) and the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (LGRRC), a research centre devoted to the study of fighting and suffering. After briefly outlining the historical background in the first part, the next part focuses on the concept of memory regime and explains how the memory regime of fighting and suffering emerged and gained hegemony in Lithuania. The third part focuses on the gendered dimensions of the memory regime of fighting and suffering, paying attention to the ways in which women are portrayed in it. I focus on the state institutions associated with the creation of this regime, specifically the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights and the LGRRC. The fourth part of the chapter focuses on the voices of women who took part in the partisan war and their relationship with the memory regime. How did they talk and write about their partisan experiences? Were their narratives consistent with the narrative of fighting and suffering promoted by state institutions? How did they defend their version of memory? How were their narratives integrated into the dominant memory regime?

### **Lithuania's anti-Soviet partisan war and deportations under Stalin: A brief historical sketch**

Lithuania gained its independence in 1918. During World War II, it was occupied three times: twice by the Soviet Union (1940–1941 and 1944–1945) and once by Nazi Germany (1941–1944). During the first Soviet occupation, Lithuania's residents experienced political repression and there was a mass deportation of so-called 'enemies of the state' (who could be anyone, including children). Between 14 and 18 June 1941, approximately 17,500 individuals, including ethnic minorities, women and children, were deported from Lithuania.<sup>1</sup> Many were forcibly removed to places with particularly harsh conditions, including areas inside the Arctic circle.

Between 22 and 27 June 1941, as Soviet troops retreated and German troops advanced into the country, the Lithuanian people staged an uprising (the 'June Uprising') with the goal of regaining independence. Its leaders were influenced by Nazi propaganda and its press included anti-Semitic

proclamations.<sup>2</sup> After the return of the Soviet military in 1944, many participants of the June Uprising joined the armed anti-Soviet resistance.

June 1941 also marked the beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania, when the first pogroms took place. During the German occupation, approximately 90 per cent of Lithuanian Jews (out of the 250,000 who were in Lithuania in 1941) were murdered. Local collaborators played a major role in these murders.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the country's Jewish population, approximately 40,000 other individuals living in Lithuania, including Roma, were killed during the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

During the second Soviet occupation, many of Lithuania's residents experienced political repression and mass deportation once again. Political violence continued until 1953, well after the end of World War II.<sup>5</sup> During the same period, there was also fierce armed anti-Soviet resistance, which peaked between 1944 and 1949. This war was more intense than the wars in neighbouring Latvia and Estonia and it was waged across the entire country. It is not surprising, therefore, that the war became a subject of so many historical studies in Lithuania, including memory studies, after independence was restored in 1991 (Streikus, 2022).

It is estimated that there were at least 50,000 anti-Soviet resistance fighters active in Lithuania from 1944 to 1953. If we include the partisan helpers (i.e. people who provided food, shelter, information, etc.) and partisan messengers, this number increases to 100,000. Approximately 20,000 partisans were killed during the anti-Soviet partisan war.<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s, after several waves of mass deportations and forced collectivization of agriculture (the creation of *kolkhozes*, or collective farms), the anti-Soviet partisan movement ended. Many of its supporters and family members of armed partisans were deported to Siberia and other distant places in the Soviet Union.

In 1945, during the second Soviet occupation, a new wave of deportations began, which continued until the death of Stalin, in 1953. Alongside the families of anti-Soviet partisans and their supporters, it also targeted the owners of large farms. This process sped up the establishment of *kolkhozes* and helped to suppress anti-Soviet partisan resistance. According to data collected since 1988, more than 150,000 individuals experienced repression (including mass deportation) during the Soviet occupations of Lithuania.<sup>7</sup>

The Soviet authorities in Lithuania vilified the resistance fighters as 'bandits' and 'enemies of the state'. Some of them had cooperated with the Germans before joining the anti-Soviet resistance, and these cases were brought to public attention to discredit the entire anti-Soviet partisan movement. (Indeed, they continue to be a source of mnemonic conflict to this day.)

In the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union started to disintegrate, a national revival movement sprang up in Lithuania which coincided chronologically with *glasnost* (openness) and also shared the same commitment to finding the truth about the past. It was named after the armed anti-Soviet resistance, *Sąjūdis*. As part of this movement, Lithuania's historians and journalists started publishing essays about anti-Soviet partisan warfare and deportations. During that time, public commemorations were also organized, such as the

reburial of former anti-Soviet resistance fighters and the retrieval and return of the remains of deportees from Siberia and other distant places. As such, *Sqjūdis* marked the beginning of Lithuania's memory regime of fighting and suffering, which has become a hegemonic narrative since it gained independence.

### **Memory regime of fighting and suffering: from repressed memories to a hegemonic narrative**

As conceptualized by Bernhard and Kubik (2014), a memory regime can be defined as a compilation of 'cultural and institutional practices' used to commemorate and remember traumatic events, such as war. Memory activists (or memory entrepreneurs) who are passionately devoted to their version of history and ready to defend it play an important role in constructing memory regimes and perpetuating them. Hegemonic narratives embedded in memory regimes are usually supported by large segments of society.

The memory regime that developed in Lithuania during the times of *Sqjūdis* embraced both the anti-Soviet partisan resistance as well as the deportations under Stalin. (The two traumas were closely related because many members of the anti-Soviet partisan war and their relatives were targeted for deportation.) Initially, the focus of this memory regime was on the mass deportations; however, geopolitical developments, such as Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and especially Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, followed by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, made memory about anti-Soviet resistance especially popular. The 2019 decision by the European Court of Human Rights, in Strasbourg, that the 'systematic annihilation of the Lithuanian partisans and their helpers could be seen as genocide',<sup>8</sup> strengthened the memory regime of fighting and suffering and the arguments of those (including the Lithuanian government) who used the discourse of 'Soviet genocide' to refer to the mass deportations and repressions under Stalin.<sup>9</sup>

From its inception, Lithuania's memory regime of fighting and suffering was distinct from the memory regimes commemorating World War II in Russia or in the West. As eloquently explained by Saulius Sužiedėlis and Šarūnas Liekis (2013), neither the 'Great Patriotic War' narrative, popular in Russia, nor the 'Good War' narrative, popular in the United States, have any real emotional resonance with most Lithuanians.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the dates commonly used to indicate the beginning and end of World War II (1939–1945) are of little relevance in Lithuania, as most ethnic Lithuanians were killed, deported or subject to repression after the war, between 1945 and 1953. This post-war period, or *pokaris*, which generally refers to the first decade of the second Soviet occupation (1944–1953), left an abiding memory of trauma in which anti-Soviet partisan resistance and mass deportations feature prominently. The state discourse portrays anti-Soviet resistance fighters as heroes, and this same image permeates the memories and narratives of different generations on a personal level (Vervečkienė, 2023). The memorialization of the *pokaris* and anti-Soviet resistance fighters has been related to the portrayal of

threat from Russia, especially since its invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Rimaitė-Beržiūnienė, 2022).

Since the mid-1990s, when a transnational narrative about the uniqueness of the Holocaust was introduced to Lithuania,<sup>11</sup> this narrative has clashed with the memory regime of fighting and suffering, with its focus on the collective trauma experienced under Stalin. The proponents of the latter memory regime hold that the trauma associated with Soviet crimes is just as severe as the trauma of the Holocaust. Furthermore, the Lithuanian state and society have been slow to fully condemn the Nazi collaboration of some anti-Soviet partisans, such as Jonas Noreika (nom de guerre Generolas Vėtra), during World War II. Noreika was an active participant in the struggle to restore Lithuanian independence under both the Soviet and the German occupations; however, he also participated in the creation of ghettos during the German occupation. It has been documented that in September 1941, Noreika issued orders to local officials to confiscate the belongings of Jews.<sup>12</sup> Noreika's granddaughter Silvia Foti, in collaboration with a memory activist, Grant Gochin, who lost many family members during the Holocaust in Lithuania, have argued that Noreika was directly involved in the killing of Jews in Lithuania during the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup> Fighting to defend their version of history, Gochin even took the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (LGRRC), the country's leading memory institution, to court, albeit unsuccessfully.<sup>14</sup> The LGRRC has refused to fully condemn Noreika's involvement in the Holocaust, arguing, for example, that in 1941 Lithuanian residents did not see ghettos as 'part of the Holocaust' because they did not know that 'the isolation of Jews would end in mass killings'.<sup>15</sup> These arguments have received widespread condemnation, especially outside the country, and have been interpreted as attempts to obfuscate the Holocaust.<sup>16</sup>

The LGRRC and its subsidiary, the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Lithuania, are state institutions associated with the establishment of the memory regime of fighting and suffering in Lithuania. The LGRRC was founded in 1993 by the Lithuanian parliament as a successor to the Genocide Research Centre of Lithuania, created in 1992 to house the records of the state security service of Soviet Lithuania, the KGB. The Genocide Research Centre was itself the successor of the non-governmental Commission for Research into Stalinist Crimes, created in 1988 to record the names of former deportees and political prisoners. The Commission was supported by former victims, who described the Stalinist crimes as 'genocide' and called for the public identification of KGB collaborators and the bringing to justice of the perpetrators of the crimes. In 1997, a law passed by the Lithuanian parliament outlined the functions of the Centre, which included recording the names of former deportees and political prisoners. It also placed the Museum of the Victims of Genocide (now the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights), created in 1992 to commemorate the victims of the Soviet occupation, under the LGRRC's control.<sup>17</sup> The museum had been created under the auspices of two organizations: the Ministry of Culture and Education and the

Union of Deportees and Former Political Prisoners (Kuodytė, n.d.). As such, former deportees and political prisoners played a major role in the development of the museum and its core narrative.

Researching and commemorating various aspects of anti-Soviet partisan resistance and deportations under Stalin remains an important part of these institutions' identity. The narrative about the anti-Soviet partisan war presented in the museum focuses on the heroism of the anti-Soviet partisans, keeping silent about the engagement of some of these individuals in the Holocaust and only briefly mentioning punitive actions against the civilians who collaborated with the Soviet occupiers. Local armed collaborators with the Soviet occupation forces (known as *stribai*, from the Russian word *istrebiteli*, or 'destroyers') are presented in the same section as the Soviet perpetrators, with a note that they were especially despised by the local population.

Even though in the past the museum was called the Museum of the Victims of Genocide, it failed to depict the Holocaust that took place in Lithuania.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, responding to international criticism of this omission, the museum revised its permanent exhibition, devoting one room to the Jewish Holocaust in Lithuania. A separate section on the Roma Holocaust in Lithuania was added later, in 2015. Nonetheless, these exhibits still downplay Lithuanian participation. There is only one short mention of the existence of Lithuanian special forces (*Ypatingasis būrys*) participating in the killing of Jews, and even in this, the fact that it was under German command is stressed. And there is no mention whatsoever of the anti-Semitic proclamations of the leadership of the June Uprising, in 1941.

By and large, the narrative about the anti-Soviet partisans presented in the museum is consistent with the way they are portrayed by the Lithuanian state in its memory war with Russia.<sup>19</sup> When depicting the anti-Soviet resistance, the museum's narrative exhibits characteristics that Dirk Moses (2022) associates with what he calls 'partisan history'. According to Moses, 'partisan history' has three characteristics:

First, partisan history refers to the East European nationalist partisans who fought the Soviet Union, itself the sponsor of the major wartime partisan forces that fought Axis forces; second, it represents partisan—that is, highly partial—arguments to protect the exalted status of these East European nationalist 'freedom fighters'; and, third, its temporal structure collapses past and present so that contemporary nationalists imagine themselves to be partisans, weaponizing memory in fighting yesterday's battles today.

(Moses, 2022, p. 104)

Consistent with Moses's definition of 'partisan history', the narrative created by the museum has become a 'political statement directed at the Russian Federation as well as a claim for recognition aimed at the international audience' (Klumbytė, 2020, p. 27). After Russia's full-scale invasion of

Ukraine in 2022, the museum added several more political messages, highlighting Lithuania's emotional identification with Ukraine (felt by society and articulated by the government). An entire exhibition focusing on Ukraine was added. It includes a poster, 'Joint Resistance to Communist Occupation', highlighting the links between Lithuania's and Ukraine's anti-Soviet partisans and similarities between the two armed resistance movements. The message is simple: Lithuania and Ukraine have similar traumatic memories associated with their Soviet past, and now, in the present, they are fighting the same war against Russia, which has never disowned its Soviet past. In front of the museum, there is an outdoor exhibit about the Holodomor, or 'death by hunger', in Soviet-occupied Ukraine in 1932–1933. The exhibit, presented in both Lithuanian and Ukrainian, attempts to establish a connection between the historic Ukrainian genocide and the present-day assault on the country by Russia. As suggested by Moses in his definition of 'partisan history', in this case we can observe the merging of the past and the present and an attempt by the museum to mobilize a traumatic past to fight today's battles.

### **Gendered aspects of the memory regime of fighting and suffering: The portrayal of women in war by the leading memory institutions**

The exhibitions in the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights focus on four themes associated with the Soviet regime and its crimes: repression (including access to former KGB prison cells), anti-Soviet partisan resistance, deportations under Stalin and civic anti-Soviet resistance (1954–1991). Anti-Soviet partisans are featured prominently in the museum, and their fight and suffering are idealized. There are many photographs and displays of personal belongings to depict how the partisans organized and conducted their struggle. There are also authentic documents related to the partisan fight, publications produced by the partisans (who had a thriving underground press) and many images of their everyday life. The surviving artefacts, such as newspapers produced by the partisans, are used to demonstrate their devotion to the nationalist cause.

Alongside these, there are multiple images of the cruel suppression these partisans experienced at the hands of the Soviet authorities, including some infamous images of the dead bodies of partisans slain by the oppressor, lying in public places, such as town squares. (Leaving the bodies of partisans in public view was a strategy used by the Soviet authorities to deter local people from joining the partisan units.) Dead bodies lying in town squares is a vivid image in popular memory about the partisan war. In the photographs exhibited in the museum, women's bodies are shown lying together with those of men, suggesting that female participants in the war were subject to the same punishment as their male counterparts.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the museum exhibition has no shortage of images of female partisans engaged in both active combat and support activities (working as messengers, providing medical care, etc.). I counted nineteen



photographs and one drawing featuring women who engaged actively in the partisan war in the three rooms depicting this war. Twelve of the nineteen photographs depicted messengers (helpers), while the other seven photographs and the drawing portrayed women who participated in combat. There was one poster explaining that most of the women who engaged in this war served as messengers. In most of the depictions (twelve out of twenty), the women appear in 'traditional' roles, such as helping the partisans or tending their graves. At the same time, there are several photographs showing female partisans standing next to their male counterparts, suggesting that they participated equally in the fighting. Women partisans are also shown in ceremonies commemorating the dead. In addition, there are pictures showing women receiving recognition for their contribution to the cause.

According to estimates made by the LGRRC in 2021, approximately 770 of the estimated 50,000 active combatants in the anti-Soviet partisan resistance were women. If messengers and support staff are counted, then this number increases to approximately 4,618, or 13 per cent of all participants.<sup>20</sup> In the museum, these women (both active combatants and messengers) are presented as 'heroic subjects': important participants in the partisan fight. In addition, there are several scenes revealing details of their everyday life, even potentially romantic relations between partisans and partisan messengers.

The inclusion of these images gives the anti-Soviet partisan fighters a personal touch: they are humanized, and it becomes easier to relate to them and their cause. As argued by Klumbytė (2020, p. 27), the museum creates 'an affective ideology of sovereignty by reclaiming victims of violence as sovereign subjects and by projecting forces of affective subjectification onto visitors'. This portrayal is very different from the narrative about the Jewish Holocaust presented in the museum. This narrative consists mostly of factual information about the Nazi occupation and descriptions of archaeological finds in Paneriai, a site of mass killings, without humanizing the victims. There is a picture of a pile of victims' belongings, but there is no description of what happened to their owners.

The part of the museum depicting the mass deportations under Stalin includes many pictures of women and children. These can be understood as indicating that the suffering resulting from the mass deportations is associated with femininity and womanhood. The museum clearly wants to make sure its visitors connect with the deportees. The exhibition includes a host of personal items that belonged to the deportees, including needlework and artwork created by female deportees in the places of deportation. There is no clear link made between participation in the anti-Soviet partisan war and deportation, even though many partisans and their supporters, including the messengers, were deported to Siberia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. For example, when depicting the fate of Natalija Gudonytė, a partisan messenger, the exhibition designers describe her as 'a student, a French teacher' who was deported to a forced labour camp in Taishet. The two parts of the memory regime—fighting and suffering—are presented as separate units, with fighting

featuring heroic male partisans and ‘heroic subjects’ (female fighters and messengers), and suffering featuring just women and children.

Female fighters and messengers are also present as ‘heroic subjects’ in the works of historians employed by the LGRRC. Admittedly, the inclusion of women in the commemorative landscape shaped by this memory institution started relatively recently. The results of a research project, *Women in Lithuania’s Partisan War 1944–1953*, were published only in 2021. For several decades after the establishment of this memory institution, the focus was on male partisans and their heroic deeds. The first academic article on women in Lithuania’s partisan war (in Lithuania) was published in 2006 in a scholarly journal (*Genocidas ir rezistencija*) published by the LGGRRC. Its author, Žaneta Smolskutė (2006), argues that even though there were not many women in Lithuania’s war of resistance and that most of them were partisan messengers, they played an important role in this war by conducting intelligence operations and killing Soviet officers. In the eyes of Smolskutė, women were essential participants in Lithuania’s anti-Soviet partisan war.

In the public space, women who participated in this war were commemorated in Lithuania’s Special Archive, a state-supported institution not affiliated to the LGRRC, but based in the same building, a former KGB prison. In 2019 the Special Archive organized an online exhibition, *Moterys Lietuvos partizaniniame kare, 1944–53* (‘Women in Lithuania’s Partisan War, 1944–53’).<sup>21</sup> This exhibition identified the roles played by women during this war (active fighters, partisan supporters, partisan messengers and Soviet collaborators). It showed the documents created by the partisans with which they tried to regulate the activities allowed for women. In addition, this exhibition included many photographs from the archive documenting the everyday life of female participants of the war, including their participation in the funerals of fallen partisans. (Similar photographs with scenes from everyday life of female partisans are presented in the permanent exhibition on the partisan war in the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.) Unlike the hegemonic narrative of ‘heroic subjects’ perpetuated by the museum, this online exhibition included a special section about the collaboration of Lithuanian women with the Soviet occupying forces. The chief organizer of the exhibition, Vilma Ektytė, explained that she wanted to create a multidimensional picture of the partisan war, challenging the idea that it was a ‘clean’ affair.<sup>22</sup>

As outlined in the research agenda articulated by the LGRRC in 2021, their intention is similar: to research different aspects of women’s participation in the partisan war, including a broader social historical context and international comparisons.<sup>23</sup> So far, the research that is publicly available provides factual information about women’s participation in the war,<sup>24</sup> including their roles and fate, as well as an attempt to write some biographies of women fighters.<sup>25</sup> In addition, there is a published case study of women’s participation in northeastern Lithuania.<sup>26</sup> These studies were published in a special issue of *Genocidas ir Rezistencija*, a journal published by the LGRRC in 2023.<sup>27</sup> In its presentation of factual information about women participants

in the anti-Soviet resistance, the LGRRC appears to still propagate the memory regime of fighting and suffering established in the late 1980s by portraying the women as 'heroic subjects'. It is argued that when they joined the partisan movement, the women 'clearly realized what fate awaited them' (i.e. repression and deportation), but despite this knowledge they still joined the movement.<sup>28</sup>

By and large, there is little in the research conducted so far by the LGRRC on women in the partisan war that touches upon painful themes, such as betrayal, rape or violence against civilians ('womenandchildren'). This is a topic that the Lithuanian historian Mindaugas Pocius covered in an interview in 2009. According to his estimates, the anti-Soviet partisans were responsible for the deaths of approximately 9,000 civilians, including hundreds of children. Pocius was critical of Lithuania's official history politics (since 1991) and what he called the 'ideological didactic grand narrative', which portrayed an idealized partisan fight (Davoliūtė, 2009). Although he was worried that his work may be exploited by politicians or 'imperialist propaganda' in Russia, he felt that it was 'time to come to terms with painful events of the past' (ibid.). However, this work was met with strong resistance from various circles, including former political prisoners and deportees. Pocius was accused of misusing sources and repeating Soviet clichés labelling the partisans as 'bandits' (Jokimaitis, 2010). His critics even convinced the Prosecutor General to launch a criminal investigation into his work. It did not yield any results, as the expert employed by the prosecutor was unable to challenge Pocius's findings (Ruin, 2016). We should note that, since then, the controversies associated with the anti-Soviet partisan movement, including violence against the civilian population, have been included in the research agenda of the LGRRC, where Pocius now works part-time as a senior historian.<sup>29</sup>

Another recent study that endeavours to tackle some controversial topics, such as betrayal, in Lithuania's anti-Soviet partisan war is Marius Ėmužis's (2020) book *Partizanė: Monika Alūzaitė-Moteris laisvės kovose* ('A Female Partisan: Monika Alūzaitė: A Woman in the Struggle for Freedom'). Ėmužis was a researcher associated with LGRRC when he started working on this book. The study focuses primarily on the story of a female partisan, Monika Alūzaitė, as a 'heroic subject' devoted to the fight for Lithuania's independence. For example, when she was captured in a bunker, she tried to kill herself; later, she was brutally tortured by the KGB and tried to take her life again. Yet despite this primary narrative, the author tries to paint a 'holistic view' of Monika, highlighting the cruel aspects of the partisan war, including betrayal.

Attempts to create a more nuanced view of the partisan war, including the role of women, are a relatively recent phenomenon in Lithuania's memory culture and can probably be linked to changes in gender norms. Lithuania joined the European Union in 2004, and this geopolitical shift fostered a new gender culture which supports women's rights. The origins of the memory regime of fighting and suffering, dating back to the mid-1980s, were rooted in a neo-patriarchal gender culture with clearly segregated gender roles, in which

the experiences of the male partisans dominated the narrative. This gender culture has affected the ways in which ‘heroic subjects’ have articulated their own narratives and defended their version of history.

### **‘Heroic subjects’ speak: The voices of women who participated in the anti-Soviet partisan war**

Since women have a longer life expectancy than men in Lithuania, many memory activists who helped to create the memory regime of fighting and suffering were women. In this section, I will examine two cases of prominent female memory entrepreneurs—women who participated in the anti-Soviet partisan war themselves and decided to share their stories publicly—and how their stories relate to the narrative of fighting and suffering articulated by the LGRRC and its museum.

The first narrative is by Aldona Vilitienė (née Sabaitytė, 1931–2020), who created the first museum commemorating the anti-Soviet resistance and the deportations carried out under Stalin. I have analysed the structure of Vilitienė’s narrative and her mnemonic strategies in depth elsewhere (Budrytė, 2016a; 2016b; 2018). I believe it is necessary to return to her story once again in the context of this article because Vilitienė was a very active and vocal memory entrepreneur. It could even be argued that she was crucial in constructing the regional and even the national metanarrative about the partisan war.

As I have argued elsewhere (Budrytė 2016b), Aldona Vilitienė’s life story stands out for her passionate and uncompromising devotion to memory work. An author of three books and co-author of two, she spent many years creating a museum in Marijampolė. To be specific, in 1993 she founded the *Tauro Apygardos Partizanų ir Tremties Muziejus* (Tauras District Museum of Partisans and Deportation) in Marijampolė, serving as its director until 2000. The museum institutionalizes a version of the fighting and suffering regime. Vilitienė’s oral testimony, presented in 2013, was loosely structured around the two main themes of armed resistance and deportation, in addition to her activities as a memory entrepreneur. It included sections on imprisonment and life under deportation.

In her book of memoirs, *Laiko dulkes nužėrus* (‘Having Removed the Dust of Time’), Vilitienė describes the political agenda of the museum, which was created to serve as a ‘bastion of patriotism, as [a way to express] pride in those ... who did not bow their heads or genuflect before the invader’ (Vilitienė, 2013, p. 5). The book is an attempt to defend her version of memory against those people (mostly local bureaucrats) who tried to obstruct her efforts to create a museum. The description of the museum’s ideology also reveals her traditional, conservative values. She argues that she wanted to protect the memory of the male partisans with whom she fought. Accordingly, in her book and also in the museum, the role of the women who engaged in the war is downplayed. (When I visited the museum in July 2024, there was no depiction of women’s roles in the partisan war. In the past, there

was only one place where women's role was depicted.) As revealed by Vilutienė in her interview, her goal was to commemorate the 'brave men' from her partisan unit. She saw women primarily as their helpers.

The narrative Vilutienė presented in her published work and in the interview in 2013 was an attempt to construct a story with clear heroes and villains. Such storytelling requires strategic forgetting, which means that any event that clashes with this heroic narrative is omitted. During her interview, she recalled how people 'from all over Lithuania', having found out about the museum, approached her to tell their stories about the past and brought her various items from prisons and places of deportation. These 'relics' included photographs, embroidery made by women in prisons and after deportation, wooden boxes made in the Soviet Far North, rosaries made out of bread, albums, medals and buttons retrieved during the re-burials of resistance fighters.<sup>30</sup> Vilutienė was determined to find a way to incorporate these items into a dramatic story about resistance against the Soviet regime in the museum. Despite some opposition from local bureaucrats, she managed to open the museum, including among its exhibits the items donated by these political prisoners and deportees. Prison art made mostly by women (such as embroidery) in the places of deportation and imprisonment also features prominently.

Vilutienė's personal story recounts her experiences as a partisan messenger between 1945 and 1949 in the district of Tauras, which was one of the best-organized partisan units, established in 1945. In her oral testimony, she describes her tasks, which included distributing newspapers, transferring various objects and procuring cigarettes and buttons for the partisan uniforms. (They wore uniforms from the times of Lithuania's independence, between 1919 and 1939, prior to Soviet occupation.) While these tasks may have been quite mundane, they were, she claimed, the most difficult ones to execute. (Testimony of this kind is missing from the exhibition in the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.) Thus, inadvertently, she depicted partisan messengers, most of whom were young women, as 'heroic subjects', even though she felt they were not as important as their male counterparts.

As in the testimonies of other former resistance fighters, betrayal by her fellow fighters stands out as a painful memory in Vilutienė's story. Studies of other irregular wars suggest that betrayal—brutal violence inflicted on neighbours and acquaintances—and 'malicious denunciation' are common occurrences during such conflicts (Kalyvas, 2006; Clark, 2014). Academic studies of anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania clearly demonstrate that this conflict was no exception (e.g. Pocius, 2009; Petersen, 2001; Mikelevičius, 2013; Kaunietis, 2006). However, betrayal by anti-Soviet partisans is all but absent from the museums in Lithuania depicting the post-war period. The collaborators who helped the Soviet forces are shown together with the perpetrators of violence (the Soviet units). The reason could be that it is virtually impossible to portray betrayal in a museum setting as part of a broader narrative of fighting and suffering; it blurs the sharp dividing line between heroic fighter and villain.

The second narrative is by Ona Butrimaitė-Laurinienė (b. 1929), who was made famous by her granddaughter, the journalist Živilė Kropaitė-Basiulė. Laurinienė also served as a partisan messenger. Just like Aldona Vilutienė, she was cruelly repressed and deported for her partisan activities. Even before the publication of *#fainiausiasaulymočiutė: Anūkė klausia apie karus ir sąžinę* (2022) (*#thecoollestgrandmotherintheworld: A Granddaughter Asking about Wars and Conscience*), a book by her granddaughter Živilė Kropaitė-Basiulė, Laurinienė shared her story about the anti-Soviet partisan war in the mainstream media, in schools and in a collection of published memoirs. Her memoirs were published for the first time in 2008, in *Aukštaitijos partizanų prisiminimai* (*'Memoirs of the Partisans from Aukštaitija'*). Like Vilutienė, she portrays Soviet rule as the ultimate evil in her memoirs, drawing a sharp contrast with independent Lithuania and also restored Lithuania (1991). The German occupation during World War II is mentioned very briefly. Her memoirs meticulously describe the difficult reality of the partisan war, with multiple betrayals and subsequent deportation to Siberia.

On the personal level, Laurinienė's story is similar to the other trauma stories associated with the *pokaris*. She lost her three brothers to war. She experienced torture multiple times and was deported to a lager (forced labour camp) in Taishet (Siberia) and later to a prison in Krasnoyarsk. More recently (June 2022), in a recorded interview for Vilniaus Ramovė, an organization linked to Lithuania's military, she told stories of repression, partisan war and deportation.<sup>31</sup> These included gruesome descriptions of the torture she endured, the killings of her brothers, who were partisans, and a story about another woman, a traitor, who tried to spy on her in prison. She described the day she was told about the death of one of her brothers, a partisan, as the most traumatic in her life.

Like Vilutienė, Laurinienė's testimony and memoirs have a strong political message. At the end of her story, she calls for the Soviet crimes to be treated as genocide (*'What we experienced was beyond cruel'*) and argues that the fight of the partisans (and the death of her brothers) had a meaning: that they fought for freedom for future generations. To Laurinienė, freedom should be *'valued above all'*, especially in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.

This political message is repeated in the aforementioned *#fainiausiasaulymočiutė: Anūkė klausia apie karus ir sąžinę* (2022), written by Živilė Kropaitė-Basiulė (b. 1985), one of Lithuania's foremost young journalists, about her grandmother, Ona Butrimaitė-Laurinienė. The book became a bestseller in Lithuania, and Basiulė was invited to discuss it in a range of venues to various audiences, both in Lithuania and even abroad. In it, Basiulė combines her grandmother's memoirs with Facebook entries written by herself about her grandmother, commenting on various social and political issues. (In her book, the author cites her own humorous and witty Facebook entries documenting her interaction with her grandmother.) The book also includes a commentary by a historian providing historical context and *'corrections'* to Laurinienė's story.<sup>32</sup>

The gendered experience of Ona Butrimaitė-Laurinienė as a messenger in the partisan war is one of the main foci of the book. We read about her work as a partisan messenger (with the nom de guerre Daina), which involved delivering food, socks and other important items to the partisans, and conveying important information, and we also learn of the many instances of inhumane torture she endured. Basiulė says she is moved by her grandmother's humanity. Even in the face of cruelty by a Soviet persecutor (who showed her a picture of the dead body of her young brother), Laurinienė did not feel any anger towards her tormentor and still viewed him as a human being.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Basiulė portrays her grandmother as a 'heroic subject', in line with the broader portrayal of female participants of war in the state-supported memory regime of fighting and suffering.

The book delves into the topics that memory entrepreneurs, including Laurinienė, tend to eschew: Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust, Jewish-Lithuanian relations before World War II and the cooperation of one of Laurinienė's brothers with the Germans. Basiulė admits that she was surprised and terrified when she found out that one of Laurinienė's brothers had served in one of the police battalions, some of which were involved in killing Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>34</sup> In addition, she challenges her grandmother when the latter repeats stereotypes still popular in Lithuania: that Lithuania's Jews were 'cruel KGB persecutors' and that all of them greeted the Soviets with open arms. 'I tried to keep an open mind about these painful issues', said Basiulė during our interview. 'I was happy to hear from several historians that I had not joined the so-called "committee of partisan daughters"'—a pejorative term coined to refer to ardent defenders of partisan memory. In the end, however, Basiulė's political message resembles her grandmother's: 'Russia is a terrible imperial aggressor which continues to use the same tactics as it did in the past'.<sup>35</sup> To both, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine makes the anti-Soviet partisan fight relevant and inspiring and its memories worth defending.

Both Vilitienė's and Laurinienė's narratives exhibit some of the characteristics of what Margaretta Jolly (2014, p. 10) has described as 'rights stories'. They can be read as stories that 'often, eventually, involve motifs of restitution and triumph'. In both cases, there is a clear political message against forgetting (the anti-Soviet partisan fight) and for a certain type of remembering (linking the remembering of Soviet crimes to Russia's aggressive foreign policy). Both women declared their passionate commitment to their version of the past, which was consistent with Lithuania's memory regime of fighting and suffering, idealizing the importance of the partisan fight and highlighting the trauma and suffering associated with it.

Presented in the public sphere, these two women's personal stories enrich the memory regime of fighting and suffering by focusing on what appear to be insignificant everyday occurrences in the course of their activities as partisan messengers. Both women interviewed told stories of betrayal among partisans, torture and physical hardships they had to endure as women. Physical and psychological intimidation, the mutilation of human bodies, the public

exposure of dead bodies and mass violence against civilians are common characteristics of partisan wars. These details are present in both narratives. Listening carefully to the voices of female participants of war and paying attention to their everyday experiences can give a new understanding of the ugliness and divisiveness of the partisan war in Lithuania. The stories they tell provide a contrast to the heroic narratives about the war associated with the memory regime of fighting and suffering.

### **Concluding remarks**

The goal of this chapter was to outline the gendered dimensions of ‘defending memory’: attempts by both state and non-state actors to put forward their own version of historical truth and defend it against those who challenge it. ‘Defending memory’ is closely linked to what Dirk Moses has termed ‘partisan history’ (2022): a passionate attempt to defend the memory of anti-Soviet resistance fighters in Eastern Europe. As argued by Moses (2022), the gendered dimensions of partisan history include victimization (suffering cruelty at the hands of an occupying force, the Soviet Union), which is commonly associated with femininity, and brave resistance against this much stronger occupying force (again, the Soviet Union), which tends to be associated with masculinity.

My analysis of the exhibition presented in Lithuania’s Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (formerly known as the Museum of Victims of Genocide) suggests that it contains both themes: victimization and brave resistance. At the same time, women fighters and women helpers also feature prominently as ‘heroic subjects’ who fought on the ‘right’ side. The inclusion in the exhibition of women as partisan helpers, fighters, wives and lovers introduces a strong personal dimension, helping to individualize history and ‘project forces of affective subjectification onto visitors’ (Klumbytė, 2020). Women as ‘heroic subjects’ are also present in the works produced by the historians of the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre—another memory institution, commonly associated with ‘defending memory’ in the context of memory wars. Ultimately, there seems to be a place for women in the public commemorations promoted by Lithuania’s ‘defenders of memory’, provided they fought on the ‘right’ side of history.

An analysis of the gendered dimensions of defending memory would be incomplete without hearing the voices of women who participated in Lithuania’s anti-Soviet partisan war. I chose to explore the voices of women who publicly shared their war experiences. These ‘memory entrepreneurs’ embraced the themes of victimization and heroization of the anti-Soviet resistance present in the museum. In their narratives, they present themselves as partisan helpers, highlighting the dangers associated with these ‘supporting’ roles. Although the lives of these partisan messengers are depicted in the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, they are somewhat marginalized and overshadowed by the brave actions of the male anti-Soviet fighters. Individual oral testimonies of women present the anti-Soviet partisan war as



a prolonged trauma full of pain and betrayals, in addition to extolling the heroism of the male fighters.

This exploration of the gendered dimensions of defending memory in Lithuania supports the insights of feminist authors who argue that the portrayal of women as active participants in war in memory regimes tends to be gendered. In the case of Lithuania, the institutions and actors engaged in defending memory actually include many female participants of war, but they mostly portray women as ‘heroic subjects’. By including women in this way, these institutions hope to amplify the emotional appeal of the narrative of fighting and suffering that they communicate. Women who were participants of war have also served as memory entrepreneurs, helping to create and perpetuate memory regimes that supporting their version of history.

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.archyvai.lt/exhibitions/tremimas/pratarame.htm> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 2 <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/birzelio-sukilimas/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 3 ‘Lithuania’, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005444> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 4 ‘Lietuvos gyventojų netektys okupacijų metais’, Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, <http://genocid.lt/centras/lt/147/c/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 5 An estimated 118,000 individuals were deported between 1944 and 1953, and there were approximately 53,000 deaths resulting from the deportations and repressions during this period. ‘Lietuvos gyventojų netektys okupacijų metais’, Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania. Available at <http://genocid.lt/centras/lt/147/c/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 6 This information is from the LGRRC website, available at <http://genocid.lt/centras/en/2390/a/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 7 <https://www.lietuviAISibire.lt/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 8 <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1096142/european-human-rights-court-upholds-landmark-ruling-on-soviet-genocide-in-lithuania#:~:text=The%20Strasbourg%20court%20upheld%20the,genocide%20against%20the%20Lithuanian%20nation> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 9 In Lithuania, mass deportation is listed in its Criminal Code of 2003 as an act of genocide. However, the international recognition of these acts as genocide committed by the Soviet Union has lagged. For a more in-depth discussion, see Sagatienė (2021).
- 10 According to the Great Patriotic War narrative, Russia was the main reason why the Allies won World War II. This narrative has been especially important in Putin’s Russia and has played a major role in mobilizing the population’s support for full-scale war in Ukraine. Russia’s opponents (Ukraine and its allies, such as the Baltic states) are called ‘fascists’, despite the fact that many Ukrainians fought on the side of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany during World War II. The ‘Good War’ narrative tends to highlight the role of the United States, who fought on the side of good against the ultimate evil, the Nazis.
- 11 One example of this transnational narrative is the iconic film *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (1985).
- 12 <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2015-11-09-iggrtc-j-noreikos-veikla-vokieciu-okupacijos-metais-vertintina-nevienareiksmiskai/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
- 13 Silvia Foti wrote a book, *The Nazi’s Granddaughter: How I Discovered that My Grandfather Was a War Criminal* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishers, 2021). A

- film, *J'Accuse*, featuring Foti's and Gochin's narratives was released in 2022 (directed by Michael Kretzmer).
- 14 <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1159437/state-research-centre-wins-case-over-noreika-holocaust-report> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 15 LGGRTC, *Dėl kaltinimų Jonui Noreikai (Generolui Vėtrai)*, 2019.03.27. Available at [http://genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Titulinis/2019/20190327\\_noreika.pdf](http://genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Titulinis/2019/20190327_noreika.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 16 For a more detailed discussion of this memory conflict, see: <https://journals.lnb.lt/parliamentary-studies/article/view/803> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 17 For a more detailed description of the Centre, see Budrytė (2023).
  - 18 There is a small museum in Vilnius, known as the 'Green House', which focuses on the Holocaust in Lithuania.
  - 19 An alternative view of the museum is presented by Eglė Rindzevičiūtė (2012), who argues that there is no hegemonic narrative presented in the museum.
  - 20 [http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119\\_statistika.pdf](http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119_statistika.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 21 <https://virtualios-parodos.archyvai.lt/lt/virtualios-parodos/34/moterys-lietuvos-partizaniname-kare-1944-1953-m.-lya/exh-137> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 22 Written interview with Vilma Eikytė, 9 July 2019.
  - 23 [http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119\\_tyrimas.pdf](http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119_tyrimas.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 24 [http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119\\_statistika.pdf](http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119_statistika.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 25 [http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119\\_pranesimas.pdf](http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119_pranesimas.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 26 [http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/2022\\_projektas\\_moterys\\_II.pdf](http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/2022_projektas_moterys_II.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 27 *Genocidas ir Rezistencija*, 2023 (2), available from <https://www.zurnalai.vu.lt/gr/article/download/34835/33172/89039> (accessed on 18 May 2024).
  - 28 [http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119\\_statistika.pdf](http://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/GRTD/20211119_statistika.pdf) (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 29 <http://genocid.lt/centras/lt/45/c/> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 30 Interview with Aldona Sabaitytė-Vilutienė, 13 June 2013.
  - 31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcZsQa-Uugo> (accessed on 12 August 2023).
  - 32 Nerijus Šepetys, a leading Lithuanian historian, wrote this commentary. He included comments on the most controversial aspects of the book, such as the assertion by Laurinienė that Lithuania's Jews enthusiastically greeted the incoming Soviets in 1940. Šepetys argues that such beliefs could have been an outcome of Nazi propaganda or possibly the stories of other people. Laurinienė was only 11 years old in 1940, and her memories may not have been accurate. Such assertions (that Lithuania's Jews enthusiastically supported the Soviets) are linked to an anti-Semitic double genocide narrative which is still popular in Lithuania. According to one version of this narrative, Lithuania's Jews supported the Soviets, the Soviets repressed and deported the Lithuanians, and the Lithuanians exerted revenge against the Jews by collaborating with the Nazis and participating in the Holocaust. Undoubtedly, there are many problems with such anti-Semitic narratives. Many Jews suffered greatly when the Soviets occupied Lithuania in 1940, and many were subject to deportation by the Soviet Union. For more on Soviet deportations of Lithuania's Jews, see: Davoliūtė (2015).
  - 33 Interview with Živilė Kropaitė-Basiulė, 13 July 2022.
  - 34 Ibid.
  - 35 Ibid.

## Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the funding of the European Union under the WIDERA program (EUROPAST project, Grant Agreement No. 101079466), which this research is part of.

The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.



**Funded by  
the European Union**

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