

## **Book Review:**

Juozas Lukša. *Forest Brothers: The Account of an Anti-Soviet Lithuanian Freedom Fighter: 1944 – 1948*. Translated with an Introduction by Laima Vincė. Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2009.

Juozas Lukša's memoir of anti-Soviet underground resistance in the postwar years was the first ever published, and it remains one of the most vivid depictions of what went on after the Soviets swept back into Lithuania in 1944.

The Lithuanian partisans fought the returning invaders as best they could, usually employing guerilla tactics. After three years of bloody resistance battles, Lukša escaped through Poland in 1947 in a vain attempt to solicit Western help, but he became stranded in Paris. There, he met and married Nijolė Bražėnaitė, only to return to Lithuania for the CIA in 1950. But the resistance was in its final years, and in this melancholy twilight of the partisans, Lukša was betrayed by a former comrade-in-arms and killed in 1951.

Juozas Lukša's memoir and biography are extremely popular – they have appeared in five editions in Lithuanian, the final one exquisitely footnoted (though with too many errors in pagination). His story was made into a feature film in Lithuania and is being made into a documentary in the USA. The memoir was abridged and translated into Swedish, and into English in 1975. I used elements of the Lithuanian version in my own novel, set in the partisan resistance.\*

*\* Antanas Sileika, *Underground*. Toronto: Thomas Allen and Son, 2011.*

Now we have a new translation of Lukša's memoir from Laima Vincė, and it is a welcome addition to the growing body of evidence about the resistance, not only in Lithuania but throughout the so-called "borderlands" of the former Soviet Union, consisting of parts of Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine, Estonia, and Latvia.

Although Lukša's memoir is far from perfect – its structure and time sequences are confusing – it is an excellent mosaic of first- and second-hand accounts of various crimes visited upon the locals by the Soviet occupying forces: robbery, murder, dispossession and deportation.

In response to this violence, Lithuanian men first gathered into bands in the forest to escape Soviet conscription or arrest and then began to fight back with any means they had: an underground press, sabotage, assassination, and finally pitched battle. Over time, the number of Soviet collaborators began to rise and the resistance situation, as we now know, became entirely hopeless, although it did not seem that way to the partisans at the time. Many continued to hope for rescue from the West.

So here we have the most romantic of stories – the biography of a hero who sacrificed his love and his life for his country. While Juozas Lukša was undoubtedly both romantic and heroic, this new translation appears at a time when a great deal more information about the partisans and their context has come out, and our own attitudes are more skeptical now than they were during the Soviet occupation.

Certain aspects of the partisan mind-set might seem peculiar to some of us now, as demonstrated in such moments as the atom bomb party, when the partisans danced with delight to hear of the atomic weapons dropped on Japan. We have learned to deplore the twin atomic explosions, but to the partisans it seemed as if the Americans finally had a knockout punch against the Soviets. It was peculiar to them that the Americans chose not to use it.

The cruelty inflicted upon the partisans by the Soviets and their collaborators was quite horrifying. In one case, provocateurs captured a partisan and buried his head in an anthill. Captured partisans were tortured by many other horrible means. Frequently, their grotesquely mutilated bodies were tossed onto the marketplaces as examples to the locals, and those who identified the bodies were themselves deported.

For their part, the partisans did not hold back and employed violence of their own. For example, they burned a house with phosphorous grenades so the collaborators inside suffocated in the basement; they attacked the homes of Soviet settler families who moved onto the properties of deported citizens; and they planned elaborate assassinations. Most dramatic among these assassinations was the infamous “engagement party,” in which a partisan pair masquerading as an engaged couple invited local communist functionaries to a party, only to shoot five of them dead after dinner. The accordion player, wounded in the throat, was found by the authorities fleeing across a bridge. Unable to speak, he wrote out the story of what had happened, and the police went on to photograph the scene. The grisly photo of the carnage appears in the Lithuanian version of the book, but not in this translation.

The partisan delight at killing enemies stands as a strong corrective to the romance of Lukša’s story. Traitors were hunted down and liquidated. The violence of the occupation bred the violence of the resistance, it is true, but the violence remains appalling.

When I stopped at a Marijampolė museum in 2009 to look at its partisan history displays and to visit the scene of the engagement party assassination, the director, upon learning that I planned to write about the partisans, cautioned me against humanizing their enemy. He said that, if I went that route, I would be doing an injustice to those who died defending their homes, their families and their country.

He had a point, but one can’t help remembering that many of the partisans’ victims were civilians. In his recent study of the partisan resistance, Alexander Statiev, in *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands*, goes so far as to claim that the partisan war was a form of civil war. This statement is exaggerated – there would have been no partisan war without the Soviet occupation, but it does stress that most losses were civilian losses.

In *Partizanai tada ir šiandien*, Lithuanian historian, Bernardas Gailius, goes beyond defending the partisans. He makes the point that, by their actions, they demonstrated the resistance of the Lithuanian nation against the Soviets. He would

call the resistance a war rather than an insurgency, and an extension through war of the policy of the legitimate Lithuanian government.

Yet in Lithuania itself, any online newspaper article about the partisans prompts dozens of comments, most of them negative (one might argue that newspaper commentators do not reflect the general population). These commentators claim the partisans were killers and thieves. Defenders of partisans say the killers and thieves were agents provocateurs planted by the Soviet regime, or a few men gone bad. The fact remains that, in Lithuania itself, the subject causes occasional controversy because, in some smaller towns, virtually all the inhabitants were touched by the partisan war. As a friend said to me of Merkinė, a town in the south of Lithuania, “Only two types of people live here: those whose parents suffered under the Soviets and those whose parents caused the suffering.”

This partisan story is mostly unknown in the West – all the more reason to be grateful to Laima Vincė and her publisher for retranslating one version of it.

However, even among the few in the West who do know about the partisans, the subject is sometimes controversial. The Jews who survived in Lithuania and the East were rescued by the Soviets. To them the Soviets were saviors. On the other hand, some of the Soviet counterinsurgency operatives in Lithuania were Jews. At least two of them, Nachman Dushansky and Aaron Greisas (the latter not identified in the translation as a Jew, although he is identified as such in the original) are named in this text, the former surviving long enough to flee to Israel after Lithuania's independence and the latter killed by partisans.

There have been all sorts of intemperate accusations on this score. Juozas Lukša is identified in some Jewish web sites as a Nazi collaborator (unsubstantiated) and he was depicted as a criminal in a Soviet piece of disinformation called *Vanagai iš anapus*, published in the Soviet Union in 1961. Extremists on the other side make exaggerated claims about Jews as Soviet operatives and collaborators.

What it meant to be a “collaborator” in Lithuania is a fraught subject as well because it was not just Nazis who killed Jews there. Some Lithuanians were involved too, and whatever their actual number may have been, even one was too many.

In other words, controversies swirl around Lukša and the partisans, and while we need not take these controversies too seriously, we cannot let them pass unremarked upon.



One of the strengths of the fifth edition of the Lithuanian version of this memoir, carried over in Vincé’s translation, is the addition of extensive footnotes that humanize the victims Lukša writes about. Thus we read the following in Lukša’s original text:

A few days later I met my friend, who went by the code name of Uosis (Ash Tree).\* He was a partisan. He had come to Kaunas to retrieve a printing press...

\*Algirdas Varkala, 1927 - 1948. March 18, 1948 he was retreating from the enemy when he was shot in the leg. He shot himself to avoid being taken prisoner.

The two exchange some information about partisan life, and Uosis is described as optimistic and determined. He is a minor player in the story, but even minor players had lives important to them and their loved ones. Timothy Snyder, in his recent and magisterial *Bloodlands*, points out that we need to remember the humanity of every single person who suffered in World War Two. In a Vincé translation footnote, we read the following additional information about Uosis:

In other words, most of the people mentioned in the memoir had histories and fates that play out in the footnotes, making their lives all the more vivid and tragic.

On the matter of the translation itself, the text reads easily enough – the sentences are fluid. A stickler might argue that the tone is somewhat American (the partisans sometimes sound like Marines in basic training) and the phrasing is not always felicitous with the original.

For instance, the 1975 translation by E. J. Harrison reads:

A lone Red Army trooper appears and turns his hard-riden nag into our yard. The animal is unencumbered by either saddle or bridle – a length of rope around its neck apparently serving the purpose of both.

Vincė writes:

The first Red Army soldier appeared at the rear of our barn on the back of a tired, old nag. A pair of pants slung over the nag's back served as a saddle and stirrups.

The Lithuanian original names neither rope nor pants, but a hobble tossed over the back of the horse. Since hardly any modern person knows what a hobble looks like, one can see the need to change the word, and one can see the different strategies of Harrison and Vincė, including a change of verb tense.

We should cut Vincė some slack on this issue – scrupulous precision would have made for a bumpy translation.

This rich trove of partisan memoirs, histories, articles, and archive material has barely been translated into English. The *Diary of a Partisan* (Lionginas Baliukevičius), a document found in KGB archives, is a welcome exception, but there are more books awaiting translation, among them Adolfas Ramanauskas's *Daugel krito sūnų* and the late Liūtas Mockūnas's *Pavargęs herojus*.

And there are many more books being written about the context of the resistance. In addition to the ones mentioned above, the late Tony Judt's *Postwar* and the more focused *The Lands Between*, by Alexander Prusin, are worth looking at. First-hand

accounts from other countries should be looked at as well, including the chilling Polish-language *Egzekutor*, by Stefan Dąbski.

The controversy about the partisans is not likely to go away any time soon, but if we hope to come to a balanced judgment, we will need to study all the sources available and thoroughly thrash out the different interpretations of them. Laima Vincé has made an important contribution to this ongoing project of remembrance and clarification.

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