

**From:** Ričardas Dediāla <[ricardas.dediala@kpd.lt](mailto:ricardas.dediala@kpd.lt)>

**Re:** Re: Press inquiry

Dear

I received your inquiry regarding the “Jewish partisans’ fort” in the Rūdinkai Forest, and I will try to answer it as comprehensively as possible, drawing also on the information collected by my colleague Augustina Kurilienė (Chief Specialist of the Accounting, Inventory and Register Division of the Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture (hereinafter – the Department)), concerning the registration process. I will also add my own historical remarks so that you may better understand the context.

**Historical context.** During the German–Soviet War in Eastern Front front (1941–1945), the Soviet leadership sought to organize large-scale partisan operations in the rear of the German (Nazi) army. The aims of partisan warfare were: (1) destabilizing the German army’s rear, (2) disrupting front-line supply systems, (3) providing intelligence to the Red Army, and so on. In the German rear, there operated groups and detachments subordinate to several institutions: the Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement based in Moscow, the 4th Directorate of the USSR NKVD–NKGB, and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Red Army. In addition, partisan detachments also formed spontaneously in German-occupied territories. These were composed of escaped prisoners of war, Red Army soldiers left behind in encirclements, and persons hiding from German reprisals. At first such units were not subordinate to any structure. Most often, once they encountered groups sent from Moscow, they came under their control. In historiography they are referred to as the “Red Partisans” or “Soviet Partisans”.

In Lithuania, the Soviet partisan movement did not develop organically and was therefore artificially instigated from Moscow. In general, the activities of the so-called Red partisans were highly unpopular in Lithuania and had virtually no public support. For that reason, the Soviet authorities, lacking any real social basis, had not only to organize the movement artificially but also to mythologize the phenomenon and popularize it through literature - for example, the controversial writer Petras Cvirka’s short story “Lakštingala” (eng. *Nightingale*) (1942), about a child helping Soviet partisans. This essentially copied the various war myths already being created in the Soviet Union, in what during the Soviet era - and still today in Russia and Belarus - is called the “Great Patriotic War”.

Why did this happen? For context, Lithuania experienced three occupations at that time: (1) the first Soviet occupation and annexation of Lithuania (1940–1941), (2) the Nazi occupation (1941–1944), and (3) the second Soviet occupation (1944–1990). During the first Soviet occupation, 17,600 people were deported to Siberia, and another approximately 5,500 were killed. Thus, when the Nazi occupation began in 1941, society - which had already experienced Soviet repression - viewed any cooperation with Soviet authorities negatively, especially under occupation conditions.

At that time (the Nazi occupation period), Lithuanian anti-Nazi resistance began, with its main goal being the restoration of an independent Lithuanian state. The resistance members oriented themselves toward the United States and Great Britain, hoping that the principles of the Atlantic Charter (1941) would be implemented. Lithuania's greatest enemies were the communist-controlled Soviet Union (enemy number one) and Nazi Germany (enemy number two). As the Nazis pursued a harsh and blunt policy of oppression, secret Lithuanian resistance organizations began to form in late autumn 1941: the Lithuanian Front (LF), the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters' Union, the Lithuanian Freedom Army, and others. The strongest and most active anti-Nazi organizations were the LF and the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters' Union (formed in late 1941–early 1942). The LF mainly attracted Catholic-oriented youth and intellectuals, while the Union drew people of nationalist and liberal leanings. The LF had military (the Kęstutis Organization), political-information, and finance divisions. Together with other underground organizations, on November 25, 1943, the LF helped establish the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania (VLIK). By mid-1943, the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters' Union had gathered about 3,000 members all around Lithuania. It published an internal information bulletin. In early 1944, the Union established the secret Free Lithuania Radio; its broadcasts could even be heard in Sweden. In 1943–44, the Gestapo arrested more than a dozen members of the Union's leadership and publishers of its press.

A distinctive feature of the anti-Nazi resistance was its tactic of non-violent resistance. This took various forms: Lithuanian men refused to join the military and political units organized by the German occupation administration; the entire population avoided going to work in Germany; farmers did not fulfil agricultural quotas; anti-Nazi propaganda and agitation were carried out; efforts were made to preserve Lithuanian cultural and educational institutions; collaborators were exposed and intimidated. The main method of resistance was the clandestine anti-Nazi press.

Nevertheless, a total of 29,500 Lithuanian residents of various nationalities were imprisoned in Nazi prisons and concentration camps. These included people from the anti-Nazi underground, members of the intelligentsia, political figures held as hostages, prisoners. It is estimated that about 30,000 Lithuanian residents were taken into police and military units, while approximately 60,000–70,000 were deported to Germany for forced labor; according to other sources, the number was 30,000–40,000 people. And this does not even include one of the most horrific events organized by the Nazis in Lithuania—the genocide of the Jewish people, during which about 175,000–200,000 (90–95%) of Lithuania's Jews were murdered. As I mentioned, for Lithuanian resistance organizations and, in general, for most of the society, both the Nazi and Soviet authorities were objects of resistance.

The first attempts to organize resistance in the rear of the German (Nazi) army were already taking place in 1941. Chekist groups (that is, members of the Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, or the *Cheka*, Soviet Russia's first political police, 1917–1922; sometimes the term is also applied to employees of later USSR security institutions) and Red Army reconnaissance groups were sent into Lithuania. Their members were betrayed, arrested, surrendered, killed, or disappeared without trace.

To develop the resistance movement, the Lithuanian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement (LPJŠ) was established in 1942 by decision of the USSR State Defense Committee, under the leadership of Antanas Sniečkus. To organize, coordinate, and expand the partisan movement in Lithuania, the LPJŠ formed an operational group, which was sent closer to Lithuanian territory. The group was based in Belarus, in the vicinity of Lake Narach (Lith. Narutis). This base served as an intermediate point from which partisans would move into Lithuania. Moreover, Rūdninkai Forest provided favorable conditions for such groups to operate because of its vast size and its relative proximity to Belarus, from which Moscow-organized forces could enter more easily than they could other, more urbanized areas of Lithuania.

Until 1943, the Rūdninkai Forest provided shelter for escaped prisoners of war, local residents hiding from Nazi persecution, and scouts sent from Moscow. The partisans had no contact with leadership, received no assignments, and carried out no purposeful operations. Although Soviet saboteur and reconnaissance activity in 1941–1943 was limited, because of their presence the residents of villages in the Rūdninkai Forest area suffered German reprisals already in 1941 and the first half of 1943. The situation began to change only in the second half of 1943. As the front moved westward, the importance of Lithuanian territory as a potential rear area for sabotage increased. In addition, the Red Army leadership required intelligence. Therefore, it was decided to establish a partisan centre within Lithuania itself. Representatives of the LPJŠ Operational Group arrived from the forests of Belarus into Rūdninkai Forest, where they were tasked with coordinating actions in the rear of the German army.

Rūdninkai Forest became the centre of the Soviet partisan movement in Lithuania. From here, in 1943, Soviet scouts and saboteurs began penetrating deeper into Lithuania. Their main task was to undertake active sabotage and gather intelligence. They were also to prepare the ground for the country's reoccupation (that is, the second Soviet occupation, which indeed later occurred): to rally people loyal or favourable to the Soviets, establish underground Communist Party and Komsomol committees, spread anti-German propaganda, and publish underground periodicals.

In addition, the partisans compiled lists of traitors and enemies. These included policemen, village elders, local administrative workers, auxiliary policemen, and people suspected of collaborating with the occupation authorities and repressive structures. Such persons were either killed by the partisans, or their punishment was postponed until the Red Army occupied Lithuania and Soviet rule was restored.

In the autumn of 1943, Jews who had escaped the Vilnius Ghetto began gathering in Rūdninkai Forest too. It should be noted that the units formed by these people did not act independently. They were incorporated into the Soviet partisan movement and became an integral part of it. Like other Soviet sabotage units, formations in which a large share of members were Jews carried out the directives of Soviet leadership. Soviet partisan activity was essentially concentrated in Rūdninkai Forest. Over the entire period of their operations, it is estimated that there were around 3,900 Soviet/Red partisans in Lithuania, whose ethnic composition was highly diverse (according to 1944 data): Russians – 45.82%, Jews – 44.52%, Lithuanians –

6.73%, other nationalities – 2.93%. Therefore, these were not exclusively Jewish groups but rather ethnically mixed formations. Because the number of these Soviet partisans was relatively small, the topic has been well researched in historiography. It should be noted that the Soviet Union was a multinational state, and its official propaganda typically presented such movements in ethnically neutralized terms, without singling out specific nationalities.

In 1943–1944, 13 Soviet partisan detachments were based in Rūdinkai Forest. Their numbers grew constantly: in November 1943 there were 460 people, of whom 140 were armed; by the end of December 1943 there were 650, half of them armed; by March 1944 there were around one thousand partisans in the forest.

The partisans carried out sabotage on highways, railways, forest industry enterprises, dairies, and elsewhere. In response to the intensifying partisan activity, the Germans undertook reprisals. For example, in September 1943, partisans derailed a military train on the Lentvaris–Rūdiškės railway section near the village of Ferma, and in retaliation the Germans burned the village and deported part of its population for labor in Germany. Altogether, in 1943–1944, the Germans burned 14 villages in Lithuania in revenge for Soviet partisan attacks. The most tragic German reprisal operation took place in June 1944. Retaliating for soldiers killed in an ambush by Soviet saboteurs, the Germans burned the village of Pirčiupiai and murdered more than one hundred of its inhabitants. Soviet partisans mostly supplied themselves with food and everyday goods through so-called “procurement operations,” which in essence amounted to robbing farmers. Such activity led to highly strained relations between society and the Soviet partisans. To defend themselves against economic and physical terror by the partisans, armed village self-defense units began to be formed in 1943.

I should also note that in 1960 the Soviet authorities erected a monument in Pirčiupiai to commemorate this tragedy, emphasizing the terror of the Nazi occupation. However, highlighting the image of the burning of Pirčiupiai was also convenient for the Soviet authorities for another reason: namely, to mask the atrocities committed by Red Army soldiers and NKVD punitive units in Lithuanian villages and small towns in 1944–1945—mass looting, rape, killings, and the burning of homesteads. More broadly, in Soviet symbolic politics, places such as Pirčiupiai were intended to function as symbols of the mass killings of Lithuanian civilians by the Nazis in their attempt to “clear eastern space for the chosen race.”

In December 1944 alone, 144 farms were burned and 265 people shot dead in ten Lithuanian rural districts. In the same Dzūkija region, in Merkinė district of Alytus county, 48 homesteads were burned within a radius of several kilometers on 22 December 1944, some together with their residents; in Klepočiai, 20 km from Pirčiupiai, 22 people were killed. In addition, in 1944 these partisans, acting on the orders of the underground forces of the Southern Region led by Genrik Ziman, secretary of the Communist Party of Lithuania (Bolsheviks), destroyed the villages of Kaniūkai and Bakaloriškės: they killed dozens of inhabitants and burned the buildings. In addition, in 2004 a memorial cross was unveiled in remembrance of the village of Kaniūkai, which was burned by Soviet partisans on January 29, 1944, and

of its murdered inhabitants. I would also note that on the edge of Rūdninkai Forest there is a memorial stone dedicated to the burned village of Gumbas and the memory of those who perished (in 1993, this village site and its monument were inscribed in the Cultural Heritage Register under the unique registration code 16798), Link: <https://kvr.kpd.lt/#/static-heritage-detail/06F80CC3-E571-4C69-BA7E-F454FD076A4F>

Historians generally describe the activities of the Soviet partisans as terroristic toward local inhabitants. Relations between the partisans and local self-defense units were highly tense. There were cases when this confrontation, as I mentioned above, escalated into armed clashes or even massacres. Therefore, Lithuanian society's attitude toward the Soviet partisans was naturally negative, and there were very few ethnic Lithuanians among them. So, their actions in Lithuania lasted until their area of operation was occupied by the Red Army. When Soviet reoccupation began in the second half of 1944, some of these partisans served in repressive organs or in the Red Army, some worked in party and administrative institutions, and some engaged in civilian activity or emigrated abroad.

In response to your question: *“Why is this anti-Nazi relic not maintained and presented to visitors in the same way as the partisan bunkers of the Forest Brothers (from another phase of the resistance)?”*

The following may be emphasized: Soviet partisans in Lithuania in 1941–1945 were a constituent part of the USSR forces fighting Nazi Germany and performed their own functions. This anti-Nazi armed underground, inspired by Moscow as early as 1941, in Lithuania served the political interests of the USSR and operated as a force seeking to consolidate a new Soviet occupation (re-occupation), pursuing these aims through various means, including repressive and even criminal methods. Some Jewish partisans (as did participants of other nationalities) became instruments and accomplices in the perpetration of Soviet crimes. Their activity is viewed as hostile to local population and Lithuanian statehood, and cannot be equated with the later partisan war fought against the Soviet Union. Since the anti-Soviet armed resistance pursued fundamentally different aims and employed different methods of action. This is because the essential goals of the Lithuanian partisans (also known as the Forest Brothers, i.e., the Lithuanian Armed Resistance against the Soviet Occupation Regime in 1944–1953) were: (1) restoring Lithuanian independence, (2) hindering the consolidation of Soviet occupation, (3) resisting Sovietization and collectivization, and (4) defending the population against repression, deportations, and mobilization. This is particularly significant because in 1944–1953, during mass and other deportations (34 in total), around 132,000 people were deported from Lithuania (more than 5% of the population). The Soviet authorities killed around 20,000 Lithuanian partisans.

I should emphasize to you that, as of today, the historical narrative of Soviet (Red) partisans remains very strong in countries such as Belarus and Russia. In Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for nearly 32 years, the “Partisan Republic” (Belarusian: *партызанская рэспубліка*) is one of the most important identity myths in the official historical narrative. It claims that during the

Second World War Belarus was a land of exceptionally widespread Soviet partisan resistance, and that the entire nation therefore supposedly became a “collective community of resistance.” This narrative was originally shaped during the Soviet era and continues today to be actively used to legitimize the regime.

Soviet partisans have been extensively discussed in Lithuanian historiography, especially in the studies of Rimantas Zizas:

- <https://etalpykla.lituanistika.lt/object/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2004~1367183905643/J.04~2004~1367183905643.pdf>
- <https://www.zurnalai.vu.lt/gr/lt/article/view/37881/35547>

The author’s monograph: Zizas, R. *Sovietiniai partizanai Lietuvoje 1941–1944 m.* Vilnius: Lithuanian Institute of History Press, 2014, 607 p.

Also according to separate studies carried out by the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania: <https://www.genocid.lt/>

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### **On cultural heritage objects within the Rūdninkai military training**

**area** (Rūdininkai Forest is a vast forest massif located in the Šalčininkai and Varėna districts of Lithuania). First of all, there are two cultural heritage objects registered in the Cultural Heritage Register within the territory of the Rūdninkai training area:

1. The historic charcoal-burning site of Žygantiškės (unique code in Cultural Heritage Register: 16381), Šalčininkai District Municipality, Pabarė eldership, Žygantiškės village.  
Link: <https://kvr.kpd.lt/#/static-heritage-detail/dd937cf8-4a3a-448e-bf3d-f51199992f37>
2. The memorial site of the 1863–1864 Uprising battle in Rūdninkai Forest (unique code in Cultural Heritage Register: 38319), Šalčininkai District Municipality, Baltoji Vokė eldership, Senieji Maceliai village.  
Link: <https://kvr.kpd.lt/#/static-heritage-detail/3AF3397D-C99E-4945-A9B4-D7F43427FED7>

### **Regarding the Soviet partisan dugouts (bunkers/forts)**

The above-mentioned dugouts (which you refer to as forts) are indeed associated with Soviet partisans, but they are not authentic, i.e. they were built later. As Partisan Dugouts (No. IR 159) (Lith. *Partizanų žieminės*), they were included in the list of historical monuments of republican significance of the Lithuanian SSR, approved by Resolution No. 294 of the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR on 15 July 1969.

It should be noted that at that time both the republican and local lists of historical monuments were among the most politicized: roughly half of the monuments on these lists consisted of Soviet soldiers’ graves, buildings where revolutionary or executive committees had operated, and similar objects.

In 1974, the dugouts were “reconstructed,” and an adjacent building was erected to house an exhibition. In essence, they were used for propaganda purposes (schoolchildren were brought there, etc.). The Department possesses the 1974 reconstruction project of these dugouts or “forts”. This project does not mention or in any way single out persons of Jewish ethnicity. Therefore, this is not an authentic relic of the Soviet partisans active in 1941–1944, but rather a postwar object created to commemorate Soviet partisan activity in general.

More detailed information on the Partisan Dugouts (No. IR 159), as well as the “reconstruction” project, can be found in the former “passport” of the object (this was the term then used for heritage accounting documents).

### **On the legal status of the Soviet partisan dugouts**

After the restoration of Lithuanian independence, the heritage protection system of independent Lithuania began to be developed, and at the same time the cultural heritage objects included in the monument lists of the Lithuanian SSR were revised.

Taking into account that some historical monuments had been dismantled, were inauthentic, or had been artificially elevated in significance, and in accordance with Article 17 of the (then valid) „Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Protection and Use of Historical and Cultural Monuments“, part of the objects were removed from the republican and local monument lists by Government Resolution No. 687 of 8 September 1993. This included the above-mentioned Soviet partisan Dugouts (IR 159).

The Department has no data on potential new immovable cultural properties, and no procedures are currently envisaged for identifying and registering new cultural heritage objects in the Cultural Heritage Register (i.e. the national register in which all immovable and movable cultural properties are registered).

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In response to your question: *“Are there any plans to preserve this fort, place it under protection, or grant it special protection status?”*

At present, the registration of the above-mentioned dugouts (“forts”) in the Cultural Heritage Register would also not comply with the currently valid legal acts, namely:

1. the provisions of the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Protection of Immovable Cultural Heritage (Link: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.9BC8AEE9D9F8/asr?csrt=8700439971671213648>)
2. the provisions of the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Prohibition of the Promotion of Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes and Their Ideologies (Link: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/09a371f081df11ed8df094f359a60216/asr?csrt=8700439971671213648>)
3. paragraph 23 of the Description of Criteria for the Evaluation, Selection, and Determination of the Significance Level of Immovable Cultural Heritage Values, approved by Order No. ĮV-150 of the Minister of Culture of the

Republic of Lithuania of 15 April 2005 (amendment of Order No. IV-59 of 26 January 2023) (Link: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.9A8B1926C66E/asr?csrt=8700439971671213648>) which states that:

*“23. Objects shall not be evaluated (except graves and tombstones located in inactive cemeteries, burial or reburial sites of human remains) if they depict or contain as a component part:*

- 23.1. the flag, coat of arms, Nazi swastika, or SS insignia of Nazi Germany;*
- 23.2. the flag, coat of arms, Soviet hammer and sickle, or Soviet five-pointed star of the USSR or the Lithuanian SSR;*
- 23.3. symbols of Nazi or communist organizations, inscriptions glorifying such regimes;*
- 23.4. images of leaders, members, or other persons of the German National Socialist Party or the Communist Party of the USSR responsible for repressions against Lithuanian inhabitants under occupation regimes;*
- 23.5. signs composed based on the symbols referred to in subparagraphs 23.1–23.3, or symbols of anti-constitutional organizations similar thereto;*
- 23.6. sculptures, images, inscriptions, or other symbols promoting the activities or members of the armies or special services of Nazi Germany or the USSR that carried out repressions against Lithuanian inhabitants;*
- 23.7. other symbols, organizations, events, or dates of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes and their ideologies, symbolizing such regimes and ideologies, their military aggression against another state, the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940–1941 and 1944–1990, the Nazi occupation of 1939–1944, and the establishment and repression of these occupations.”*

This object would also essentially meet the criteria of the Law on the Prohibition of the Promotion of Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes and Their Ideologies, according to which it could potentially be removed as a public object promoting totalitarian or authoritarian regimes and their ideologies.

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I hope I have answered your questions in sufficient detail. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact either me or my colleague from the Accounting, Inventory, and Registry division Augustina Kurilienė ([augustina.kuriliene@kpd.lt](mailto:augustina.kuriliene@kpd.lt)), who can also provide you with competent information on the legal regulation and processes of cultural heritage accounting.

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