

United States Marine Corps
Command And Staff College
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Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

“Forest Brothers,” 1945: The culmination of the
Lithuanian Partisan movement

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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March 11, 2009

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Date: 24 March 2009

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 11 MAR 2009	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Forest Brothers, 1945: The culmination of the Lithuanian Partisan Movement		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 43	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISCLAIMER	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
“FOREST BROTHERS,” 1945	6
Introduction	6
The First Soviet Occupation	7
German Occupation and Operation <i>Bagration</i>	8
The “Third Liberation”	12
The “Forest Brothers”	13
Hope and Motivation	14
Soviet Measures against the Resistance	16
Culmination	20
Conclusions	23
ENDNOTES	26
APPENDIX A	33
APPENDIX B	34
APPENDIX C	35
APPENDIX D	40
APPENDIX E	41
APPENDIX F	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY	43

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my parents, Michael and Jina Leskys for instilling within me a sense of nationalism and pride in Lithuania as a young boy; little did they know that by encouraging my Lithuanian pride, so would grow my sense of patriotism and duty for the United States. I wish to acknowledge Tomas Skucas who provided me with the initial idea to pursue this thesis topic, as well as for having provided me with a number of valuable resources from Lithuania. At the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, I wish to thank Dr. Paul Gelpi, in particular, for all of his invaluable assistance as my advisor in this endeavor; Rachel Kingcade for her research help; and LtCol Kelly Alexander, USMC, and LTC Michael Lewis, USA, for their mentorship and support. Lastly, I wish to thank my wife, Anne Leskys, for all of her encouragement and late-night editing prowess.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: "Forest Brothers," 1945: The Culmination of the Lithuanian Partisan Movement

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Thesis: Although the resistance effort maintained its strength ideologically, the Lithuanian partisan movement never recovered from the culminating point in 1945 because of a shortfall in resources, a lack of external support, and the inability of resistance leadership to adapt rapidly enough against a comprehensive Soviet assimilation campaign.

Discussion: While many authors argue that the high point in the Lithuanian partisan war occurred between 1946 and 1947, the totality of evidence points towards a culmination in 1945 from which the effort never recovered. This culminating point may be attributed to a miscalculation of partisan resources on the part of their leadership as well as a lack of external support. The main reason for achieving culmination, however, rested in the inability of partisans to fight a conventional war against a massive, combined arms Soviet force. Mass deportations between three separate occupations and a wave of 60,000 escapees created a vacuum of political, military and moral leadership. Compounded with the realization that there would be no external support from the democratic West, the will of the Lithuanians was bent by the Soviet campaign. Ultimately, the numbers of partisans killed, captured or given amnesty by Soviet forces reflect an apex in military capability in 1945 that drastically diminished thereafter.

Conclusion: The pinnacle of partisan effort in 1945 clearly represents a culminating point that forced the Lithuanian resistance movement to shift their operations drastically. Ultimately, based on the totality of evidence, the 1945 culminating point splits the resistance into two stages: 1) 1944-1945 – conventional war operations, a period of traditional offensive warfare by an organized partisan movement; and 2) 1946-1953 – irregular warfare operations, a period of unremitting decline by a significantly diminished resistance, relegated to a more defensive posture and small scale offensive operations.

Introduction

Conventional acceptance of the Lithuanian partisan movement against the Soviets from 1944 to 1953 typically delineates the effort into three stages according to distinguishable patterns of operations and centralization of effort.¹ Operationally, however, the Lithuanian resistance fought by the “forest brothers”² may be more clearly divided by defining the unacknowledged culmination that occurred in 1945—a point when overwhelming Soviet combat power caused a decline in partisan capabilities that continued until the conflict’s final demise in 1953. Although the resistance effort maintained its strength ideologically, the Lithuanian partisan movement never recovered from the culminating point because of a shortfall in resources, a lack of external support, and the inability of resistance leadership to adapt rapidly enough against a comprehensive Soviet assimilation campaign.

Cold War delineation of the Lithuanian partisan movement generally divided the war into two stages, “four years of strength (1944-48) and four of gradual decline (1949-1952).”³ With the elucidation provided by previously classified documents of the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs), the generally accepted post-Cold War division of the partisan movement is segmented into three stages: 1) July 1944-May 1946, 2) May 1946-Nov 1948, and 3) Nov 1948-May 1953. The first period encompassed the years of “victory and romanticism” when partisans “would gather in the hundreds in the forests and arrange well-fortified camps” to plan large scale attacks against the Soviets.⁴ In the second period from May 1946 to Nov 1948, partisans were forced to avoid battles with the NKVD while dividing into smaller units that lived in small, camouflaged bunkers; during this period, “a joint resistance authority was formed [and] the organizational structure of the resistance units took shape.”⁵ In the final period, partisans created the joint authority for both military and political resistance; nonetheless, “the Soviets

organized a brutal liquidation of farm households, deportations and forced collectivization, depriving the forest brothers of their supporters.”⁶

These divisions create logical lines that embrace the campaign’s efforts along tactical methodology, as well as the effort to create a linear “shadow” government on the strategic level. From an operational campaign perspective, however, the partisan effort is more logically divided into two stages distinguished by a 1945 culminating point: 1) 1944-45—conventional war operations, a period of traditional offensive warfare by an organized partisan movement; and 2) 1946-1953—irregular warfare operations, a period of unremitting decline by a significantly diminished resistance, relegated to a more defensive posture and small scale offensive operations.

The First Soviet Occupation

Lithuania declared its neutrality at the start of World War II, but in doing so, was ostracized from Germany and essentially handed over to the Soviet Union through the signing of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.⁷ Now within the sphere of Soviet influence, the Bolsheviks forcibly coerced the Lithuanian administration into assuming a puppet communist government that then requested annexation by the Soviet Union.⁸ The communists mobilized the NKVD who rapidly embarked on a campaign to disband the Lithuanian armed forces, suppress the Roman Catholic Church, nationalize business and industry, confiscate agricultural property, and deport enemies of the state.⁹

In 1941, the NKVD selected individuals for deportation based on a list of 23 different groups considered threats to the communist integration of Lithuania¹⁰ (see Appendix A). The NKVD implemented this deportation program quickly and efficiently. In one week between June 14 and June 21, 1941, “30,425 deportees in 871 freight cars were sent to various regions of

the Soviet Union.”¹¹ The first occupation in 1940-41, accordingly, “eliminated a sizable stratum of the educated and politically conscious,” effectively suppressing the leaders within Lithuanian society.¹²

In Lithuania, the Soviets followed procedures similar to those they implemented successfully in other usurped nations as well. In Poland, the Soviets deported “upwards of 1 million people from all social classes and all ethnic groups ... to Siberia and Soviet Central Asia.”¹³ In the Ukraine, “[t]he wanton rape, pillage, deportation and slaughter of innocent people of all ages, and burning of the entire villages were common occurrences.”¹⁴ In reaction to these Soviet atrocities, resistance movements formed across the annexed nations in pursuit of independence from oppression.

The first organized resistance group in Lithuania, the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAP), formed in October 1940 by Kazys Skirpa, a former Lithuanian military attaché to Germany.¹⁵ Broken down into three man “cells” across Lithuania, this 36,000-member organization was to “incite a revolt when the leadership determined that the conditions were right.”¹⁶ Lithuanian leadership activated the LAP on 22 June 1941 as Germany invaded the Soviet Union, resulting in the liberation of major cities and the retreat of the Red Army.¹⁷ This victory was short-lived, however, as the Germans soon arrived to become yet another occupying regime.

German Occupation and Operation *Bagration*

Over the course of the three-year German occupation, the bitter sting of the communist totalitarian government from 1940-41 still lingered. The Lithuanians would not soon forget the painful treatment under the Soviets, let alone the deportation of 35,000 friends and family members to labor camps.¹⁸ Fueled by the flames of these atrocities, an organized anti-German

resistance movement formed, including an underground political center—the Supreme Committee for Liberation of Lithuania.¹⁹

As the Germans began to lose significant momentum in their operations, this Supreme Council discussed strategic concerns and ramifications for the outcome of WWII, formulating three possible scenarios: “1) Germany will make a compromise peace with Western democracies, which will force Germany to grant Lithuania independence; 2) Germany will lose the war to Western democracies and will be forced to grant independence and if necessary defend Lithuania by force of arms from Soviet designs; 3) Germany will also lose the war to Russia, which in all probability will mean the destruction of Lithuania.”²⁰

As the last scenario evolved into the most probable course of action, the Lithuanians appealed to the Germans to develop a defense force to fight the Red Army. Timed appropriately with concurrent actions by Soviet guerrillas in eastern Lithuania, the Lithuanian government reached an agreement with the Germans in February of 1944 to enable the creation of a “Home Guard” for “defending the homeland from [the] red partisan menace and the Red Army.”²¹ The plan called for the establishment of an officer’s school and fourteen battalions.²²

Within four months, however, the Germans discovered the intent behind the Supreme Committee underground and rapidly disbanded the Home Guard to prevent an organized resistance.²³ Although the defense force was dispersed when the Germans broke their agreement in May 1944, a formalized organizational structure with identified leadership was established.²⁴ Upon its dissolution, many of its members left for the woods to assume the guerilla war posture for the expected war against the Soviets.²⁵

As anticipated by these Lithuanians, the Red Army executed its greatest success in WWII from 22 Jun-19 Aug 1944 – Operation *Bagration* – a strategic offensive campaign on the eastern

front of the Axis lines. At the end of the operation, the Soviets seized most of Lithuania and northeastern Poland, creating a gap in the eastern front for follow-on movement towards Warsaw and Berlin. The Soviets rapidly expelled the Germans and “liberated” Lithuania once again. This efficient expulsion created an infrastructure vacuum, promptly filled by communist soldiers and police from the massive Red Army production machine.

During the planning process, the Allies discussed both operational planning and the status of post-war Europe. Roosevelt and Churchill became increasingly wary of Stalin’s possible intent to further territorial expansion into the Baltic and, ultimately, Poland. It became evident that Stalin “wanted to be in a position to take any necessary measures to ensure Soviet domination after the war, specifically to prevent the return of the anti-Soviet Polish government that was in exile in London.”²⁶

The end state for Operation *Bagration*, accordingly, may be perceived with an appreciation for Stalin’s desire to expand Soviet dominance across Europe. Under the *Stavka* (Soviet Supreme High Command) plan, the Red Army was to defeat German forces in Belorussia (focusing on the German Army Group Center), creating a gap in the eastern front for follow-on movement towards Warsaw and Berlin thus further advancing Soviet territorial expansion throughout Europe. As a measure of the operation’s success and Soviet strength, the Red Army defeated 25 divisions and 300,000 men of the German Army Group Center at the end of the tactically planned twelve-day effort.²⁷

The *Stavka* maintained the momentum of their operational advantage and sought to exploit opportunities to gain further territorial control. On the convergence of Minsk, the *Stavka* quickly recognized the total collapse of German resistance, and, accordingly, maintained the

tempo to exploit westward into Poland and Lithuania even as exhaustion and logistical depletion beset their units.

As the immediate front missions rapidly progressed, the *Stavka* looked towards transitioning to the exploitation phase to maintain the offensive momentum and achieve further strategic mission goals. The 3rd Byelorussian front, accordingly, received follow-on orders on 4 July to continue the push westward through Lithuania, towards the Baltic Sea. This area carried strategic weight as it opened the flank of Army Group North, exposing a desired avenue of approach towards Warsaw and Berlin.²⁸ The six-day battle to “liberate” Lithuania’s capital, Vilnius, occurred from 8-13 July, resulted in 8,000 German casualties and 5,000 prisoners.

The rapid expulsion of German forces by the massive Red Army prevented any organized resistance efforts among the Lithuanians, allowing the Russians to quickly transition into communism integration operations. Their production machine continued to generate additional soldiers and equipment. This Soviet surplus of soldiers provided a pool of military trained forces to use in the course of occupation. Combined with the overwhelming levels of Red Army production of soldiers and equipment, the rapid expulsion of German forces set the ideal conditions to accelerate the process of integrating Lithuania into the communist Soviet state.

Psychological intangibles like ‘esprit de corps’ advanced by vendetta and communist ideology played a significant role in the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in July of 1944. To fuel the passions of Red Army soldiers, the *Stavka* initiated Operation *Bagration* on 22 June—the third anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union.²⁹ With this mindset, the Soviets acted more brutally than before upon their re-occupation, as they “were eager to wreak vengeance for their panicky retreat in the summer of 1941.”³⁰

Additionally, “four years of savage fighting against the Germans, and the millions of dead produced by it, contributed to the formation and execution of savage pacification policies, especially when these policies were to be applied to a population considered guilty of collaboration.”³¹ In an effort to exact some revenge for ‘collaboration’ with the Germans, the Soviets either executed or deported an estimated 37,000 Lithuanians over the following 5 months of 1944.³²

The Third “Liberation”

The successful Soviet blitzkrieg in 1944 would be the beginning of the third “liberation” of Lithuania during World War II in a period of five years.³³ The first in 1940 was a Russian liberation from “capitalist and Fascist exploiters,” and the second in 1941 was a German liberation from “Bolshevik bondage.”³⁴ With each consecutive wave of occupation, the elders, public officials, and those in power were segregated, arrested, and often executed or deported to labor camps, further weakening the core of Lithuanian society.

The third occupation allowed the Soviets to resume their deportation effort, which ended with the extradition of 35,000 Lithuanians to labor camps.³⁵ In conducting all “liberating” efforts, the Red Army would bear in mind “the humiliating reverses inflicted upon them by inferior numbers of Lithuanian guerrillas before the actual entry of German troops.”³⁶ Accordingly, the Soviets embarked rapidly on a campaign to arrest and deport with renewed fervor.

Armed with their knowledge of Soviet intent and practices, many of the remaining leaders and educated Lithuanians attempted to escape from the approaching Soviet front. An estimated 80,000 Lithuanians tried to escape but, “many were cut off by the pincers of the Soviet front in western Lithuania ... only about 60,000 actually escaped.”³⁷ The totality of mass

deportations between the three occupations and the wave of 60,000 escapees ultimately led to a vacuum in political, moral, and military leadership at the forefront of the partisan effort.³⁸

The “Forest Brothers”

The partisan effort represented a movement comprised of individuals across the social strata broken down into “three categories of freedom fighters: (1) the active front line soldiers who lived in the forests or in farm shelters; (2) the inactive fighters who were armed but who stayed at home and were called upon to join the active ranks when necessity demanded; and (3) the supporters of the resistance who lived in the open and who did not bear arms.”³⁹ The main tier of the “Forest Brothers” were comprised of partisans who wore Lithuanian military uniforms to project legitimacy in their efforts and were armed “with captured German and Soviet weapons, including Czechoslovakian Skoda machine guns, Soviet ‘Maxim’ machine guns, and a few mortars.”⁴⁰

Most sources estimate that the resistance strength exceeded 30,000 active participants at its height within the first two years.⁴¹ By 1946, however, these numbers dropped to approximately 4,000 and then further down to 2,000 by 1948 due to the success of the Soviet campaign against the partisan effort.⁴² The strategic aim of the resistance movement was ultimately to achieve independence for Lithuania. At the operational and tactical level, however, the goals of the movement were much more precise:

- (1) to prevent Sovietization of the country by annihilating Communist activists and the NKVD forces in the countryside; (2) to safeguard the public order, to protect the population from robberies, either by civilians, or by Red soldiers; (3) to free political prisoners from detention wherever circumstances allowed it; (4) to enforce the boycott of the “elections” to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR or to the leadership of the puppet state, and thus to prevent the falsification of the will of the Lithuanian nation and the creation of a false base for the legality of the Soviet-imposed regime; (5) to disrupt the draft of Lithuanian youth into the Red Army; (6) to obstruct the nationalization of landed property and collectivization of

agriculture; (7) to prevent the settling of Russian colonists on the land and in the homesteads of the Lithuanian farmers deported to Siberia.⁴³

Because the Soviets were able to maintain effective pressure early in their campaign, these partisan aims remained decentralized by region (See Appendix B). Attempts to unify the disjointed effort were made from the start, but a formalized sense of unity was not accomplished until 1946. By 1949, the resistance finally achieved a centralized command that “reorganized into the Movement of Lithuania’s Struggle for Freedom (LLKS) [and] adopted tactics more suitable to small conspiratorial groups.”⁴⁴ In 1949, however, the effort had seriously been degraded, and the partisan military strength was a mere fraction of its once peak numbers.⁴⁵

This unification effort also facilitated the Soviet counter-insurgency targeting campaign. The Soviets “encouraged the centralization of the underground so that leadership could be decapitated and local units more easily uncovered.”⁴⁶ Though the targeting of leadership helped facilitate Soviet closure in the partisan defeat, the reduction of active Lithuanian forces from 30,000 in 1945 to 4,000 in 1946 clearly identifies a pivotal point in the resistance movement.

Hope and Motivation

Ideology defined the partisan effort. A strong sense of nationalism, a desire for independence and an already ingrained hatred towards the Russians from the prior Tsarist and earlier Soviet occupations spurred the will of partisans and the people alike. Lithuanians joined the resistance effort inspired by a full spectrum of motives—national pride, self-preservation, and avoidance of Red Army conscription.

The international political community, still in flux at the end of WWII also provided a sense of hope and faith that the democratic West would not let the Soviet annexation continue. To further these aspirations of viable independence in the near future, Roosevelt and Churchill generated a post-World War II global vision in the Atlantic Charter, proclaiming that

independent states should have the right to “self-determination.” The partisans “believed that the West would implement the Atlantic Charter and demand freedom for the occupied nations.”⁴⁷ Lithuanians were convinced that the West would liberate them.⁴⁸ Thus, the resistance movement was not concerned with the defeat of the Soviet occupants, but rather “only sought to delay and harass the Soviets until help arrived.”⁴⁹

In addition to the optimism generated by the Atlantic Charter, Lithuanians pinned hope on the threat of the atomic bomb. In the hands of the West, the political use of such a weapon could force the Soviet Union to “withdraw from the countries she occupied and to renounce the idea of world domination through warfare – declared or undeclared.”⁵⁰

The ideological front was also greatly assisted by the fact that over ninety percent of the country was Roman Catholic. Catholic clergymen in several instances participated as staff members for the movement.⁵¹ Resistance members “usually held prayer meetings and frequented sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, to which the majority of the partisans belonged.”⁵² To add to the solemnization of the oath ceremony for partisans, “whenever available, a priest, usually the group’s chaplain, administered the oath, and the new partisans kissed a crucifix or the Bible, and often a gun as well.”⁵³ The obvious Soviet movement to stifle the faith of Lithuanians, merely by the inclusion of clergymen on the deportation lists, stoked the fires of the partisan front, and ideologically, “the defense of national values became intrinsically connected with the defense of one’s faith.”⁵⁴

Along with religion, the Soviets faced a comprehensive battle against nationalistic ideology to bend the will of the Lithuanian population. Success in irregular wars requires “the government to be accepted as legitimate by most of that uncommitted middle.”⁵⁵ Ideological emphasis by the partisan effort was the glue that held together the will of the people in 1944-45,

creating the hope that kept the passive majority pro-partisan. This ideology, however, neglected to view “a realistic analysis of the balance of power and the national interests of the adversaries.”⁵⁶ It would soon become apparent to Lithuanians that their hopes for international intervention would not come to pass.

Across the Atlantic, the will of the American people was not apt to support additional wars or threats for war at the end of WWII, even with sole knowledge and capability of atomic weaponry. In addition, unbeknownst to the Lithuanians, “Roosevelt and Churchill did not even question the occupation of the Baltic by the USSR” at the Yalta Summit which ratified the post WWII Europe.⁵⁷

Lithuania saw time progress without assurances of support from the West, even as the Soviets continued the process of mass arrests, collectivization, deportation and execution. With the realization that there would be no support from the democratic West, the driven will of the partisans and people faded rapidly.

Soviet Measures against the Resistance

Predictably, the Soviets upon occupation immediately engaged in “the conscription of all able-bodied Lithuanian men and women into forced labor gangs.”⁵⁸ Conscripts were to dig a network of defensive trenches and clear land for airfields to further Soviet operational reach against the German Army Group North.⁵⁹ By maintaining order through this conscription, the Soviets, within a matter of days of entry into Lithuania, seamlessly transitioned occupational authority from the Red Army forces of the 3rd Byelorussian front to the NKVD rear defense regiments of the 3rd Byelorussian Rear Defense Corps and the 1st Baltic Rear Defense Corps.⁶⁰ The NKVD was a self-contained organization with infantry “as well as an efficient network of intelligence operatives and informants, and a brutal terror apparatus.”⁶¹ The military arm of the

NKVD wasted no time in the implementation of force. Within weeks of the occupation, and counter to the Hague convention accord, the Soviets began to mandate conscription of all young males into the Red Army.⁶² When this mandate was ignored, the NKVD began an aggressive campaign to locate the evading conscripts and often “shot the fleeing or hiding draft evaders on sight.”⁶³

In addition to the NKVD, the SMERCH (military counterintelligence) and the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) provided the Soviet resources for General Kruglov – the Kremlin dispatched Commissariat selected in September 1944 to spearhead the counter-insurgency campaign in Lithuania.⁶⁴ Having acquired a reputation of cruelty towards Soviet opposition as the deputy director of SMERCH, Kruglov approached the resistance effort with pragmatic brutality.⁶⁵ According to Kruglov, “anybody who ran away, whether armed or not, was an enemy and had to be shot (in this way most village idiots were killed as they did not understand what soldiers speaking a strange language wanted of them), and every farm visited by partisans was an enemy house and could be burnt down.”⁶⁶

Kruglov’s overall strategy applied effective and persistent pressure across the spectrum of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic lines. The strategy prescribed five principles: “the formation of locally based and recruited militias, called *istrebiteli*; the periodic combined operation of *istrebiteli* and NKVD forces in ‘sweeps’ through the forested areas to surround and capture or kill Lithuanian partisans; the infiltration of partisan units with spies; periodic offers of amnesty; and... collectivization accompanied by deportation.”⁶⁷

The *istrebiteli*, also called the “defenders of the people” were a Soviet organized local militia created as an informational campaign to transform the perception of the partisan effort into a “civil war.”⁶⁸ This force consisted of roughly sixty percent Lithuanians who were paid a

salary through the NKVD and was mostly comprised of “thieves, drunks and other disorganized individuals.”⁶⁹ Through the course of the partisan effort, the *istrebiteli* acquired a reputation among partisans as a band of ruthless criminals, effectively quashing any domestic perception of a civil war.⁷⁰ Though their over-all effectiveness as a separate unit was questionable, the *istrebiteli* proved quite valuable to the Soviets when combined with NKVD oversight to conduct forest-combing operations.

Together with NKVD soldiers, the *istrebiteli* conducted cordon and search operations throughout the forests of Lithuania to flush partisan encampments out of the woods and into open engagement areas. Soviet soldiers would surround areas in a human chain, broken down in pairs with gaps of ten to 15 meters between them to provide mutually supporting effort.⁷¹ They effectively conducted these forest-combing operations until the larger groups of partisans were forced to disband and assume alternate safe havens in underground bunkers by late 1945.

The implementation of an amnesty program under Major-General Bertasiunas of the NKVD proved to be one of the greatest successes of the Soviets.⁷² Assurances were provided to partisans who surrendered that they (and by extension their families) would not be harmed or arrested through this proclamation of amnesty. According to *chekist* (Soviet state security) numbers, a total of 38,604 partisans and supporters were given amnesty, of which 36,272 were given amnesty in 1945 alone.⁷³

Economically, the Soviets embarked on a nationalization and collectivization program that usurped all land from private ownership. The numbers in 1940 reflect the significance of agriculture in Lithuania – roughly “76.7 percent of the population were occupied in agriculture on privately owned small and medium sized farms, and only the remaining 23.3 percent were involved in industry, commerce, and other trades.”⁷⁴ In effect, this effort was a tenet of

communization, and more importantly, a mechanism to attack the heart of the Lithuanian economy and individual agrarian prosperity.

The collectivization program enabled the Soviet state to claim ownership to all land and simultaneously provided the Soviets with a propaganda campaign to create a schism between small landowners and larger ones. At the forefront, much of the land was redistributed to Soviet sympathizers and many who had owned land. In August 1944, the collectivization program “ordered a new land distribution that fragmented landholdings and inflicted economic punishment on ‘kulaks’ (any farmer who owned over 25 hectares or about 62 acres) and farmers singled out as German collaborators.”⁷⁵ Ultimately, the process “deprived of land not only the so-called ‘kulak’ ... , but also the numerous class[es] of small-holders, who had become self-sufficient farmers with very close attachment to their land.”⁷⁶

Accompanying the collectivization of agriculture was a policy of deportation for the “kulaks” as well as an enforcement measure for those smaller farm owners who resisted. The “kulak” farmers, “whose land had been forcibly taken over and agglomerated into the collective farm ... were loaded into cattle-trains and deported to Siberia, where most of them were destined to perish.”⁷⁷ *Chekist* statistics disclose 106,037 Lithuanians were sent to labor camps over the course of the partisan movement, deporting 4,479 in 1945 and reaching a height of 39,482 deportees over the summer of 1948.⁷⁸

Kruglov’s campaign proved highly effective in applying pressure across multiple lines of operation. In his final campaign modifications to isolate the partisans in 1950, Kruglov directed the NKVD to include the formation of *chekist* military groups, consisting of 10-30 soldiers or agents who focused specifically on individual partisan units.⁷⁹ These groups existed until the elimination of their partisan counterpart. The basis of their targeting, accordingly, was

intelligence collection focused on “the number of partisans, their codenames, surnames, age, behavior, methods of camouflaging and fighting, bases, signalers, [and] supporters.”⁸⁰

At its peak in 1945, NKVD presence exceeded 20 regiments and platoons⁸¹ numbering “more than 100,000 men stationed in a nation of only 3 million people.”⁸² When used in conjunction with remaining Red Army forces, to include the Air Force, armor and artillery, the NKVD was a massive and formidable opponent to the partisans.

Culmination

While many authors argue that the high point in the Lithuanian partisan war occurred during 1946-47, the totality of evidence points towards a 1945 culmination, from which the effort never recovered. In part, this culminating point may be attributed to “miscalculated partisan resources” by partisan leadership in addition to a lack of external support.⁸³ The main reason for achieving culmination, however, rested in the inability of partisans to fight a conventional war against a massive, combined arms Soviet force.

The Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania believes that roughly four percent, or about 120,000 of the three million strong population of Lithuania, were engaged in the partisan movement.⁸⁴ In comparison, two percent of the population supported the insurgency in Vietnam directly or indirectly.⁸⁵ Of these 120,000 presumed partisans in Lithuania, more than 60 percent were neutralized in 1945 alone based on previously classified documents of the NKVD. In a single year, the Soviets incapacitated 73,769 partisans and supporters: 36,272 partisans and supporters were given amnesty, 9,777 partisan fighters were killed, 7,747 were captured, and 19,973 were arrested.⁸⁶

In a larger sense, the efficiency of the Soviets in stifling the partisan effort may also be attributed to the communist party’s comprehensive understanding of how to conduct guerilla

warfare, having emerged victorious through the Russian revolution. The Soviets understood that an insurgency is a war of the masses and ideology, where the population's stance is determined by "which side gives the best protection, which one threatens the most, [and] which one is likely to win."⁸⁷

Though the partisan effort constitutes a less 'orthodox' method of insurgency, the failure to follow basic tenets for insurgencies may have led to the effort's premature demise (See Appendix C). During the first part of the occupation, in 1944-1945, the partisan effort was led by former officers of the Lithuanian army.⁸⁸ Still maintaining the structured mindset from the "Home Guard" organization under the Germans and having only been trained in conventional warfare, the leadership engaged in force on force operations against their Bolshevik oppressors.⁸⁹ These former officers "did not know the tactics of partisan warfare and attempted to fight a positional war with the Soviet Army (this included building trenches, shelters, etc.)."⁹⁰

For however bold the partisan force and leadership may have been, a conventional fight against the Russians failed to take into consideration a simple relative combat power assessment. Traditional war against the Soviets matched a light infantry partisan effort against the weight of a battle-hardened combined arms force, complete with armor, artillery, and air. Having incurred significant casualties in conventional attempts, "almost all partisan groups switched to partisan tactics in late 1945."⁹¹ By this time, however, partisan numbers had dwindled from 30,000 to roughly 4,000.⁹²

By August of 1945, the increased pressure of the Soviet campaign along with the amnesty program extended by NKVD Major-General Bertasiunas compelled the resistance to hold a "congress of partisan commanders."⁹³ The congress was to address the general's amnesty proclamation that "urged the partisans to lay down their arms and return from the forests, at the

same time promising not to punish those who surrendered, nor to take any repressive measures against their families and relations.”⁹⁴ Although it seemed clear to all partisans that this proclamation was inconsistent with current communist actions, it nonetheless provided an “out” for many with a sense of despair against the daunting Soviet campaign.

Seeing the desire of many partisans to lay down their arms, the congress of partisan commanders concluded they would “not forbid the men to lay down their arms and be registered.”⁹⁵ This decision also appeared to be tainted with some sense of desperation. The leadership justified amnesty for two reasons – inability “to support a large number of partisans” and “with no likelihood of a speedy change in the political situation in Europe, the number of armed resisters was too large for the tasks imposed upon them.”⁹⁶

This decision to allow the ranks to decide freely about amnesty provided the single greatest loss in partisan numbers based upon the *chekist* data. The 36,272 partisans and supporters that were given amnesty in 1945 would represent more than one percent of the total population of Lithuania.⁹⁷ Once registered and without arms, the Soviets had free reign to interrogate these ex-partisans to garner further actionable intelligence about the resistance movement.

In addition to the amnesty program, the collectivization program implemented in August 1944 succeeded in the rapid closure of underground support networks in rural areas, as safe havens were usurped by the Soviet state. The resistance forces by the end of 1945 were forced to divide into smaller units and, “instead of the camps arranged in the forests or homesteads, partisans built well-camouflaged bunkers.”⁹⁸ The same year signified the Soviet peak in dismantling underground command centers and finding regional and district staff members, as well (see Appendix D). Holed up defensively, command, control, and communications suffered

significantly. With dwindling control, the partisans were relegated to fewer and smaller operations against the Soviets, dropping from 3,324 in 1945 at its peak to 2,354 in 1946 (see Appendix E).

Lost resources created an additional unrecoverable concern for the resistance. Without resupply, “the development of the insurgent military establishment is impossible.”⁹⁹ To continue the effort, resources had to be either captured or derived from an outside source. The Soviets effectively blocked the borders and prevented partisan resupply efforts. Further, the German and Soviet weapons cached over the organizational development of the anti-Nazi resistance movement and the “Home Guard” effort were captured at an alarming rate. According to *chekist* data, the number of captured weapon systems peaked in 1945 and drastically diminished thereafter (see Appendix F).

Lastly, although the number of Soviet army operations nearly doubled between 1945 and 1946 from 8,807 to 15,811¹⁰⁰, the number of partisans killed dropped from 9,777 to 2,143¹⁰¹ (see Appendix E). Further, only 563 Soviet operations were conducted in 1,947 and 515 in 1948.¹⁰² These numbers reflect the transition from large conventional offensive operations of the Lithuanians in 1945 to smaller partisan efforts in 1946 and a culminating point from which the partisan effort never recovered.

Conclusions

Even though the early culmination occurred, it is relevant to note that the resistance continued for an additional eight years. The tenacity of the “forest brothers” evolved into a symbol of patriotism that permeated the core of Lithuanian art, stories, and folk song lyrics. In many ways, the legendary status of the partisan movement represented hope in times of despair under an oppressive communist regime.

The partisans were also successful in at least one of their seven operational aims: “to prevent the settling of Russian colonists on the land and in the homesteads of the Lithuanian farmers deported to Siberia.”¹⁰³ Under current census data, “while ethnic Russians now make up a third of Latvia’s population and a quarter of Estonia’s, only around [six] percent of the population of Lithuania is ethnically Russian.”¹⁰⁴ Analyzing these percentages as a measure of effectiveness, one may conclude that the reputation of the resistance effort made Russian colonists reluctant to settle down in Lithuania.

Although these successes transcended beyond the movement, the resistance campaign, nonetheless, may be conclusively divided into two stages split by the 1945 culminating point. This point bridged a gap between partisan attempts at traditional warfare and a forced transition to irregular warfare operations.

Initially, the vacuum of leadership at the forefront of the partisan effort occurred because of mass deportations between the three occupations and the wave of 60,000 escapees. With the absence of civil and military leaders, the Lithuanians were already in part ‘decapitated’ before the partisan movement even began. As a result, lower ranking and reservist leadership that only knew how to fight conventional wars initiated the resistance movement. Against the weight of a battle-hardened combined arms Soviet force, light infantry tactics under the guise of less experienced leaders was bound to fail.

Ideologically, Lithuanians realized that there would be no external support from the democratic West as time progressed with no obvious attempts or indications. With the hopes of the people fading fast, the Soviets were able to bend the malleable will of the “uncommitted middle” by mobilizing a massive NKVD force that exceeded 100,000 men in 1945. When taken together with five continuous years of conflict and three separate occupations, the majority of

Lithuanians were less apt to want to continue the struggle. War weariness against a formidable foe, therefore, may also have been an additional factor to the quick culmination as evidenced by the number of Lithuanians that so willingly surrendered under the 1945 amnesty program.

Lastly, the numbers reflect an apex in military capability that continued to slide after 1945. Lithuanian partisan numbers dwindled from 30,000 in 1945 to 4,000 in 1946, the number of partisan operations decreased from 3,324 in 1945 at its peak to 2,354 in 1946, and the number of weapons captured continued to fade away after the 1945 zenith.

Accordingly, this pinnacle of partisan effort in 1945 clearly represents a culminating point that forced the Lithuanian resistance movement to shift their operations drastically because of a shortfall in resources, a lack of external support, and the inability of resistance leadership to adapt rapidly enough against a comprehensive Soviet assimilation campaign. Ultimately, based on the totality of evidence, the 1945 culminating point splits the resistance into two stages: 1) 1944-45 – conventional war operations, a period of traditional offensive warfare by an organized partisan movement; and 2) 1946-1953 – irregular warfare operations, a period of unremitting decline by a significantly diminished resistance, relegated to a more defensive posture and small scale offensive operations.

NOTES

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² Ibid, 17.

³ Stanley V. Vardys, *Lithuania Under the Soviets* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 85.

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⁸ Daniel J. Kaszeta, "Lithuanian Resistance to Foreign Occupation 1940-1952," *Lituanus Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 34, No. 3, Fall 1988.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

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¹³ Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 227.

¹⁴ Peter J. Potichny, "The Archive of Soviet Internal Forces as a Source of Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency Studies," *The Ukrainian Quarterly*, Vol. LIX, No. 3-4, Fall-Winter 2003, 289.

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- ¹⁸ Stanley V. Vardys, *Lithuania Under the Soviets* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 86.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Remeikis, *Opposition to Soviet Rule in Lithuania 1945-1980* (Chicago: Institute of Lithuanian Studies Press, 1980), 43.
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- ²¹ Ibid, 44.
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- ³¹ Roger D. Peterson, *Resistance and Rebellion* (Baltimore: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 171.
- ³² Joseph Pajaujis-Javis, *Soviet Genocide in Lithuania* (New York: Maryland Books Inc., 1980), 89.
- ³³ Juozas Daumantas, *Fighters for Freedom* (New York: Maryland Books, 1975), 10.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 10.
- ³⁵ Stanley V. Vardys, *Lithuania Under the Soviets* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 86.

- ³⁶ Joseph Pajaujis-Javis, *Soviet Genocide in Lithuania* (New York: Maryland Books Inc., 1980), 89.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 89.
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- ⁴⁰ Daniel J. Kaszeta, "Lithuanian Resistance to Foreign Occupation 1940-1952," *Lituanus Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 34, No. 3, Fall 1988.
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- ⁴⁵ Ibid, 85.
- ⁴⁶ Roger D. Peterson, *Resistance and Rebellion* (Baltimore: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 172.
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- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 17.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 17.
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- ⁶⁶ Arvydas Anusauskas, *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Pasauliui apie mus, 2006), 50.
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- ⁶⁹ Arvydas Anusauskas, *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Pasauliui apie mus, 2006), 61.
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- ⁸² Daniel J. Kaszeta, "Lithuanian Resistance to Foreign Occupation 1940-1952," *Lituanus Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 34, No. 3, Fall 1988.
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- ⁸⁶ Nijole Gaskaite, Algis Kaseta and Juozas Starkauskas, *Lietuvos Kovu ir Kanciu Istorija; Lietuvos partizanų kovos is ju slopinimas MVD-MGB dokumentuose 1944-1953 metais* (Kaunas: Pasaulio Lietuviu Bendruomene, 1996), 620.

⁸⁷ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964, repr, 2006), 26.

⁸⁸ Arvydas Anusauskas, *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Pasauliui apie mus, 2006), 56.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 56.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 56.

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⁹⁴ Ibid, 88.

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⁹⁹ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964, repr, 2006), 26.

¹⁰⁰ Arvydas Anusauskas, *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Pasauliui apie mus, 2006), 56.

¹⁰¹ Nijole Gaskaite, Algis Kasetas and Juozas Starkauskas, *Lietuvos Kovu ir Kanciu Istorija; Lietuvos partizanu kovos is ju slopinimas MVD-MGB dokumentuose 1944-1953 metais* (Kaunas: Pasaulio Lietuviu Bendruomene, 1996), 620.

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APPENDIX A

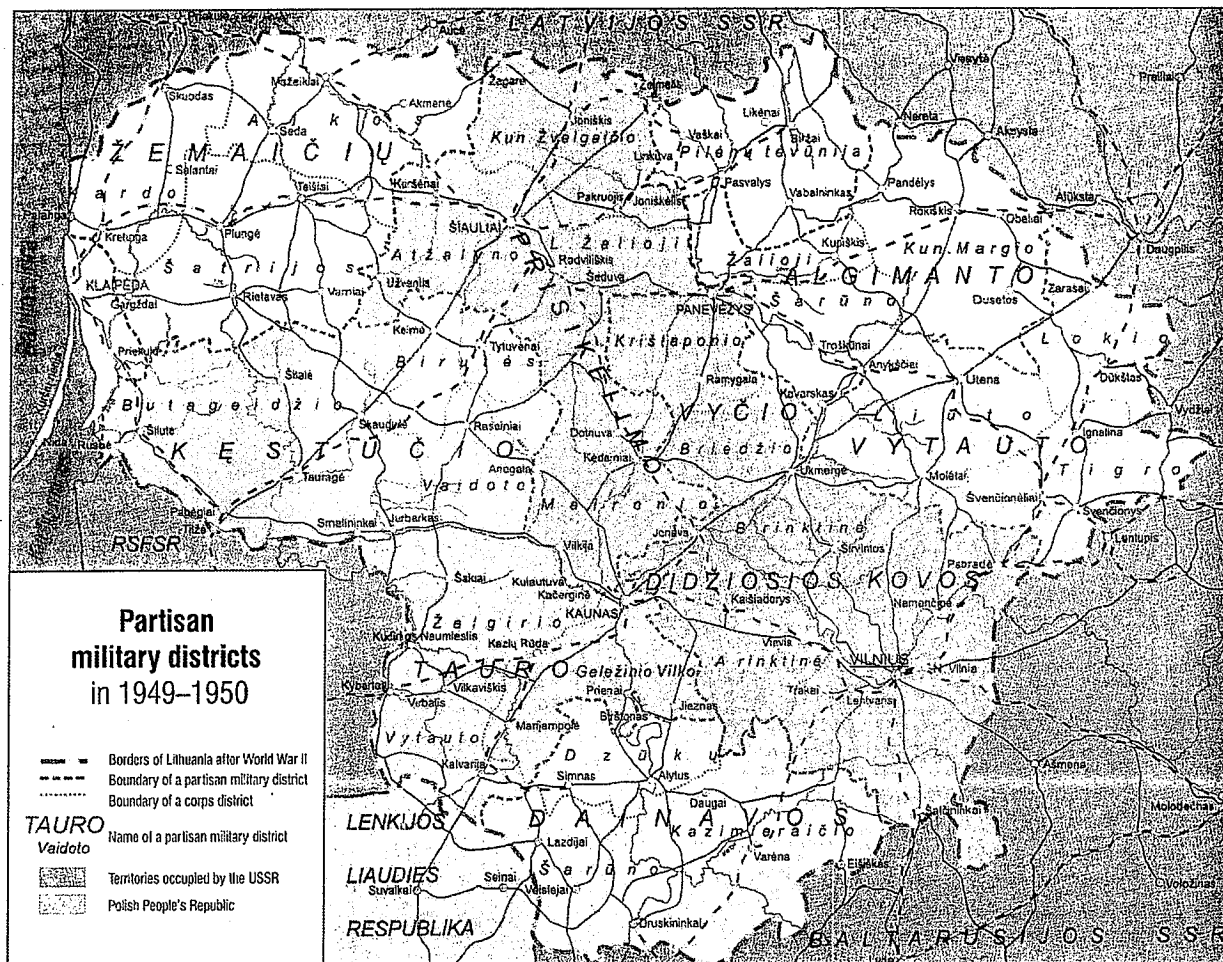
1941 NKVD deportation priorities: Groups considered a threat to the occupation

1. Former members of legislative bodies and prominent members of political parties
2. Army officers from the Russian Civil War (1917-1921)
3. Prosecutors, judges, and attorneys
4. Government and municipal officials
5. Policemen and prison officials
6. Members of the National Guard
7. Mayors
8. Border and prison guards
9. Active members of the press
10. Active members of the farmers' union
11. Business owners
12. Large real estate owners
13. Ship owners
14. Stockholders
15. Hoteliers and restaurateurs
16. Members of any organization considered to be right wing
17. Members of the White Guard
18. Members of anti-communist organizations
19. Relatives of any person abroad
20. Families against whom reprisals had been taken during the Soviet regime
21. Active members in labor unions
22. Persons with anti-communist relatives abroad
23. Clergymen and active members of religious organizations

Appendix A (1941 NKVD deportation priorities: Groups considered a threat to the occupation)

Source: Daniel J. Kaszeta, "Lithuanian Resistance to Foreign Occupation 1940-1952," *Lituanus Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 34, No. 3, Fall 1988.

APPENDIX B



Appendix B. Partisan military districts

Source: Kuodyte, Dalia and Rokas Tracevskis. *The Unknown War*. Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2006.

APPENDIX C

Theoretical Appendix: A Case Study in Flexibility and Security

The successful Soviet blitzkrieg during Operation *Bagration* in 1944 would be the beginning of the third occupation of Lithuania during World War II in a period of five years (Daumantas 1975, 10). The first in 1940 was a Russian “liberation” from “capitalist and Fascist exploiters,” and the second in 1941 was a German “liberation” from “Bolshevik bondage” (Daumantas 1975, 10). With each consecutive wave of occupation, the elders, public officials, and those in power were segregated, arrested, and often executed or deported to labor camps. A fierce sense of patriotism and hatred towards these occupiers arose, resulting in the build-up of a robust partisan movement lasting from 1944 to 1953. Though this Lithuanian partisan movement remained strong ideologically and continued to resist for ten years, it never recovered from a premature culmination in large part due to its failure to embrace two universal tenets for successful insurgencies – flexibility and security.

People and Ideology

The foundation for the resistance was grounded in two of the most basic fundamentals of insurgencies – people and ideology. In *Guerilla Warfare*, Mao Tse-tung states, “Because guerilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and cooperation” (Griffith 1961, 43). Accordingly, the partisan movement was initially fueled by the fire of overwhelming support towards a universal ideology – independence from an occupying force.

Truong Chinh describes this universal ideology by delineating between two kinds of wars – just and unjust. “Just wars are wars against oppressors and conquerors to safeguard the freedom and independence of the peoples. Unjust wars are wars aimed at the seizure of

territories, at usurpation of the freedom and happiness of the majority of the people of such territories” (Chinh, 1963, 107). Freedom against oppression was a simple and universally appreciated rationale to set the foundation for a just war against the Soviets.

Ideology defined this partisan effort in every respect. A strong sense of nationalism, a desire for independence and an already ingrained hatred towards the Russians from the prior Tsarist and earlier Soviet occupations spurred the will of partisans and the people alike. An occupying force is by its very nature easily demonized, and the movement found recruits in droves. Lithuanians joined the resistance effort inspired by a full spectrum of motives—national pride, self preservation, religious oppression and avoidance of Red Army conscription.

Success in irregular wars requires “the government to be accepted as legitimate by most of that uncommitted middle” (Headquarters Department of the Army 2006, 1-20). Initially, the occupiers had no legitimacy. Ideological emphasis by the partisan effort was the glue that held together the will of the people in 1944-45, creating the hope that kept the passive majority pro-partisan.

Most sources estimate that the resistance strength exceeded 30,000 active participants at its height within the first two years (Kaszeta 1988). In addition to the active front line soldiers, the movement consisted of inactive fighters who were “on call” and a supporting or auxiliary element that resourced the effort (Kaszeta 1988). Though their numbers were initially high and a strong ideology unified the masses, the effort was slow to adapt against a comprehensive Soviet counterinsurgency campaign.

Flexibility

Guerilla strategy must be based mainly on “alertness, mobility, and attack” (Griffith 1961, 46). According to Mao Tse-tung, this strategy “must be adjusted to the enemy situation,

the terrain, the existing lines of communication, the relative strengths, the weather, and the situation of the people” (Griffith 1961, 46). The Lithuanian resistance movement did not properly observe many of these fundamentals and failed to adapt rapidly enough to oppose a combined arms Soviet force.

During the first part of the occupation from 1944-45, the partisan effort fell under the leadership of former officers of the Lithuanian army (Griffith 1961, 46). Maintaining a structured organizational mindset and having only been trained in conventional warfare, the leadership engaged in force on force operations against their Bolshevik oppressors (Griffith 1961, 56). These former officers “did not know the tactics of partisan warfare and attempted to fight a positional war with the Soviet Army (this included building trenches, shelters, etc.)” (Griffith 1961, 56).

Che Guevara in *Guerilla Warfare* states that “an attack should be carried out in such a way as to give a guarantee of victory” (Guevara 1997, 91). He further posits, “Against the rigidity of classical methods of fighting, the guerilla fighter invents his own tactics at every minute of the fight and constantly surprises the enemy” (Guevara 1997, 59). The inability of the Lithuanian partisan movement to recognize the necessity to rapidly change their style of warfighting characterizes inflexibility and contributed greatly to the movements’ demise.

Also, for however bold the partisan force and leadership may have been, a conventional fight against the Russians failed to take into consideration a simple relative combat power assessment. Traditional war against the Soviets matched a light infantry partisan effort against the weight of a battle-hardened combined arms force, complete with armor, artillery, and air. Having incurred significant casualties in conventional attempts, “almost all partisan groups

switched to partisan tactics in late 1945” (Anusauskas 2006, 56). By this time, however, partisan numbers had dwindled from 30,000 to roughly 4,000 (Kuodyte and Tracevskis 2006, 35).

These numbers are vitally significant to analyze. According to Guevara, “In a fight between a hundred men on one side and ten on the other, losses are not equal where there is one casualty on each side” (Guevara 1997, 59). In terms of the Lithuanian resistance, that single casualty signifies a significantly higher loss to the insurgency, a force outnumbered three to one by the Soviets who had “more than 100,000 men stationed in a nation of only 3 million people” (Kaszeta 1988).

Security

Although the resistance spanned across all social strata, active partisans remained in the forests for protection and received support from the rural population. This dispersion across rural regions made sense where roughly “76.7 percent of the population were occupied in agriculture on privately owned small and medium sized farms” (Pajaujis-Javis 1980, 109). In many regards, the resistance movement and support network typified the classic “agrarian revolutionary” concept of Mao Tse-tung, Truong Chinh and Che Guevara (Guevara 1997, 53). The partisan movement originated from and gained its strength from the rural populace.

Towards the beginning of the movement the ideology for the “just war” was sufficient to maintain support from the agrarian population. The population maintained its support for the partisans because there were no issues with regard to the first two tiers of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs – fundamentals for survival (i.e. food, shelter, and clothing) and security. As the Soviets began to defeat the partisans, however, the second tier of security for the agrarian population faded, as did their unbridled loyalty to the resistance out of fear for survival.

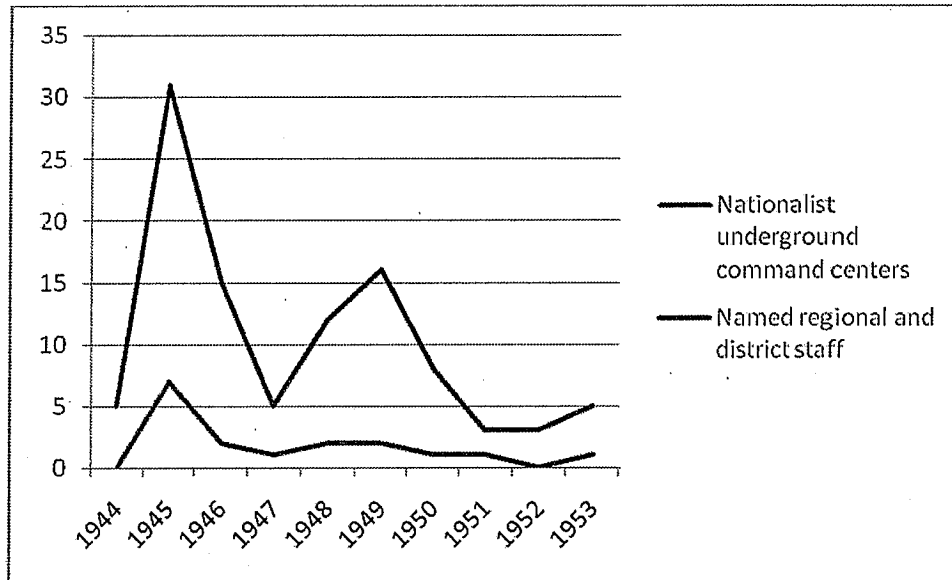
According to David Galula, the population's stance is determined by "[w]hich side gives the best protection, which one threatens the most, [and] which one is likely to win" (Galula 2006, 26). Another means of describing the crux of this statement is in the equation: "Quality" (Q) x "Assurance" (A) = "Effectiveness" (E). In the case of the Lithuanian resistance, the partisans espoused an ideology of freedom for the future "Quality" of life. Their "Assurance" for security and success, however, dwindled as the Soviets gained momentum in their movement.

The Soviets, on the other hand, embarked on a nationalization and collectivization program to usurp all land from private ownership, "guaranteeing" a higher "Quality" of life in co-ops for the rural populace. Additionally, the Soviets were rapidly seen as the side most likely to win, "Assuring" security for compliance. The Soviet equation rapidly tipped the scales of "Effectiveness" which decimated the partisan support infrastructure and led to the movement's early culmination.

Conclusions

There were a number of reasons for the resistance movement's early culmination to include a shortfall in resources, a lack of external support, and the inability of resistance leadership to properly address each element of the comprehensive Soviet assimilation campaign. Ultimately, the main reasons for achieving culmination rested in the inability of partisans to adapt rapidly in their kinetic operations and the inability to preserve the security of the agrarian population. The resistance could not succeed in fighting a conventional war against a massive, combined arms Soviet force, and the effectiveness of the Soviet efforts eventually persuaded the populace to abandon the movement stemming from a collective desire to preserve any sense of security.

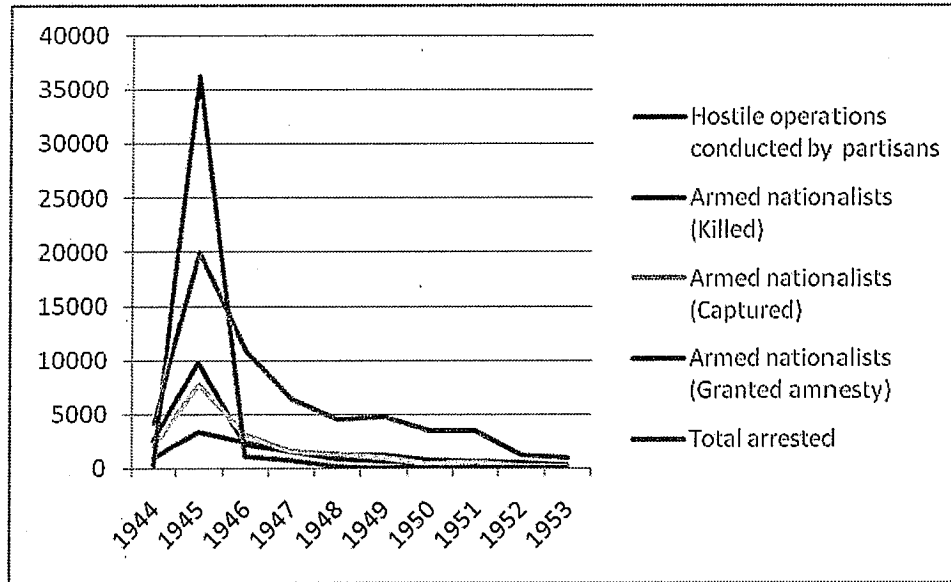
APPENDIX D



Appendix D. Chekist data: Number of Nationalist underground command centers dismantled; regional and district staff members captured or killed by the Soviet campaign

Source: Graph created based on information from: Nijole Gaskaite, Algis Kaseta and Juozas Starkauskas, *Lietuvos Kovu ir Kanciu Istorija; Lietuvos partizanų kovos ir jų slopinimas MVD-MGB dokumentuose 1944-1953 metais* (Kaunas: Pasaulio Lietuvių Bendruomenė, 1996), 620.

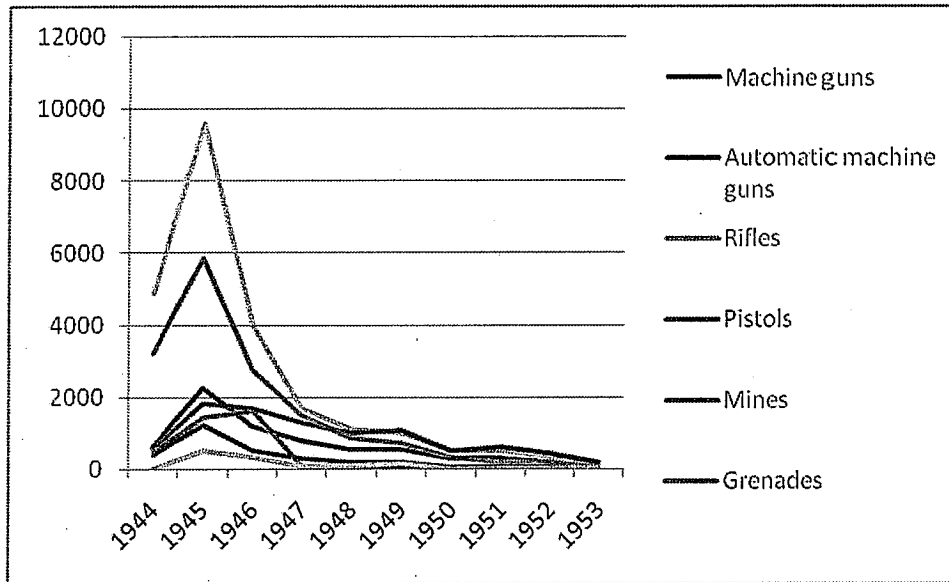
APPENDIX E



Appendix E. Chekist data: Number of partisan operations conducted; partisans killed, captured, arrested and given amnesty

Source: Graph created based on information from: Nijole Gaskaite, Algis Kaseta and Juozas Starkauskas, *Lietuvos Kovu ir Kanciu Istorija; Lietuvos partizanu kovos is ju slopinimas MVD-MGB dokumentuose 1944-1953 metais* (Kaunas: Pasaulio Lietuviu Bendruomene, 1996), 620.

APPENDIX F



Appendix F. Chekist data: Number of captured weapon systems by Soviets

Source: Graph created based on information from: Nijole Gaskaite, Algis Kaseta and Juozas Starkauskas, *Lietuvos Kovu ir Kanciu Istorija; Lietuvos partizanu kovos is ju slopinimas MVD-MGB dokumentuose 1944-1953 metais* (Kaunas: Pasaulio Lietuviu Bendruomene, 1996), 620.

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