

# Guerrilla war against the Soviet Union in the Baltic countries

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## Battle in the dark

### Guerrilla war in the Baltics against the Soviet Union

*By Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Arts, Jonas Öhman, translator from Lithuanian to Swedish.*



[Picture 1](#)

*Soviet soldier guards a destroyed bunker*

Very little is known in the West about the desperate struggle waged by the peoples of the countries effectively occupied by the Soviet Union after the end of World War II. Men and women took up arms against communist power, at first in large numbers and with relatively great success, eventually in increasing desperation.

This unknown war, which in many places continued until the mid-1950s, entailed great suffering and claimed tens of thousands of lives. The most intense fighting took place in western Ukraine and in Lithuania.

In the book, which will be presented in the next issue of PENNAN & SVÄRDET, the guerilla war in the southernmost of the Baltic countries is described through one of those who took part in the fight, and saw its course with his own eyes. Major Juozas Luksa with the cover name Daumantas describes in his book *Skogsbröder*, how he and others with weapons in hand took up the fight against the Soviet invader.

## The History of the Unknown War



[Picture 2](#)

*Map of the area*

It may seem strange that so incredibly little has come to light in, for example, Sweden about the armed struggle of the Balts and other peoples against the Soviet Union at the end of and after the Second World War.

Partly it is, of course, about the effective shielding of the Iron Curtain, which to this day has not been completely broken, but perhaps one can also look for reasons in the political and also psychological post-war environment that has shaped us more than we perhaps understand. In any case, SMB now slightly lifts a veil that has been over an almost unknown piece of history that is close in both time and geography.

Juozas Luksa wrote the book in Paris, where he was the special envoy of the resistance movement in the late 1940s after breaking through the Iron Curtain together with some comrades. Its purpose was to show the countries in the West what was going on in the Baltics during the Soviet occupation. However, it had a limited impact at the time and it is not really until now that its testimony has begun to be appreciated outside the Lithuanian sphere. In the previous issue of PENNAN & SVÄRDET the book itself and its contents were described, in this issue a general account of the resistance struggle and its conditions is given.



[Image 3](#)

*Cozy atmosphere. Partisans of a peasant family.*

Already during the first occupation in 1940 - 1941, it had become clear to all Balts what the Soviet Union stood for. When the Red Army in 1944 had pushed the Germans back against Prussia, intensive work was carried out in the Baltics to "Sovietize" the countries. This meant, among other things, rigged elections, where Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania "voluntarily" joined the Soviet Union as republics. Society was reorganized according to the Soviet principles of collectivization and centralization, often

with hair-raising results and great suffering for the population as a result. Forced labor and confiscation of property and agricultural products became commonplace. Anyone who opposed in any way could expect to be harassed, imprisoned, deported or even executed. Often entire families could be deported to Siberia purely for preventive purposes. A massive troop presence - often in the form of marauding Red Army men - and the methods of the ruthless security services helped to create a situation where more and more people saw armed struggle as the only possible way out.

## The second occupation



[Image 4](#)

*Homemade  
partisan coat of arms.*

In the second half of 1944, large partisan groups were formed in Lithuania. Many men were conscripted into the Red Army to take part in the final battle against Nazi Germany and chose to flee into the woods to join them. In the forested parts of the country, especially in the northeastern region towards the border with Belarus, the partisan forces were so extensive that they engaged in regular battles with primarily NKVD forces. All over the country, more or less well-organized guerilla groups arose, which disrupted the Soviet power in various ways for several years. These armed groups had broad support from the civilian population, for each partisan there were generally four or five so-called "supporters" who assisted with food, accommodation and intelligence in the freedom struggle.



[Image 5](#)

*Farewell to a fallen comrade.*

For example, young shepherds and others who moved in the woods and fields were invaluable in order to get a picture of the Soviet troop movements. Another very important group were the young women, who functioned as, among other things, messengers, carriers of weapons and ammunition, and health care managers. The powerlessness and

bitterness on the part of the Soviet authorities towards civil resistance increased in the post-war period, and great efforts were made to crack down on the rural population, including mass deportations and even executions of entire families by agents acting as "partisans".

It can be noted that the guerrilla movement received very little concrete support from the West in both moral and practical terms. So were, for example, virtually all weapons that were used of Soviet or German origin, although there were, for example, Finnish, American and French weapons.



[Image 6](#)

*Killed partisans on display.*

Over time, the partisans became increasingly adept at modifying the available equipment for their needs. So they could provide German hand grenades with a Russian "mantle" to increase the effect. Furthermore, Soviet assault rifles were often modified to use larger magazines. The wealth of invention in terms of hiding places was also very great and it happened that Soviet soldiers looked for hidden forest brothers for several weeks within a small area without being able to locate their bunker. These were not infrequently placed under or next to a farmhouse. Much of the underground propaganda was conducted via printing presses placed in well-disguised bunkers where newspapers, leaflets and appeals were published and then distributed through the backers and their channels.

All resistance fighters took a cover name which they then used all the time. Nicknames were often taken from nature, the animal kingdom or from Baltic mythology. Luksa first called himself Daumantas but later changed this to Skirmantas when he returned from the West by being flown in from Germany via the Baltic Sea in 1950 and airdropped to organize the continued resistance.

## **Battle in the dark**





[Image 7](#)

*Ammunition storage.*

Most of the guerrilla activities were carried out during the dark hours of the day. In many parts of the country, the partisans were in almost complete control of large areas during the night as the Russians retreated to their entrenched positions in villages and communities. From the beginning, the resistance was completely uncoordinated, but over time a fairly well-functioning network for communications between different resistance groups emerged and several joint tactical and strategic operations could be carried out. Among other things, the guerrilla movement succeeded in seriously disrupting the elections for the Soviet political representation in 1946 by coordinated attacks on polling stations and preventing Russian forces from moving freely during election day.

On several occasions, various types of planned looting actions were also carried out against government warehouses and factories. Special operations to liquidate centrally located communists were carried out with great cunning, imagination and improvisational skills.



[Image 8](#)

*Female partisans.*

The progress of the forest brothers evoked legends and myths that spread by word of mouth and served as moral support and comfort in an often almost hopeless situation among the civilian population. Individual partisans and various battles found a place in the rich tradition of folk songs, which the Balts have always had. An example is the song about the battle in the Kalniskė forest in southern Lithuania where 80 partisans, among them several women, were attacked by 800 NKVD soldiers and killed 400 of them during which the Russians repeatedly attacked the brothers of the forest who entrenched themselves in hilly forest terrain.

At most, twelve regular NKVD regiments (the organization subsequently changed its name several times and is best known under the designation KGB) were stationed in Lithuania to fight the guerrilla movement. Furthermore, special "anti-bandit units" were established under the supervision of a certain Major Sokolov, who carried out unimaginably ruthless operations to access the resistance movement, incidentally a conceivable parallel to contemporary Russian activities in the fight against terrorism. An increasingly extensive work with intelligence activities and infiltration was also carried out, something that in time caused the resistance to partially crumble from within.



[Picture 9](#)

*From the prison camp in Siberia.*

The most intense phase of the resistance in Lithuania lasted from 1944 to mid-1946 with very extensive fighting and also heavy losses on both sides. From 1946 to 1949, the struggle was conducted considerably more in the covert, with smaller partisan groups carrying out limited operations and heavily pursued by Russian security forces. From 1949 to 1953 or possibly 1954, the resistance gradually declined, but also during these last years of more organized armed resistance, there were acts of war of a more extensive nature. A few forest brothers in the Baltics stayed hidden right into the 1960s and 1970s.



## Picture 10

### *Female Lithuanian partisan.*

It should not be overlooked that over time, the struggle, from being very patriotic and even a little romantic, took on increasingly brutal features. There were merciless reprisals on both sides and it was not always easy for the civilian population to find themselves between the two warring parties.

The resistance to Soviet power in Lithuania was significantly stronger than in both Latvia and Estonia. On the one hand, the degree of organization in the form of military areas and centralized command was significantly higher, and on the other hand the forested country could offer better opportunities for creating bases and hiding places. An important underlying reason was also the strong traditions of independence and military strength that Lithuania can actually refer to historically. During the early Middle Ages, the country was a force to be reckoned with and was seen by both Russians, Swedes, Germans and Poles as a real power factor.

The fight against the Soviet Union and its oppression is still a living theme in the Baltics, something that can be felt in meetings with older people in particular. The ambition to join NATO, which has now also been carried out, can be seen, among other things, against the background of the guerilla war in the late 1940s, a war that took place in "darkness" with hardly even a symbolic support from the West. In February, SMB presents the book *Skogs brødet*; a testimony from this struggle, abundantly provided with unique images that have never before been published in Sweden.

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## **Text for the illustrations**

### Caption 1 The

bunkers used by the forest brothers were usually very well disguised, but it happened that they were cleared and surrounded by Soviet soldiers, who made short work of those who were in them. Here, a blown-up bunker is guarded by a Soviet soldier. During this search operation, which was carried out in 1949, five bunkers were blown up and 19 partisans lost their lives.

### Caption 2 The

nine military areas within which the Lithuanian resistance movement operated (1949). The country was further divided into three defense areas, "Sea", "Mountains" and "South".

### Caption 3

Perhaps the most important reason why the guerrilla war was able to continue for as long as it did was the support of the civilian population. This support was both moral and practical. Here some partisans sit together with a farm family for supper and socializing. It can be added that if this type of image fell into the wrong hands, it had fatal consequences for those portrayed.

### Caption 4 It

was important to the Lithuanians that the war was fought in the name of the country and on a so-called official level. The partisans often sewed their own unit badges and the like to resemble a regular army as much as possible. Here a badge with the name Lietuva (Lithuania) over the country's colors yellow (the sun), green (the forest and the land) and red (the blood that flowed for independence).

### Caption 5

Over time, the resistance movement suffered heavy losses. Here is a picture of forest brothers saying goodbye to a fallen comrade. Note the numbers on the card, which were put there by the Soviet security service to identify those standing - an eerie symbolism.

### Caption 6 The

forest brothers rarely had the opportunity to bury their dead. Often the bodies were collected by the Russians and

were taken to the nearest town, where everyone who lived nearby was forced to pass by for security to see, if anyone reacted, to what they saw. The bodies were then desecrated and finally thrown into a gravel pit or elsewhere without burial.

#### Caption 7

The wealth of invention in terms of weapons and maintenance was great. The cartridges were often stored in airtight bottles by the forest brothers to prevent them from rusting.

#### Caption 8 Many

young people went out into the field to defend their country, both boys and girls, often with a rather romantic view of what freedom fighting means. Here a picture of two young Lithuanian women with German weapons, Jadvyga Þardinskaitė (code name: Doctor Doolittle) and Marijana Ðtarolytė (code name: Stormbabyn).

#### Caption 9

Hundreds of thousands of Balts, including 118,000 Lithuanians, were deported in the years after the war to Siberia or other places in the Soviet Union. The largest part of these were women and children. After serving time, it was common that one was not allowed to return home, but had to stay for several more years.

The picture was taken in the Zaija County area in Mongolia.

#### Caption 10 The

desperation of the population when they realized that the Russians had come to stay is hard to imagine.

Many who, under other circumstances, would not have even thought of it, entered the fight in various ways, often with weapons in hand. Here a Lithuanian partisan woman with a Russian k-pist on her chest. Ona Les\_kaite (alias: Akacia) was captured after some time in the forest.