

LITHUANIAN RESISTANCE TO GERMAN MOBILIZATION ATTEMPTS 1941-1944

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German forces entered Lithuania June 22, 1941, the same day Germany began the campaign against the USSR. Almost immediately, the Germans attempted to mobilize Lithuanians for assistance in their war against the Allies. As part of these undertakings, the German administration of Generalbezirk Litauen (General Administrative Region Lithuania) tried to form a Lithuanian SS (Schutz-Staffel) legion. The Lithuanians, however, resisted these attempts, successfully preventing the formation of an SS legion.

The Lithuanian national revolt of 1941 against the USSR coincided with the start of the German-Soviet battles of World War II. The Lithuanian revolutionary forces can be divided into two groups of armed manpower. The first group was composed of the regular Lithuanian army personnel, subjugated to Soviet control. These units resisted Soviet orders to retreat into the Soviet Union proper when the Germans attacked the Soviets. The second group consisted of spontaneous volunteers. It is estimated that approximately 100,000 armed men were involved in the national revolt. The combat resulted in many casualties: over 2,700 died in battle, about 1,500 were executed, and some 4,000 were wounded.

The Lithuanian revolt against the Soviets helped the Germans in their immediate military actions against the Soviets. The Soviets retreated because they were encountering hostilities from both the Lithuanians and the Germans. This was typical for the Soviets at that time: They were abandoning areas where they were encountering both local ethnic and foreign German pressure.

The Germans, delighted by their first victories, did not allow the newly established provisional government of Lithuania to maintain its own army. The Germans tried to influence the Lithuanian youth into joining the German war effort — especially by promising good jobs and other material luxuries, such as cigarettes and alcohol. These volunteers were to be used in various military assignments especially on the Eastern Front.

The youth was not attracted by the German promises. The Germans were thus forced to use other methods which included deception and force.

Starting in 1942, the Germans started to form SS units in the occupied territories. The Reichsminister for Occupied Eastern Territories, Alfred Rosenberg, knew that the Baltic countries were trying to regain their sovereignty. He showed a sign of German good will by claiming that Germany was considering the republics' political goals. He also promised to restore the privilege of private ownership, a right which the Soviets had abolished. The Third Reich decided to allow Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia "national legions under indigenous leadership which would, alongside the Germans, be able to protect their own countries from the Bolshevich threat."² The occupied nations did not believe these promises as they knew the real German intents. The SS official publication, *Das schwarze Korps*, had already described the German plans for colonization of the occupied territories in an editorial entitled "Germanisieren" (Germanize).³

The Germans did succeed in forming Latvian and Estonian SS legions. The Germans, encouraged by this success, urged the Lithuanians to follow their Baltic neighbors. In January 1943, the SS Police Chief Maj. Gen. Wysocki conferred with Lithuanian colonels Antanas Rėklaitis and Oskaras Urbonas, both veterans of the liquidated Lithuanian army. The purpose was to enroll them into the SS. Rėklaitis relates his meeting with Wysocki:

"After a few introductory comments, general Wysocki turned to me, saying 'Herr Oberst (Colonel) Rėklaitis, you are assigned the Chief of the Lithuanian SS First Regiment, which will be the nucleus of the whole legion.

'You will receive the rank, uniform and pay of a colonel in the German army. After the war you will receive one of the best estates in the Ukraine.

'Do you agree to organize the Lithuanian SS First Regiment?'"[4](#)

Rėklaitis, just like Urbonas, categorically refused to organize Lithuanian SS units.

The Germans did not easily give up their intentions to organize 30-40 thousand professionally trained Lithuanians for the German war effort. These Lithuanian units were to have been stationed outside Lithuania, possibly in Poland. Apparently the Germans were unwilling to station armed Lithuanians in Lithuania because they still remembered the 1941 Lithuanian revolt against the Soviets. Favorable circumstances could have again allowed Lithuanians to shake off the German occupational forces.

Starting in early 1942, the Generalkommissar for Lithuania, Dr. Adrian von Renteln, attempted to mobilize the Lithuanians with Lithuanian hands. This would have made it appear that the Lithuanians themselves were mobilizing to aid the Germans. The fact became evident in a meeting where the author was a participant. From the Lithuanian point of view, immediate action was necessary to prevent the German plans from reaching fulfillment.

The Lithuanian General Councilors (Tarėjai), as local administrative officials of occupied Lithuania, took the initiative. In an illegal meeting February 16, 1943, Lithuanian Independence Day, the councilors and other participants unanimously decided to send a memorandum to the Supreme Command via von Renteln. The memorandum stressed that Lithuania was an occupied country, as defined by the regulations of the Den Haag Peace Conference of 1907. According to the laws laid down at this convention, men from occupied countries cannot be mobilized to the front.

Nevertheless, the Germans established the headquarters for forming a Lithuanian SS legion in the city of Kaunas in early 1943. The office used all available media for its propaganda, urging the youth to join the legion. Extravagant rewards were promised in the recruitment campaign. The Lithuanian underground publications, reflecting the greatest divergence of ideological and political views, opposed the recruitment without exception. The youth did not join, as if boycotting the SS legion. The Germans again did not achieve their goals.

Renteln then attempted to obligate the local Lithuanian administration into mobilizing Lithuania. He sent selected councilors to meet with the Reichskommissar for Ostland, Heinrich Lohse, in the capital of Latvia, Riga. Lithuania was part of the German administrative unit Ostland which included the Baltic republics and Byelorussia. There the councilors met with the SS Obergruppenführer and police general Friedrich Jackeln, who demanded a Lithuanian SS legion to be immediately formed. The representatives avoided the demands imposed on them any way they could. They withheld the pressure. Jackeln, infuriated, stated that the Germans would undertake the mobilization themselves. Their attempts were unsuccessful: Only the bow-legged and hunchbacks, unfit for service, responded to the conscription.[5](#)

Still, Renteln did not give up. He called the Lithuanian councilors (to a meeting held February 28, 1943. The author was also present at this meeting. In addition to the Lithuanians, Renteln's entire staff was present. Also present was the military commander for the Lithuanian protective zone, Maj. Gen. Emil Just with his staff. He, a long time representative to the Republic of Lithuania before the war, was reserved at the meeting.

Renteln started the meeting with a long speech about Hitler's aims of liberating Europe from the Bolshevik threat. Hitler, according to Renteln, was to determine the status of occupied nations after the war. Naturally, the Germans had no doubts about victory. All in all, his speech was a "love song" for Lithuanian ears. It seemed as if he cared for Lithuania much more than the Lithuanians did themselves. The speech was wonderful, had clever rhetoric, but the conclusion was an overused cliché: The Lithuanians need to scratch Germany's back for the kindness it has shown. This would be an appropriate gesture of thanks on part of the Lithuanians. The only kindness Germans had shown was foggy promises. In other words, the general councilors themselves were to mandate the conscription of recruits into the SS.

The councilors retorted well to the demands. First of all, the councilors were not legally competent to conscript the nation because they were not a constitutional body with such rights. Second, the Lithuanians knew very well that Lithuania was occupied. They would not listen to the orders of a foreign influenced, unconstitutional administration.

This, of course, infuriated the Germans. They retaliated against the Lithuanians harshly. Renteln ordered 46 prominent figures, including those who voiced their opposition in the meeting, to be deported to the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig. The arrests and deportations occurred March 25-26, 1943. A list of these individuals, including the author, is given in the appendix. In addition, many schools of higher education were closed. These included the universities in Kaunas and Vilnius, the Lithuanian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Academies of Veterinary Medicine and Agricultural Sciences, the Art School, the Institute of Education, the Institute of Applied Arts, the Vilnius Philharmonium, the Conservatory of Music, the Teachers' Seminar.

Later, the Germans no longer tried to establish a Lithuanian SS legion, calling the Lithuanians worthless. Such a nation was too morally weak to belong to the SS. The Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei, German secret police) publicly blamed the Lithuanian intelligentsia for being too numerous and hindering the German war effort. The Gestapo also threatened to

send additional members of the intelligentsia to concentration camps. A group of 16 journalists was deported to Stutthof in April 1943. Threats were made to bring two SS legions to Lithuania to teach the Lithuanians a lesson. The Lithuanian administration, composed of councilors, was threatened with replacement by a government based on the German-imposed Polish model.

Since the brutality of the Germans was unpredictable, a special Lithuanian conference was convoked May 5, 1943 to ease the tensions. The Germans did not oppose the conference, especially since it was in favor of mobilizing against the eminent communist threat. The Red Army was gaining on the German Eastern front while the Eastern region of Lithuania was routinely harrassed by communist partisans, supported and supplied from the Soviet Union. The Germans disagreed only with the conference's references to Lithuanian independence. November 24, 1943, the first councilor (pirmais tarėjas) convened a meeting of 45 select prominent Lithuanian figures. At the meeting, it was stated that a Lithuanian SS legion or any SS unit would be unacceptable in Lithuania as such groups are contrary to the Lithuanian spirit. Lithuanians can only accept and support a national armed force, the purpose of which would be Lithuanian national defense. The use of the term "Lithuanian Armed Forces" was completely unacceptable to the Germans. After a lengthy discussion, it was agreed that an SS legion would not be formed in Lithuania.⁶ Instead, simple armed Lithuanian forces would be established with the name "Litauische Streitkräfte" (Lithuanian Troupes), acceptable to the Germans.

After long discussions and conferences, Gen. Povilas Plechavičius, Jackeln and SS Police Chief for Lithuania Maj. Gen. Harm signed a written agreement February 13, 1944 for forming a local Lithuanian detachment (Lietuvos Vietinė Rinktinė).⁷

The stipulations were as follows: Only Lithuanian officers would be in charge of the detachment, thereby preventing any German intervention. Such intervention was also specifically prohibited by the agreement. Lithuanian commands were to be formed all over the country, their work being limited to the territory of Lithuania proper. This ensured the detachment from assignment to foreign locations. Twenty battalions were planned with possible additions later. The soldiers would wear Lithuanian insignia on their uniforms. The detachment was to be formed only from volunteers. Additionally, the Germans agreed not to deport any more Lithuanians to forced labor as soon as the detachment was started.

February 16, 1944, Lithuanian Independence Day, Gen. Plechavičius, commander of the Lithuanian detachment, made a radio appeal to the nation for volunteers. It is noteworthy that all Lithuanian political underground organizations supported this solution. This was achieved through constant communication between Lithuanian commanders and resistance leaders. The February 16th appeal was enormously successful: More volunteers came forward than was expected. The Germans were very surprised and deeply shocked by the number of volunteers since their own appeals went unheeded, as described.

The Germans, worried by the success of the detachment, started to interfere, breaking the signed agreement.⁸ March 22, 1944, Jackeln called for 70-80 thousand men for the German army as subsidiary assistants. Chief-of-Staff of the Northern Front Field Marshal Model pressed for 15 battalions of men to protect the German military airports. Plechavičius rejected the demand April 5, 1944. Renteln himself demanded workers for Germany proper. Other German officials also voiced their demands.

Finally, April 6, 1944, the Germans ordered Plechavičius to mobilize the country. Plechavičius responded that the mobilization could not take place until the formation of the detachment was complete. This greatly displeased the Germans since it was clear the detachment did not serve their immediate needs and interests.

The Germans decided to end the resistance of the Lithuanians and the formation of the detachment. Provocation seemed to be the best method to escalate the situation. Jackeln demanded the detachment troops to take an oath to Hitler, the text of which was provided. Plechavičius rejected the demand. May 9, 1944, Jackeln ordered the detachment units in Vilnius to revert to his direct authority. All other units of the detachment were to come under the command of the regional German commissars. Furthermore, the detachment was to don SS uniforms and use the "Heil Hitler" greeting.

The Lithuanian headquarters directed the detachment units in the field to obey only the orders of the Lithuanian detachment. It also ordered the Detachment Officer School in the city of Marijampolė to send the cadets home. May 15, Plechavičius, the commander of the detachment, and Col. Oskaras Urbonas, chief-of-staff of the detachment, were arrested together with the other staff members. They were deported to the Salaspils concentration camp in Latvia. Subsequently, 40 more officers of the detachment were arrested and deported.

The Germans acted ferociously in liquidating the detachment. For example, they publicly executed 12 randomly selected soldiers in a Vilnius line-up which consisted of some 800 men. En route to the city of Kaunas, while transporting some arrested members, one of the prisoners escaped. In retaliation, the Germans then selected non-commissioned officer Ruseckas for execution on the spot. Since the German regular army guards were stalling the execution, a German SS commissioned officer did the actual shooting.

The cities of Vilnius, Panevėžys, Marijampolė, and others were deeply affected by the dismantlement of the Lithuanian detachment. Any resistance resulted only in suffering and greater sacrifice: 3,500 were arrested. A part of those resisting were sent to forced labor camps in Germany. Some of the armed soldiers inevitably reached the forests and undoubtedly joined the newly formed armed Lithuanian underground to fight the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania.

The Nazi Germans' attempts at incorporating the Lithuanians into Hitler's war failed, thanks to Lithuanian resistance and stubbornness. The opposition to forming a Lithuanian SS legion was especially strong. This is one of Germany's bitter failures in Lithuania, as shown by the effort Germany put into attempts at organizing a Lithuanian SS legion.

Gen. Stasys Raštikis, former Lithuanian commander in chief, carefully collected data about these events. His conclusions are well suited here:

"Larger nations than Lithuania were not able to withstand the Nazi German pressures. They had to provide the Germans with national SS legions, divisions, brigades, and other SS units.

"The French, Danes, Norwegians, Spaniards, Croatians, Albanians, Slovaks, Romanians, Hungarians, Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Estonians, Latvians, and others had formed such units. The Lithuanians and the Poles were the only East Europeans who did not provide the Germans with an SS unit."[9](#)

APPENDIX A:

LIST OF LITHUANIANS ARRESTED AND DEPORTED TO STUTTHOF

MARCH 25-26, 1943

Kazys Bauba	Rapolas Mackonis
Vincas Blažys	Mikas Mačiokas
Juozas Brėdikis	Petras Mačiulis
Ignas Budrys	Jonas Maliniauskas
Petras Buragas	Zigmantas Masaitis
Vladas Butkus	Vytautas Meilus
Jonas Čiuberkis	Juozas Narakas
Adolfas Darginavičius	Jonas Noreika
Vladas Darginavičius	Mykolas Pečeliūnas
Pranas Germantas	Stasys Puodžius
Bronius Grigas	Leonas Puskunigis
Antanas Januškevičius	Kazys Rakūnas
Vladas Jurgutis	Jonas Rimašauskas
Aleksandras Kantvilas	Balys Sruoga
Jonas Katinauskas	Vytautas Stanevičius
Petras Kerpė	Antanas Starkus
Petras Kiškis	Jonas Šernas
Mečys Kriaučiūnas	Algirdas Tumėnas
Antanas Kučinskas	Juozas Valenta
Kazys Kuprėnas	Jurgis Valiukevičius
Alfonsas Lipniūnas	Stasys Yla
Antanas Liūdžius	Pilypas Žukauskas
Mečislovas Mackevičius 10	

APPENDIX B:

AIRGRAM FROM STOCKHOLM DATED JANUARY 27, 1944

(spelling unchanged)

Secretary of State, Washington, A-99, January 27, 10 a.m. Lithuania

(Military-Political)

Confidential

Reference is made to the Legation's report concerning the negotiations between the German authorities in Lithuania and a group of Lithuanian leaders regarding the possible establishment of a Lithuanian military unit. (See page two of dispatch no. 2685 dated January 13, 1944, entitled "Report for December 1942 by the Lithuanian Radio Monitor at the American Legation, Stockholm.") It will be recalled that at the time the dispatch was written, no information was available regarding the reply, if any, of Commissar General von Ronteln to the Lithuanian proposal regarding the establishment of "a Lithuanian national army commanded by Lithuanian officers to be used only for the defense of Lithuania in the event the Russians should attempt to occupy the country." From a Swedish diplomat who has recently returned to Stockholm from Berlin, the Legation's monitor has obtained information regarding the German counter-proposal. A summary of the monitor's report follows:

"The Germans are still attempting to force the Lithuanians to comply with the German military mobilization measures. A change in these measures had, according to my informant, taken place recently. The Germans were now no longer insisting upon the creation of a so-called Lithuanian SS Legion (National Legion). They had, in fact, consented in principle to the formation of a Lithuanian division. Usually the ranking officers of SS Legions formed by the Germans are German high military officers. For the Lithuanian division which had been agreed upon, the Germans had, however, consented to permit a Lithuanian officer to be in charge. The chief-of-staff of the division is also to be a Lithuanian. My informant added that General Kubiliūnas, the present chief counselor of the Lithuanian self-administration in Lithuania, has had nothing to do with bringing the foregoing arrangement into effect.

"In giving their consent to a formation of a Lithuanian division, the Germans had made one condition. They insisted that the Lithuanians submit a petition to the German authorities requesting the permission of the latter to form a Lithuanian military unit. Thus far it had not been possible, however, to find any group of Lithuanians willing to sign such a petition. Lithuanian generals who were approached refused to take such action on the grounds that they did not regard themselves as the elected representatives of the Lithuanian people. The Germans will not permit elections to take place nor will they have anything to do with a procedure that has a democratic aspect. They have, therefore, suggested that prominent Lithuanians be found to sign the petition, thereby giving it the appearance of being the will of the people.

"My informant went on to say that there are three Lithuanian generals who have been suggested as candidates for position of commander of the proposed Lithuanian division. These are:

- 1) General Hashtikis
- 2) Colonel of the General Staff Rėklaitis
- 3) General of the General Staff Plechavičius.

"The Germans might possibly have been under the impression that these generals were popular among the Lithuanian people for which reason they had been suggested as candidates. On the other hand, their names may have been given to the Germans by members of the Lithuanian self-government body. Finally, they may have been suggested by General Just, the German military commander in Lithuania.

"My informant also asserted that when the above-mentioned generals were asked as to their opinion concerning the proposed Lithuanian division, they replied that it might be possible to mobilize Lithuanians for such a unit in case the High Command thereof was placed in Lithuanian hands. A second condition was that Lithuanian troops in no case be sent beyond the frontiers of Lithuania.

"On earlier occasions the Germans had always refused to consider the establishment of a separate Lithuanian military unit because such an arrangement did not fit in with the general German plan for disposing of all military units. In the present instance, they had, however, agreed in principle to the formation of a separate Lithuanian military unit. Thus far, however, the requested Lithuanian petition had apparently not been received.

"In my opinion, the concession made by the Germans in this instance was an evident sign of weakness on their part."

Johnson

HEC/GLW/gd

(Courtesy of Dr. B. Nemickas, researched at the National Archives).

APPENDIX C:

TELEGRAM FROM STOCKHOLM DATED APRIL 29, 1943

(spelling unchanged)

Secretary of State, Washington, 1381, April 29, Noon.

Confidential

Report from Lithuania dated March 28 and just received by local Lithuanian circles gives following background recent developments up to end of March.

February 24th Reich Commissar in Riga issued decree urging Lithuanians enlist voluntarily in new Lithuania SS legion and two days later Commissar General in Kaunas issued identical appeal. Fact Lithuanians failed respond led to third appeal March 3rd signed by First Counselor General. Other Lithuanian Counselors General did not sign this appeal. It urged people help fight Soviets but failed urge them join legion which did not satisfy Germans so supplementary appeal issued calling men enlist in their national legion. These appeals were followed by flood illegal pamphlets urging youth refrain joining German service and demand country's independence with result practically only ones who appeared at recruiting offices were physically unfit. This and fact Counselors General refused sign appeals resulted in German Commissar General going Berlin. Command of legion was offered to several Lithuanian Generals who refused honor. March 19th Germans issued order that legion abandoned and men being enrolled only in connection with Wehrmacht. Labor service is compulsory in Baltic States and registrants continually being called up but as in Estonia and probably Latvia Germans first attempt persuade or force them join armed services, legions in latter two countries and Wehrmacht collaboration or pioneer battalions in Lithuania.

Johnson

MRM

(Courtesy of Dr. B. Nemickas, researched at the National Archives).

1 Translated and edited by the staff of *Lituanus*.

2 Pranas Dailidė, *Rudosios sutemos*, (Chicago: private publication, 1949) 42.

3 "Germanisieren," *Das schwarze Korps*, No. 34, 1942.

4 Antanas Rėklaitis, "Atsiminimai," *Karys* 9 (1976).

5 Matulionis, Jonas, *Neramios dienos*, (Toronto: private publication, 1975) 216-20.

6 See Appendix B, a telegram to the Secretary of State on the formation of a Lithuanian SS Legion.

7 Stasys Raštikis, *Lietuvos likimo kelias*, (Chicago: Akademine skautijos leidykla, 1982) 361.

8 See Appendix C, a report submitted to the Secretary of State.

9 Raštikis, 338-39.

10 *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, XXXIX: 94.