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Book Review

New Notes from the Underground: The Partisan War

Lionginas Baliukevičius. *The Diary of a Partisan. A Year in the Life of the Postwar Lithuanian Resistance Fighter Dzūkas*. Translated by Irena Blekys and Lijana Holmes. Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2008, 182 pages.

Reviewed by Antanas Šileika

Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians are intensely aware of the history of the "forest brothers" who fought a doomed guerilla war against the Soviets from 1944 into the 1950s. To say the West knows little of them is an understatement, and those who do know are not always sympathetic. Not long ago, I was having coffee with a friend whose grandfather survived the Nazis in Latvia by withdrawing with the Soviets in 1941. He had heard of the Lithuanian partisans, but he only knew them as "fascist bandits." He was skeptical about my claim that tens of thousands of young men and women had fought the Soviets not because they were "war criminals," but because they were defending their homeland and believed it was better to die fighting than be deported to Siberia. But the story remains contentious to some, especially after decades of Soviet disinformation. So it's an uphill battle to get the story out and see it in proper perspective.

The story of the postwar partisan war against the Soviet occupation is very important to Balts and Ukrainians. It corrects the ugly claim that Lithuania and the others joined the Soviet Union willingly. A young Lithuanian historian, Bernardas Gailius, in *Partizanai tada ir šiandien* (The partisans then and now), makes a book-length argument that the partisan resistance was a full and proper war, albeit one unrecognized in the West.

This matter of Western recognition of the historic suffering of the Balts and Ukrainians is problematic. The West never did pay much attention to the East. The extension of NATO and the EU eastwards can be said to have made up for the historical oversight. The latest battle is the battle for understanding and sympathy for the horrors that Lithuania (and others) went through. These horrors have never been broadly known, overshadowed by the horror of the Holocaust and by current horrors. But recognition is growing, as can be seen from recent histories such as Norman Davies's *Europe at War* and Tony Judt's *Postwar*. In both of those histories, the importance of the partisan war in the Ukraine and the Baltic States has been recognized.

Since Lithuania's independence in 1991, there has been a vast movement toward the study and publication of partisan materials. Where once we had only Juozas Lukša's *Partizanai* and some historical overviews, now we have dozens and dozens of memoirs, monographs, in-depth studies, and even on-going magazine publications. It's hard for anyone but a determined historian to stay on top of all this material, but some of the stories stand out, and the diary under review is one of them. It is one of the five or six most important first-person accounts of partisan activity and deserves a place of prominence among them.

Here are brief descriptions of some of the others, which might be better places for the uninitiated reader to begin. Only one of the partisan memoirs named below has been translated into English.

The most prominent partisan writer of them all is Juozas Lukša, known among other code names as Daumantas, a handsome young man who fought heroically and then in 1947 found his way out of the country against impossible odds and went to Sweden, Germany, and France to seek help from the West. Marooned in Paris for a time, he wrote the first

popular chronicle about the partisan war he had left behind. Lukša fell in love and married in Paris, but he left his new wife behind in 1950 in order to parachute with American help into Lithuania, where he was betrayed by a former comrade and killed a year later. For decades, his book *Partizanai* (*The Partisans*) was a stirring record of the partisan battle on a soldier's level, and the only one translated into English. To add to the romantic tragedy of this story, a posthumous book of love letters to his wife has also been published.

When it comes to dashing, courageous, and tragic partisan heroes, a close second to Lukša has to be Adolfas Ramanauskas, known as Vanagas (The Hawk), who commanded hundreds of partisans in the South of Lithuania and who, in order to bolster the morale of his men, seized the ancient town of Merkinė for a day and lived to record the names and stories of forty-one of his fellow soldiers from that action, all of whom subsequently died. Ramanauskas's luck ran longer than most, because he managed to live semi-legally for three years after abandoning the fight in 1952. He wrote the very moving *Daugel krito sūnų* (Many sons fell), which tells of the partisan fight up until the end of 1947. Ramanauskas was captured in 1956 and interrogated, tortured, and shot in 1957. The coroner's report on the state of his body at death is chilling. He too has a romantic side because he frequently lived underground with his wife. The last words he was known to speak were to his wife as they were being seized on the street and he turned to her to say, "I always loved you." Curiously, his stirring book of memoirs has not yet been translated.

If Ramanauskas and Lukša are romantic heroes, doomed yet noble, their darker counterpart is Jonas Deksnys, a brave fighter but eventual traitor, described in great detail in Liutas Mockūnas's *Pavargęs herojus* (Tired hero), also untranslated. Deksnys seemed to live a charmed life, crossing the border to freedom twice and heading an information bureau in Stockholm. But he was caught on his third reentry into Lithuania, turned, and used for purposes of disinformation. He lived out his last days as a pathetic drunk, a habitué of the Hotel Neringa bar in Vilnius, a broken character out of Graham Greene or John Le Carré.

If these three most prominent partisans came from the upper echelons of the movement, others were less involved in the organization and propaganda, and "more ordinary but lovely," in the manner of Shakespearean secondary characters. Juozas

Jakavonis, known as Tigras (Tiger), was one (*Šalia mirtis* – At death's side), and Povilas Pečiulaitis, known as Lakštingala (Nightingale), was another. Pečiulaitis in particular was a sidekick type, a regular guy, a private in the partisan army. He fought with Lukša and managed to escape from the massive trap in which Lukša was ambushed. Captured in 1952, when almost all the other partisans were already dead or imprisoned, Pečiulaitis survived and prevailed through repeated imprisonments and harassments until his death in independent Lithuania in 2007. His book *Šitą paimkite gyvą* (Take this one alive), has not been translated either.

And finally, perhaps the most vivid is the melancholy brooder, Lionginas Baliukevičius, whose diary of one year in his partisan life has just been translated into English. This is a story of decline and fall, and it needs to be set in context.
Although Baliukevičius's story is the most circumscribed and describes the partisan war in less breadth than the other books named, it is a welcome and riveting addition to the partisan literature. The book is fascinating for its depiction of the day-to-day life of a partisan and his inner struggles. It also depicts one of the more monstrous betrayals in that ill-fated war.

The partisan diary under discussion here is intensely melancholy, shot through with the knowledge that the massive partisan movement was crumbling by 1948 and 1949, even as it finally achieved a unified national command. At one point, Baliukevičius was promoted to the leadership of the partisans in the South, who he said now consisted of 1,000 dead and 250 living. Those numbers would soon get worse. Of the approximately 140 partisans named in the diary, the vast majority would die in 1949, and most of the others, like Baliukevičius himself, in 1950.

The diary survived Baliukevičius's death on June 24, 1950 by a stroke of luck. The typescript languished forgotten in KGB archives for forty years, somehow being overlooked during periodic purges. The diary only came to light after independence and was not published in book form in Lithuania until 2006. It appeared in English translation in 2008.

All the other prominent partisan books mentioned above were written as memoirs after the fact. Baliukevičius's work, on the other hand, was written during the events described between June 23, 1948, and June 6, 1949, when this fragment breaks off. It is therefore more vivid, more profoundly psychological, more given to speculation about the future – because Baliukevičius was primarily looking to the future, not the past.

On one level, what's fascinating about this diary is that most of it is concerned with simple creature comforts – more usually discomforts: the digging of bunkers, staying underground away from sunlight for weeks at a time, living with water dripping on your head day and night during rainy weather or spring thaws. In particular, the lack of air in poorly ventilated bunkers proved to be a serous discomfort. Baliukevičius, and Ramanauskas as well, complained of the airlessness, of being on the verge of suffocation for hours at a time.

Baliukevičius was often bored and had too much time to think, and there was frequently not much good to think about. Hope of help from the West in the form of all-out war was fading, even though many regular people held onto this belief right into 1949. Collectivization of the farms and deportations to Siberia were cutting the support base out from under the

partisans, and infiltration and betrayal were becoming more effective methods of eliminating resistance than sweeping forests with masses of soldiers.

Philosophical by nature, Lionginas Baliukevičius had a lyrical side, a romantic sense of doom that was all too prescient and made beautiful moments seem all the more precious, as in sections such as this:

> It is especially beautiful at the end of the day. It seems as if this is the last good-bye to summer. These days somehow affect my mood. I feel a bit melancholy. Memories seem to surface, and I feel sad for the beautiful days gone by – – – I would like to study again, to achieve something more. Oh, these beautiful, peaceful, and, at the same time, sorrow-tinged days.

This sensitive partisan is a real intellectual, a reader of Anatole France, Henrik Ibsen, and Leo Tolstoy. Baliukevičius has a turn of phrase that is almost Shakespearean at times:

> I feel as though a worm has burrowed into my heart and is poisoning my blood.

Or

> Back then there were so many men, so many ideas, dreams, plans, and now everything is buried under the ground. Only the pines and spruce still rustle, just the way they did before.

Although the language and the sentiments of this diary make it a unique and worthy addition to the partisan literature, the most fascinating – and monstrous – part of the book lies in the story of betrayal at the center of the diary, a story that might barely be credible if not for this record.

Baliukevičius and the other partisans needed to recruit new members, particularly intellectuals, to fill the places of those who died. Regular farm boys could fight well enough, but intellectuals were necessary to run the underground press, and they were scarce. Several years before Czesław Miłosz wrote his Captive Mind, demonstrating how easily intellectuals are co-opted by tyrannical regimes, Baliukevičius recognized that the people he needed the most were the ones least willing to risk their skins.

The unwillingness of intellectuals to join the movement in its later stages is not surprising. They could see all too well that one was doomed if one joined the partisans, and not just the person doing the joining. Baliukevičius and his fellow soldiers had decided that the fight for their nation was worth not only their own lives but also the lives of their families. The mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters of partisans were deported to Siberia. Thus a partisan who went underground doomed not only himself but his family as well. Yet Baliukevičius believed that the sacrifice was worth it because it brought more good to more people than simply saving one's own family. One's family was likely doomed anyway. Most intellectuals did not agree.

In this dearth of intellectuals, an odd pair of poets, code-named Kapsas and Vilnis (The Wave), became occasional supporters of the partisans, and Baliukevičius worked hard to recruit them. They were not sure they were prepared to live underground. Not only were they necessary to the partisan cause, but Baliukevičius loved to discuss philosophical and literary matters with them. The two poets loved to talk as well, and the reader senses that Baliukevičius was looking for people like himself, people he could talk to during the interminable lulls in action.

Baliukevičius frequently welcomed them into his bunker and listened to them read their poetry, which he described as unremittingly dark. One can only imagine what these readings must have been like, carried on by oil lamp in an underground bunker where there was often not enough air. The readings were followed by discussions, often hours long. The two hesitant poets defended their unwillingness to commit full-time to the partisan war on unusual grounds. Kapsas and Vilnis were arguing a version of art for art's sake, for the superiority of art over politics, nationalism, and justice. It's the sort of argument Oscar Wilde made, but imagine making such an argument in an underground hole as the MGB swept the earth above, and you will get a sense of the incongruity of the situation, something like *The Importance of Being Ernest* crashing into *Notes from the Underground*!

Kapsas behaved like an ambivalent object of affection, sometimes willing to help, yet not sure he wanted to commit wholeheartedly. The more he and Vilnis resisted, the more Baliukevičius tried to woo them. At times Kapsas was helpful, bringing paper and ink for the underground newspaper.

And then came the betrayal. While Baliukevičius and others were out on a mission, Kapsas and Vilnis came to their bunker where they found a sole remaining partisan, asleep. They shot him dead. Then they fled to the city of Alytus and brought in the MGB to surround another nearby bunker where another four partisans were killed as well. In other words, the poets Kapsas and Vilnis were MGB agents provocateurs insinuated into the partisan movement.

Once Baliukevičius discovered the truth, he was appalled and disgusted with them and himself, wondering who could be trusted if even poets were betraying the partisans. Betrayals of this sort were already happening from time to time. What makes this one remarkable is the subsequent fate of the two agents.

These two poet betrayers, Kapsas and Vilnis, were in reality Kostas Kubilinskas and Algirdas Skinkys. They had belonged to a Catholic youth organization and had written verses satirical of the Soviets, which made them vulnerable to manipulation when the Soviets returned in 1944. They were neither the first nor the last to turn against their countrymen. What gives their story a dark, typically East European twist is that, after working for the KGB and killing a sleeping partisan and betraying others, they went on to enjoy literary careers in Soviet Lithuania.

Algirdas Skinkys achieved minor literary celebrity, writing poetry and humorous sketches, became a particularly heavy drinker and died, it is said, a pathetic drunkard in a ditch at the age of forty-five. Kostas Kubilinskas achieved much greater literary renown, becoming a major children's writer in Lithuania with works translated into many languages. He too, however, perhaps haunted by his past, became a thorough alcoholic who was sent out of the country to be cured and supposedly was executed by the KGB in his sanitarium in 1962 at the age of thirty-nine. The stories of Skinkys and in particular Kubilinskas were among the most shocking revelations in the Lithuanian postwar period. Most of Lithuania's generation in its forties to its sixties was raised on Kubilinskas's children's books. The revelations about him were as unsettling as the revelations of Christa Wolf's collaboration with the Stasi in East Germany, but more so. Wolf never actually pulled a trigger, but Kubilinskas did. It would be the equivalent of Americans discovering that Dr. Seuss had secretly shot American soldiers while working with the Communists. Imagine reading *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* after such a discovery! Yet, not all readers find it such a big problem. A couple of the web sites I looked up on Kubilinskas, barely mentioning his perfidy, spend the bulk of the pages discussing his contributions to children's literature.

Baliukevičius's partisan story is moving and tragic, and yet a modern sensibility looking at this historical record would feel that something is amiss. For us, no description of the Second World War and its aftermath can be complete without mention of the Holocaust, yet Jews are not mentioned in this work at all.

Here is Baliukevičius on a comparison between the Communists and the Nazis:

> What other choice did the Lithuanians have than to fight? We know what happened in the Rainiai forest in Pravieniškės. Should we have helped the communists fight against the Germans so similar events would repeat themselves? No way! A German is not our brother by a long shot, but a Bolshevik is and remains our greatest enemy.

No doubt, a Jewish partisan fighting for the Red Army during the same period would have written the complete opposite. But it might be unfair to sit in judgment sixty years after the fact, asking for Baliukevičius to profess sympathy for Jews when he and his own family and countrymen were under imminent threat of deportation or death by the Soviet occupation. Still, the habits of the past should not go unmentioned. Baliukevičius often refers to the Russians as "Mongols," and this expression shows a disdain toward Soviet soldiers from the Far East that was popular at the time among the population. Today we tend to deplore such prejudices and no longer see Western Christianity as the bastion of civilization against the barbaric East. On the other hand, we might be naïve about Eastern Europe's fears. Perhaps one should not look for universal truths in first-person narratives of this sort or be willing to read the personal narratives of many others as well as a few overviews. Otherwise, we simply have competing claims of victimhood.

In the passage quoted above, the expression "no way" distracts the reader. In this otherwise felicitous and even admirable translation, the decision to use some current modern expressions rings false. I don't think anyone in Lithuania in 1949 would have said "no way!" or something like "hang in." That a Kapsas "snitched" on someone feels like an error of social register to me – one would expect to read that Kapsas "betrayed" someone. Such slips into somewhat modern slang are especially out of place considering that Baliukevičius is often lyrical in his use of language. It sounds as if Robert Frost is slipping into a Bowery Boys phrase from time to time, shattering the power of the mood.

The introductory material to the volume, written by Algis Kašėta and Guntis Smidchens, is excellent in providing historical background. However, one wishes it were longer and gave more context. Readers entirely unfamiliar with the postwar partisan battles would benefit from more information. An afterword about the last days of the Lithuanian partisans would have been a proper elegy for Baliukevičius.

The publication of Baliukevičius's *The Diary of a Partisan* in English translation is a worthy addition to this body of knowledge. This short, vivid diary does better than any other book I know in English, not only to give an idea of what happened in the partisan war, but also to demonstrate what it *felt* like to be fighting in it.

Baliukevičius wondered at one point whether everything he and the partisans went through would have any meaning at all in the long run. He knew despair. But history has shown that his story has been remembered, and there was a happy ending, insofar as any political story can have a happy ending, for others, if not for him. Sometimes the acts of men in remote places in the distant past bear fruit in subsequent generations, and no amount of political cynicism or postmodern irony can ever detract from their achievements.

Baliukevičius felt deeply for his people and his country. And now, sixty years later, the reader returns the favor by feeling deeply for him and others of his kind.

Antanas Šileika