

# AN ARMY NEVER CREATED: LITHUANIAN NATIONAL UNITS IN RUSSIA AND THEIR VETERANS ORGANISATION IN LITHUANIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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## ABSTRACT

The formation of national units in the Russian army began in 1914 during the First World War. They allowed for the creation of national formations of Poles, Czechs, Armenians, Georgians and Latvians. After the February revolution of 1917, at a similar time to the Estonians and Ukrainians, Lithuanian soldiers who served in the Russian army also started to create units. Formed in different places, the Lithuanian units did not reach the homeland in an organised manner. However, there were repeated attempts to present this Lithuanian military organisation in Russia after the war as the origins of the national army. These attempts intensified when veterans of national units started to come together in Lithuania, and in 1937 they established a separate organisation, the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga [Association of Army Predecessors]. It highlighted the contribution of Lithuanians to the Great War, but there was not enough time before 1940 to develop its activities as planned. The article reveals the reasons for and the circumstances of the creation of Lithuanian national units, and examines how and why former soldiers from these units, who lived in Lithuania during the interwar period, joined the organisation.

**KEY WORDS:** First World War, national units, Russian army, Lithuanian army, veterans organisations, Association of Army Predecessors.

## ANOTACIJA

Pirmajame pasauliniame kare tautinius dalinius Rusijos kariuomenėje pradėta formuoti 1914 m. Juos buvo leista kurti lenkams, čekams, armėnams, gruzinams, latviams. Jau po 1917 m. Vasario revoliucijos, panašiu metu kaip estai ir ukrainiečiai, tokius dalinius ėmė kurti lietuvių kariai, tarnavę Rusijos kariuomenėje. Suformuoti skirtingose vietovėse, lietuvių daliniai nepasiekė gimtinės organizuotu būdu. Vis dėlto po karo būta nevienkartinį bandymų pateikti šią lietuvių karių saviorganizaciją Rusijoje kaip tautinės Lietuvos kariuomenės ištakas. Labai šie bandymai intensyvėjo buriantis tautinių dalinių veteranams Lietuvoje, ypač 1937 m. įkūrus savo atskirą organizaciją – Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjungą. Jos veikla turėjo tarytum išryškinti lietuvių indėlį į Didįjį karą, tačiau iki 1940 m. tos veiklos nebuvo spėta išrutulioti taip, kaip planuota. Straipsnyje atskleidžiamos lietuvių tautinių dalinių kūrimo priežastys ir aplinkybės bei nagrinėjama, kaip ir kodėl buvę šių dalinių kariai, gyvenę Lietuvoje tarpukariu, susivienijo į organizaciją.

**PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, tautiniai daliniai, Rusijos kariuomenė, Lietuvos kariuomenė, veteranų organizacijos, Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga.

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In 1919, an abundantly illustrated book on the revival of the Lithuanian army, covering more than a hundred pages, was published in the United States. Its author, the artillery officer and future diplomat Ladas Natkevičius, wrote: 'The beginnings of the Lithuanian army, the appearance of its officers and non-commissioned officers, was in Russia, where the Lithuanian military made efforts to form national units in exile at the dawn of the revolution. In Russia, our militaries were answering a question about their future: should they come together and support Lithuania's independence, or should they remain dissipated in the ranks of the Russian army. It was in Russia where the organisation of the units began. Lithuanian soldiers created a Lithuanian detached battalion, separate from the Polish division.'<sup>1</sup> After a separate column 'Lithuanians in Russia'<sup>2</sup> appeared in the magazine *Karo archyvas* dedicated to Lithuanian military history, articles about the development of Lithuanian units or the activities of Lithuanian soldiers during the Great War in Russia were published throughout the interwar period. Publications for soldiers stated that the period of the formation of national units in Russia, 'this time of the dawn of our army', 'it is highly significant for our independent life.'<sup>3</sup> There were opinions that 'if not for the Lithuanian Bolsheviks, bigger formations of the Lithuanian army could have been created [in Russia]' and at the end of 1918 they could have returned in an organised way 'to Lithuania, to fully protect it until the state of Lithuania is strengthened and has prepared more troops'.<sup>4</sup> In 1928, retired Major Petras Ruseckas also noted that, after returning to Lithuania, the officers from national units 'contributed significantly to the creation of the Lithuanian army, with their experience, spirit and work'. He also noted that the disbanding of units ended the hopes of returning from Russia to Lithuania with an organised national army.<sup>5</sup>

All of these quotations indicate clearly that in the military historiography of modern Lithuania, Lithuanian national units that operated in Russia were considered to be the source of the Lithuanian armed forces. The official establishment of the army in Lithuania was announced on 23 November 1918; however, during the interwar pe-

<sup>1</sup> NATKEVIČIUS, Ladislovas. *Lietuvos kariuomenė*. New York, 1919, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> LINKEVIČIUS, [Petras]. Lietuviai Sibire. *Karo archyvas*, 1925, t. I, p. 25–72; VEGĖLIS, J[onas]. Lietuvių karių veikimas rusų XII armijoje 1917 m. *Karo archyvas*, 1925, t. II, p. 299–312; LAURINAITIS, M. J[onas]. Lietuviai kariai antroj Rusijos revoliucijoj. *Karo archyvas*, 1925, t. II, p. 313–338; LAURINAITIS, J[onas] M. Lietuvių kariuomenės daigai. *Karo archyvas*, 1928, t. IV, p. 137–181; 1929, t. V, p. 158–184; BRIEDULIS, [Pranas]. Mano atsiminimai. Iš Rovno lietuvių karių gyvenimo. *Karo archyvas*, 1928, t. IV, p. 182–191; BIČIŪNAS, V. Šis tas iš lietuvių karių organizacijų istorijos Rusijoje. *Karo archyvas*, 1929, t. V, p. 103–114; SABALYS, [Kazys]. Lietuviai kariai Rumunų fronte. *Karo archyvas*, 1929, t. V, p. 115–146; ČEPULIS, St[asys]. Atsiminimai iš Atskiro Lietuvių Bataliono gyvenimo. *Karo archyvas*, 1938, t. X, p. 137–142; BALSYS, Kostas. Atsiminimai iš Nikolajevo lietuvių karių sąjūdžio 1917–1919 m. *Karo archyvas*, 1939, t. XI, p. 229–235.

<sup>3</sup> BUTKUS, St[asys]. Mūsų kariuomenės priešaušrio laikais. (Mano atsiminimų nuotrupos). *Karys*, 1927-11-16/23, nr. 46 (442), p. 418–420.

<sup>4</sup> GUŽAS, [Petras]. Lietuvių karių gyvenimas Rusijoje. *Karys*, 1928-02-16, nr. 8 (456), p. 156–159.

<sup>5</sup> RUSECKAS, P[etras]. Mūsų kariškosios dalys Rusuos (10 metų sukaktuves minint). *Karys*, 1928-05-16/31, nr. 21–22 (469–470), p. 411–415.

riod, there were attempts to show the national units as a prototype of the army. In 1932, the magazine *Trimitas* even suggested an alternative date for the formation of the army. According to the magazine, despite the significance of 23 November, 'the first beginnings of the army in Russia could be seen earlier, on 7 June 1917.'<sup>6</sup>

The aim of the Lithuanian soldiers who organised themselves in Russia was to create military units that could participate in the defence of the independent Republic of Lithuania. However, these units did not reach Lithuania in an organised way: soldiers returned individually or in small groups. There were similar attempts to utilise the organised potential of Lithuanian troops in other countries for creating the Lithuanian army. Plans existed to form a brigade on the basis of Lithuanians serving in the US army.<sup>7</sup> However, there were obstacles in the way, such as the need for permits from the US government for its citizens to take part in such activities, and the high cost of creating these units. Consequently, the idea was not implemented.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the number of Great War veterans who served in the US army and returned to Lithuania was relatively modest in comparison with the Lithuanian troops who were organised into national units in Russia. Thus, the role of the latter in consolidating their experience and making it important later was incomparably greater.

This article aims to reveal the activities of the latter Great War veterans in Lithuania in the interwar period. Previous studies have already described in detail where, when and how national units were created and operated, and what their relationship was with the Lithuanian army, which began to be formed in 1918.<sup>9</sup> In addition, many aspects of the creation and activities of combatant associations in Lithuania are analysed.<sup>10</sup> However, the article aims to take a new look at relatively well-known issues. It looks at how the experience gained during the First World War became a unifying element in a group of war veterans, and how they sought to highlight the significance of this experience: by stating that they also fought for freedom, and that the beginning of the restoration of the army can be seen in their activities.

<sup>6</sup> Gerbkime kariuomenę! *Trimitas*, 1932-11-17, nr. 47, p. 925.

<sup>7</sup> Until the Great War, Lithuanian paramilitary organisations functioned in the United States, while during the war about 40,000 Lithuanians served in the US army. In 1919, Lithuanians from the United States expected to organise a national army of 30,000 to go and fight for Lithuanian independence: Amerikoje buvo lietuvių kariuomenė (Su dr. Račkum pasikalbėjus). *Trimitas*, 1935-08-01, nr. 31 (764), p. 555-556; Amerikos lietuvių kariuomenė. *Karys*, 1935-08-01, nr. 31 (854), p. 728. On Lithuanian soldiers in the US army and their organisation, see more: STEPONAITIS, Vytautas. Amerikiečių lietuvių kariškos aspiracijos XIX amžiaus pabaigoje. *Karo archyvas*, 1928, t. IV, p. 1-77.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this issue, see: LESČIUS, Vytautas. *Lietuvos kariuomenė 1918-1920*. Vilnius, 1998, p. 170-180.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17-59.

<sup>10</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, Aušra. Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjungos įkūrimas ir veikla 1937-1940 metais. *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, 2007, nr. 19, p. 80-99; JUREVIČIŪTĖ, Aušra. *Buvusių karių organizacijos ir jų vaidmuo Lietuvos vidaus politikoje 1923-1940 m.* Daktaro disertacija. Kaunas, 2009.

I

The formation of military units on an ethnic basis is an old and widespread phenomenon, and still exists in the 21st century. National units differed from territorial units by deliberately bringing together soldiers with linguistic and cultural similarities. Territorial units were formed despite the linguistic or cultural commonality of soldiers, but based on their place of origin. At the beginning of the 20th century, both types of units had a 'Lithuanian' wording in their names. Such units operated in the Russian,<sup>11</sup> Soviet Russian,<sup>12</sup> Polish<sup>13</sup> and Prussian (German)<sup>14</sup> armies. In turn, the Republic of Lithuania also had such units. For example, during the first few years, before the territory controlled by the Lithuanian government had been settled, the army had the 1st infantry regiment of Belarusians.

The creation of Lithuanian national units started in the Russian armed forces, focusing mainly on the examples of the Latvians and Poles. For example, Antanas Juozapavičius, one of the most active creators of Lithuanian national units, volunteered to serve in the 6th Latvian Tukums battalion.<sup>15</sup> Jonas Nemertas wrote on behalf of the soldiers of the 49th brigade: 'We Lithuanians, having learned that they are going to organise Lithuanian regiments, wholeheartedly support it,' because 'back in 1916, when we learned that the Poles and Latvians had their own legions, we eagerly awaited this... The question often arose among Lithuanian soldiers whether to stay away from others, whether to establish Lithuanian units, and whether to call Lithuanian soldiers serving in various parts of the Russian army to come together.'<sup>16</sup> However, the example of the Latvians was not necessarily very favourable. It was known that Latvian units in the Russian army were fighting in the ethnographic territory of Latvia, but this seemed increasingly impossible in the case of Lithuania in 1917. In addition, the Latvians who had fought with the German army on the Daugava front had suffered considerable losses. This fact had to be considered very carefully, and was an additional argument for those who believed that the formation of Lithuanian military units was not expedient: the Lithuanian nation, which was already depleted and scattered by the war, could have suffered even further losses.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For instance, the Lithuanian regiment of the Imperial Guards (in Russian Leib-gvardii Litovskii polk).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, the Samogitian regiment was formed in the Red Army.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the 1st and 2nd Lithuanian-Belarusian divisions (in Polish Dywizja Litewsko-Białoruska) in the Polish army in 1919–1921, or the 10th Lithuanian lancer regiment in the same army (in Polish Pułk Ułanów Litewskich) in 1918–1939.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, the Lithuanian dragoon regiments in the German (Prussian) army (in German Dragoner-Regiment Prinz Albrecht von Preußen (Litthauisches) Nr. 1 and Litthauisches Ulanen-Regiment Nr. 12).

<sup>15</sup> ANIČAS, Jonas. *Karininkas Antanas Juozapavičius 1894 02 13 – 1919 02 13*. Vilnius, 2004, p. 21–22.

<sup>16</sup> NEMERTAS, Jonas. Del lietuvių pulkų. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-07, nr. 31 (160), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> ANIČAS, J. Op. cit., p. 28.

From a political point of view, the possibility for considering the creation of Lithuanian national units arose after the February revolution, when democratisation and unrest set in in the Russian army. There was no unanimous opinion on the need for such units. On 24 and 26 April 1917 (7 and 9 May, new style), Lithuanian soldiers from the Vitebsk garrison passed a resolution stating that it was not expedient to form national units. The following arguments were presented: 1) since Lithuania was occupied by Germany, the units could not be supplemented by Lithuanian soldiers, and therefore, they would be eliminated after a few big battles; 2) the withdrawal of Lithuanian troops from the front, forming national units on their basis, could be understood by the Russian authorities as avoiding participation in the 'defence of freedom'; 3) the creation of national units disorganises the Russian army; 4) an army made up of national units would be weaker than a united Russian army; 5) after learning about this initiative, Germany might also begin to form Lithuanian units, and thus there would be a threat of fratricidal battles.<sup>18</sup> By opposing the creation of Lithuanian units, it was emphasised that it would be inappropriate to separate from the Latvians, since common units of Lithuanians and Latvians are 'most in line with the aims of Lithuania at present'.<sup>19</sup> Jonas Pakalka stated in the name of the Lithuanian soldiers of the 20th Finland dragoon battalion: they were against the establishment of Lithuanian units, and they would not join them. 'Why should we set up our brothers in separate regiments? So that German grenades could simultaneously kill more Lithuanians at a time? In a joint army, we will lose fewer lives than in separate units,' the soldier said.<sup>20</sup>

The Lithuanian soldiers of the Smolensk, Nevel, Tartu and Simbirsk city garrisons, and the delegates at the assembly of Lithuanian soldiers of the 12th army and the Western Front, were against the formation of national units. Meanwhile, Lithuanian soldiers in the Oriol, Voronezh and Tambov garrisons referred the question of the formation of national units to the congress of Russian Lithuanian Soldiers or the Lithuanian National Council,<sup>21</sup> which was established in March 1917 in Russia. On 27 May (9 June), the Congress of Lithuanian Units of the Russian Army in Petrograd 'decided in the meantime by a majority of votes not to establish national units'.<sup>22</sup> It was proposed to address the matter of the establishment of national units by organising a referendum on combatants.<sup>23</sup> According to Martynas Yčas, a member of the Russian Duma who participated actively in the organisational activities of Lithuanians in Russia, only a minority of officers and soldiers who participated in the congress were dissatisfied with this decision. The Lithuanian soldiers moving to serve in Polish national units were

<sup>18</sup> Vitebsko garnizono susirinkimas. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-14, nr. 33 (162), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> JAČIONIS, Jonas. Atsišaukimas. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-07, nr. 31 (160), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> PAKALKA, Jonas. Gerbiamoji Redakcija! *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-14, nr. 33 (162), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> LESČIUS, V. *Lietuvos kariuomenė...*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> YČAS, Martynas; VAITIEKŪNAS, L[eonardas]; JUOZAPAVIČIUS, A[ntanas]; LAURINAITIS, J[onas]. Lietuvių pulkų steigimo klausimu. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-07-27, nr. 54 (183), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> LESČIUS, V. *Lietuvos kariuomenė...*, p. 26.

also dissatisfied with the decision not to create Lithuanian national units: 'They could not return [to joint Russian units] and they did not have their own unit.'<sup>24</sup>

However, processes going in the opposite direction had already begun. On 18 (31) March 1917, a meeting of the Lithuanian political club in Smolensk stated that bringing together Lithuanian soldiers was the most pressing task at that time. 'This coming together is carried out in a most full and fruitful manner, by forming Lithuanian units (legions) because: a) Lithuanian soldiers, their leading officers, doctors, nurses, intendants and others, are brought together from everyone; b) by this, the brightest and most prominent face of Lithuanians could be shown to the world most seriously [...]; and c) this Lithuanian army would be highly necessary for defending our homeland.'<sup>25</sup> On 6 (19) April, the Lithuanian soldiers of the Moscow garrison passed a resolution for the Lithuanian National Council encouraging participation in the organisation of national units. The soldiers demanded the transfer of Lithuanians who served in Polish and Latvian national units, if not to Lithuanian units, then to common military units of the Russian army.<sup>26</sup> The same organising group of Moscow Lithuanian soldiers campaigned: 'Lithuanian soldiers and officers! Of all the Russian lands, all with a united voice, let us insist on the establishment of Lithuanian legions (regiments). They will fight for the freedom of Lithuania [...] Do not join the Polish legions, and those who have already joined, leave them immediately and wait for the establishment of Lithuanian legions. Let it be known to you, brothers, that in fighting among the ranks of Poles or Latvians, you remain enemies of your brothers, sisters and Lithuania.'<sup>27</sup> There was public support and fears about the delay, because 'Poles go to their own regiments, and Latvians too, as well as Muslims and Estonians, are preparing to organise.' Therefore, it was believed that the passivity of Lithuanian soldiers could be detrimental to Lithuania's aspirations for independence.<sup>28</sup> Lithuanian soldiers from Kiev, Moscow, Tula, Rybinsk, Simferopol, Poltava, Yaroslavl, Viatka and other Russian garrisons were demanding the creation of Lithuanian national units.<sup>29</sup> The support and willingness to serve in national units was also expressed by soldiers from the front, emphasising that the commanders would not allow them to come together.<sup>30</sup>

The Lithuanian engineer Antanas Julijonas Gravrogkas campaigned in Smolensk in May 1917 in the newspaper *Lietuvių balsas* to form national regiments, perceiving this as an answer to the organisation of the 'so-called Polish regiments', as Lithuanian

<sup>24</sup> YČAS, M. et al. Lietuvių pulkų steigimo klausimu...

<sup>25</sup> Lietuviai ir laisvė. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-04, nr. 30 (159), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Rezoliucijos, priimtos lietuvių ir aficerių Maskvos garnizono susirinkimo 1917 m. balandžio 6 d. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-04-13, nr. 26 (155), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Atsišaukimas Maskvos lietuvių karininkų organizacinio biuro į lietuvius kareivius ir oficerius. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-04-23, nr. 28 (157), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> VALAKANIS; VELIČKA; MATUIZA. Dėl lietuvių pulkų. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-04, nr. 30 (159), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> LESČIUS, V. *Lietuvos kariuomenė...*, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> RAUCKIS, Antanas. Laiškas iš karo laukų. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-07, nr. 31 (160), p. 4.

soldiers were joining the latter in large numbers. According to him, 'opponents of Lithuanian regiments see a threat to our youth in being together, because they might be sent to a dangerous place and separated, as was the case with the Latvian battalions.'<sup>31</sup> According to Gravrogkas, the main danger in 1917 to Lithuanian soldiers was not mass death in national units, since 'the war is almost over', but joining Polish units, where the danger was much greater: 'We Lithuanians are oppressed in the Polish regiment, they do not allow us to speak Lithuanian.'<sup>32</sup> Soldiers complained in the press: 'Dear Lithuanians, we desperately want to join you. We ask you to let us know: maybe somewhere they are bringing Lithuanian soldiers together. We in the Polish division are highly oppressed, they do not allow us to speak Lithuanian; most Lithuanians here are from the Kaunas province.'<sup>33</sup> There were more such complaints in the press.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the desire to separate from Polish national units became one of the main arguments for forming Lithuanian national units in the Russian army. Two more arguments were the aspiration to bring Lithuanians together, and the preparations for the armed defence of an independent Lithuania.

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On 16 (29) July 1917, representatives of Lithuania, the Duma member Yčas, and the officers Juozapavičius, Pranas Klimaitis, Jonas Martynas Laurinaitis and Leonardas Vaitiekūnas, appealed to General Aleksei Brusilov, the commander-in-chief of the Russian army, who supported the formation of Lithuanian national units, and had already made a promise to a delegation of Lithuanian soldiers who had visited him.<sup>35</sup> The first occasion, when about 700 Lithuanian soldiers and one officer separated from a Polish unit, was recorded on 23 May (5 June) 1917 in Kiev. A few days later, this unit was sent to Galicia, where, despite some controversy, on 29 June (12 July), it received permission from the military command to form a separate Lithuanian unit. In December 1917 (January 1918), this unit was sent to the Vitebsk garrison, which was subsequently called the Lithuanian detached battalion in Vitebsk. The battalion was disbanded on 24 April 1918. Permission to form a Lithuanian unit in Smolensk was obtained on 19 November (2 December) 1917, and the formation began on 5 (18) December. The unit operated until 8 April 1918. In Rovno (currently in Ukraine), it was allowed to form a national battalion on 12 (25) January 1918, but that did not last long, and on 31 August 1918, soldiers of the battalion reached Vilnius. Most of them joined the Lithuanian army. In Siberia (Novosibirsk), a Lithuanian battalion detaching from a Polish division was formed on 13 June 1919, and dismissed in December. A Lithuanian cavalry squadron was operating in Valka (current Latvian-Estonian border) from December 1917 to March 1918. The 226th Lithuanian field hospital in Ungheni (currently Moldova)

<sup>31</sup> GRAUROGKAS, Ant[anas]. Lietuvos legijonai. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-11, nr. 32 (161), p. 1–2.

<sup>32</sup> GRAUROGKAS, Ant[anas]. Lietuvos legijonai. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-14, nr. 33 (162), p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> PERK-NĒLIS, B. Dėl lietuvių pulkų. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-11, nr. 32 (161), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> JASIUKONIS, Jonas. Kareivio laiškas. *Lietuvių balsas*, 1917-05-28, nr. 37 (166), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> LAURINAITIS, [Jonas]. Iš mūsų kariuomenės istorijos. Generolas Brusilovas ir Lietuvos armija. *Kariškių žodis*, 1920-03-19, nr. 12 (44), p. 100.



operated from 16 February to 29 June 1918.<sup>36</sup> During the interwar period, there was mention of the existence of one more battalion, the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas reserve battalion in Novgorod,<sup>37</sup> but we cannot confirm its existence. Additionally, the Soviet Russian government gave permission to 'Lithuanianise' the 115th infantry division with artillery and other units,<sup>38</sup> but this intention was not implemented. Thus, we can see that Lithuanian units in the Russian army were geographically distant from each other, and even operated at different times.

How many Lithuanian soldiers took part in national units? The data is quite controversial. On 25–29 May (7–11 June) 1917, at a congress of Lithuanian soldiers in Petrograd, the same one which decided not to set up national units but left the final resolution of the matter to a vote by soldiers, was attended by 88 delegates, who stated that they were representing 16,000 Lithuanian troops.<sup>39</sup> The congress established the Rusijos kariuomenės Lietuvių karių sąjunga [Union of Lithuanian Soldiers of the Russian Army], which set the goal of bringing together all Lithuanian-speaking soldiers, and, as subsequently announced, it was able to bring together 8,000 soldiers out of 30,000 Lithuanians who at that time were allegedly serving in the Russian army,<sup>40</sup> including over 200 officers.<sup>41</sup> It was recorded that in 1917–1919, Lithuanian soldiers in the Russian army served in 74 garrisons and in 62 other types of units and formations.<sup>42</sup> However, only 4,000 soldiers and officers were united in Lithuanian national units of which data is available.<sup>43</sup> Of these, 1,283 soldiers and 53 officers participated in the Vitebsk battalion; about 1,000 soldiers and 37 officers in the Smolensk battalion; 700 soldiers and 27 officers in the Rovno battalion; 200 soldiers, one officer and three non-commissioned officers serving as officers in the cavalry squadron in Valka;

<sup>36</sup> LESČIUS, V. *Lietuvos kariuomenė...*, p. 32–59.

<sup>37</sup> Reserve Colonel-in-Chief Jurgis Gudaitis wrote his memoirs about this battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Vytautas Steponaitis had doubts about the existence of the battalion: the memoirs stated that 491 soldiers served in the battalion (mentioning the names Praporshchik J. Daugirdas, Colonel-in-Chief Julius Tamošiūnas, Private Juozas Černiauskas, the civil servant Antanas Kalukštis, and others), but nobody else submitted any other memoirs or documents about this unit: Letter from the manager of the military history unit Lieutenant Colonel Steponaitis to chief NCO Jurgis Gudaitis, 12 January 1938. *Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (Lithuanian Central State Archives, hereafter LCVA)*, f. 929, ap. 6, b. 219, l. 15–15 ap.; Letter from J. Gudaitis to the manager of the military history unit Lieutenant Colonel Steponaitis, 24 March 1938. *LCVA*, f. 929, ap. 6, b. 219, l. 134; Letter from the manager of the military history unit Lieutenant Colonel Steponaitis to chief NCO Jurgis Gudaitis, 26 March 1938. *LCVA*, f. 929, ap. 6, b. 219, l. 135.

<sup>38</sup> Al[eksandras] Žilinskas, [Jurgis] Byla, and [Petras] Gužas to the minister of defence, 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 11.

<sup>39</sup> *Pirmojo organizuoto Rusų armijos Lietuvių Karininkų suvažiavimo posėdžių nutarimai ir medžiaga*. Petrapilis, 1917, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> SENKUS, J. Didysis karių suvažiavimas Tautos šventės metu. *Kardas*, 1937-09-15, nr. 18 (272), p. 409.

<sup>41</sup> [No title and no date]. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 44, l. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Lithuanian militaries operated in the Russian army in the national movement of 1917–1919 [no date]. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 110.

<sup>43</sup> S. Reikšminga sukaktis. Rengiamas 1917–19 m. karių, tarnavusių rusų kariuomenės lietuvių tautinėse dalyse, suvažiavimas. *Karys*, 1937-05-06, nr. 19 (946), p. 514.



150 soldiers, and 21 officers and physicians in the Ungheni field hospital; and 416 soldiers and 13 officers in Siberia.<sup>44</sup>

These figures once again testify to the absence of a consensus among Lithuanian soldiers on the organisation of national units. Even on the basis of these figures, it should be noted that national units brought together only slightly more than a tenth of the Lithuanians serving in the Russian army. Of course, some of the soldiers had no opportunities to join such units, or to create them everywhere. However, others were clearly against the idea of creating national units.

It should also be mentioned that after the end of the First World War, the Bolsheviks also took part in developing Lithuanian national units. First, the Red Army attempted to attract the soldiers from the already existing Lithuanian units to their side. Second, at the end of 1918, the 5th Vilnius regiment was formed on a territorial basis in Moscow, with Jews, Belarussians and Poles, as well as Lithuanians. At the turn of 1918 and 1919, the Red Army began to create military units in occupied Lithuania on the basis of the local population<sup>45</sup> in Panėvėžys, Šiauliai and elsewhere. The unit in Šiauliai later became the 1st Samogitian regiment. On 21 January 1919, the Pskov division of the Red Army was renamed the Lithuanian division, and the 5th Vilnius (renamed the 7th Lithuanian) and the 1st Samogitian (renamed the 8th Lithuanian) Red Army regiments were transferred to it. Soviet historiography states that about 4,000 Lithuanians served in the Red Army in 1919–1920, but this number included not only those who served in the Lithuanian units of the Red Army specially created on a national or territorial basis.<sup>46</sup> The participation of Lithuanians in military units of the Red Army was not exclusive. Similar support for Bolshevik ideas was noted, for example, among Latvian Red Riflemen. In any case, the experience of Lithuanian soldiers in the Red Army in the interwar period was largely unnoticed in Lithuania, unlike those who served in national units organised by the *Lietuvių karių sąjunga*.

## II

Officers returning from Russia to Lithuania became the basis for the formation of the Lithuanian army. So far, we do not have accurate details on how many First World War veterans overall, and specifically from Lithuanian national units in Russia, continued to serve in the Lithuanian army. However, it is known that the Vytis Cross,

<sup>44</sup> SENKUS, J. Op. cit., p. 409.

<sup>45</sup> Juozas Audėnas writes in his memoirs about conscription into the Red Army at the beginning of 1919 in northern Lithuania: AUDĖNAS, Juozas. *Paskutinis posėdis*. New York, 1966, p. 46–47.

<sup>46</sup> ГАЙГАЛАЙТЕ, А[лдона]. Советские литовские воинские формирования в 1917–1920 гг. *Lietuvos TSR Mokslo akademijos darbai, serija A*, 1962, t. 1 (12), p. 133–147.

the state award established in 1919 and awarded to the most distinguished people in the struggle for freedom, was awarded to 131 Lithuanian soldiers who had previously served in Lithuanian units in Russia,<sup>47</sup> and in total, 1,594 people received this award in the interwar period.<sup>48</sup>

Service in Lithuanian units was not forgotten in the interwar period. One of the most important parts of its commemoration and honouring was the brutal history of the liquidation of the Vytautas the Great battalion in Siberia. The Bolsheviks disbanded this unit on 9 December 1919, in the village of Cheremushkino in the Altai region, by killing (dismembering) eight soldiers of the battalion without trial. Another officer was shot at Cherepanovo station on 25 November 1919. The deaths of the soldiers of the Vytautas the Great battalion were remembered and honoured throughout the interwar period.<sup>49</sup> Five years after the event, the names of the soldiers were recorded on a memorial plaque put up in the Vytautas Church in Kaunas. The plaque was made with donations from officers, and unveiled on 9 December 1924. Mass was celebrated for the occasion. It was attended by the minister of national defence Teodoras Daukantas, the commander-in-chief of the army General Silvestras Žukauskas, the former officer of the Siberian Lithuanian battalion Lieutenant Petras Linkevičius, and others.<sup>50</sup> In 1931, the victims were honoured on Kaunas radio with half an hour of radio time.<sup>51</sup> In 1934, commemorative events took place in Kaunas on the 15th anniversary.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, in the late 1930s, those who died were compared with those who perished in the battles for Lithuania's independence. For example, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of statehood, a list of names of all victims in the battles for independence was announced under the heading 'We Perished for You to Live Free'. It included nine soldiers from the Vytautas the Great battalion in Siberia.<sup>53</sup>

Attention to Lithuanian national units created in Russia was also shown in other cases. General Vladas Nagevičius, the founder of the Military Museum in Kaunas, who had served in the Russian navy during the Great War and participated in the activities of the Lietuvių karių sąjunga in the Russian Army, took care to show the his-

<sup>47</sup> SENKUS, J. Op. cit., p. 409.

<sup>48</sup> RUZAS, Vincas. Karininkai Vyčio kryžiaus kavalieriai 1919–1926. *Karo archyvas*, 2002, t. XVII, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> Sibire žuvusiems kariams paminėti. *Trimitas*, 1922-12-09, nr. 48 (118), p. 7; T. Sibiro lietuvių bataliono žuvimo sukaktuvės. *Trimitas*, 1929-12-05, nr. 49, p. 810; Sibiro lietuvių Vytauto Didžiojo vardo bataliono sukaktuvės. *Trimitas*, 1929-12-12, nr. 50, p. 827; Kariai pagerbė žuvusius Sibiro bataliono karius. *Trimitas*, 1930-12-18, nr. 51, p. 1053; Y. Tėvynės gandas. *Karys*, 1930-12-11, nr. 50 (602), p. 1007–1009; STS. Sibiro lietuvių karžygius prisiminus. *Trimitas*, 1931-12-10, nr. 50, p. 986; Sibiro lietuvių karių tragedijos dieną minint. *Karys*, 1931-12-10, nr. 50 (654), p. 1010; Jau 15 metų nuo Sibiro lietuvių karių tragedijos. *Karys*, 1934-12-06, nr. 49–50 (820–821), p. 1061; Tolimojo Sibiro tragedijos aukos. *Kardas*, 1934-12-15, nr. 24 (201), p. 496.

<sup>50</sup> Sibiro lietuvių karžygiai. *Karys*, 1925-01-01/07, nr. 1 (293), p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Radio pusvalandis. *Trimitas*, 1931-12-10, nr. 50, p. 989.

<sup>52</sup> Lietuvių komiteto nukentėjusiems dėl karo šelpti 20 m. įsisteigimo ir Vytauto Didžiojo vardo bataliono tragedijos sukaktuvių minėjimas. *Kardas*, 1934-12-15, nr. 24 (201), p. 516.

<sup>53</sup> Žuvome, kad gyventumėte laisvi. *Lietuvos karo invalidas*, 1938, nr. 1, p. 40.

tory of Lithuanian national units in the Military Museum. The flags of these national units were presented to the museum, and a mannequin dressed in the uniform of a Siberian battalion officer was displayed in the exhibition.<sup>54</sup> In 1934, a group of senior officers signed an appeal to the public, emphasising the importance of the activities of Lithuanian soldiers in Russia and the United States in the years of the Great War to the later formation of the Lithuanian army, and encouraged everyone to send related documents and other exhibits to the Military Museum.<sup>55</sup>

However, the soldiers themselves who had served in the Lithuanian national units were increasingly taking the initiative to draw the attention of the public to their role. In February 1928, the congress of Lithuanian soldiers who had served on the Romanian front during the Great War took place in Kaunas. Not only soldiers, but also other people who contributed to the creation of Lithuanian units, were invited. Those who were unable to attend were asked to write down and send in their memories.<sup>56</sup> The event had about 20 participants, and was initiated on behalf of a group consisting of the commander of the supply chain of the Lithuanian army Lieutenant Colonel Vldas Grudzinskas, the medical doctor Boleslovas Kaunas-Kaunackis (who organised a hospital in Bessarabia during the Great War<sup>57</sup>), and Captain Kazys Sabalys.<sup>58</sup> This group did not grow into an organisation of veterans, and was limited to several congresses, while Captain Sabalys soon published his memoirs.

A much wider response to the idea to bring together troops who had served in Lithuanian national units was received in 1937, when they decided to hold a bigger congress for the 20th anniversary of the movement of Lithuanian soldiers of the Russian army. Its main promoter is considered to be Major Sabalys.<sup>59</sup> The historian Aušra Jurevičiūtė states that, initially, this congress only aimed 'to bring together those who had created Lithuanian units in the Russian army in 1918–1919, and celebrate the 20th anniversary. Only later, during the organisation of the congress [...] was the idea of establishing an organisation of participants in the national movement born.'<sup>60</sup> However, the idea to create such an organisation is already recorded in the first appeal by Major Sabalys to society, published on 15 January 1937.<sup>61</sup> Based on the models of other countries (Czechoslovakia, Poland, etc), and emphasising

<sup>54</sup> B., M. Sibiro Lietuvių batalionas. *Karys*, 1929-12-12, nr. 49–50 (549–550), p. 815–816.

<sup>55</sup> Jamžinkim mūsų kariuomenės atgijimo laikus! *Karys*, 1934-12-06, nr. 49–50 (820–821), p. 1067.

<sup>56</sup> INICIATORIŲ GRUPĖ. Kvietimas. *Karys*, 1928-01-26 – 02-01, nr. 5 (453), p. 75.

<sup>57</sup> Boleslovas Kaunackis. *Mažeikių krašto enciklopedija*: <[http://www.mke.lt/Boleslovas\\_Kaunackis/](http://www.mke.lt/Boleslovas_Kaunackis/)>, accessed 31 January 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Pranešimas. *Kardas*, 1928-01-30, nr. 3 (99), p. 48; Rumunijos fronto lietuvių suvažiavimas. *Trimitas*, 1928-02-23, nr. 8, p. 261; SABALYS, K[azys]. Buv. rumunų fronto lietuvių karių suvažiavimas. *Kardas*, 1928-03-10, nr. 7 (103), p. 117–118; SABALYS, [Kazys]. Rumunų fronto lietuvių karių suvažiavimas. *Karys*, 1928-03-07/13, nr. 11 (459), p. 210–211.

<sup>59</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos...*, p. 247.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> SABALYS, K[azys]. Paminėkime ir mes. *Kardas*, 1937-01-15, nr. 2 (256), p. 51.

that the Lithuanian army continued the deeds of Lithuanians who had served in the Russian army, Major Sabalys invited to the congress all soldiers who were 'making efforts for foreign affairs on fronts from the Daugava to the Danube, and the distant Transcaucasia, and who were spread across vast Russia during the Great War'. The initiator of the congress not only suggested a specific date for the congress (16–17 May), outlined the plan for who should be invited, and where the congress should take place (in the Kaunas officers' club), but eventually stated: 'Moreover, maybe it would be useful to establish a corresponding association, like in other countries which took part in the Great War and which were established afterwards, with the aim of strengthening the capacity of the country.'<sup>62</sup>

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The possibility of establishing such an association was also mentioned in a memorandum from representatives of the organising committee of the congress to the government dated March 1937. The organising committee stated in its appeal that 'the first units of the Lithuanian national army, the first national military organisation, was formed in Russia,' and pointed out that 'it will be a great loss to our nation and to the education of the army for strengthening the idea of an independent state and for history itself if we do not commemorate appropriately that first period of the revival of our armed forces. This first commemoration, alongside other nationwide commemorations in the past, would show our nation, and other nations, and especially our younger generation, that the Lithuanian nation was no less mature for independent life than other cultural nations ruled by Russia.'<sup>63</sup> The memorandum was signed on behalf of the organising committee by three reserve officers: the Kaunas notary, former chairman (1927–1928) of the governing *Lietuvių tautininkų sąjunga* [Union of Lithuanian Nationalists] and minister of justice (1928–1934) Aleksandras Žilinskas, the former prosecutor with the Kaunas District Court, Supreme Court judge and member of the Council of State Jurgis Byla, and the lawyer and chairman of the *Lietuvos kariuomenės kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga* [Association of Lithuanian Army Creators-Volunteers] Petras Gužas.

The fact that the memorandum was signed by influential Kaunas lawyers, as well as the fact that one of the signatories was the head of the main association of veterans of the Wars of Independence, apparently contributed to the favourable decision by the government, as did the fact that the prime minister Juozas Tūbelis and the minister of national defence Brigadier General Stasys Dirmantas were also veterans of the Great War who had served in the Russian army (although not in Lithuanian national units). It is not surprising that the memorandum was favourably received by the president, the ministers of national defence and the interior, and the commander of the army, and the requested assistance for the congress was promised.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> Al[eksandras] Žilinskas, [Jurgis] Byla, and [Petras] Gužas to the minister of defence, 1937. LCVA, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 10–12, quotes from l. 11 and 10.

The ministries of transport, agriculture, interior and others promised to contribute to the organisation of the congress, and the minister of national defence Brigadier General Dirmantas agreed to be the patron of the congress. According to the decision of the cabinet of ministers, it was allowed to publish information over the radio and offer transport privileges for delegates, and the army could accept delegates as visitors.<sup>64</sup> The government allocated 9,250 litas<sup>65</sup> to fund the congress, and the rest of the preparations were made with the support, knowledge and assistance of the minister of national defence and the commander-in-chief of the army.<sup>66</sup>

The congress was organised by sending special questionnaires, which were expected to be filled in by former servicemen from Lithuanian national units and active members of the *Lietuvių karių sąjunga*. Data was collected through the police, commanders' offices, municipalities, divisions of the *Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga* [Lithuanian Riflemen's Union], and operating units and institutions of the military; and by contacting the military over the radio. Everyone who completed a questionnaire was asked to indicate if they were going to participate in the congress. In this way, more than 1,000 participants registered for the congress:<sup>67</sup> officers, officials, priests, current and former ministers, and professors.<sup>68</sup> More than 800 participants, including six generals on active service and seven reserve generals, came to the congress.<sup>69</sup>

The congress took place on 7–9 September 1937 in Kaunas. It opened with a solemn ceremony in the cathedral 'for those Lithuanians who died in the World War in the ranks of the Russian, English, American, German and other armies of participating states'.<sup>70</sup> The congress was attended by President Antanas Smetona. At the end of

<sup>64</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos...*, p. 250.

<sup>65</sup> Organisation Committee of the Congress of Participants in the National Movement of Lithuanian Militaries in Russia in 1917–1919, 19 November 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 112.

<sup>66</sup> A[leksandras] Žilinskas and J[urgis] Byla to the minister of defence, 15 January 1938. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 131; Letter from the committee of assignees of the Union of Army Predecessors to the minister of defence, 18 January 1938. *LCVA*, f. 929, ap. 4, b. 715, l. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Announcement No 3 of the Organisation Committee of the Congress of Participants in the National Movement of Lithuanian Militaries in Russia, 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 90.

<sup>68</sup> Announcement No 2 by the Organisation Committee of the Congress of Participants in the National Movement of Lithuanian Militaries in Russia, 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 88.

<sup>69</sup> Representatives were divided as follows according to former national units: 242 soldiers from the Vitebsk detached battalion, 81 soldiers from the Smolensk detached battalion, 95 soldiers from the Rovno detached battalion, 34 from the Siberian Vytautas the Great battalion, 31 from the Valka cavalry squadron, and 19 from the 226th field hospital in Ungheni. Another 308 participants were former members of the *Lietuvių karių sąjunga*. The congress was attended by the following generals: active servicemen Edvardas Adamkavičius, Vincas Vitkauskas, Kazys Musteikis, Vladas Nagevičius, Klemensas Popeliučka, Kazimieras Navakas, reserve generals Julius Čaplikas, Jonas Jurgis Bulota, Jurgis Kubilius, Motiejus Pečiulionis, Juozas Grigaitis, Mykolas Velykis and Stasys Nastopka: *Istorinis suvažiavimas. Trimaitis*, 1937-09-11, nr. 36 (873), p. 844. Other sources claimed there were 970 participants: M., J. *Lietuvių karių sąjūdžio ir tautinio lietuvių dalių Rusijoje 1917–1919 m. dalyvių pirmasis suvažiavimas. Lietuvos karo invalidas*, 1937, nr. 1, p. 32.

<sup>70</sup> Organisation Committee of the Congress of Participants in the National Movement of Lithuanian Militaries in Russia, September 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 101.

the congress, a committee of 25 people was elected<sup>71</sup> to take care of ‘subsequent issues of the participants in the Lithuanian soldiers’ movement’. As was stated at the meeting, first, the elected committee would attempt to issue a special publication on the Lithuanian soldiers’ movement, to build a huge monument to all Lithuanians who had perished in the war, and to create a special badge for participants in the movement.<sup>72</sup> These endeavours were not reflected in the final congress resolution,<sup>73</sup> but we can observe a clear trend towards their realisation in the further steps taken by this initiative.

### III

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The committee had its first meeting in December 1937, and decided to set up an organisation called the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga [Association of Army Predecessors], which immediately began to discuss one of the issues broached at the congress, the project of the movement’s participant medal.<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of its activities, the organisation focused on the preparation of the statute of the medal and regulations for wearing it, and finding out who really had the right to wear the medal and be considered as a predecessor of the army. However, the newly established association remembered its other objectives as well, namely ‘to commemorate and maintain among ourselves and in the nation the historically and educationally important activities’ of the Lithuanian national movement in Russia in 1917–1919.<sup>75</sup>

The implementation measures for these ambitions were foreseen in a statute of the organisation approved by the Ministry of the Interior on 31 December 1937.<sup>76</sup> They stated that the association should: ‘a) make a list and organise the predecessors of the armed forces, and represent them; b) maintain spiritual collaboration, discuss current issues through the press, radio, meetings and congresses; c) collect and publish historical material on the Lietuvių karių sąjunga and the national units during the period 1917–1919; d) collect museum items from that time; e) organise lectures, commemorations and tours; f) publish books, newspapers and other printed material; g) participate in the commemoration of events important to the state, the nation

<sup>71</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos...*, p. 254.

<sup>72</sup> SENKUS, J. *Op. cit.*, p. 408.

<sup>73</sup> M., J. Lietuvių karių sąjūdžio ir tautinio lietuvių dalių Rusijoje 1917–1919 m. dalyvių pirmasis suvažiavimas. *Lietuvos karo invalidas*, 1937, nr. 1, p. 29–30.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes No. 21, 11 December 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 117–117 ap.

<sup>75</sup> To the predecessor, 6 April 1938. *LCVA*, f. 975, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 4. A similar formulation is also presented in the letter from the assignees of the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga to the minister of defence, 14 January 1938. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 131.

<sup>76</sup> Statute of the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga, 31 December 1937. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 124 ap.

and the army; h) cooperate with the army and similar public organisations; i) care for the moral and material support of members.<sup>77</sup>

What options did the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga have for these activities during the years of the authoritarian regime? In 1938, its supreme board included Aleksandras Žilinskas (chairman), one of the leaders of the governing Lietuvių tautininkų sąjunga, Boleslovas Giedraitis, general secretary of the Ministry of the Interior, Jurgis Byla, a member of the State Council (who took over the leadership of the association in 1939), Brigadier General Kazimieras Navakas, intendant of the army, Brigadier General Vincas Vitkauskas, army inspector, Juozas Šarauskas, head of the Press and Education Division of the Lithuanian General Staff, and Major Kazys Sabalys, head of the Administrative Division of the Line Unit of the Lithuanian General Staff. The audit commission included the general secretary of the Ministry of Transport and Communications Juozas Jankevičius, Reserve Division General Jurgis Kubilius, and Reserve General Juozas Grigaitis, a judge with the Court of Appeal. The Court of Honour consisted of the minister for the interior Brigadier General Julius Čaplikas, the commander of the 2nd infantry division Division General Eduardas Adamkavičius, and War Sanitation Chief Brigadier General Vladas Nagevičius.<sup>78</sup> Thus, the structure of the association's leadership was impressive: six generals, including Kubilius, the founder of the Lithuanian army, who had a very good reputation, Čaplikas,<sup>79</sup> who was highly loyal to the nationalist regime, and Adamkavičius, a former soldier in the Rovno battalion, 'a person close to the nationalists, a good friend of Mironas, Tūbelis and even President Smetona'<sup>80</sup>. In general, with a few exceptions, the association's leadership consisted of almost only senior state officials or officers, some of them closely related to the nationalists.

The Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga expanded mainly through networking in offices of the military and the commander. The military leadership issued a special permit to soldiers on active duty and civil servants of the Ministry of National Defence to participate in the association's activities.<sup>81</sup> Thus, on 11 February 1938, after adopting the resolution to establish local branches, as many as 19 branches were established between March and July, with five more on the way.<sup>82</sup> By 1 January 1939, there were 21 branches in provincial centres, and two in smaller towns, with 1,200 members (including candidates) ranging from 43 to 70 years old. In June 1940, the association had 24 branches.<sup>83</sup> The activities of the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga covered more or less all of Lithuania.

<sup>77</sup> *Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjungos įstatai*. Kaunas, 1938, p. 2–3.

<sup>78</sup> List of the command of the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga, 26 February 1938. *LCVA*, f. 1446, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 145.

<sup>79</sup> JANKAUSKAS, Vidmantas. *Nepriklausomos Lietuvos generolai*. Vilnius, 1998, p. 192–199.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>81</sup> Chief Board of the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga, 26 February 1938. *LCVA*, f. 975, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 1.

<sup>82</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos ...*, p. 255–257.

<sup>83</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjungos įkūrimas...*, p. 97–99.



The main opposition to the association's activities arose from the Lietuvos kariuomenės kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga [Association of Lithuanian Army Creators-Volunteers, LKKSS]. This association was founded in 1927 on the initiative of the right-wing parties, and comprised volunteers from the Lithuanian Wars of Independence. In 1937, it had 34 branches and nearly 4,000 members,<sup>84</sup> although the number of creators-volunteers who enjoyed all the privileges and preferences<sup>85</sup> was several times higher. The Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga was seen by the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga as a rival organisation. The name 'Kariuomenės pirmūnai' ['Army Predecessors'] meant that the participants in the Lithuanian national movement in the Russian army were the precursors of the Lithuanian army, who were the first and had advantages over the volunteers from the Wars of Independence. This alone was annoying to the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga. Its Central Board contacted the prime minister and the speaker of the Seimas with comments on granting the name 'Pirmūnai' ['Predecessors'] to the new organisation. They presented three arguments why the name was inappropriate for an association of Lithuanian military units in the Russian army: 1) the 'Predecessors' name should be reserved for the rebels of 1863 and book smugglers, etc; 2) the Lithuanian state was not newly formed in 1918, but was reinstated, and therefore the 'predecessors' were the soldiers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; and 3) abandoning the name 'Predecessors' meant the organisation could include not only Russian troops but also soldiers from other armies.<sup>86</sup> The Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga suggested accepting only soldiers from Lithuanian national units of the Russian army who later also served in the Lithuanian army as 'predecessors' to the new organisation, as this way they effectively demonstrated their 'desire to restore Lithuania with weapons'.<sup>87</sup>

A discussion on this issue opened in the Seimas, and later moved to the press. On 26 January 1939, a draft law on the establishment of the Predecessors medal was submitted for consideration to the Seimas. During the meeting, former volunteers from the Lithuanian army, the members of the Seimas Julius Indrišiūnas and Jonas Viliušis,

<sup>84</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos kariuomenės kūrėjų savanorių sąjungos kūrimas. *Karo archyvas*, 2000, t. XVI, p. 137–145.

<sup>85</sup> They included awards, land, support for settlement and transport privileges. In 1933, it was stated that 9,900 people were recognised and awarded as volunteers, and the number was expected to rise to 10,000. Land was already provided to 9,100 people, including the families of deceased volunteers, and the material support (loans, allowances and timber) amounted to 13.175 million litas. It was stated that there were still about 800 volunteers not supplied (Minutes of the general meeting of members of the Lietuvos kariuomenės kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga, 29–30 April 1933. *LCVA*, f. 560, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 78–78 ap.). But on 26 May 1934 at the general meeting of the LKKSS, the chairman of the Central Board Gužas noted that 'Two years ago the meeting of the general assembly decided to suspend the issue of privileges. Nearly all the privileges requested in 1927 have already been granted, with the exception of free treatment in public hospitals. This issue will be solved with the construction of a new hospital' (Minutes of the general meeting of members of the Lietuvos kariuomenės kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga, 26 May 1934. *LCVA*, f. 560, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 49 ap.).

<sup>86</sup> To the prime minister and chairman of the Seimas, 10 April 1940. *LCVA*, f. 560, ap. 1, b. 79, l. 558.

<sup>87</sup> On predecessors and volunteers, May 1940, Central Board of the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga. *LCVA*, f. 560, ap. 1, b. 79, l. 559.

who was also chairman of the Lietuvos laisvės kovų invalidų sąjunga [Invalids Association of the Lithuanian Fight for Freedom], resented the pressure exerted on the Seimas.<sup>88</sup> Viliušis had doubts not only about the name 'Predecessors', but also about the status of the proposed medal. If the predecessors of the army were those who created the Lithuanian army, it was unclear why the status of the proposed medal was lower than that of the creators-volunteers. Famous members of the Seimas objected mostly to the fact that the award would be granted not for specific deeds or merit to the independence of Lithuania, but simply for belonging to the units and the idea. Finally, the clear charge was made that individuals who after returning to Lithuania did not join the army as volunteers but rather waited to be called up would be awarded.<sup>89</sup> The first to respond to the critics was the government's representative who introduced the draft, Brigadier General Kazys Navakas. He had served in Lithuanian units in the Russian army, and was called up into the Lithuanian army only on 7 December 1920.<sup>90</sup> He noted that 'it was the president who named the participants in the national movement in Russia as predecessors, when he gave a speech at their congress.'<sup>91</sup> The member of the Seimas Brigadier General Julius Čaplikas also advocated for the predecessors. He had served in Lithuanian units of the Russian army, but had also joined the Lithuanian armed forces as a volunteer in 1918.<sup>92</sup> Čaplikas made it very clear that some of the officers could not have been volunteers, since during the creation of the Lithuanian army the officers were the first to be called up, and therefore they subsequently remained unappreciated: 'We know that the officers were the most disadvantaged. They were affected by conscription immediately, and although they accepted the volunteers, marched them into combat, and suffered together with the volunteers, they were not volunteers.'<sup>93</sup> The Seimas finally admitted the draft law for consideration, and the final decision was passed by 36 votes out of 45 in 1940.<sup>94</sup> At that time, the debate on the issue<sup>95</sup> arose again, and the wider public could also read about it. There was an attempt in the press to defend the predecessors from the attacks of the creators-volunteers by naming the latter the 'children' of the first, and recalling that in 1918 the command of the Lithuanian armed forces was made up of predecessors<sup>96</sup> who taught the volunteers. The Central Board of the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga responded publicly only by explaining its position.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>88</sup> See the stenograph of the meeting: *Seimo stenogramos*, 1939 01 26, 114/13-sis posėdis, p. 9–14.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> ASEVIČIUS, Vytautas et al. *Lietuvos kariuomenės karininkai 1918–1953*. T. V. Vilnius, 2005, p. 328.

<sup>91</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos...*, p. 260.

<sup>92</sup> JANKAUSKAS, V. Op. cit., p. 192–193.

<sup>93</sup> *Seimo stenogramos*, 1939 01 26, 114/13-sis posėdis, p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos...*, p. 260.

<sup>95</sup> P. K. „Nesusipratimas“. *Kardas*, 1940-05-15, nr. 10 (334), p. 241.

<sup>96</sup> PAŠIAUŠIŠKIS, V. P. Pirmūnai ir savanoriai (laiškas iš Kauno). *Vilniaus balsas*, 1940-04-18, nr. 89 (142), p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Dėl pirmūnų ir savanorių (atsakymas V. Pr. Pašiaušiškiui). *Vilniaus balsas*, 1940-05-28, nr. 120 (173), p. 3.

The opposition of the creators-volunteers to the predecessors, and the government's support for the latter, could hardly be associated with the ideological rebuffing of organisations or the need to offset the influence of the creators-volunteers by creating the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga. The initiative in this case belonged to former officers in the Lithuanian national units in the Russian army themselves; and primarily the aspiration of certain influential groups to remind the public about themselves, and to occupy the appropriate position in public, was the main reason behind the creation of the new veterans association. Other veterans associations in Lithuania, such as the organisations of war invalids, were not a serious threat to the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga, due to their insignificance.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga, with their pretentious name, at the very first meeting announced that their numbers could reach into the thousands, as high as the creators-volunteers. However, not all creators-volunteers were part of the opposition to the predecessors, but only a certain part of the organisation. As has been mentioned, the chairman of the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga, Reserve Lieutenant Colonel Petras Gužas, belonged to the organising committee of the Congress of Predecessors, and the committee for the creation of their association. He had also served in the Lithuanian cavalry squadron in the Russian army.

Despite the opposition by some of the creators-volunteers, the Medal of the Army Predecessors was approved on 11 April 1940. It was established that it was for Lithuanians 'who during the World War in 1917–1919 were either soldiers or war chaplains, and served: 1) in the Vitebsk Lithuanian battalion, 2) the Smolensk Lithuanian battalion, 3) the Rovno Lithuanian battalion, 4) the Siberian Lithuanian battalion, 5) the Lithuanian cavalry squadron, 6) the 226th Lithuanian field hospital in Ungheni, 7) or the Lithuanian Soldiers Unions (a) Central Committee, Petersburg, (b) West, Southwest and Romanian front committees, and (c) committees of armies, or various units of joint formations and garrisons, and supported the idea of Lithuanian independence.' The award of the medal did not confer any social privileges. Only those awarded the medal who were poor and over 60 years old could be paid an annual pension of 100 litas.<sup>99</sup> Upon acceptance of the medal's statute, the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga immediately approached its branches to collect information about the people to be

<sup>98</sup> The number of the Lietuvos karo invalidų sąjunga [Lithuanian War Invalids Association] which united war invalids of both Lithuanian and Russian armies increased from 100 to 783 in 1926–1939. The Lietuvos laisvės kovų invalidų sąjunga [Invalids Association of the Lithuanian Fight for Freedom], consisting only of invalids from the Wars of Independence, at its best had 100 members, and in 1939 it had 84 members and five candidates. For comparison, the Lietuvos kariuomenės kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga grew from 1,700 to 3,780 members in 1926–1939: JUREVIČIŪTĖ, A. *Buvusių karių organizacijos...*, p. 199, 201, 221.

<sup>99</sup> Seime priimtas Kariuomenės Pirmūnų medalio statusas. *Karys*, 1940-04-18, nr. 16 (1096), p. 448; Lietuvos valstybės ordinų, medalių ir kitų pasižymėjimo ženklų įstatymo pakeitimas. *Vyriausybės žinios*, 1940-05-04, nr. 702, p. 315–316.

awarded.<sup>100</sup> The medal-awarding commission<sup>101</sup> began its work, and considered the first applications, the number of which was over 20.<sup>102</sup> We know that about 1,000 medals were produced, but none were awarded before the Soviet occupation.

Given the high number of influential people in interwar Lithuania in the ranks of the Predecessors, there is no doubt that, if it were not for the Soviet occupation, the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga would have implemented two other priority tasks as well. The approval of the medal would have been followed by book about the Lithuanians in the First World War, and a memorial to all the Lithuanians who perished in the war. These aspects may show a certain political direction, an attempt to join the discourse of the Western Allies (first of all French and British) about the Great War. Until then, only the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga supported close relations with French war veteran associations.<sup>103</sup> The Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga began to operate at the same time that the Lithuanian-French Society in Lithuania began its annual commemoration of the end of the Great War, paying homage to the French and Lithuanians killed in the common fight.

## Conclusions

Debates on the formation of Lithuanian units in the Russian army began in 1917, after the February revolution. First of all, it was a response to the revolution and the expression of Lithuania's aspiration to national sovereignty, but also a reaction and even an answer to the creation of Polish military units in which Lithuanian speakers served. Not all Lithuanian soldiers who served in the Russian army supported the emergence of national units. The opponents of the decision had as many supporters. The difference in opinions, and the distribution of Lithuanian soldiers throughout Russia, influenced the fact that only about 4,000 Lithuanian soldiers joined the units, out of several tens of thousands of Lithuanians. But these units also did not succeed in reaching Lithuania in an organised manner, as was planned. After returning to Lithuania individually, some servicemen from these units, however, contributed to the formation of the Lithuanian armed forces.

This experience of Lithuanian national units in the Russian army were not forgotten in Lithuania. Specific rituals for honouring the victims were applied, and memories were refreshed by repeated publications. Soldiers did not forget their experience during the interwar period, and gathered together on these grounds, declaring

<sup>100</sup> Kariuomenės pirmūnams. *Karys*, 1940-06-06, nr. 23 (1103), p. 619.

<sup>101</sup> Kariuomenės pirmūnų medalio komisija. *Trimitas*, 1940-06-06, nr. 23 (1016), p. 571.

<sup>102</sup> Kariuomenės Pirmūnų medalio komisija jau dirba. *Karys*, 1940-06-13, nr. 24 (1104), p. 654.

<sup>103</sup> Overview of ten years of activities of the Kūrėjų savanorių sąjunga. *LCVA*, f. 560, ap. 1, b. 68, l. 518.

publicly their importance and merit to Lithuania. The 20-year anniversary of the movement that emerged in 1917 was used to establish the Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga. Its establishment was determined by several factors. Primarily, some senior officers in the Lithuanian armed forces, politicians and public figures, due to the legal environment that existed during the first years of independence (they were called up to the Lithuanian army), did not have the status of creator-volunteer. Further research should show whether there was any deeper political underpinning in the creation of this association. It is clear that President Antanas Smetona supported the organisation, and even offered its name. It is also evident that amid the rise in tension in Europe, and in the wake of the new war, it made sense to highlight the fact that Lithuanians fought against Germany during the First World War, by modelling possible relations and possibly a political rapprochement with the Western Allies.

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## NEĮVYKUSI KARIUOMENĖ: LIETUVIŲ TAUTINIAI DALINIAI RUSIJOJE IR JŲ VETERANŲ ORGANIZAVIMASIS LIETUVOJE TARPUKARIU

Vytautas Jokubauskas

Santrauka

Vytautas Lesčius jau yra išsamiai aprašęs, kur, kada ir kaip kūrėsi bei veikė Rusijoje 1917–1919 m. kurtieji lietuvių tautiniai daliniai, koks buvo jų ryšys su 1918 m. Lietuvos vyriausybės pradėta kurti kariuomene. Aušra Jurevičiūtė yra išnaginėjusi daugelį visuomeninių kombatantų asociacijų Lietuvoje kūrimosi ir veiklos aspektų. Taigi šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjami iš pirmo žvilgsnio jau palyginti gerai žinomi dalykai. Tačiau į juos siekta

pažvelgti iš naujos perspektyvos, atskleidžiant, kaip Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais įgyta patirtis tapo tam tikros karo veteranų grupės vienijančiu elementu ir kaip jie siekė šią patirtį sureikšminti: teigdami, kad ir jie kovojo už laisvę, kad jų veikloje glūdi kariuomenės atkūrimo užuomazga.

Dėl lietuvių tautinių dalinių formavimo Rusijos kariuomenėje buvo pradėta diskutuoti 1917 m., po Vasario revoliucijos. Pirmiausia tai buvo reakcija į revoliuciją ir tautinių aspiracijų į Lietuvos suverenitetą išraiška, bet kartu ir reakcija ar net atsakas į lenkiškų karinių vienetų, kuriuose stėjo tarnauti ir lietuviakalbiai, kūrimą. Toli gražu ne visi Rusijos kariuomenėje tarnavę lietuvių kariai rėmė tautinių dalinių atsiradimą. Sprendimo oponentai turėjo ne ką mažiau šalininkų nei jo rėmėjai. Nuomonių išsiskyrimas, o ir lietuvių karių pasklidimas po visą Rusiją, turėjo įtakos, kad iš kelių dešimčių tūkstančių lietuvių karių į mažiausiai šešis vienetus susitelkė tik apie 4 tūkstančiai. Bet ir šiems daliniams organizuotai pasiekti Lietuvos, kaip buvo planuojama, nepavyko. Grįžę į Lietuvą individualiai, dalis šiuose daliniuose tarnavusiųjų visgi prisidėjo prie Lietuvos Respublikos kariuomenės formavimo.

Nepaisant to, tautinių lietuvių dalinių Rusijoje egzistavimo patirtis Lietuvoje nebuvo pamiršta. Ją aktualizavo daugkartinės publikacijos, o moderniosios Lietuvos karo istoriografijoje būtent Rusijoje veikę lietuvių tautiniai daliniai buvo laikomi Lietuvos Respublikos kariuomenės ištakomis. Oficialiai kariuomenės įkūrimo diena Lietuvoje buvo paskelbta 1918 m. lapkričio 23 d. Tačiau visą tarpukarį šalyje būta bandymų parodyti tautinius dalinius kaip Lietuvos valstybės kariuomenės prototipą, o 1932 m. žurnalas „Trimitas“ net pasiūlė alternatyvią kariuomenės kūrimo datą (1917 m. birželio 7 d.).

Su lietuvių tautiniuose daliniuose tarnavusių karių patirtimi buvo susiję specifiniai žuvusiųjų pagerbimo ritualai. Pavyzdžiui, Vytauto Didžiojo Lietuvių bataliono Sibire karių žūtis 1919 m. lapkričio mėn. buvo prisimenama ir pagerbiama visą tarpukarį.

Galiausiai atkreipti dėmesį į savo vaidmenį vis labiau ėmėsi iniciatyvos patys kariai, kadaise tarnavę lietuvių tautiniuose daliniuose. Savosios patirties pagrindu jie telkėsi, viešai deklaruodami savo svarbą ir nuopelnus Lietuvai. Vienas ankstyvųjų tokio telkimosi pavyzdžių – 1928 m. pradžioje Kaune įvykęs Rumunijos fronte Didžiojo karo metais tarnavusių lietuvių karių suvažiavimas. Į veteranų organizaciją šis sambūris neišaugo, tačiau jau po dešimtmečio į idėją suburti lietuvių tautiniuose daliniuose tarnavusius karius reaguota gerokai plačiau. Judėjimo, kuris kilo 1917 m., dvidešimtmetis buvo išnaudotas Kariuomenės pirmūnų organizacijai įkurti. Jos steigimą lėmė keli aspektai. Dalis aukšto rango Lietuvos kariuomenės karininkų ir politikos bei visuomenės veikėjų dėl teisinio reguliavimo, galiojusio pirmaisiais nepriklausomybės metais (į Lietuvos kariuomenę jie buvo mobilizuoti), neturėjo kūrėjo savanorio statuso. Ar būta kuriant šią organizaciją gilesnės politinės potekstės, turėtų atskleisti tolesni tyrimai. Tačiau neabejotina tai, kad Prezidentas Antanas Smetona organizacijos kūrimui pritarė ir netgi pasiūlė jai pavadinimą. Akivaizdu ir tai, kad kylant Europoje įtampai ir gresiant kilti naujam karui, išryškinti tai, kad ir lietuviai Pirmajame pasauliniame kare kovojo prieš Vokietiją, turėjo prasmės modeliuojant galimus santykius ir galbūt politinį suartėjimą su Vakarų sąjungininkais.

Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjungos įkūrimas svarbus ne tik tuo, kad tai buvo pirmoji vien tik Didžiojo karo veteranus vienijusi kombatantų asociacija, įkurta Lietuvoje. Sąjungos steigiamajame suvažiavime buvo aptarta, kad jos uždaviniai yra išleisti specialų leidinį

apie lietuvių karių sąjūdį Rusijoje, pastatyti didelį paminklą visiems pasauliniame kare žuvusiems lietuviams ir pagaminti sąjūdžio dalyviams specialų ženklą. Šiuos tikslus imtasi įgyvendinti jau 1937 m. pabaigoje, bet iki 1940 m. birželio mėn. tebuvo spėta sukurti ir pagaminti sąjūdžio dalyvio ženklą – Kariuomenės pirmūno medalį, kuris niekam nebuvo įteiktas. Faktas, kad sąjungos vadovybę su keliomis išimtimis sudarė beveik vien aukšti valstybės pareigūnai arba karininkai, o dalis jų buvo glaudžiai susiję su tautininkais, neleidžia abejoti: jei ne sovietinė okupacija, Kariuomenės pirmūnų sąjunga būtų įgyvendinusi ir kitus du prioritetinius darbus. Medalio įteisinimą būtų lydėjęs knygos apie lietuvius Pirmajame pasauliniame kare išleidimas ir paminklas visiems lietuviams, žuvusiems Didžiajame kare. Pastaruosiuose aspektuose galima įžvelgti ir tam tikrą politinę komunikaciją – bandymą įsilieti į Vakarų sąjungininkų (pirmiausia prancūzų ir britų) diskursą apie Didįjį karą.