

Families in the Lithuanian Partisan War: The Case of the Dešinys Group (1949–1953)

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The purpose of this study is to analyse the relationship of the participants of the armed underground resistance with their families after they decided to become partisans and after they actually became partisans, to include discussion of how such a decision changed the fate of their loved ones.

The existing sources hint at three possible reactions of any family to the decision of one of its members to join the armed anti-Soviet resistance: such a person might be blessed with a prayer (and a cross) with kneeling; but there were also chaotic reactions. But, in any case, having to saying goodbye to loved ones did not change the decision of those who went ahead with it. Family members, regardless of whether they expressed approval or opposition to such a decision, often naturally became involved in underground activities.

The case of Dešinys Group (tėvūnija) reveals the importance of families in the Lithuanian fight for freedom and the extent to which relatives were involved – with a unit as small as the Dešinys Group, according to this investigation, 66.7% of the individuals of these five families became fighters or their informants. In the Lithuanian fights for freedom, these five families in it lost 16 children, and not a single relative was left untouched by the Soviets – all of them were exiled or forced to hide.

Keywords: Lithuanian fights for freedom, partisans, Dešinys tėvūnija/Group, deportation.

Introduction

In post-war studies of the fights for freedom, it is still common for people to focus on the stories of those who participated in the armed underground resistance, with discussions of the procedures they employed and their struggles, while other equally important people active in the underground resistance seemingly end up forgotten; starting with the fact that, behind each fighter, there were usually their family members. Partisans' family members accompanied them from the moment they began to resist, and they too became an equally important part of the guerrilla war – the first supporters, the liaisons, and finally the fighters who took up arms. When this is borne in mind, family research offers a somewhat broader view of the participants of the resistance and their diversity; the contribution of not only of the fighters in the partisan war but that of their relatives as well is highlighted. Even the partisan groups (*tėvūnija*) have not received much attention from historians to this date, and this attempt to reveal the involvement of families in the resistance – with an analysis of the Dešinys Group – may fill this gap, at least to some extent.

This is a topic which is becoming more and more important in today's context, with new insights from psychologists on traumatic experiences and their long-term consequences, especially when one considers that one of the most important environments that can help a person overcome the trauma of war and occupation – the family – was destroyed during this period.¹ There can be no doubt that the stories of the families involved in the resistance to the occupying regime are only becoming closer and more relevant in the wake of the war in Ukraine that began in 2022, and the ongoing dispersal of Ukrainian families.

The subject of the work. Consider the closest environment of a partisan before they join the ranks of armed underground resistance i.e. the members of their family. Although the fighters were also supported by their relatives, it was decided that only those closest to the participants of the armed underground resistance would be discussed here; those who immediately gained suspicion among those in the repressive structures of the Soviets.

The aim of the work. To analyse the relationship of the participants of the armed underground resistance with their families after they decided to become, and indeed became, partisans; and how such a decision changed the fate of their relatives.

Objectives:

1. To analyse the relationships and ties of family members with those among their relatives who became partisans.
2. To reveal the role of the family within small organisational units, with the example of the Dešinys Group of the Geležinis Vilkas Unit of the Tauras District.
3. To discuss the fate of the relatives of the partisans of the Dešinys Group.

¹ Danutė Gailienė, *Ką jie mums padarė. Lietuvos gyvenimas traumų psichologijos žvilgsniu*, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2021, p. 75.

Research methods. A descriptive analytical method was chosen, for the sake of outlining the course of the research, and analysis of the sources and the conclusions, while the case study also allowed for examination of the involvement of relatives in the partisan war in more detail.

Chronological boundaries. The starting point is 1949, when the groups began to be created, and the end of the period of the research is a point in 1953, but the fate of partisans' families in later years is also visited.

A review of the historiography. Although the historiography does not deal with the history of the relatives of those who participated in the freedom struggles, Regina Laukaitytė's monograph,² published in 2022, offers a separate, albeit very short chapter (which does not include much new information) devoted to the families connected with the armed underground resistance. One thing that is probably a little more important is the author's contribution to the topic of exile, which deals with a previously ignored issue – life after *escaping* exile. The importance of local communities, including the family members of fighters, in the resistance to the occupation regime is also highlighted by the American political scientist Roger D. Petersen.³ However, most of his statements have been empirically substantiated and embellished by Dainius Noreika – it is in the dissertation of the latter⁴ that we find the most relevant issues for this thesis which discusses the relatives of partisans.

The works on the partisan war⁵ are very brief when it comes to families' histories and their contribution to the post-war freedom struggles, or the relations between the partisans and their relatives – the main aspects of the work are but briefly mentioned here. There was greater employment of syntheses, with the aim of arranging and developing the main focus or commemorating general events of the post-war freedom struggle. Meanwhile, the relevance of contextual literature was greatest in connection with understanding the measures undertaken by the Soviet repressive structures against the partisans' relatives. This was mainly the subject of the historian Arvydas Anušauskas.⁶

Overview of sources. The first group of sources comprises archival sources and the subgroups thereof – and this category is particularly problematic in terms of quantity and retrieval; it is partisan documents and personal letters. Of course, letters, especially those

² Regina Laukaitytė, *Pokaris Lietuvoje belaukiant išlaisvinimo*, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2022.

³ Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion. Lessons from Eastern Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁴ Dainius Noreika, *Partizanų karas Lietuvoje (1944–1953): socialinių struktūrų problema* [daktaro disertacija], Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2020.

⁵ Nijolė Gaškaitė, Dalia Kuodytė, Algis Kašėta, Bonifacas Ulevičius, *Lietuvos partizanai 1944–1953*, Kaunas: Lietuvos politinių kalinių ir tremtinių sąjunga, 1996.

⁶ Arvydas Anušauskas, *Teroras 1940–1958*, Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2012.

written to family members who were exiled during the partisan war, are not without their figurative meanings, but there is also another problem: many letters, like partisan documents, are scattered across various files, and it is also likely that many of them are not yet available to researchers on the basis of the fact that they are kept in private collections. This work will delve into the discovered letters of the fighters of the Dešinyš Group (*Dešinio tėvūnija*), which are included in the formulary files, as well as in the criminal file of Julija Popieraitė.⁷

The second significant group is comprised of the documents of the Soviet repressive structures. These comprise, first of all, the criminal files of partisans and their relatives, stored in the Lithuanian Special Archive. They do not really go into the family history relevant to this research; at best, as was usually required in initial interrogations, these listed family members, relatives, their places of residence, and perhaps a few additional facts, such as why they joined the freedom fights, but this often cuts off the more detailed story about the family – it was much more important for the interrogators to know where the family was hiding, and where the bunkers were. Criminal files are not always sufficient for revealing in full detail the relationships and connections between partisans and their family members, except when there is no other option and no more material has been discovered. However, these files have been chosen in order to form the basis of a more coherent narrative. In order to provide an overview of the Dešinyš Group, the agency file “Vabalai” (Beetles) (Жуки), which was opened up in the combating of the fighters of this unit, and the deportation files in the K-19 Collection have been drawn on here.

The third group is made up of published sources, these being primarily memoirs of partisans and their relatives. The most obvious weakness to be recognised with such a source (oral history), is the temporal distance i.e. the problem of (re)constructing the emerging general narrative and memories. However, it is not always possible to find a larger number of contemporaneous sources, which, of course, most accurately capture and authentically convey here-and-now experiences and emotions (especially in the case of letters). Thus, in this work, we have to rely on memoirs to provide a description of the fate of relatives where there are no contemporaneous sources, and also to convey some of the details of the everyday life of the partisans and their relatives. It is also believed that, by efforts not to retell encounters with the army as accurately as possible, or by focussing not on individual dates but rather on the stories of families, it is possible to discover unique material which, when combined with other archival sources for the purpose of verifying some of the details of the narrative or for filling in gaps, is the only thing that can provide a more diverse presentation of the subject.

One thing included in the published sources relevant to the research is the written legacy of the partisans, although the main problem for most of them is writing for a wider

⁷ Criminal case of Julija Popieraitė, in: *Lithuanian Special Archives (LSA)*, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. P-14993.

audience.⁸ In this way, we find experiences that are not entirely authentic, and narratives that have been literarised. In view of this obstacle, when trying to circumvent it to some extent, it should be added that sources that have become classics of this kind offer more opportunity to verify, and most importantly to complement, the claims that have already been established in historiography.

Partisans' relations and ties with their relatives

When we talk about a determined person leaving home, their motivations influenced by various reasons and circumstances, the classic image of a mother blessing her children and seeing them off to fight in the partisan war immediately comes to mind. This is perhaps something best recognised in the memoirs of Juozas Lukša, in which he describes the parting of himself and his brother Stasys-Juodvarnis from their weeping mother, who sends off her kneeling children as she makes the sign of the cross on them, wishing God's protection for her sons on the path they have chosen.⁹ Such farewells to children were not a phenomenon exclusive to the Lithuanian partisan war effort; similar farewells have been known since ancient times, in which, according to different traditions, parents blessed those who were going to the battles of the time, and later to the uprisings. Only in the case of Lithuania, from the 19th century to the early 20th century, such farewells were almost unheard of – Lithuanian men were dispatched to the wars in Tsarist Russia, usually without being allowed to say goodbye to their families,¹⁰ and the partisan war only revived the broken tradition after a long time. Moreover, between the wars, Lithuania was little-affected by secularisation, and it was the mother who was the person in the family that was expected to pass the faith to her children¹¹ – perhaps, in the more religious families, this was the way of saying goodbye.

However, it is also possible to detect less sacred or harmonious-sounding farewells from home; farewells which, although not often emphasised in historiography, give the impression that they were not entirely rare. On the contrary, they seem quite realistic and human and, given the situation at the time, it seems likely that there could have been more than a few. We find fewer images of family members falling on their knees, crying or making accusations (“you will get my children killed”¹²), or reproaches (“you are not supposed to walk

⁸ [Juozas Lukša] Juozas Daumantas, *Partizanai*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1990; Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, *Daugel krito sūnų...*, Vilnius: Mintis, 1991.

⁹ J. Daumantas, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹⁰ Vita Ivanauskaitė, „Mirtis ir laidotuvės vėlyvosiose karinėse-istorinėse dainose: folkloriniai naujos istorinės patirties atspindžiai“, in: *Tautosakos darbai*, vol. 30, 2006, p. 162.

¹¹ Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė, *Lietuvių šeima vertybių sankirtoje (XX a. – XXI a. pradžia)* [monografija], Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto leidykla, 2012, p. 114.

¹² Told by Benediktas Trakimas-Genelis, in: *Laisvės kovotojų prisiminimai*, edited by Romas Kaunietis, Vilnius: Margi raštai, 2010, vol. 8, no 2, p. 61.

in the woods; you are supposed to raise a child”¹³) against the would-be partisan fighter, but the reasons for such omissions can vary – perhaps it is not considered an important part of the story, especially if everything happened without any special blessing, or perhaps it is too painful to talk about a particular borderline situation following which the fate of families was irreversibly changed; something which is (un)consciously being tried to be pushed aside. But such behaviour or anger on the part of family members should not come across as something of a surprise, given the original context of the initial tyranny of the Soviet reoccupation and the Red Army, during which many people joined the partisan ranks. With the terror raging – one might have seen examples of it among their relatives or neighbours – it is natural to fear both for the fate of the person leaving and for the fate of those who stayed home. However, although it would seem that a lack of traditional blessing and attempts of family members’ activists to discourage them by presenting plausible future opportunities must have made the decision to leave and become a partisan much more difficult, for many people, neither their family nor their requests changed their beliefs.

In most cases, regardless of the circumstances under which ways were parted, those family members who stayed at home naturally became the first point-of-call supporters and liaisons of the armed underground resistance when one of their relatives became involved. In his attempt to explain what motivated individuals to join the resistance, Petersen places particular emphasis on the importance of family ties. This study identifies family ties as unconditional – something which brings about much higher potential risks when it comes to providing assistance if at least one family member joins or supports the armed resistance (+2).¹⁴ When asked why they took such risks, relatives often talked like they did not even understand the question: “[...] our brothers are in the forest – how can you not bring them socks or food?”¹⁵ although it was the norm that family members did not take an official oath, so as to avoid documenting the “guilt” imposed on them if they fell into the hands of the Soviets – the partisans wanted to protect them better. On the other hand, partisans certainly did not always refrain from giving riskier tasks to relatives. Albinas Kentra, a young gymnasium student and the brother of three partisans, who became an intermediary between the anti-Soviet organisation Diemedis in Šilalė, organised by Mečislovas Dargužas, and the partisans, would try to provide weapons or ammunition at his brother’s behest.¹⁶ It was also important that family members, both in the early peri-

¹³ „Railų šeima ir jos likimas”, in: *Laisvės kovotojų prisiminimai*, edited by Romas Kaunietis, Vilnius: Margi raštai, 2014, vol. 8, p. 32.

¹⁴ Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion...*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Ž. Kropaitė-Basiulė, *#fainiausiapasaulymočiūtė. Partizanų ryšinininkės ir politinės kalinės Onos Butrimaitės-Laurinienės istorija*, Vilnius: BALTO leidybos namai, 2022, p. 88.

¹⁶ Report of the interrogation of Albinas Martinavičius, 26-08-1946, in: LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 6205/3, l. 52-54; the mediation in the acquisition of weapons is revealed by the undated letter of his brother partisan Rutenis, which is attached to the file, in: *ibid.*, envelope no. 123, l. 123-2–123-2 atv.

od and later, even when they lost their homes and wandered around staying at strangers' farms, still tried to help the partisans as much as they could. There was also a tendency to believe that, when a fighter was killed, their relatives were generally not inclined to abandon their original activities and that they usually helped the underground resistance until such time as they ended up arrested.

As has been noted, there were different opinions among the partisans themselves as to how much their families should know, and how much already vulnerable individuals should get involved in the underground resistance. Some liaisons – including family members – were denied knowledge of the exact locations of bunkers without a need-to-know basis,¹⁷ as it may not have been relevant to their tasks, and, like many others, they did not necessarily have direct contact with the partisans, but rather they remained in contact with them through other liaisons. Meanwhile, others were simply trusted indiscriminately, they revealed the locations of hiding places. As early as 1945, in a letter to his brother, Pranas Švilpa-Barzdyla wrote: “it would be better if only *our family members* knew the location of the bunker” [emphasis mine – E. K].¹⁸ It is also to be noted in these sources that, in some cases, the exclusion of partisans' relatives by emphasising that they were *from a particular family*, can be acknowledged not only from the relatively greater trust shown in them in particular cases, but also through more leniency sometimes shown in the event of an act that was not in accordance with the partisans' instructions. With this, there existed a polarised attitude in the partisan ranks (high trust *versus* treating relatives as ordinary liaisons), but it is important to mention the motive for the trust that has been found – some partisans probably expected that their family members would not be able to testify about their relatives even when interrogated. A close friend of Birutė Stačiokaitė, the sister of a partisan, recalled the words of the sister of three partisans who had suffered the interrogations: “who could I betray, my hiding parents, brothers, friends, bunker?”¹⁹

The case of the Dešinys Group: the characteristics of family involvement

According to the 1949 Statute for the Movement of the Struggle for the Freedom of Lithuania (commonly referred to by its Lithuanian acronym, LLKS), the reorganisation of the Tauras District companies into groups (*tėvūnija*) started in April of the same year,²⁰ and in June, one of the companies in the District, the 54th, following the death of the commander Kazimieras Pinkvarta-Dešinys, was renamed after him, and it adopted the name the Dešinys Group, which operated within the borders of three districts – Kazlų Rūda, Marijampolė

¹⁷ Ž. Kropaitė-Basiulė, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

¹⁸ Letter from Pranas Švilpa-Barzdyla to his brother, undated, beginning with the words “Ponui Afenui...”, in: *Laisvės kovų archyvas*, 2010, vol. 43, p. 75.

¹⁹ From a personal conversation with Zita Žemaitienė (kept by the author).

²⁰ N. Gaškaitė, D. Kuodytė, A. Kašėta, B. Ulevičius, *op. cit.*, p. 480.

and Prienai. Out of the ten groups operating in the district, only three were named after a specific partisan (one for each unit in the district) – this testifies to the significance of the whole personality and authority of Dešinys, not only in the company but also in the whole unit. Another important reason for the case of the group chosen for the study is that, for the first time, such a unit was being led by a woman – Antanina Kurtinytė, who had lost three brothers in the partisan war. Two of them participated in the same group, and this in itself is enough to let us determine the first cases of partisanship within families, which, when looked at one after another, indicate that there were five such families in the group. From about 1950 until the end of the existence of the group in November 1952,²¹ the same names of the participants in the freedom struggle can be found in the list of the fighters and liaisons in the group – Popiera, Marčiulaitis, Kurtinys, Banislauskas and Gumauskas (due to the young age of the fighters, in this case the “family” shall be acknowledged as including only parents, brothers and sisters).

When considering how the five families could have come together in a single unit, it is clear that they were brought together by the same living environment – the villages of Dambrauka (Popiera), Stuomenai (Marčiulaitis), Jasenava (Kurtinys) and Sarginė (Banislauskas) in the Marijampolė district were very close to one another. According to the 1942 census,²² these families grew up in Šilavotas Volost, while Dambrauka was a few kilometres further away, in Marijampolė Volost. The presence of the Gumauskas family in the Dešinys Group seems somewhat strange, as the village where they lived (Liepynai) is obviously distant from the main birthplaces of the other fighters. However, Julija Popieraitė’s interrogation reports reveal one particular significant detail: the sister of the six partisans, when interrogated, said that she and Vincas Gumauskas (brother of Algimantas and Petras Gumauskas, the future fighters of the Dešinys Group) were studying together in their third year of a teachers’ seminar in Marijampolė, and that there was also contact with families – indeed, the Gumauskas family was visited by Antanas Popiera-Žilvitis in 1947, and he was already a partisan at that time.²³ The roots of the Gumauskas family themselves also lay in Igliškėliai Volost – the father of Antanas Gumauskas was born in the village of Grabava, Igliškėliai Volost, near the places where the 54th Company, which would later become known as the Dešinys Group, was engaged in partisan activities.²⁴ Marija Brūzgaitė-Gumauskienė, the future wife of Antanas and a mother of four children, also grew up in the same Volost, where, in 1947, after the family was dispersed, the remaining members of the family

²¹ The arrest of the commander of the group, Antanina Kurtinytė, on 7 November 1952, ended the activities of the unit.

²² *Visuotinio Lietuvos gyventojų surašymo 1942 metais bylų rodyklė*, in: *Lithuanian Central State Archive (LCSA)*, f. R-743, op. 2, vol. II.

²³ Report of the interrogation of Julija Popieraitė, 09-04-1948, in: *LSA*, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. P-14993, l. 14.

²⁴ Profile of the arrested Antanas Gumauskas, in: *LSA*, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 9162/3, t. 2, l. 4 (321).

had to stay with her brother Jonas Brūzga, who lived there. Thus, the acquaintance with the Popiera family, along with visits made by relatives in these areas, who were probably also personal contacts with the Geležinis Vilkas Unit (brother Vincas Gumauskas-Musė was the leader of the reserve partisans of the 6th company of the 3rd group of this unit²⁵), led to Gumauskas family members aligning with partisans in the more distant Prienai district.

In the case of the families of the Dešiny Group, the initial situation was that one member of each went to the forest: in 1945, Andrius Popiera-Naktinis,²⁶ Vitas Marčiulaitis-Vėjelis and²⁷ Antanas Banislauskas-Neptūnas²⁸ became partisans. Klemensas Kurtinys, who was killed in the same year, was also in contact with the partisans in 1945, but the information about him available in existing sources differs considerably, and it may not be entirely clear whether Klemensas was actually a member of the armed underground resistance, as he was still a teacher at the Plutiškės Gymnasium and was living in a legal capacity.²⁹ When interrogated, his sister Antanina Kurtinytė did not disclose whether he had died as a partisan – she merely briefly remarked that he had been killed by the Soviets while he was walking through the woods.³⁰ Perhaps it was believed that the security service had no information on him although they knew he had been involved early on, and that at least this would be a way to soften some facts about his family who were already labelled as “bandits” or to try to throw at least one accusation against the occupiers themselves. Klemensas served in the Territorial Defence Force,³¹ and later, in her memoirs, Kurtinytė said that her brother was visited by friends who were officers, and that meetings took place in their home, and that he took charge of the partisans operating near the Kurtinys’ home.³² The presumption that Klemensas had joined the partisans is strengthened by the fact that his family had been involved in supporting the partisans, including V. Marčiulaitis-Vėjas who had been a partisan of the future Dešiny Group since 1945, and that there were two hideouts in Kurtinys’ house; so it is possible that Klemensas may have at least helped the first fighters to organise themselves. Similarly, the Gumauskas family were initially active

²⁵ Fighters of the Geležinis Vilkas Unit 6th Company 3rd Platoon, under Musė, the head of the group [partisan document], 04/01/1947, in: *ibid.*, envelope no. 331, l. 331–1.

²⁶ Justinas Sajauskas, Rūta Trimonienė, “Popieros”, *Valstybinė lietuvių enciklopedija*, in: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/popieros/> (24-05-2023).

²⁷ Justinas Sajauskas, “Marčiulaičiai”, *Valstybinė lietuvių enciklopedija*, in: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/marciulaičiai/> (24-05-2023).

²⁸ Indictment of the Prienai District Special Service, April 1948, in: *LSA*, f. V-5, ap. 1, b. 3731, l. 8.

²⁹ Told by Antanina Kurtinytė-Mackelienė-Liepa, in: *Laisvės kovotojų prisiminimai*, edited by Romas Kaunietis, Vilnius: Margi raštai, 2014, vol. IX, p. 547.

³⁰ Report of the interrogation of Antanina Kurtinytė, 24-11-1952, in: *LSA*, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 25953/3, t. 1, l. 85.

³¹ *Suvalkijos partizano Klemenso Kurtinio paskutiniai žingsniai mokykloje*, parengė Marijampolės Tauro apygardos partizanų ir tremties muziejus, in: <https://www.lndm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/13-stendas72.compressed.pdf> (25-05-2023).

³² Told by Antanina Kurtinytė-Mackelienė-Liepa, in: *Laisvės kovotojų prisiminimai...*, vol. 9, p. 547.

supporters of the partisans in the post-war freedom struggle. In 1947, some members of the family were deported because of the partisans that were found on their farm, which is why the timing of their later involvement in the partisanship is also evident – after the family's dispersal around 1948, a former reserve partisan, Algimantas Gumauskas-Balandis, himself became a partisan.

Due to lack of sources, the involvement of relatives in supporting / acting as liaisons for these first partisans is rather unevenly disclosed. On the one hand, the archival files show that members of the Kurtinys, Banislauskas, and Popiera families did help the fighters with food and varied information about the situation in the village before they were deported in 1946–1948. Because of this support for the underground resistance and the sons' activities, the parents and a few other children were repressed, and it can be presumed that the dispersed parents of the Marčiulaitis family were no longer able to engage in similar activities. On the other hand, even if the specific facts of the assistance provided by some of the individuals in this early period of the partisan war have not been recorded, it does not appear that the family members of the first listed partisans, the brothers and sisters in particular, were passive – as many as thirteen individuals, who were connected by family ties with the fighters who had gone to underground in 1945, were added to the ranks of the partisans in the years 1946–1952, and they eventually formed the core of the Dešinys Group established in 1949. As can be seen from the orders of the Tauras District issued to the units and groups, one did not always become a partisan just because they were the brother or sister of a participant in the armed underground resistance; they were also required to distinguish themselves and gain the confidence of the fighters. In November 1950, Kazimieras Kurtinys-Ažuolas only became a candidate for the partisans of the Dešinys Group, while Albinas Banislauskas-Klajūnas was given the title of a partisan for “good execution of his duties”.³³

During the period of the founding of the group, due to the increased arrests of relatives, more criminal and operative cases emerged, from which it was able to be noted that the relatives of the fighters who had become liaisons stood out from the rest of the liaisons of the group by the riskier tasks that they undertook, despite the fact that they were already vulnerable and wanted by agents, and this meant that any appearance of them in public could have led to their arrest (Petras Gumauskas-Pipiras was arrested in 1951 and at that time he had photos of Dešinys and other partisans with him – attempts were made to recruit him and afterwards he was probably persecuted³⁴), and, if they were

³³ Order No. 77 of the leader of the Tauras District, Antanas Pužas-Gintaras, to the Geležinis Vilkas Unit, Transcript, 18-12-1950, in: LSA, f. K-12, ap. 1, b. 3, file No. 00057 (files are digitised and the originals are unnumbered / illegible page number).

³⁴ Vincas Peckus, *Legendinis partizanas Petras Gumauskas-Pipiras*, Marijampolė: Marijampolės Rygiškių Jono gimnazija, 2013, p. 11.

caught alongside the fighters, they could have been killed. In addition to distributing press and carrying correspondence, they did not shy away from taking part in some actions. Romutė Gumauskaitė, only fifteen at the time, and Antanina Kurtinytė did their bit with the partisans in the repairing of partisans' graves, which were constantly being vandalised (the girls decorated the crosses with wreaths which bore the inscription "The country will remember you, who have fallen for freedom"), and in the mine-laying of the cemetery of Mikališkės in the village of Stuomenai, where, the very next day, three members of the Soviet Union special service were killed.³⁵ Pipiras, the brother of Balandis, the commander of the group, had to travel long distances as part of his tasks, which included maintaining communication between the Dešinys Group, the Geležinis Vilkas and Vytautas Units, and accompanying partisans to meetings. The activities of the relatives in the underground resistance even after the deaths of the brothers and the arrest of P. Gumauskas, a former liaison and partisan since 1951, is also evidenced by the fact that, in June–November 1952, a rather strong group comprised of the last surviving girls of the three families under investigation, plus former liaisons (Romutė, Antanina, Marytė Banislauskaitė) and Monika Marčiulynaitė-Nykštukas, a newly-joined adjutant of the group, who had also lost a brother, Stasys Marčiulynas-Lapinas, in the fighting, is observed. A review of their criminal files shows that they stuck together during this period and worked together to keep the group alive – writing circulars together, distributing press and correspondence through each other, staying at the homes of supporters. Of course, they were united by similar experiences i.e. the loss of their brothers, and this may have encouraged them to continue working and sticking together. However, this shows how important the continuity of the activities of the group and the brothers was to them, because, despite the threat of arrest, the girls did not try to remain passive or to confine themselves to distributing the newspaper "Partizanas" and to writing circulars – in October 1952, they helped Juozas Vitkauskas, who was hiding from mobilisation, to join the armed underground resistance:³⁶ their successful persuading him to do so helped him to get in contact with other partisans – Vytautas Stanaitis-Aidas and Petras Kučinskas-Tyla.

During the three years of the Dešinys Group's existence since its establishment, as many as twelve members of the five families under investigation joined the partisan ranks, although some of them were partisans for only a short period of time, e.g., Leonas Kurtinys-Jaunutis and his companion Justinas Marčiulaitis-Milžinas stayed only a few weeks in the armed underground resistance. It was from 1950 onwards that the largest number of new partisans joined the ranks – in that year, ten out of twelve fighters joined the Dešinys Group, so it could be said that the members of the same families remained at the core of

³⁵ Report of the interrogation of Antanina Kurtinytė, 19-11-1952, in: LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 25953/3, t. 1, l. 54–55; Report of the interrogation of Romutė Gumauskaitė, 10-12-1952, in: *ibid.*, l. 231.

³⁶ Report of the interrogation of Antanina Kurtinytė, 29-11-1952, in: *ibid.*, l. 133–134.

the group until the very end of its activity. This late moment of fighters joining the ranks also reflects a general characteristic of the later period of the partisan war: at a similar time (according to the study of the historian Noreika, 1946–1950), in light of the fear of deportation or arrest, the partisans were mainly joined by former liaisons who amounted to being supporters – these individuals included a lot of relatives of those who had been partisans before.³⁷ A more distinctive feature of the Dešinyš Group was that the partisans took the places of their dead brothers both in 1951 and in 1952, when the scale of the loss of relatives was increasing and the last fighters of the unit had already lost *all* their brothers who had fought in the ranks of the partisans. Meanwhile, a total of only twelve members joined the six partisan units (platoons, companies and units, which are larger than groups) investigated by Noreika from 1950 onwards.³⁸ In the specific case of the Dešinyš Group, the reasons for joining (as identified by the historian) were also perfectly valid. At a time when some of the family members had already been deported, with reports that the children in exile, the little brothers and sisters of those who had remained in Lithuania, were starving,³⁹ the fear of arrest, and especially the fear of exile, could have played a role here; it seemed preferable to join the armed underground resistance or even die rather than be sent to Siberia. The threat of mobilisation remained a concern. After the death of her son Algimantas, the mother of Petras Gumauskas asked her youngest son to join the army and at least save himself, but according to the report of an agent who had contacted the mother, he only replied that “I would rather perish in a ‘gang’ [quotation marks added by me – E. K.] than join the army”.⁴⁰ However, the factor of mobilisation alone could not have been decisive – Gumauskas himself, being “from such a family”, would certainly not have been accepted into the army, but rather would have been interrogated and deported, and it cannot be ruled out that he could have realised this.

It is perhaps more important to emphasise here that the deaths of the brothers could only have strengthened the will to fight against the occupying force – although the partisan war was almost at an end, those left broken as a result of the loss of loved ones might have figured that there was no other way to go other than to continue what their family members had started. Such an idea might also explain the seemingly strange decision of Kostas Marčiulaitis-Dainius – a minor aged only seventeen, who had lost his brother, the partisan commander Vėjelis – to join the partisans; although he certainly could have attempted to find his family – his brother Antanas was working as a teacher and his sisters were still at school, so a return to a semi-legal life was a possibility, but he decided to continue the struggle anyway. It is possible that Antanina Kurtinytė’s decision to accept

³⁷ D. Noreika, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

³⁹ Julija Popieraitė-Savičienė, “Giesmė motinai”, in: *Laisvės kovų archyvas*, 1992, vol. 3-4, p. 64.

⁴⁰ Agency report by Akmušas, 23-06-1951, in: *LSA*, f. K-19, ap. 1, b. 624, l. 41.

Sergijus Staniškis-Litas' offer to become the commander of the group in August 1952 can be explained in a similar way. This year marked the greatest losses in the Dešiny's Group, brought on by but two Soviet operations: on 31 January, four partisans were killed while they were surrounded in their campsite in the Varnabūdė forest (two of them were taken alive, including the partisan P. Gumauskas).⁴¹ This is how Kurtinytė lost her last fighting brother, the commander of the group, partisan Ažuolas. On 24 June of the same year, when the security service knew that they were among the last fighters in the district (and the last ones of the group under investigation) and that there was no longer any reason to take the staff of the Dešiny's Group or the Geležinis Vilkas Unit alive or to spare them, the special service agents shot seven partisans in their sleep.⁴² Even under circumstances like these, as she was contemplating her fate, Antanina did not consider the legalisation in force or the prospect of living with fake documents; on the contrary, she became an active liaison of the commander of Southern Lithuania, Litas, and in her districts she distributed partisan press (the newspaper "Partizanas") and circulars, and became a leader, who, together with the surviving sisters of the partisans and the liaisons of her group, continued to work for her group until she was arrested on 7 November 1952. She also attempted to avenge the shooting of her comrades by organising the surveillance and assault of special service agents Ūkas and Gasneris.

A localised look at one small partisan unit can also help one to understand the fundamental question raised in this paper: what was the exact importance of families in the partisan war, especially in smaller units? First of all, the case study discussed here confirms the historiography's assertion that partisanship was engaged in by families⁴³ – it was enough for just one person to join the armed underground resistance for their whole family to eventually end up involved in the freedom struggle. In the case of the Dešiny's Group, among the five families (45 members in total), as many as eighteen persons took turns taking the place of their fallen brothers as they became participants in the armed underground resistance (40% of all the members of the five families). The remaining significant part – 12 persons (26.7%) – had been supporters and liaisons throughout the entire period prior to the repressions, and some of them were also entrusted with some of the most important tasks, without which it would have been difficult to envision the activities of the group. Thus, we can confidently speak of the involvement of the majority (66.7%) in the post-war freedom struggle. This leaves fifteen persons, of whom four (Popiera), these including three minors, were deported immediately, and three were deported having been labelled as partisan supporters only before a relative of theirs joined the

⁴¹ Special report on the results of the Chekist-military operation in Varnabūdė forest, Marijampolė District, 31 January 1952, [undated], in: *LSA*, f. K-19, ap. 1, b. 624, l. 53–54.

⁴² Report on partisans killed by an agent group, 24-06-1952, in: *ibid.*, b. 640, l. 302–303.

⁴³ Bernardas Gailius, *Partizanai tada ir šiandien*, Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2006, p. 89.

armed underground (Gumauskas). This leaves seven individuals from all the families who do not appear in the sources, but even they cannot be firmly identified as passive due to an existing lack of information – the help provided by those who had escaped deportation is difficult to trace in existing sources, due to a lack of criminal files or memoirs.

The fates of the fighters of the Dešiny's Group

In total, the five families under investigation in the Dešiny's Group lost sixteen children in the partisan fighting, ten of whom died in the Dešiny's Group (this is generally referenced in connection with its partisan deaths throughout its entire existence) – not a single fighter survived, with the exception of A. Kurtinytė-Liepa and Petras Gumauskas-Pipiras. The only survivor was Sigitas Jankauskas-Keleivis, who tried to shoot himself and was sentenced to death. During the partisan war, the Popiera family lost five children, while the Marčiulaitis family lost four, the Kurtinys and Banislauskas families lost three each, and the Gumauskas family lost one. Although there were attempts to prevent the last of their brothers from joining the partisans, on the grounds that “at least you will survive”,⁴⁴ in some cases they were not convinced, and none of them escaped. One example: when Kazimieras Popiera tried to dissuade 17-year-old Bronius from joining, he still joined the Dešiny's Group in 1951 and soon afterwards both he and his brother were killed. The extent of the loss of family members was so great that people simply avoided informing those mothers who had lost so many sons of new deaths. Antanina Kurtinytė, who maintained correspondence with her exiled mother (as can be seen in a letter written on 12 March 1952), concealed the death of her brother Leonas all the time. In her letter to her mother, she writes: “today I am writing a letter and I will tell you what I know, as you keep asking me not to lie and to tell the truth [...] but it seems easier to do anything else to keep you from knowing all of our misery; but I imagined that you might find out anyway, and so I write on. Mother, we have not lived at home since 16 May 1950. Remember that 16th day [...] It was very painful to have to part with my dear brother, who was hit by an enemy bullet at that very minute.”⁴⁵ But she probably realised that she was unable to report the loss of her group's partisan brother Ažuolas at the same time, something that she had suffered only two months earlier, and with this she tried to reassure her mother for a while: “I am in close contact with Kazimieras, we talk, I give him your letters, and we wish each other happiness in life, and that we may meet again somewhere else.”⁴⁶ In general, the discussion of the fate of the fighters of the Dešiny's Group and their relatives reveals the usual Soviet repressive measures that were applied to many of the families of those who were active in the partisan war. However, a case study which reveals the fate of specific families can give

⁴⁴ Report of the interrogation of Antanas Gustaitis, 08-10-1951, in: LSA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 1227, p. 331.

⁴⁵ Letter from Antanina Kurtinytė to her mother Marcelė Kurtinienė, 13-03-1952, in: LSA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 1229, l. 50–2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50–2 atv.

a better idea of the scale of Soviet extermination – i.e. information on how many people were affected by *at least one* person who had joined the armed resistance.

One of the first steps taken by the Soviets against the relatives of the fighters of the group was deportation – in 1946, the mother of the Popiera partisans, Magdalena, with her three small children (Justinas, Saloméja and Petras), were deported to Siberia, as were the parents of the partisans Banislauskas, Jurgis and Ona in 1948. Although the relatives of the partisan Algimantas Gumauskas-Balandis – his father Antanas Gumauskas, his brother Vincas and his sister Julija – were also deported in 1947, the reason for their deportation was somewhat different – these three persons had ended up in Siberia as supporters of the partisans even before Algimantas had joined the armed underground resistance, and they were additionally accused of involvement in the aforementioned partisan reserve group. The time of the deportation of the relatives of the fighters, the Popiera and the Banislauskas families, differed; although with both families the first children joined the armed underground resistance at almost the same time, in 1945. However, when the Popiera family members were deported in February, their son Andrius-Žilvitis was still active in the partisan struggle (he was killed in September of the same year). At the time of the deportation of the families on 15 February 1946, the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, Juozas Bartašiūnas, had just issued a public appeal to the fighters of the armed underground resistance and their relatives, warning them (for the last time) that the families of partisans who had not surrendered would be rounded up and deported.⁴⁷ With this, on the first day of the deportations (on 18 February), the Popiera family was deported to Siberia because of their son's disobedience of the order. Meanwhile, in June 1945, the first son of the Banislauskas, Antanas-Naktinis, was killed in the battle of Degimai, and the security service probably did not have any information about their son Petras Banislauskas – this can also be determined from the deportation dossier of his parents – meaning that the Banislauskas were not yet affected by the deportations in 1946. Also during these deportations and subsequent ones, one can note a dispersal of families: although families were not separated at stations, as was the case during the June 1941 deportations,⁴⁸ only those persons found at their homes were deported – not a lot of effort was put into finding those who had fled. It was often the case that some family members were not present during deportations, and that only those who could be found were taken away. This marked a beginning of long years of people not seeing each other, with a constant search of the whereabouts of those who remained in Lithuania. Even later, those who were repressed were not necessarily taken to the places where their deported relatives were located. Julija Popieraitė, deported in 1948, was only allowed to go to her mother in Sverdlovsk in 1954.⁴⁹ Others were simply moving

⁴⁷ A. Anušauskas, *Teroras...*, p. 200.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁹ Conclusion on the archival accounting file, 08-10-1957, in: LSA, f. V-5, ap. 1, b. 6455/5, l. 53.

from place to place all the time. Estimates suggest that the number of those who escaped deportation in the first decade after the war may have been as high as 150,000, which suggests that the number of illegal residents was higher than the number of partisans.⁵⁰ In the case of the Dešinys Group, the entire Marčiulaitis family (with four partisans), having been warned, also managed to escape deportation, but its members were not able to live together, because of both the existing conspiracy and to make it easier to find places to live with other people. According to the Marčiulaitis sisters, Anelė and Birutė, their family members had to travel all over Lithuania, changing their place of residence every nine months or so, and many times they simply had nowhere to stay, so they had to sleep in rye fields, before finally moving to the Kaliningrad region.⁵¹

The partisans under investigation and their relatives who remained in Lithuania maintained contact with their relatives in Siberia through letters – in particular, correspondence between the Kurtinys and the Popiera families can be found. This correspondence shows that the exiles were often supported by parcels, even though it was at a late point in the partisan war and the fighters were not in a position to carry out major offensives. Nevertheless, families continued to receive parcels from Lithuania and their relatives who fought there until 1952, and Kostas Popiera reassured his exiled sister: “Viktutė, don’t worry too much, we will put together what we can, while we are alive. The morning of freedom will soon come.”⁵² The moral support provided by the relatives of the deportees, who could not have known the real situation in Lithuania and who were separated from the rest of their family, was also important. In their letters, partisans’ children tried to assure their deported parents, brothers and sisters, letting them know in figurative terms that this situation would not last long and that war would soon break out.⁵³ Julija Popieraitė’s letters to her mother and brothers were courageous – they included various drawings depicting the occupation, and poems about the struggle for freedom, with mention of partisans lying on the pavement. On the one hand, such bold talk was supposed to support the hope of the deportees that they would not have to suffer in Siberia for long, but on the other hand it is clear from the agency files that the Soviets checked every letter, translated it into Russian, highlighted the parts that proved their “guilt”, and then used them for their own ends. This was also how the partisans’ communication schemes were drawn up: lists of supporters and liaisons were drawn up on the basis of the addresses where letters were sent,⁵⁴ and the relatives themselves were repressed for the bold content of their letters (Julija Popie-

⁵⁰ Regina Laukaitytė, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

⁵¹ *Prienu rajono apylinkės teismo sprendimas*, 15-10-2021, in: <https://eteismai.lt/byla/192502186807864/2-336-805/2012?word=tremties> (29-05-2023).

⁵² Letter from Kostas Popiera to Magdalena Popierienė, 25-06-1951, in: *LSA*, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 1214, l. 81.

⁵³ Letter from Kazimieras Popiera to his brother [Klemensas], 03-05-1951 in: *ibid.*, l. 54 atv.

⁵⁴ A diagram of Kazimieras Popiera’s contacts with his exiled relatives, in: *LSA*, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 1213, l. 93.

raitė was deported on the grounds of the letters and the possible bad influence she had on seminary students because of her views).

The return of the repressed to Lithuania was difficult, as were their attempts to survive in the new reality without being able to find half of their family. It's just that, in the realm of historiography, the return of partisans' relatives from exile and their attempts to survive in the late Soviet era have not been explored much. When a large number of exiles were released in 1956, there were still plans in place to prevent them from settling in Lithuania, and to create unbearable conditions for those who did,⁵⁵ indeed, during 1955–1957 most of the partisans' relatives returned to Lithuania, and only the more active members of the underground resistance were prevented from returning. Klemensas Popiera, a former partisan liaison, who had started a family in Siberia, was not released with his wife and child – his sentence was lifted in 1957, but he was forbidden to return to Lithuania, and he had to write nine appeals for a review of his case; his mother and wife also applied for pardon, but all of them were rejected as “having no foundation”. It was not until 1966 that this brother of the partisans managed to return, but even then he was not allowed to register as a resident.⁵⁶ Klemensas was accused of being an major liaison for his brothers and other partisans, and of having participated in the disarming of a policeman and handing him over to the partisans. Such “crimes” were probably dealt with more severely than those of the rest of the family, who had been released from Siberia earlier. Antanina Kurtinytė's exile period was also prolonged (probably because of her active participation in the partisan war): she was deported to Tayshet, Irkutsk Oblast in 1949, and only allowed to return in 1963.⁵⁷ In investigation of the fate of the relatives of the Dešinys Group, it has been noted that those family members who returned joined collective farms, while the Popiera brother Justinas completed his service in the Soviet army, although those relatives who remained in Lithuania were not left in peace – they continued to be followed by agents,⁵⁸ and their parents were denied retirement pensions.

In accordance with the principle of collective responsibility, all relatives of those who participated in the armed underground resistance were considered guilty for the decision of at least one of their children or siblings to join the resistance – know that the lives of all those family members who stayed at home were irrevocably changed when the first sons among the children joined the underground resistance. The deliberate dispersal of families, which did not end with the suppression of the partisan struggle, was just one of

⁵⁵ A. Anušauskas, *Teroras...*, p. 256.

⁵⁶ Application for pardon for Klemensas Popiera, 01-03-1966, in: LSA, f. V-5, ap. 1, b. 6455/5, l. 116.

⁵⁷ *Lietuvos gyventojų genocidas, t. 5, 1950–1953 (A–M)*, Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2019, p. 588.

⁵⁸ Reply to the inquiry of the Prienai District militia regarding Jurgis Banislauskas, 21-08-1957, in: LSA, f. V-5, ap. 1, b. 3731, l. 21.

the many worries around at the time, and one far greater challenge was coming to terms with the losses – across five families, almost all of the relatives who had participated in the partisan struggle perished; this reflects the full scale of the destruction of the families on the part of the Soviets.

Conclusions

It has been noted that, when a fighter decided to become a partisan, not only did an historiographical image of their children leaving home with a blessing manage to prevail, at least a few other less agreeable reactions amongst members of their family were also noted. However, for the most part, relatives were naturally involved in the underground resistance in any case, and they continued to play a role even after the death of their family member.

The significance of families in the partisan war, namely through the extent of their involvement in the underground resistance, can be acknowledged in the case of the Dešinys Group of the Geležinis Vilkas Unit of the Tauras District and the five partisan families that formed the core of the group and were active in it. In the Dešinys Group, 18 out of the 45 persons from the five families became partisans, in so doing replacing their fallen brothers. 12 persons would become particularly significant supporters and liaisons of the fighters of the group. Of the remaining family members, 7 were deported immediately, before they could get involved, and the activities of another 7 remain unknown.

The Dešinys Group can also illustrate the fate of families in general. In the partisan war, five families lost 16 children: 10 died in the Dešinys Group, and, in accordance with the principle of collective responsibility, not a single relative was left unaffected by the repression – almost all of them were killed in the armed underground resistance, while the rest were deported or forced to go into hiding.

Emilija Karaliūtė

Šeimos Lietuvos partizaniniame kare: Dešinio tėvūnijos (1949–1953 m.) atvejis

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatomos penkios aktyviausiai Tauro apygardoje Dešinio tėvūnijoje veikusios partizanų šeimos – Popieros, Marčiulaičiai, Kurtiniai, Banislauskai ir Gumauskai. Tyrimas koncentruojasi į jų veiklą pagrindyje, namie likusių artimųjų santykį su kovojusiais ginklu, likimus, kartu bandant apčiuopti ir šeimų reikšmę atskiruose smulkesniuose daliniuose.

Šaltiniai atskleidė tris pagrindines šeimos reakcijas vienam iš jos narių nusprendus tapti partizanų – vyrauja ne tik istoriografijoje įsitvirtinęs vaikišlydėjimo išnamųsu palaiminimu vaizdinys, bet ir aptinkama dar bent keletas ne tokių darnių namiškių reakcijų. Tačiau svarbu, kad ir kokia reakcija lydėjo būsimą kovotoją, atsisveikinimas su namiškiais nekeisdavo pirminio asmens apsisprendimo, savo ruožtu namiškiai dažnai bet koku atveju natūraliai įsitraukdavo į pagrindžio veiklą.

Tokiame nedideliame dalinyje kaip Dešinio tėvūnija, iš penkių šeimų 66,7 proc. asmenų tapo aktyviais pagrindžio dalyviais – ginkluotais kovotojais, vienais svarbiausių jų rėmėjų ir ryšininkų. Šios penkios šeimos partizaniniame kare iš viso neteko 16 vaikų, o ir likusieji šeimos nariai buvo ištremti ar priversti slėptis nuo tremties.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Laisvės kovos, partizanų šeimos, Dešinio tėvūnija, artimųjų likimai.