Lithuanian Historian: June Uprising was Rehabilitation for Shameful Surrender to Soviets

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The Lithuanian June Uprising of 1941 was a kind of rehabilitation of the shameful surrender to the Soviets in 1940. That's what historian Dr. Arūnas Bubnys says about the still-controversial uprising.

In an interview with Delfi, the department [?] director of the Lithuanian Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of Residents of Lithuania said the rebels during the uprising weren't entirely clean, but that there are no data they engaged in the mass murder of Jews before the German military arrived.

In the current days we are commemorating the 72nd anniversary of the June Uprising of 1941. What does the June Uprising mean to Lithuanian history? Do we know everything about it?

Many articles and books have been written about the uprising, especially about events in Kaunas and Vilnius; the activities of the Provisional Government of Lithuania are known and have been studied sufficiently. But there are questions which are not clear and unknown even now. For example, the actions of the rebels in the countryside. We don't know how many people in total took part in the uprising. The figures are very different, there are extreme assessments of from 10 to 15 thousand up to almost 100 thousand, as Kazys Škirpa writes in his book "Sukilimas" [Uprising]. The same can be said about the number of insurgents who died, the statistics vary from 600 to 4,000. I should think the second figure is greatly exaggerated.

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Another thing demanding study is a social portrait of members of the uprising, from which [social] strata they originated, what their professions, educations, ages were. This has still not been researched sufficiently. There are not many professional Lithuanian historians working on the problems of World War II and the Nazi occupation, therefore there isn't an opportunity for a group of historians to come together around a single specific theme and study it sufficiently quickly [?] and [sufficiently] comprehensively.

Often, in Lithuania and abroad, the uprising is mixed up with other historical expressions. Even so, I feel the uprising of June, 1941, was an autonomous historical expression which shouldn't be identified with other expressions which took place at almost the same time--for example, with the Nazi-Soviet war which was beginning, with the Nazi occupation, with the onset of the holocaust. These are mutually interconnected, but not identical matters.

A judgment of the uprising should be linked with the answer to the essential question: Does an enslaved people have the right to rise up and seek freedom and the independence of the state, or not? If we answer this question affirmatively, then the principal judgment of the uprising should be positive. It would be strange if Poles judged negatively the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 against the Nazis, or if the Hungarians acted the same way with the 1956 Hungarian uprising against the Soviets.

Is the uprising usually equated with the beginning of the holocaust correctly?

I wouldn't approve that opinion. The uprising itself has clear chronological boundaries, from June 22 till June 28-29, 1941. This is the first week of the war, during which the German military occupied all Lithuanian territory. When that was done, the Soviets withdrew from Lithuania, and at the same time the uprising also ended. The uprising took place against the Soviet occupiers, the main goal was to restore an independent Lithuanian state. And when the Soviets fled, there was no one to fight: then, the rebels and the Provisional Government imagined Germany was their ally, that it would help drive the Soviets from Lithuania and Lithuania would thus restore perhaps a limited form but some sort of sovereignty. This was what the Lithuanian public figures imagined, because the Provisional Government's ministers could not have known what the leadership of the Third Reich was planning. Moreover, rank-and-file rebels could not have known this.

I would consider the beginning of the holocaust in Lithuania was June 24, when the Tilsit Gestapo and Klaipeda German police unit shot 200 Jews in Gargždai. This was the first mass murder of Lithuanian Jews in Nazi-occupied Lithuania.

If we are to discuss the relationship between the uprising and the holocaust, which is very topical, we often see diametrically opposed opinions. Those who seek anti-Semitic events and features in the uprising need to be precise and to analyze what happened during the uprising, what the rebels did to Jews and civilian residents of other ethnicities during the uprising itself, rather than afterwards, when the uprising was over and the Nazi occupation was established. That means [they] need to analyze what happened before the German military occupied a specific Lithuanian location. [They] need to attempt to answer the question of whether the rebels, before the arrival of Germans at a specific Lithuanian town or village, perpetrated mass arrests and murders of Jews, persecution of Jews, whether their actions were directed especially against Jews, or whether against political and military enemies of different ethnicities. From what I know from my academic work and archival research, I cannot point to specific facts of rebels, before the arrival of the German military to, say, Kupiškis, Rokiškis, Zarasai or elsewhere, shooting Jews en masse. I cannot confirm this.

Another matter is that certain Israeli historians speak of around 40 locations where, allegedly, Lithuanian rebels shot Jews before the arrival of the German military. They mostly base this on testimonies of Jewish survivors of the holocaust. I am not saying that these testimonies are unreliable, but they need to be judged carefully, with great attention [to detail] and compared with other historical sources. Only then can [we] confirm a chronology of events and establish the truth.

The beginning of the war was horribly chaotic; Red Army units, Soviet activists of different ethnicities, Communists and Communist Youth were withdrawing; whoever could was trying to flee Lithuania as quickly as possible for the East, for Russia, to avoid repressions for their actions during the first Soviet period. There were cases where the rebels shot at and arrested these withdrawing columns. The rebels' attach was not directed against Jews alone: it was directed primarily against Soviet activists, Red Army troops, Soviet security personnel, Communists, Communist Youth, without regard to their ethnicity. Therefore political, but not ethnic-racial, motivations dominated the actions of the rebels.

At that time the understanding of the rebels was this: if you are fleeing, you don't want to stay in Lithuania, which is being freed from the Soviets, and that means you have committed some crime and are avoiding revenge, punishment. Of course, there was shooting at those withdrawing, and ambushes set up along roads, [and] some Communists or Soviet activists of Jewish ethnicity in that mass of fleeing people might have been shot, too, not just those of Lithuanian, or Russian, or another ethnicity. But such cases do not mean that this was the holocaust; this was shooting at withdrawing or resisting Soviets or Bolsheviks, as they said back then.

Perhaps there were isolated cases, more of a criminal nature, where one or two families were robbed or murdered, or isolated Jewish individuals [were]. But that the rebels would take all Jews from a town before the Germans arrived, force them into some sort of forest or fields and shoot [them] while the uprising was still going on, before the arrival of the Germans--I don't know of such cases. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the withdrawing Soviets mass murdered Lithuanian civilian residents (Rainiai, Pravieniškės, Červenė and other massacres). The Soviet occupiers withdrawing from Lithuania and local collaborators murdered more than one thousand unarmed Lithuanian civilian residents. The Red Terror provoked the rebels to acts of violence and revenge, but cases of disproportionate violence on the part of the rebels during the first days of the war and the uprising were, I should think, much less in number than [those] on the part of the Soviets.

But the situation changed cardinally after the Germans arrived.

The situation changes after the Germans arrived, the Nazi occupation begins, a strict German military administration is introduced which in August of 1941 is replaced by a civilian German administration. In July-August, 1941, rebel units were reorganized into auxiliary police units. Some rebels, after the uprising was over, left the units and went back to their jobs, farms, [while] some remained auxiliary police officers. Those who after the uprising remained in the auxiliary police units, or who entered the ranks of the auxiliary police anew, can no longer be considered rebels. They were subordinate to the German police and had to carry out the orders of the chiefs of the German and Lithuanian police agencies.
One such action [non sequitur, or does "action" here refer to police orders in the preceding paragraph?], knowing policy of the persecution and genocide

of Jews the Third Reich carried out, was the inclusion of local administrations and police forces in the holocaust. Some of these auxiliary police units were used for repressions against Lithuanian citizens of Jewish ethnicity. They--auxiliary police, popularly frequently called white armbanders--executed arrests of Jews, moved detainees into ghettos and temporary holding camps and guarded them.

Later some of them moved the Jews condemned to death to the massacre venues, and some of them simply shot [the Jews]. We cannot say exactly how many did these things because no special investigations of this type have been performed yet. I would dare say there might have been several thousand auxiliary police officers in Lithuania who took part in the arrest and mass murder of Jews. In this context it is important to make distinct the concepts of rebel and auxiliary police officer. A rebel is a person who fought of his own free will Soviet occupiers and collaborators between June 22 and 29, 1941. An auxiliary police officer was a person who performed police and punitive functions during the Nazi occupation, subordinate to higher German and Lithuanian police chiefs. There were a number of former rebels in the auxiliary police units, but it is not possible to say today how many exactly, because the lists of rebels and auxiliary police officers have not survived. There remain only lists of a few Lithuanian districts. [lists of rebels and auxiliary police from a few districts?]

To which period would you assign the Lietūkis and Viljampolė massacres? What was the contribution made by Lithuanians in them? The Provisional Government of Lithuania did not publicly condemn them.

Viewing [it, them?] chronologically, the first German military units reached Kaunas at about 3 P.M. on June 24. The "Lietūkis" garage tragedy happened on June 27, when the Germans already truly controlled the situation in the city. We know well from the Gestapo reports how the pogroms were organized in Kaunas; it is clearly written there that local anti-Semitic forces need to be included in the "cleansing" of Jews and Communists.

Pogroms took place in Kaunas June 25-28, the number of their victims is also not known precisely. One set (German security police and SD documents) announce almost 5,000 Jews were murdered in Kaunas and other locations, but, in my opinion, we cannot trust blindly in these figure. In my opinion, they are exaggerated. And here the residents of Kaunas

remember well the massacre in the yard of the "Lietūkis" garage: there were 27 Jews murdered there. On June 25-26 a pogrom took place in Viljampolė, too, [and] the number of victims is likewise not known precisely. In total, over the period of the pogroms in Kaunas, several hundred Jews might have been murdered.

Who carried out these pogroms in Kaunas? Mainly the unit of the journalist A. Klimaitis (about three hundred people, including former prisoners with a great thirst for revenge and criminal elements who had insinuated themselves among them), who had received instructions from the Gestapo, was armed by the Germans, and members of his unit provided with special SD identity papers. This unit was not under the command of the Lithuanian Activist Front nor the Provisional Government. I am not saying the rebels during the uprising were totally clean, undoubtedly there was a bit of everything, and there might have been all kinds of incidents, but that the rebels would have mass murdered Jews before the arrival of the German military, I cannot confirm that.

If you tried to summarize, what did the rebels manage to achieve?

We also do not know how many Red Army troops the rebels shot or arrested. To the extent I have studied the course of the uprising in certain Lithuanian districts, it still appears that there were not many Red Army, Soviet Communists and activists who were armed and shot [by the rebels], probably not more than the number of rebels who perished. But a number of Red Army [troops] were taken prisoner or surrendered to the rebels. This number, I feel, reaches several thousand.

The political scientist Kęstutis Girnius has claimed that while the rebels worked together with the Nazis, they resisted the Germans' political aims, openly and consistently seeking Lithuanian independence. He says the Provisional Government cannot be compared with the [pro-Soviet] government of J. Paleckis, that Paleckis cooperated with the Soviets, burying Lithuanian independence, [while] the Provisional Government cooperated with the Nazis, aspiring to restore Lithuanian independence. Do you agree with K. Girnius's opinion?

I believe there truly is an essential difference. Paleckis's government was a Soviet tool to liquidate Lithuanian statehood, [whereas] Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis's government was an attempt, albeit unsuccessful,

to restore and save Lithuanian statehood. These are totally opposite things, comparing the two governments is impossible.

Perhaps Lithuanians were attempting through the uprising to rehabilitate themselves [for] allowing in the Soviets without a shot in 1940.

These are more psychological matters, they are not tangible or measurable. If we say that a Lithuanian government apparatus was formed, that is a clear historical, physical fact.

Of course the uprising was an exotic rehabilitation for the shameful surrender to the Soviets, the capitulation of 1940. I believe this gave Lithuanians self-confidence, fortified national dignity and self-confidence; it showed it was possible to fight a much stronger enemy. I think the example of the uprising inspired those people who later took part in the unarmed anti-Nazi resistance and the post-war partisan resistance.

What do you think about the initiative by residents of Obeliai to restore a monument to the rebels of the June Uprising, desecrated by the occupiers?

I think the monument itself, built in 1942 to [commemorate] the rebels who perished and the residents of that district who suffered from the Soviets, was unique. I don't know that there was a monument of this size anywhere else in Lithuania, 8 meters long and 3 meters wide. Simple crosses and grave stones were set up for the rebels in cemeteries, but I have not seen a monument such as this one at Obeliai; there are still photographs of the monument, which was torn down in 1958.

I think it's a good idea. If it is said clearly that this is a monument to the rebels who perished, the largest critics and skeptics will have to understand that the[se] rebels who perished in the first days of the war could not have done anything bad: they were already lying in the grave.

Funds for restoring the monument can be transferred to the special account of the Obeliai Social Center, No. Nr. LT847300010105682663 (at the Swedbank band). The internet webpage is www.obeliupaminklas.lt

It is calculated that construction installation work will cost 60-70,000 litas. Since September of last year 39,270 litas have been collected. At the end of January the Victims Support and Commemoration Fund of the Lithuanian Center for the Study of the Resistance and Genocide of the Residents of Lithuania allocated a further 3,000 litas. Construction is scheduled to start and end this year.