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Dear WARRIOR readers,

russian drones are now not only flying into Alliance territory but also striking targets there. Of course, a single incident in Romania cannot yet be considered a trend or an act of aggression, but testing the limits of NATO's patience and monitoring reactions to incidents of this nature are obvious tactics — ones that, incidentally, align very closely with the kremlin's fundamental behavioral patterns.

The latter likely stem not only from general traits of the russian character but also from the local dictator's impoverished childhood in what was then leningrad, when street thugs would only back off from their potential victims after receiving a fitting response right in their faces.

Of course, it is not surprising that in Western political circles, such an action is still regarded as an escalation, the manifestation of which — in the form of a military conflict between NATO and russia — is avoided by every possible means.

It is also regrettable that the so-called 'thaw period' that followed the end of the Cold War spoiled and lulled the West, where, after the 1990s, no leaders emerged comparable to, say, Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. On the contrary, figures regarded as the messiahs of some kind of 'new politics' sought a 'reset' in relations with russia. We have been witnessing for thirteen years now in Ukraine the provisions and ammunition that the moscow regime stockpiled during that time.

Sincerely,
Chief Editor
Darius Varanavičius



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THE BIRUT GENE: 10 VO SE

The Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families is entering the second century of its existence, providing compassionate support to those who need help the most. The families of fallen soldiers, children, and young people, as well as Ukrainians suffering from the war and the relatives of German soldiers trying to settle in Lithuania, all receive the care of these active women. We spoke with Asta Vaikšnorienė, the chairwoman of this social, charitable, and support organization, about the enduring spirit of *Birutietės*.

On March 25, 1925, following the establishment of the Society of Women from Officers' Families in Kaunas, Lieutenant General Vladas Nagevičius addressed the women, urging them to engage in cultural and charitable work, to uphold beautiful Lithuanian traditions, not to succumb to foreign influences, to cultivate the positive traits of Lithuanian women — diligence, modesty, and virtue — and to revive the wearing of national costumes. One hundred and one years after the association's founding, what does it mean to you to lead this organization?



TIETĖ 1 YEARS OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE

ILONA SKUJAITĖ



Asta Vaikšnorienė, President of the the Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families.

I would put it this way: first and foremost, it is a duty, and secondly, an opportunity to contribute to the development of one's country. In life, there is always a choice, for example, you can help someone cross the street or not, even though you see that they are having a hard time; you can remain indifferent when you witness an injustice, even though you could help. So, I view these duties as an opportunity to take action to improve the current situation — this is my commitment to the future.

Of course, people perceive the state differently: some think that at the top of

the state are rulers, towering like some Ancient Greek gods, while everyone else just cowers helplessly at the bottom; others understand that the state is all of us. I support this very view and believe that we must find ways to foster the understanding that, in fact, so much depends on us, and we cannot say, "What can I, an ordinary person, do?"

Looking back at the interwar period, we can see how many ideas, still alive today, were born precisely then. At that time, the young Lithuanian state faced numerous external and internal threats; we live in a similar situation today, yet it sometimes

seems that people a hundred years ago were perhaps even a bit more conscious and had a better understanding of what to invest in and what needed to be done. I believe that the best ideas are born when there is a real need, because when you're relaxed, a warm breeze is blowing, the sea is rustling, the sun is shining, and it's safe all around — everything just flows naturally. Still, we need to realize that nothing gets done without human involvement, and the most valuable initiatives arise when we face challenges.

What are the main areas of focus for the Birutietės community right now, given the current situation?

There are several. The first is providing support to soldiers' families and maintaining contact with the families of fallen soldiers. The most visible initiative in this area is the annual 'In Memoriam' run, which will take place for the 12th time this year, but there is also Cake Day, when we raise funds, as well as various one-off activities.

Another area is fostering civic engagement among young people. The most important projects currently are the annual children's camp 'We Are for Lithuania' and the project that toured all of Lithuania last year with the play 'The Girl with the Rifle.' It seems to me that the focus on youth education and the promotion of civic engagement is currently one of the most relevant, because without investing in the younger generation — and thus in Lithuania's future — we cannot expect anything better.

Col. Stasys Raštikis (1896–1985) at the 10th-anniversary celebration of the Grand Duchess Birutė Society of Women from Officers' Families at the National Theatre. March 4, 1935.



The committee for the 10th anniversary of Birutietės, together with Lithuania's First Lady Sofija Smetonienė. Kaunas, 1935.



"TOGETHER TO VICTORY": *BIRUTIETĖS'* ASSISTANCE TO UKRAINIANS

"When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on the morning of February 24, 2022, the world stood still. We, *Birutietės* – wives, daughters of officers, as well as female officers – realized that we could not stand idly by. That day also marked the beginning of my personal journey, which remains one of the most poignant and meaningful experiences of my life. The first call from the wife of a Ukrainian soldier – a woman who had fled the war with her three children – was a moment I will never forget. Her voice trembled, and her words were filled with terror and uncertainty. That day, I realized that it is our duty – a human obligation – to stand by those whose husbands are fighting for their country's freedom," said Rasa Buikienė, a member of the Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families, who coordinates support for the families of Ukrainian fighters and organizes camps for their children. From the very first days of the war in Ukraine, *Birutietės* took concrete action: they organized the collection of medicines and their transport to Ukraine, helped the arriving soldiers' families find housing, provided them with essential supplies, and took care of their daily needs. Members of the organization coordinated the arrival of the first Ukrainian women and children in Lithuania – those journeys were filled not only with fear but also with hope. "Our activities grew along with the scale of the war. *Birutietės* began organizing aid shipments for Ukrainian soldiers and the families of those who had fallen: we sent medicines, warm clothing, footwear, stationery, uniforms, and generators. Later, we also provided individual protective gear for the fighters, which was

donated by a Lithuanian company after it learned about our initiative. "It was a true miracle of solidarity," said R. Buikienė. "Our participation in the Vilnius Book Fair, where we raised funds to support Ukraine, gave us a huge boost." The wives and children of Lithuanian and Ukrainian soldiers made souvenirs, baked buns, and brewed tea – every gesture was filled with warmth. The funds raised during the fair turned into tangible aid: we purchased equipment for Ukrainian soldiers, and we invited their children to a camp in Lithuania."

It is this camp that *Birutietės* call their passion project. This year, for the fourth time, the children of Ukrainian soldiers who have been killed, are missing in action, or are still fighting will come to Lithuania. Here they will rest, learn, discover friendship and safety, and simply enjoy their childhood.

The Ukrainian children's camp also received international recognition at the 'NATO Charity Bazaar' in Brussels. The "Camp for the Children of Ukrainian Soldiers Killed in Action or Missing in Action" project was awarded first place and financial support. "This is not just an award, but also recognition that our work has real, tangible value. Thanks to the support we've received and our sponsors, this year we'll be able to invite as many as 30 children from Ukraine. Today, I can only say this: we, *Birutietės*, will continue to stand with the families of Ukrainian soldiers. As long as it is needed. Until Ukraine wins. Until the words 'together to victory' become a reality," said R. Buikienė.



The third focus area involves the preservation of historical, national, and civic traditions. This involves wearing national costumes on special occasions and taking an interest in the traditions of different regions. We participate in the 'Tautadienis' project and other activities that link historical traditions with a vision for Lithuania's future. It is very meaningful that we can cultivate what the interwar officer corps created, while supplementing these activities with contemporary elements.

The fourth area is perhaps the most dynamic — it involves mobilizing and providing support in response to current events. Previously, this involved support for the families of interpreters who had arrived from Afghanistan, and with the outbreak of war in Ukraine — support for soldiers and their family members. Last year, we organized a camp specifically for the families of those killed and missing in action in Ukraine.

Supporting the families of fallen soldiers, veterans, and wounded

soldiers is an extremely important and sensitive issue. It is heartening to see long-standing initiatives such as the 'In Memoriam' run, but surely there is still more we can do to care for the most vulnerable members of our community?

'In Memoriam' is not just a one-off event — it is an integral part of our activities. This year will mark the twelfth time we've organized it. I remember the very first run very well: we participated as a family, resources were minimal, and we did everything ourselves — someone baked a cake, someone else arranged

the venue. Although we had no special funding, the idea itself instantly caught on with the public. This is the best proof that when an idea is right and strikes a chord, people become incredibly active.

The 'In Memoriam' run is simply the most visible, representative part of this work, but behind it lies an entire support system. For example, the Vilnius community, together with social managers, organizes numerous events for the families of fallen soldiers so that they do not remain alone. It is especially important that in the first years after their loss, these families





Prince Harry met with *Birutietės* who were cheering on the Lithuanian team at the 'Invictus 2025' games, held in Canada last year.

feel a constant connection, and that the children can interact with one another when they meet.

Looking at the bigger picture, this event is a very logical part of the overall system of care for soldiers' families. Prince Harry aptly observed last year at the 'Invictus 2025' games for wounded soldiers in Canada: if there is a soldier in the family — and especially if he is wounded — it affects the entire family, not just him. In fact, the military profession, regardless of rank, is a completely different way of life. It involves 24/7 duty, constant rotations, separations due to training exercises, and constant anxiety about emerging risks. The daily lives of soldiers' families are different; this has been confirmed time and again by social research and studies. Unfortunately, no special attention is paid to them. My vision is clear: a soldier's family remains part of our community regardless of whether the soldier is still serving, has been wounded, or we have lost him. There are simply no former soldiers.

In your opinion, how could support for the families of Lithuanian soldiers be improved?

My greatest wish is for the families of service members and veterans to be represented and for their interests to be defended not only by non-governmental organizations, but also at the institutional level. In many countries, such as Germany, Canada, or the United Kingdom, defense ministries have departments — usually reporting directly to one of the deputy ministers — that represent and address the needs of veterans and, in many cases, military families. This certainly does not require a large bureaucratic apparatus — a few people who work directly with lawmakers and non-governmental organizations would suffice. I believe this would demonstrate the state's genuine respect for military service, because we simply must finally say a sincere "Thank you for your service" to those who have sacrificed their health or the best years of their lives to defend their homeland.

For comparison, we can look at the German military unit currently deploying to Lithuania — they have a special unit dedicated to family integration: from helping spouses find employment to finding schools for children. These are the most basic, fundamental aspects of an organization's social responsibility, but changing the situation in Lithuania is not solely within the power of the military — broader political support is necessary to achieve this goal, and one hopes that this will indeed be the case.

How would you describe the current *Birutietės*?

It is made up of members of different ages, with diverse interests and a wide variety of professions. It is homogeneous in only one sense — all members of our organization are women, as was intended back in the interwar period. They are the wives or daughters of officers, and not so long ago another group of members joined us — female officers.



"WILLKOMMEN! WHEN LITHUANIA BECOMES HOME"



The Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families is implementing the initiative "Willkommen! When Lithuania Becomes Home," aimed at integrating the families of German military personnel living in Lithuania and strengthening community ties. The program focuses on intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding, and the creation of a friendly and supportive environment for the families of NATO allies.



"We, the wives of military officers who have accompanied our husbands during their service abroad, understand perfectly well how important it is to feel accepted, safe, and welcome in a foreign country. That is precisely why this initiative was born out of personal experience, empathy, and a desire to help the families of allies arriving in Lithuania integrate more easily, forge new connections, and discover their community," says Inga Ilgūnienė, a *Birutietė* and one of the curators of this initiative. This program has three main components. One of them is the Lithuanian-German military families' sports games. This event will bring families together for active leisure, team competitions, and socializing in an informal setting. "We believe that sports activities, relays, and challenges for children will foster unity, trust, and closer ties among the families of our allies. The event will also feature educational sessions introducing participants to Lithuanian history, culture, and traditions. This will help participants get to better know the country where the families of our allies currently live, and the event will culminate in an awards ceremony for the participants," said I. Ilgūnienė.



Another important part of this initiative is events showcasing Advent traditions. A joint Advent musical performance by children of Lithuanian and German military families is planned. Preparing for the concert together will foster unity among the children and their families, strengthen their bonds, and create a warm atmosphere of fellowship. Advent wreath-making workshops are also planned, during which families of Lithuanian and German military personnel will share their holiday traditions, learn about Lithuanian Advent customs, and create a cozy community atmosphere. These gatherings will contribute to a deeper understanding of cultures and one another.



The third part of the program consists of informal morning gatherings over a cup of coffee or tea. These will provide an opportunity for military families to get to know one another better, share experiences and practical advice, and build a strong network of mutual support.



Edita Almonaitienė, 90, is an active member of the organization.

There are also members who are 91, 96, and even 100 years old. They are all daughters of officers from independent interwar Lithuania, actively participating in our organization's activities. Their presence among us is particularly important, as it provides a unique opportunity for different generations to meet and share experiences. I am convinced that each of us who has had the opportunity to chat with these long-lived *Birutietės* has heard many fascinating stories — not necessarily cheerful, but very meaningful, revealing many details about the life of the state and families at that time.

Sometimes I think there must be some kind of immortal '*Birutietė* gene' — these women are incredibly active; they survived deportation, returned, built their lives from scratch, and sought each other out, and after independence was restored, they revived the *Birutietės*' organization. And today, even though they are over ninety years old, these women always come to events well-groomed and dressed up; they take an interest in everything, and their thinking is quick and deep: they understand perfectly what is happening in our country, speak out when necessary, and offer very valuable insights. A perfect example is Mrs. Rūta Kronkaitienė, the wife of

former Chief of Defence of the Republic of Lithuania Commander Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Jonas Kronkaitis — always well-groomed, positive, and a staunch supporter of Lithuania and its armed forces.

What does it mean to lead the Birutietės community these days? How do you collaborate with each other?

We make the most important decisions together, because if I were to simply take on a leadership role and give orders, I don't think it would work or yield results. I'm certain that leading by example is what matters most. I know this from my family, because raising children is exactly the same — no matter what you tell them, they'll only pay attention to how their parents



Asta Vaišnorienė presents a badge to Rūta Kronkaitienė, an honorary member of *Birutietės* living in the US and the wife of Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Jonas Kronkaitis, Chief of Defence of the Republic of Lithuania from 1999 to 2004.



One of the duties of the *Birutietės* is to promote the Lithuanian national costume.

behave. So we, *Birutietės*, not only have rules for making the most important formal decisions, but we also communicate a lot with each other; we have various chat platforms and call each other often.

When organizing events, we notice that different people join and actively participate in various activities, choosing the areas that appeal to them and are most relevant — where they have the skills and desire to test themselves. Often, the women themselves reach out with a wide variety of ideas. It's very important not to be afraid to try volunteering, because it's a gift — over time, it begins to bring satisfaction, as you see that you've created value, albeit not material, but especially important to our society. Of course, in some cases we also collect material aid, which is also very much needed, but I never cease to be amazed by the wonderful ideas generated by people who volunteer, and the magical projects that come to life when a team of enthusiastic women comes together. *Birutietės* are truly extraordinary, because they have their own families, jobs, and countless daily responsibilities, yet they still manage to share their time by volunteering.

You yourself are no stranger to the military — you served in the Lithuanian Armed Forces for many years. What motivates you most about working among Birutietės?

Yes, my connection to the Lithuanian

Armed Forces runs very deep. First, I became a soldier's wife; I took the oath of allegiance to the Lithuanian state with my two-month-old daughter in my arms; I spent 21 years serving in the Lithuanian Armed Forces; and I

For their efforts in promoting a culture of volunteering in Lithuania, *Birutietės* were awarded the Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Memorial Medal 'Serve Lithuania' this year.





retired with the rank of captain. Later, I worked in the national defense system as a civilian, and now I work in one of NATO's units. This is my life's path, and what gives me the greatest satisfaction and motivation is being able to help my community. I believe that volunteering makes society healthier: when you see that your efforts help others, give hope, and bring families together into the community, encouraging them to take on new initiatives, it brings immense joy. Despite the abundance of work and personal matters, seeing this meaning

and sense of community is the best reward for me.

Does the Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families have enough hands — perhaps it needs more members?

What matters most is not simply the number of members, but their motivation and engagement. We aim to bring together committed, active women who sincerely wish to contribute to our work, which is why quality

will always be more important to us than quantity.

Do all the projects you come up with succeed? What has pleasantly surprised you the most about your work over the past few years?

Ideas don't always succeed, but the most important thing is not to be afraid to make mistakes and to keep trying. I think a particularly successful project was the one organized last year titled "What (Couldn't) I Do for Lithuania Today and Tomorrow?", which established

The daughters of Lithuanian military officers from the interwar period actively participate in events and activities of *Birutietės*.





THE PLAY 'THE GIRL WITH THE RIFLE'

An educational program on citizenship, featuring the Vilnius 'Lėlė' Theater's production of 'The Girl with the Rifle' (based on the book of the same name by M. Marcinkevičius and L. Itagaki) and a citizenship lesson-discussion, garnered exceptional interest from students, teachers, and local communities throughout Lithuania.

"As soon as registration opened, the halls in every city filled up within a few days. The play 'The Girl with a Rifle' tells the story of Magdė, whose parents and entire family were deported to Siberia at the end of World War II. With the help of her teacher, who was also a partisan, the girl takes up residence in a bunker, becomes a partisan herself, and saves the lives of many people. The story is based on the memories of eyewitnesses and freedom fighters from that era, historical material, and the account of a former partisan liaison about a girl who lived in a bunker for a time. This is a play about children's courage in critical situations, their survival instinct, determination, and sense of responsibility. The fact that the children were involved in the action during the performance — reading a letter, carrying "dynamite" — helped them immerse themselves even more in the plot, feel like true patriots and civic-minded individuals.

Magdė, though she didn't know at first what partisans or bunkers were, bravely embraces this new reality and the unknown. After all, it is not the one who is not afraid who is brave, but the one who faces their fear and acts," said Jolanta Sakalauskienė, a member of the Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families, who oversaw the project.

The remaining audience members — young people, *Birutietės*, and representatives of the local community (teachers, clergy, businesspeople, military officers, and others) — actively participated in the civics lesson and discussion that followed the performance. During the discussion, questions were explored such as what it means to be a citizen and what citizenship entails, how to prepare for extreme situations, what constitutes extreme conditions in general, and how each of us can contribute to the country's security and well-being.

"The audience had nothing but warm words for the entire program team. After the performances, we heard comments such as: 'Thank you for creating works that, through artistic means, are interesting not only to children but also to adults... There is a real lack of such patriotic events for children.' We continue to receive numerous positive comments even after the project has ended," said J. Sakalauskienė.

This educational program has already concluded, but the play continues to be performed at the 'Lėlė' Theater in Vilnius and is receiving tremendous attention from schools and communities across Lithuania.





Although all *Birutietės* are extremely busy, when united by a shared commitment to volunteerism, they can move mountains.

a wonderful connection with the Vilnius theater 'Lélé'. In collaboration with them, a play was created based on the book 'The Girl with the Rifle' by Marius Marcinkevičius and Lina Itagaki, with the production partially funded by the Ministry of National Defense. It toured all of Lithuania, and after each performance, discussions on citizenship and patriotism took place, which were met with great success. We even heard feedback that this encouraged people to join the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union or other organizations. I have to admit that when I first heard the idea of creating such a play, I really liked it, but I had a hard time imagining what it would look like in reality; nevertheless, the result exceeded all expectations, and the risk paid off handsomely.

How do you view the patriotism of today's youth and the importance of volunteering in their lives? Do you notice a trend where, without the guidance of adults, they wouldn't get involved on their own? What challenges and opportunities arise in this regard?

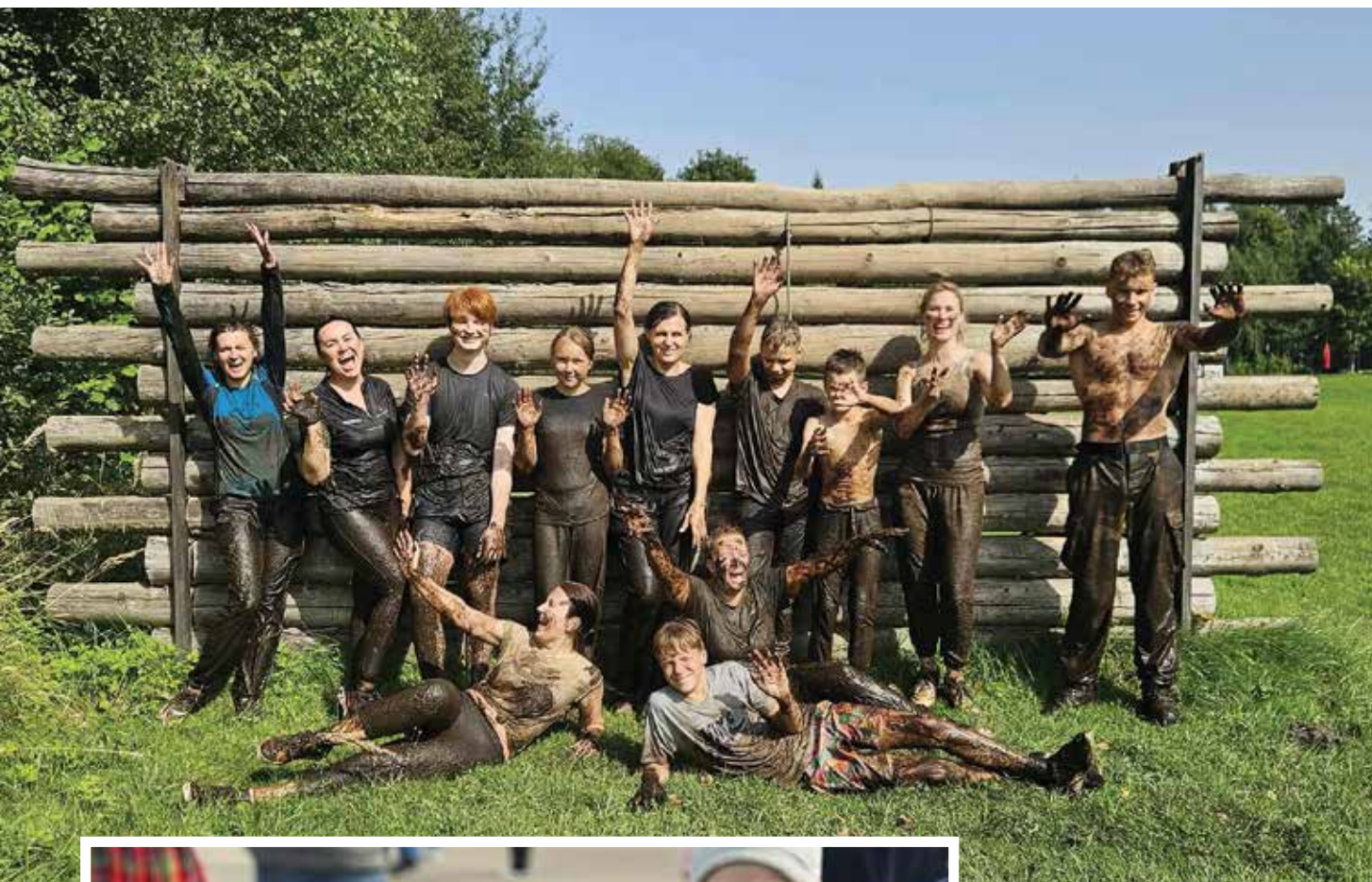
Young people usually participate



in our events because their parents bring them. *Birutietės* that are mothers involve not only their daughters but also their sons — our organization often brings entire families together. For example, even the commander of armed forces joins us in packing, taping, and placing parcels into boxes when extra hands are needed. The spouses and children of other members also join in — this is the main reason for their participation in volunteering. In addition, some *Birutietės* work as teachers or in other organizations, so they invite their students to join in the

volunteer activities. That's why we see so many young volunteers at events like 'In Memoriam'.

Speaking of engagement, I come back to the same idea — nothing works better than a personal example. You have to encourage and invite young people, because many things seem uninteresting from the outside until you know anything about them. And even after learning about them but not yet grasping the essence, the activities may not seem appealing. However, after spending more time together, people begin to delve deeper, a sense of exci-



tement arises, connections are formed, meaning is discovered, and the desire to remain in the community is born.

In my opinion, young people are patriotic — we simply need to give them the space to show it. There are no empty spaces: if we don't communicate with the younger generation, someone else will fill that space, so we cannot allow this vacuum to form. In general, today's youth are very empathetic: they are eager to volunteer when they see that they can do something useful for others or for their country. Often, it doesn't even require much time, yet the results are enormous. I was struck by an example from the United States, where we lived while my husband was studying there — there I saw first-hand how volunteering heals society, because by participating in the life of your country, you feel the satisfaction of doing good for others. Volunteering has a deep meaning — by encouraging it, we would achieve many positive results for the country. ■

BIRUTIETĖS' CAMP FOR CHILDREN: "WE ARE FOR LITHUANIA"

MES - LIETUVIŲ 2025

One of the goals of the Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families is to foster patriotism and a sense of duty to defend the homeland among young people, to strengthen the role of the Lithuanian Armed Forces in society, and to encourage respect for and interest in the country's history among citizens, especially the younger generation. In pursuit of this mission, the association has been organizing the 'We Are for Lithuania' summer camp for children and young people for more than a decade. "At this camp, we introduce children and young people to the significant anniversaries, events, and figures of a given year that have shaped and continue to shape Lithuanian history. We also introduce the different branches of the Lithuanian Armed Forces — this way, we aim to spark interest and perhaps even help the children of soldiers discover their own calling. An important part of the camp's activities is dedicated to fostering civic responsibility, critical thinking, and resilience. "We do this not only through educational activities but also by allowing them to directly experience the reality of challenging

situations," said one of the organizers, Indrė Kisielė, chairwoman of the Lithuanian Grand Duchess Birutė Association of Women from Officers' Families of the Panevėžys Garrison of the Lithuanian Armed Forces. According to her, more than five hundred children have participated in the camp over the course of its existence. *Birutietės* themselves have joined the ranks of camp leaders, as there are excellent educators among them. A beautiful friendship has also developed with other organizations, such as the Wounded Soldiers Fund of Lithuanian Armed Forces. Every year, the children of fallen soldiers are invited to the camp, and in response to the war in Ukraine, Ukrainian children have been guests here for three years, for whom this was an opportunity to escape the reality of war for at least a week in Lithuanian company. "Every year we receive very positive feedback, and seeing the children who always want to come back, we believe that this camp has found a special place in the hearts of Lithuanian Armed Forces families. And for us, *Birutietės*, it helps us grow through daily challenges and invaluable experience," emphasized I. Kisielė.





NATO Eastern Deterrence Strategy

NATO's plans to strengthen deterrence along its eastern flank envision an "autonomous zone" where only unmanned systems operate, with linked sensors, drones and long-range fires to detect and target invading Russian forces at the start of a conflict, alliance officials said on the sidelines of military exercises in Latvia.

Latvian troops tried out unmanned ground vehicles during the 'Crystal Arrow' exercise as part of operational testing to integrate new technology into NATO's Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative (EFDI), inspired by lessons from Ukraine, said Brig. Gen. Chris Gent, deputy chief of staff transformation and integration at NATO Allied Land Command.

"There's no secrets here, it's how warfare develops," Gent told 'Defense News' in an interview at

the Sēlija training area in Latvia. "There is now a zone in front of you where you're not going to put humans in harm's way, and it's all about machines taking the risk and absorbing that risk for you, and attrition."

With European intelligence agencies warning Russia could threaten NATO territory within a few years after fighting ends in Ukraine, the alliance's Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative aims to help build up a more credible border defense. Several countries on NATO's eastern flank, including Latvia and Poland, have faced drone incursions from the direction of Russia over the past year.

The initiative, shorthanded as EFDI, "has really picked up momentum very quickly," United States Army Europe and Africa commander Gen. Chris Donahue told officers and officials in a briefing at the Sēlija range, describing it as NATO's war-fighting concept.

Donahue first discussed the con-

cept at a conference in Germany last July. He said that beyond showing 'PowerPoint' slides, it's now about fielding capabilities and countries exercising with them to prove they work, and "make sure we have deterrence every day."

The concept includes a unified network of connected sensors, unmanned systems and both offensive and defensive effectors, according to Gent. The Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative envisions "an autonomous zone, well documented already" where only unmanned systems can operate effectively before either side starts taking casualties, Gent said.

"This is here right now," Gent said, citing press reports of Ukraine capturing a position in April using only unmanned systems. "We're not talking about science fiction, we're not talking about the future. We're not talking about 2040. We are talking about the requirement today."

The challenge then becomes how many autonomous systems one side has, how effective they are, and how effective the counters are, according to Gent, who said the only way to understand that is through exercises such as 'Crystal Arrow'. One



hurdle remains different levels of permissions between NATO nations about allowing autonomous sensors to fire effectors, he said.

"More and more nations are being challenged or are having that argument developed for them in real time, when, for example, you might see a drone incursion in peacetime," Gent said. "Do we shoot that drone down, where might it land, for example. It's become very real here in Latvia."

NATO has been testing new technologies in support of the EFDI since September within the 'Task Force X' framework. During the first pilot in Lithuania in September, German forces integrated unmanned ground vehicles and counter-UAS in their operations, while testing in Finland in December focused on connectivity, according to Gent.

The alliance is developing a "data backbone" across the EFDI, with a network tying together thousands of sensors and effectors, including acoustic and electro-optical sensors



as well as counter-UAS and UGVs, Gent said. The idea is for sensors across the eastern flank to talk to each other and "trigger each other's effectors across international boundaries."

Trying out new capabilities during exercises is key to helping troops integrate them, Gent said, noting

how Latvia's Mechanized Infantry Brigade used UGVs during 'Crystal Arrow'. NATO covered the cost of travel and accommodation for media attending the exercise. The alliance is also asking companies to talk about how they'll connect unmanned ground systems into NATO operating systems, with Gent ▶▶





◀◀ saying there are lessons to be learned from 'Task Force X Baltic'. Work is ongoing within NATO's operational experimentation to establish the effective size of the autonomous zone, which varies depending on the terrain, according to Gent.

In Ukraine, the term "kill zone" is used informally to describe an area near the front where movement is rapidly detected and targeted by drones, artillery or loitering munitions, and which can range to 15 kilometers or more from the line of contact in some areas.

Latvian troops are training every day to secure this "kill zone" with only unmanned systems, said Maj. Eduards Šinkūns, chief of the operational, planning and training department of the Mechanized Infantry Brigade, in a briefing with reporters during 'Crystal Arrow'. He described a multilayered system of drones supported by infantry and artillery.

"What we see in Ukraine, no vehicle movements are in the gray zone at all," Šinkūns said. "Any movement is destroyed." He declined to detail how Latvia would defend against a Russian invasion, saying "we Latvians, especially the mechanized brigade, we have a plan, and we know how to execute it. That's all I can say about it."

The EFDI Initiative is one part in a multilayered approach to dissuade a Russian attack, said Brig. Gen. Jamie Murray, the deputy commander of the Estonian Division, in an interview with 'Defense News' at the Sēlija training area. While the deterrence initiative creates a "day zero prob-

lem" by being able to detect and strike an attacker immediately, the next layer is the ability of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania to hit targets in the deep if Russia does invade. He noted Estonia's purchase of additional *Chunmoo* rocket artillery systems from 'Hanwha Aerospace' with a range of 290 kilometers.

He said the most demanding challenge for the alliance would be "a gambling Putin, throwing some forces, gambling that NATO doesn't react, nibbling a bit of any of our countries."

"If deterrence has failed, we reserve that right to then strike back at military targets," Murray said. "The thing about the kill zone, it's not going to be symmetrical. The Estonians, for example, have a very clear 'no Russian boots on our territory.' So the kill zone could be conceivably on their side of the border."



Shaping the terrain with physical barriers in combination with the deterrence initiative can allow NATO forces to compensate for the force-ratio imbalance with Russia. He cited the Baltic Defense Line of anti-tank ditches and physical obstacles, and the difficulty Soviet troops faced in 1944 to remove German troops due to the forest cover.

"The first act is to deter them, the second is to stop them, and the third is to get them into a position where ultimately they've culminated, we're forcing them to do an echelon change, and as they do that, they're really vulnerable." He said NATO's logic



has moved from the tripwire force to "deterrence by punishment and denial. The end state is clear, and we're all working towards it," Murray said.

"Prove to Russia that they shouldn't invade."

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Ukrainian Aerial Bomb Combat-ready

A Ukrainian company has produced the country's first guided aerial bombs capable of striking targets "dozens of kilometers" behind enemy lines with 250-kilogram warheads, giving Kyiv a homegrown equivalent to Russia's cheap, devastating glide bombs, the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine announced.

The aerial bomb is a winged but engineless weapon that drops from an aircraft at altitude, gliding to its target on the speed and altitude of release, steered by satellite guidance. It costs much less than cruise missiles per shot, carries much larger warheads than most drones and lets aircraft stay outside the densest air defenses. "The first

Ukrainian guided aerial bomb is ready for combat use," Minister of Defense Mykhailo Fedorov wrote in a 'Telegram' post announcing the milestone, noting the Ministry has already purchased an experimental batch and is gearing up to deploy the bombs on the front. "Ukraine is moving from importing individual solutions to creating its own high-tech weapons, which systematically strengthen the Defense Forces and provide a technological advantage on the battlefield," Fedorov said.

Until now, Ukraine had no domestic precision glide bomb. The country has relied on scarce Western donations for strikes beyond the reach of conventional artillery, like American-made *JDAM-ERs* and *ATACMS* missiles, British 'Storm Shadows' and French *SCALP-EG* cruise missiles.

Cheap to produce and free of donor restrictions, the new bombs

let Kyiv press the fight at mid-range and conserve scarce longer-range Western missiles for deeper targets — part of a broader Ukrainian push to use tech to change the mathematics of war in its favor after over four years of defending itself against a much larger and richer enemy.

"We are scaling up solutions that increase the range and accuracy of strikes and change the rules of modern warfare," Fedorov said. 'DG Industry', a little-known Ukrainian firm sponsored by the state-backed defense innovation cluster 'Brave1', started work on the munition 17 months ago. The team faced a challenging environment, requiring guidance that could survive Russia's electronic jamming, an airframe that stays stable across release speeds and altitudes and an interface that integrates with whichever aircraft will carry it. The result is a system officials say is different from others in its class.

Russia's *UMPk*-equipped *FAB* bombs, for example, are glide kits bolted onto Soviet-era bomb bodies



Ukraine knows from experience how hard they are to stop. Russia now drops an average of more than 250 guided aerial bombs on Ukrainian positions and cities each day, according to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Earlier, three FAB-250 strikes on Kramatorsk killed five civilians and injured 12 more, according to regional military officials.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has named glide bombs among Russia's most dangerous weapons since Moscow began deploying them regularly in 2023. And they cost far more to shoot down than to produce and deploy.

A UMPK-equipped FAB costs tens of thousands of dollars to manufacture, while a single 'Patriot' interceptor capable of stopping one runs in the millions. The new Ukrainian glide bomb is built to make that asymmetric cost ratio Russia's problem, too. "Soon, Ukrainian guided aerial bombs will be used against enemy targets," the Ministry of Defense said.

Information and photo credits:
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that were never meant to glide. The Ukrainian weapon is purpose-built from the airframe up, not a glide kit. "This is not a copy of Western or Soviet solutions, but a development of Ukrainian engineers for effective destruction of fortifications, command posts, and other enemy targets tens of kilometers deep after launch," Fedorov said. Glide bombs also offer another edge.

Released from standoff distance, they appear over the target only in

the last seconds of flight, leaving traditional air defenses little time to react. They can be harder to detect, too, flying at different speeds, arcs and altitudes than the threats most air defense systems are optimized to track, according to NATO's Joint Air Power Competence Centre.

Russian Su-34s release the bombs from well beyond Ukrainian air-defense coverage, and once airborne, the bombs themselves are small, unpowered and hard to track.



RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESSURE AGAINST UKRAINE

Russia's war against Ukraine has established itself in the global information space as a protracted war of attrition. In this war, military dynamics are determined not only by individual shifts in the front lines, but also by several other factors: the industrial capabilities of the states, their mobilization readiness, and, undoubtedly, their survivability and endurance capabilities. Nevertheless, the most important factors remain: the defensive resilience of airspace, technological adaptation on the battlefield, long-term financial resources to sustain state systems, and, of course, the political will of partners to ensure the continued functioning of Ukraine's economy.

COL

WARRIOR AGAINST RUSSIA

BY ALEKSIEJUS GAIŽEVSKIS

The logic of war: long-term exhaustion

Moscow will continue to seek to maintain the military initiative. This will be achieved through sustained pressure on the front lines, combined missile and drone strikes, the depletion of Ukraine's energy and civilian infrastructure, and information pressure on Western societies, with the aim of breaking the Ukrainian people's will to resist.

In this context, Russia's actions should be viewed as a broad-spectrum pressure system. It combines military force, economic coercion, diplomatic blackmail, nuclear-related threats, cyber operations, sabotage threats, and intense attempts to exploit political fatigue in democratic states. Therefore, when analyzing Russia's military potential, it is essential to assess not only its core land operations but also its long-range strike capabilities, the capacity of its defense industry, the sustainability of its state budget, and NATO's deterrence posture.

Ukraine's resilience, in turn, rests on three interrelated pillars: 1) the military's battlefield experience; 2) the ability of society and institutions to adapt to a protracted war; 3) dependence on external support. In the fifth year of the large-scale invasion, it can be stated that Ukraine is not only capable of defending itself but has also acquired significant potential to neutralize some air threats and simultaneously deliver retaliatory strikes against key nodes of Russia's war economy, which poses major challenges to the stability of Russia's military logistics. Despite these achievements, these capabilities nevertheless depend on air defense missiles, anti-drone systems, artillery ammunition, personnel rotation, political decisions by partners, and the expansion of the defense industry.

Russia's potential: scale and industry

Russia's military potential remains significant due to its large manpower reserves, a well-developed defense industry, stockpiles of Soviet-era equipment, a state-controlled mobilization apparatus, and a political willingness to prioritize war

at the expense of the domestic economy. Moscow is capable of sustaining a high intensity of use of artillery, missiles, aviation, unmanned aerial vehicles, and electronic warfare assets, although the quality and long-term sustainability of these capabilities vary across different areas.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), allocations in Russia's federal budget for war and other military expenditures amounted to approximately 16 trillion rubles (7,5% of GDP) in 2025, while the 2026 budget provides for approximately 14,9 trillion rubles (6,3% of GDP). This indicates that Russia is maintaining an exceptionally high level of war funding, despite facing inflation, budgetary pressures, and the need to tighten financial management within the Ministry of Defense.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) publication 'The Military Balance 2026' emphasizes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank remain key factors in Europe's defense economy. The structure of Russia's expenditures shows a clear shift toward a militarized economy: the military-industrial complex is given priority, resulting in civilian sectors facing labor and investment shortages, while technological dependence on third countries is only increasing, and schemes to circumvent sanctions are multiplying.

This allows for two mutually contradictory, yet both valid, assumptions. First, Russia is not close to sudden military exhaustion and can therefore continue to wage an intense war. Second, this continuation is becoming increasingly costly for the aggressor, as it relies more and more on forced mobilization, strict political control, revenue from energy resources, and external technological channels.

Russia's strike pattern

Russia's recent long-range strikes against Ukraine have featured a combined approach: large numbers of unmanned aerial vehicles are used to overwhelm, confuse, and exhaust air

defenses, while missiles and ballistic weapons are directed at critical infrastructure, the defense industry, logistics, and targets of political and psychological impact. The goal of this model is not merely the physical destruction of objects. It also aims to force Ukraine to expend costly countermeasures, maintain constant tension within society, and demonstrate to the West that Russia still retains the initiative for escalation.

Public data from Ukrainian and international news agencies regarding the combined attack carried out on May 23–24, 2026, illustrates the scale of this model: the use of hundreds of drones and dozens of different types of missiles was recorded, with the main blow falling on Kyiv and its outskirts. These episodes illustrate not one-off exceptions, but a much broader tactic of Russian military operations. It involves ‘human wave’ assaults, saturation, decoys, and the coordination of different trajectories to achieve, if not operational, then at least tactical objectives.

Russia’s arsenal of offensive weapons includes *Shahed/Geran*-type strike and decoy unmanned aerial vehicles, ballistic, cruise, and aeroballistic missiles, as well as electronic warfare and deception elements. This combination of measures is

particularly dangerous when targeting the energy, water supply, and public transport sectors, air defense resources, and the civilian infrastructure of major cities.

From a strategic perspective, these strikes serve two functions. First, they aim to paralyze the functioning of the Ukrainian state and increase the economic cost of the war. Second, they serve as a form of political communication: Russia seeks to demonstrate that Western support cannot fully protect Ukraine, thereby pressuring Ukraine to negotiate from a position more favorable to Moscow.

Ukraine’s defense capabilities

Ukraine’s defense capabilities are one of the best examples of adaptability in modern warfare. Since 2022, Ukraine has developed a multi-layered air defense system that incorporates Western and Soviet-era systems, mobile fire groups, radars, electronic warfare assets, technological solutions from volunteer initiatives, and unmanned interceptors playing an increasingly significant role.

Nevertheless, Ukraine faces a structural imbalance: cheap Russian

drones often force the use of far more expensive interception resources. Therefore, scaling up anti-drone systems, low-cost interceptors, electronic warfare capabilities, and domestic production is becoming less a tactical issue and more a strategic one. Reports from the Ukrainian President’s Office have repeatedly emphasized that air defense and anti-ballistic capabilities remain key priorities for Ukraine, while coordinating partner actions and joint production are considered essential steps due to limited global production capacity.

According to IISS assessment, Ukraine managed to prevent Russia from achieving significant operational gains in 2025, but in 2026, the country’s forces are increasingly under pressure from manpower shortages and fluctuations in the dynamics of Western support. This leads to the conclusion that Ukraine’s ability to defend itself remains at an exceptionally high level, but is not guaranteed in and of itself: it continues to depend on the quality of the state’s mobilization, organized personnel rotation, ammunition supply, air defense missiles, engineering fortifications, and the implementation of operational decisions by partners.

In this war, the strength of Ukraine’s





defense lies not only in specific weapon systems. It is based on the ability to learn quickly, develop technological solutions in a decentralized manner, integrate the civilian sector into defense innovation, and utilize partner support in a way that complements, rather than replaces, national resilience.

Asymmetric pressure

Ukraine's retaliatory strikes against the russian regime are based on asymmetric logic. Given that russia has a significantly larger territory, a deeper industrial base, and still-undepleted manpower resources, Ukraine seeks to increase the cost of war in the most vulnerable links of the enemy's system: fuel production, logistics, the military-industrial complex, air defense, warehousing, command and control, and transportation hubs. This strategic approach reflects not a contest of mass, but targeted pressure on the centers of russia's war economy.

Ukraine's modern technological response includes the development of long-range unmanned systems, maritime drones, and electronic warfare capabilities, as well as the integration of targeted intelligence and partnerships with the Western defense industry. All of this allows Ukraine to offset part of russia's quantitative advantage and force

moscow to allocate more resources to protecting targets deep within the country, repairing infrastructure, and redeploying air defense systems.

The strategic impact of such a campaign is not necessarily immediately apparent. Even if a single strike is not a decisive factor, a repeated sequence of pressure can reduce the effectiveness of russian exports, increase insurance and logistics costs, complicate fuel supply to the military, and heighten political uncertainty within the country. Nevertheless, this strategic direction remains sensitive from the perspective of escalation management, which is why Western partners often limit or differentiate their support based on weapon systems, ranges, and political risks.

Sanctions, reconstruction and partner support

The economic dimension of the war is one of the key factors in the long-term confrontation. In the short term, the russian economy is able to sustain war financing due to state revenues from energy resources, centralized control, and the militarization of industry; however, in the long run, the aggressor nevertheless faces inevitable inflation, labor shortages, technological isolation, and dependence on sanctions-evasion networks.

Therefore, the sanctions policy is entering a more complex phase. The European Union's (EU) 19th sanctions package is directed directly at russia's energy sector, finance, military-industrial base, third-country banks, cryptocurrency channels, and the shadow fleet. The European Commission (EC) emphasizes that this wave of restrictions is increasing pressure on russia's war economy through a ban on liquefied natural gas imports, stricter controls on the shadow fleet, and restrictions on financial services and cryptocurrency infrastructure.

Ukraine's economic situation is entirely different: the country is experiencing direct destruction of infrastructure, population migration, disruptions in production, and significant pressure on public finances. A joint RDNA5 analysis by the World Bank, the Ukrainian government, the EC, and the United Nations showed that Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction needs for a ten-year period, as assessed by the end of last year, amount to nearly 588 billion US dollars.

Therefore, EU financial support is becoming not merely supplementary, but a strategic element of Ukraine's resilience. According to EC data, the 'Ukraine Facility' for 2024–2027 is projected to provide up to 50 billion euros in stable and predictable support to ensure the functioning of the state, as well as for the country's reconstruction,



modernization, investments, and reforms. This funding is important not only for the economy but also for military resilience, as the continuity of public administration, energy, transport, and social services directly determines the society's ability to sustain its defense.

NATO's defensive posture

Russia's military pressure on Ukraine is directly transforming the security architecture of NATO's eastern flank. Although the Alliance is not a party to the war in Ukraine, its defense posture has become more dispersed, integrated, and focused on rapid response to hybrid, air, missile, cyber, and maritime threats, as well as threats to critical infrastructure, since 2022. This stance is particularly relevant in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, as well as in Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria.

NATO officially emphasizes that the strengthening of the eastern flank is defensive in nature. The Alliance seeks to directly deter aggression, defend every inch of allied territory, and reduce the threat of a Russian invasion. To this end, NATO maintains forward-deployed land forces in eight countries along its eastern flank, as well as integrated air and missile defense, a permanent air policing mission, maritime surveillance, cyber resilience, and critical infrastructure protection.

'Eastern Sentry' has become one of the key models of NATO's new-generation response. NATO announced this military operation on September 12, 2025, in response to the infiltration of Russian unmanned aerial vehicles into Polish airspace and the steadily increasing number of airspace violations on the eastern flank. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and Gen. Alexis G. Grynkewich presented 'Eastern Sentry' as "a flexible, multi-domain operation designed to strengthen the Alliance's posture from the Baltic to the Black Sea region."

More specifically, the essence of 'Eastern Sentry' is not offensive escalation, but controlled deterrence of an imminent threat. This operation involves various combat elements: fighter jets, helicopters, transport and reconnaissance aircraft, air defense systems, frigates, and advanced counter-drone measures. NATO AWACS E-3A patrols over the eastern flank in September 2025 demonstrated that situational awareness is becoming just as important as the kinetic neutralization of hostile capabilities. In this context, the most important thing is to detect the threat in a timely manner, classify it, transmit the data, and make proportionate decisions that ensure the ultimate goal — the effect of deterrence.

'Baltic Sentry' also reflects another important lesson for NATO: Russian pressure and destabilization can occur not only in airspace or on land, but also pose a direct threat to critical underwater infrastructure. In January 2025, NATO announced

the 'Baltic Sentry' military operation in the Baltic Sea, aimed at protecting cables, pipelines, and other vulnerable infrastructure following recent incidents in the region. This operation involves frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, minehunters, integrated national surveillance systems, and maritime drones.

These exercises serve a dual purpose. From a military perspective, they allow for the testing of logistics, host nation support, chains of command, air defense, mobility, infrastructure, and interoperability. From a political perspective, they send a clear signal to Moscow that the defense of NATO's eastern flank is based not only on declarations but also on real mechanisms for planning, deployment, and reinforcement, designed not only to deter but also, in the event of a direct threat, to deliver a retaliatory strike.

Strengthening NATO's eastern flank does not directly alter the front line in Ukraine, but it has a strategic impact on deterrence. These actions limit Russia's ability to normalize provocations against Alliance territory, allow allies to continue their support for Ukraine more safely and consistently, and force Moscow to assess a broader NATO response to any escalation of military conflict. The current model can be described as defensive escalation control: surveillance is being expanded, air policing and air defense missions are being strengthened, forward forces are being increased, and exercises are being intensified, while maintaining a clear line between support for Ukraine and the Alliance's direct involvement in the war.

The transformation of the security framework

Russia's war against Ukraine has become a broader test of the European and transatlantic security framework. It directly tests the credibility of NATO's deterrence, the EU's use of economic power, the resilience of democratic societies, the quality of sanctions enforcement, and the Western defense industry's ability to shift from peacetime production to meeting long-term security needs.

Moscow continues to seek to demon-

trate that it can outlast Western fatigue. This strategy is based on the assumption that political cycles, budget disputes, social fatigue, and differing perceptions of threats in democratic states may eventually erode support for Ukraine. Therefore, Russia's military actions, energy blackmail, diplomatic rhetoric, and information operations are directed not only at Kyiv, but also at Washington, Berlin, Paris, Warsaw, Vilnius, and other Western capitals.

The response from NATO and the EU points in a clear direction that runs counter to the Kremlin's narratives: support for Ukraine is increasingly linked to Europe's own security. Ukraine is not merely a recipient of aid — its combat experience, anti-drone solutions, air defense lessons, maritime drones, and technological transformation are becoming a source of learning for the entire European defense sector. These lessons and technologies are already being successfully integrated even in the Persian Gulf region. This means that Ukraine's defense and the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank are becoming parts of a single strategic ecosystem.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that the geopolitical environment remains unstable. The course of the war is influenced by US and European domestic politics, oil

prices, the behavior of China and other third countries, the crisis in the Middle East, global competition in the defense industry, sanctions-evasion networks, and the readiness of societies for a long-term confrontation. Therefore, any forecasts should be viewed only as tentative scenarios, not as definitive outcomes.

Insights

Russia's war against Ukraine is gradually evolving into a contest of endurance, industrial capacity, and political will. Moscow is still capable of maintaining military pressure, but the cost is rising inexorably, and its dependence on the war economy, mobilization resources, and channels for circumventing sanctions is becoming increasingly apparent. Ukraine's unique ability to hold out will depend not on a single weapons system or an isolated decision by partners, but on a consistent approach to air defense, counter-drone measures, an uninterrupted supply of ammunition, personnel management, and the strengthening of the local defense industry.

The reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank indicates that the war in Ukraine has become a broader test of the European security system. The Alliance's deterrence measures, protection of critical

infrastructure, and increased readiness significantly reduce the risk of Russia miscalculating its economic and military potential and enable Ukraine's supporters to continue providing aid without crossing the line into direct involvement in the war.

In summary, it can be said that this war confirms a fundamental rule: deterrence cannot be based solely on political declarations. It must be based on real combat capabilities, air defense, anti-drone systems, critical infrastructure protection, allied support, mobilization readiness, societal resilience, and, most importantly, the ability to demonstrate that the state possesses the political and military will to deliver a retaliatory strike. For Lithuania, this means the need to continue strengthening national defense as an integral part of NATO's eastern flank, while for the Alliance, it means maintaining the pace of rapid reinforcement, interoperability, and long-term support for Ukraine.

The main lesson of this war is not only Ukraine's ability to defend itself, but also that European security will depend on the allies' readiness for a long-term confrontation. Ukraine's defense, Lithuania's security, and the deterrence of NATO's eastern flank are all parts of the same strategic chain. ■



FAR WEAPONS



DARIUS SUTKUS

EWELL TO : GOODBYE, 5,56 MM

In 2017, the United States (US) Army launched the 'New Generation Squad Weapons' (NGSW) program.

To say that this is an ambitious project is an understatement. NGSW is the first massive-scale weapons modernization effort in the last six decades. Its goal is to replace the *M4A1* assault carbine and the *M249* (SAW) light machine gun, both chambered for 5,56x45 NATO rounds, with an entirely new family of weapons and ammunition.

The NGSW program was launched after the US Congress directed the US Army leadership to evaluate the capabilities of the existing *M4* assault carbines.

Why is the political leadership paying such close attention to what seem like minor details? After all, it was essentially common knowledge that the existing individual infantry weapons were favored and valued by soldiers, and that minor issues encountered during their use could be resolved by employing different types of ammunition, magazines, or other accessories.

However, the need for innovation coincided with several circumstances. At the time, the US was fighting radical Islamists in Afghanistan. In mountainous open terrain, long-range firefights are a common occurrence. And here it became clear that the ballistic trajectory and stopping power of 5,56 mm ammunition were insufficient for effective firing at longer ranges. The 7,62x39 and 7,62x54R ammunition used by the Taliban were more powerful.



The *H&K XM8* assault carbine came very close to being adopted into service. However, it was ultimately decided to replace both the weapon and the ammunition.

The prototype rounds likely also influenced the tender results. The decision was made to stick with the classic option.

Concerns about conventional ammunition were also raised by other major countries' transition to more modern equipment. It was noted that China is massively equipping its soldiers with body armor. Russia also announced its 'Ratnik' program to modernize soldier weaponry and equipment. Meanwhile, 5,56 mm bullets do not penetrate Class IV ballistic plates effectively enough, especially from a distance.

Therefore, the conclusion was reached: it is more practical to switch to new weapons that fire more powerful rounds than to endlessly modify the existing *M4*.

Moving ahead

It should be noted that the Americans have had similar plans in the past. In fact, there have been several programs such as the 'Objective Individual Combat Weapon' (OICW), 'Special Purpose Individual Weapon' (SPIW), and 'Advanced Combat Rifle' (ACR) come to mind. It seems that the last program was very close to being implemented, and US soldiers were about to be re-equipped with *H&K XM8* assault carbines. However, all of these long-term programs, having gone through shorter or longer phases, were ultimately shelved. This should come as no surprise — the US defense system can afford to develop numerous promising projects that do not necessarily have to result in tangible outcomes.

But this time, it seems they've taken the matter seriously. In 2017, criteria were

SIG MCX SPEAR / SIG BRASS-STEEL HYBRID AMMO

GO-DST BULLPUP / TRUE VELOCITY POLIMER CASED AMMO

TEXTRON CT SYSTEM / WINCHESTER CT POLYMER AMMO

announced that NSGW weapon prototypes were expected to meet.

The program consists of several components. These are:

- A next-generation automatic rifle intended to replace the current *M4A1*, codenamed *NSGW-R*, using a high-power 6,8 mm cartridge;
- A new light machine gun to replace the standard *M249*, provisionally designated *NSGW-AR*, which was to be no longer than 890 mm and no heavier than 5,4 kg, using a similar type of cartridge, capable of effectively engaging targets at a range of up to 610 m and suppressing them at a range of up to 1 200 m;
- Both the automatic carbine and the light machine gun were to be equipped with a new fire control system — in other words, a new aiming system to replace the various optical and collimator sights currently used by the US Armed Forces.

Participants and their proposals

From the very beginning, five manufacturers expressed interest in the project tender. Preliminary proposals for the NSGW program had to be submitted by April 24, 2019, and final proposals by May 30. These tight deadlines reduced the number of bidders.

On August 29, 2019, the Army leadership announced that three companies had been selected to move on to the next phase of the NSGW program: 'General Dynamics-OTS Inc.', 'AAI Corporation Textron Systems', and 'SIG Sauer Inc.'

Let's take a brief look at the weapon and ammunition prototypes proposed by these manufacturers.

- 'General Dynamics-OTS Inc.' were the most avant-garde competitors, presenting a minimalist bullpup design. It must be said — this is a very bold move, as the bullpup configuration, in many cases,

does not inspire much confidence in many people (especially Americans) and does not seem appealing. It's worth quoting the opinion of one US soldier here: "When you try to reload a weapon like that, you feel like a chimpanzee scratching its armpit." Such are the historical and cultural intricacies.

Moreover, the designers at 'General Dynamics' didn't bother: their machine gun is simply the same elongated carbine with the same magazine feed. It's like the soviet *RPK*: sort of a machine gun, but not quite. In short, not a very good solution for a squad fire support weapon.

The .277 TVCM ammunition with polymer casings, manufactured by 'True Velocity', designed for both this carbine and the machine gun, must have raised no less suspicion among the evaluators. These plastic rounds are lightweight, but the manufacturer should have anticipated that the evaluators would ask: is this reliable compared to the good old 'bronze,' a name that has even become synonymous with the cartridge in the US?

- 'AAI Corporation Textron Systems,' working closely with 'Heckler & Koch' and 'Olin Winchester,' offered a weapon with a classic configuration. Both the promising carbine and the belt-fed machine gun look quite solid. However, they went a bit too far in a different direction.

The image of the 'Textron' assault carbine is a very good test of attention to detail. Let's take a look and ask ourselves: what's unusual here? At first glance, everything seems normal. And only after a while can you notice that the ejection port is in a strange place: not directly above the magazine, but below the barrel and significantly further forward from the magazine and the chamber.

Strange? Very strange. In fact, this peculiarity is dictated by the very design of the weapon. Its mechanical 'digestive tract' is truly complex. And you don't even need to know Murphy's Laws for the thought to cross your mind: if the design is complicated, it can break down. And if it can break down — it will... Let's not even mention that, due to such an unusual engineering solution, the weapon can be awkward to hold by the grip in certain situations — that's obvious.

Moreover! The 'Textron' design was, in turn, influenced by the ammunition itself.

The manufacturer chose such advanced ammunition that a more conservative general, upon seeing it, would likely experience an emotional shock. The CT-type cartridge is a polymer cylinder-shaped container. The 6,8 mm diameter bullet is completely submerged inside it. Such a cartridge is nearly 40 percent lighter than a classic one, but its cosmic futurism is certainly not something that would appeal to an infantryman...

- And finally, 'SIG Sauer Inc.' or more precisely, the American subsidiary of this company, 'SIG USA.' As promising examples, they presented their automa-

tic carbine, the *MCX Spear*, and a light machine gun based on it. A classic layout, a modern yet not overly futuristic design featuring instantly recognizable details such as a *Magpul*-style stock; the carbine uses traditional magazines, while the machine gun uses belts...

The manufacturer also developed its own 6,8x51 mm cartridge (the commercial variant is the *.277 Fury*), whose hybrid-construction case consists of three parts: a brass tube, a steel base, and an internal clip connecting these two elements. This bimetallic steel and brass construction was chosen to prevent the

Proposals submitted by bidders: assault rifles and machine guns.



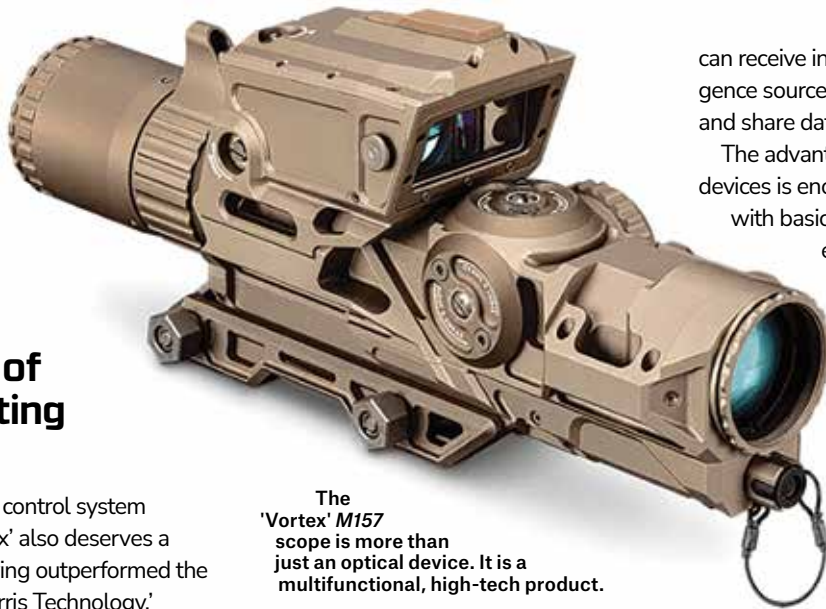
cartridge case from deforming under the pressure of the powerful powder charge during firing.

A brief overview of the targeting system

The advanced fire control system developed by 'Vortex' also deserves a special mention, having outperformed the product from 'L3 Harris Technology.'

The 'Vortex' M157 sight is adjustable: the image it displays can be magnified up to 8 times. But the M157 is not just a system of optical lenses — it is a highly sophisticated product. It also features a night vision mode. It also features a digital compass, a laser rangefinder, and, most interestingly, a ballistic microcomputer that automatically calculates and provides trajectory corrections based on weather conditions.

Another potential advantage of the M157 is that it has a wireless connection. This means that the image in the sight



The 'Vortex' M157 scope is more than just an optical device. It is a multifunctional, high-tech product.

can be transmitted, for example, to smart glasses worn by the gun's owner. Such a system is also being tested — it is a special military version of 'Microsoft's' HoloLens 2, called IVAS (Integrated Visual Augmentation System). Using it, a shooter can monitor the situation and even fire while remaining safely behind cover: all they need to do is raise the weapon above a trench or stick it out from behind a building corner. In addition, unit coordination is possible — each soldier

can receive information from other intelligence sources, mark targets themselves, and share data with their colleagues.

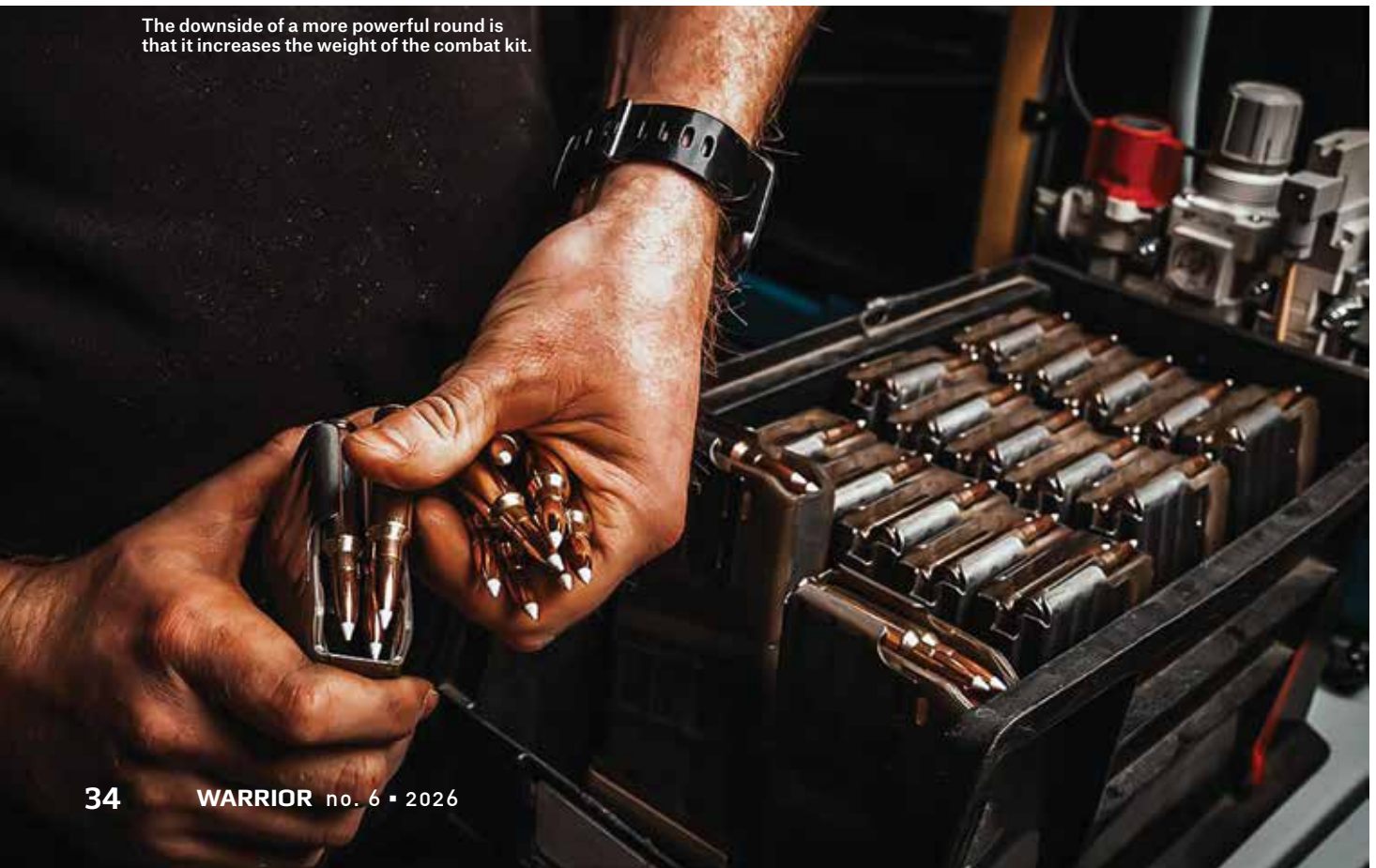
The advantage provided by such devices is enormous. Ideally, any soldier with basic marksmanship skills could effectively hit targets half a kilometer away or farther.

Of course, the M157 doesn't turn every infantryman into a professional sniper. But it is expected that in long-range firefights, the shooters of a unit equipped with these new individual weapons would be able to clearly see and identify targets, and then quickly

and effectively neutralize them with accurate fire.

What would a less technologically advanced enemy group do during a long-range firefight? The situation would depend on the unit's preparedness and discipline. A poorly prepared group without clear leadership would likely fire indiscriminately in a general direction until their ammunition ran out. A better-trained unit would fire single shots or short bursts according to the sectors of

The downside of a more powerful round is that it increases the weight of the combat kit.



'SIG' .277 FURY: NEW AND POWERFUL

5,56 and 6,8 mm. The difference is only 1,24 mm, but a cartridge of this type is no longer an intermediate cartridge, but rather a rifle cartridge. When the first reports emerged that a switch to this caliber was in the works, many gun enthusiasts immediately recalled the *Arisaka* — a classic Japanese rifle that used a similarly powerful 6,5x50 mm cartridge. Not so much out of historical memory as out of surprise: after all, an assault carbine is small — how will it be possible to fire rifle-caliber rounds from it? Indeed: depending on the type, a 5,56 mm bullet weighs 3,56–5 g, while a 6,8 mm bullet weighs 8,75–10,04 g.

It is not only the bullet weight that differs, but also the amount of propellant. The pressure it generates in the barrel is about 25 percent higher compared to the propellant charge of a 5,56x45 mm round. The shot is incomparably more powerful, accompanied by a large flash and loud noise. So it is no surprise that all NGSW competitors submitted muzzle brakes and suppressors as essential accessories for their weapons. When asked about the new type of round, Maj. Gen. Anthony Potts explained its advantages succinctly: "This caliber has many superior characteristics: it is more accurate, more lethal, and more stable compared to the 5,56 mm." Incidentally, it has been determined that, based on ballistic parameters, the *.277 Fury* outperforms even the slightly larger-caliber *.308 Win* round. However, the new 'SIG' cartridge also has its drawbacks, notably its greater weight and higher price compared to the good old 5,56x45 NATO, which everyone is familiar with.

A visual comparison of ammunition. The 6,8x51 cartridge is the first from the left. The last one is the 7,62x39 cartridge used by a potential adversary.



the pre-established fire map, or, in the best-case scenario, according to the commander's designated targets. However, the long range would be a hindrance: the fired bullets would simply lose their lethality compared to the powerful 6,8 mm ammunition.

The program continues

Shortly after the initial evaluation of the submitted weapons, the military rejected 'General Dynamics' proposal. This was to be expected.

Two contenders remained.

In 2020, 'SIG Sauer' delivered a batch of weapons manufactured specifically for the NGSW program to the US Army: *LCX Spear* assault carbines, *LMG-6.8* light machine guns, and *SLX* muzzle brakes and suppressors.

'Textron' was not far behind — they also made some modifications to their weapon prototypes.

It is expected that the test batches of weapons will undergo numerous laboratory and field tests, so a large quantity of new-model ammunition was manufactured.



'SIG Sauer' and 'Textron' competed in the final stage of the competition. Note the location of the ejection slot.

By May, more than 500 service members serving in the Army and Marine Corps had already gained hands-on experience with NGSW weapon prototypes, with their combined training time with these weapons exceeding 7 500 hours.

The NGSW weapons have also attracted significant interest from the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). A representative from the Command confir-

med that they were closely following the program's development and that the forces under their command will be among the first to seek to acquire the weaponry as soon as it begins to be supplied to the armed forces. In anticipation of positive NGSW results, USSOCOM even decided to put its own program for a machine gun adapted for 6,5 mm rounds on hold.

Testing of weapon prototypes was scheduled to continue until mid-2021. Over the course of a year, the pros and cons of the samples submitted by the contenders were to become clear. After that — a few months for summarizing, analyzing, and making a decision. And then, by the end of the first quarter of 2022, we'll be able to congratulate the winner on an extraordinary achievement!

The winner is clear

In April 2022, representatives of the US Army publicly announced the finalist of the NGSW project — 'SIG Sauer' and two of its products: an assault carbine (the XM5 variant) and a light machine gun (the XM250).

But this did not mean the end of the process. This is also evidenced by the letter 'X' in the name — in this case, it indicates that the variant is still only experimental. Testing of the weapon prototypes will take about another year, with the goal of specifically identifying their various characteristics and, of course, their shortcomings. Quite a few of these may become apparent under field conditions.

Someone once joked that a soldier's

A single integrated system: a weapon, a targeting system, and smart augmented reality glasses.





The XM250 machine gun is being tested in temperate climates and at a testing center in cold regions.

hobby is to complain about something. Therefore, it was predicted — and not without reason — that over the course of a year, there will be no shortage of complaints about the new weapon, which is still unfamiliar to the soldiers. Private Jones might be annoyed by a screw that, in his opinion, sticks out too far and catches on his gear, while Sergeant Smith will take issue with the weapon's improperly selected center of gravity. It is important to sift through all these grumbles and complaints to identify those that are substantive and have a real basis. The manufacturer then addresses the identified shortcomings, prepares the first batch of weapons, and begins supplying the first batches to the armed forces as early as 2023...

In January 2023, the name XM5 was changed to XM7. Simply to avoid potential confusion between the XM5 and another 'five' — the Colt M5.

In September of that same year, at Fort Campbell military base in Kentucky,

US soldiers from the 101st 'Screaming Eagle' Airborne Division tested the unit's new weapons and compared them to existing ones.

The XM7 and XM250 also made their way to the Cold Region Test Center (CRTC) based in Alaska. Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division tested the weapons in cold-weather conditions. Daily field tests lasted several weeks, followed by a 72-hour mission. The team monitored how cold and arctic conditions affected the weapon's mechanics, accuracy, the battery life of the aiming system, and so on. They also tested in real-world conditions whether the weapons were easy to use while wearing warm clothing and gloves.

The tests were followed by the next logical step: in March 2024, the 506th Infantry Regiment, part of this division, became the first US unit to be re-equipped with a completely new type of individual weapon, adapted to fire previously unused 6,8 mm ammunition.

Not all smooth sailing?

In May 2025, the 'SIG Sauer' NGSW prototype was assigned the designation M7. This indicated that it had already been officially recognized and adopted into service. The first batch of M7s was planned to be 200 000 units, which were to be supplied to combat units.

In 2026, the entire 25th Infantry Division trained with the new weapons. In addition, comprehensive testing of the NGSW project weapons under tropical conditions was planned.

However, the project organizers received a very clear and unpleasant signal here.

Neither the Special Operations Forces nor the Marine Corps expressed a desire to transition to next-generation weapons. True, Marine Corps representatives commented on their position in accordance with all public relations protocols: they, so to speak, will stick with their M27 for now, but, of course, will closely monitor the progress of the NGSW project.

That means 'no.' If there were a desire, the Corps would have simply accepted the new weapons.

Why? Probably due to a rather different approach to combat operations. The Army need firepower. They were impressed by

a powerful weapon capable of suppressing a PKM machine gun nest firing from a distance or cracking Class IV-V body armor like nuts. Land forces operate with generally strong rear support and, in most cases, have no supply issues.

The Marine Corps operates differently. They are the first to land, the first to secure beachheads, and hold them until the main forces arrive. These soldiers need mobility, but at the same time, they need

a substantial ammunition supply. And you won't entice them with any superweapons if they know that a standard combat loadout will weigh more.

Therefore, their choice should come as no surprise. The M27 they use is a version 416 of the 'Heckler & Koch.' In other words, German quality multiplied by 15 years of USMC combat experience.

The Special Operations Forces likely follow a similar line of thinking. If

anything, these guys have everything in their arsenal, including their own MRGG project (modifications A and S) chambered for 6,5 mm rounds. And if you have your own, why would you need someone else's? Although it's not out of the question — being flexible in their decisions, special forces representatives could take the M7 for specific missions where a long-range, powerful weapon is required.

NGSW

is not just a weapon system, but also an organizational concept. According to the proposed plan, a typical US infantry squad equipped with the new weapons would look like this:

SECTION LEADER
SSgt
M7 assault carbine, M17 pistol

TEAM LEADER
Sgt/Col
M7 assault carbine, M17 pistol

MACHINE GUNNER
Spc
M250 light machine gun

GRENADIER
Spc
M7 assault carbine, M320A1 grenade launcher

RIFLEMAN
Pfc
M7 assault carbine

TEAM LEADER
Sgt/Col
M7 assault carbine, M17 pistol

MACHINE GUNNER
Spc
M250 light machine gun

GRENADIER
Spc
M7 assault carbine, M320A1 grenade launcher

RIFLEMAN
Pfc
M7 assault carbine

Alpha Team

Bravo Team



Bigger caliber — bigger problems?

It may be that the strategists sitting in their offices for some time would never have understood why the units under their command began to respond with polite refusals. What lies behind this aversion to the new weaponry?

Someone had to articulate the reason clearly.

And that's exactly what Capt. Braden Trent did back in April 2025, when he wrote the monograph 'Maintaining Lethality Dominance: the Future of Small Arms and Joint Force.' Among other things, the book is full of critical remarks the author made while observing exercises with the new assault carbines. Trent weighed the XM7. It turned out to be heavier than even the vintage M14 rifle. And the weight of an infantryman's gear has already increased. Is the gradual transformation of a soldier into a weightlifter justified?

Incidentally, it should be noted that the M249 machine gun previously in service weighs 7,5 kg, while the M250 with a sight and a flash and sound suppressor weighs only 6,6 kg.

However, a machine gunner also requires a larger amount of ammunition. And this raises another problem — the combat loadout.



One of the vulnerable structural components: a broken fire and sound suppressor.

In short: the XM7 magazine holds 20 rounds, while the previous M4 magazine holds 30. A standard combat loadout for a rifleman consists of seven magazines. When using 6,8 mm rounds, a seven-magazine kit weighs more than the equivalent kit with 5,56 mm rounds. Moreover, although the weight increases, the amount of ammunition carried decreases by a third. Trent noted that this is a problem: after just a quarter of an hour of training, the soldiers participating began to run out of ammunition. To complete the tactical mission, they had to borrow additional magazines from radio operators or medics.

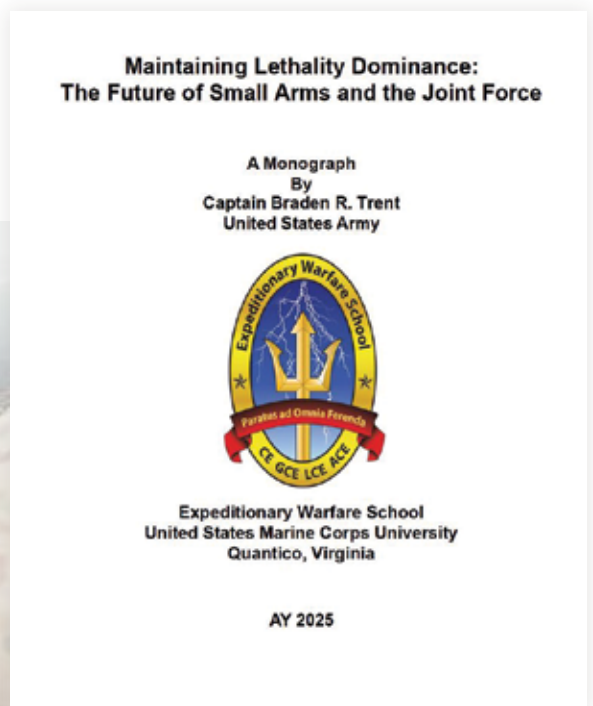
In Trent's view, some of the

new assault carbine's design elements turned out to be strangely unergonomic. For example, the rear loading handle gets caught on the buttstock. Some parts are not sufficiently resistant to mechanical stress — the barrel bore wears out relatively quickly, and the muzzle and sound suppressor often break.

Capt. Trent's study was conducted as a member of the Marine Corps University's School of Expeditionary Warfare, not as an official investigation initiated by the Department of Defense or the Army. But it is clear why USMC leadership began to view the project with skepticism.

Trent was not the only critic — some of his observations were echoed by other shooting and weapons experts with many years of colorful experience, not just in shooting ranges...

However, as we recall, within a couple of months, the XM7 became the M7 and was adopted into service. What happened? Did the critical remarks get lost somewhere in the endless chain of communication? Was the criticism dismissed as competitive rivalry? Did



The monograph in which critical remarks about the new weapon are made.

A demonstration of the M7 at a marksmanship course in Hawaii. Although the new carbine was adopted by the military, the Marine Corps and Special Operations Forces rejected it.



Combat units are already being equipped with the M7, but the NGSW remains a controversial project.

lobbying efforts come into play? Or had the project already gained too much momentum to be stopped?

So is the M7 a bad weapon? Some reviewers took a philosophical view: perhaps the M4 is no longer the best weapon, but the M7 isn't exactly amazing either.

Be that as it may, the new weapon's debut is highly ambiguous...

What happens now?

The US Armed Forces are a massive machine. It is powerful, but that does not mean that the word 'power' is always synonymous with 'efficiency' or 'precision.' In a complex, overloaded system, there is always a chance that something will go wrong.

Readers are likely familiar with one such failed project. It is the uniform reform, in which attempts were made to replace woodland and desert camouflage patterns with a single, supposedly universal one. The result — ACU Digital camouflage, intended to provide concealment everywhere — failed to meet expectations entirely. Not only did it fail to perform its camouflage function, but it actually stood out from a distance, despite

the fact that its supposed effectiveness was 'based on scientific research findings' and, it seems, did not fail in any of the testing phases...

Could a similar situation have occurred with the NGSW program? In the initial version, its duration was planned for 8 years. That is, it should already have been completed. The first batch of weapons was supposed to total 250 000 units (along with 150 million rounds of ammunition), and the initial package was also supposed to include some spare parts.

Is a quarter of a million weapons a lot? In this context — no. The US Army alone currently has at least one million AR-type assault rifles. This means that only a portion of the troops will receive the new weapons — most likely those units with the highest combat readiness.

So for a while, two different weapon systems will be used in parallel within the forces — while this won't be a complete logistical nightmare, it will likely cause certain inconveniences. For example, even if all US units were to switch to a completely new type of ammunition, the problem would only become more widespread — how would

one then ensure seamless interoperability with allies? After all, wouldn't the concept of a 'unified NATO round' then become a fiction?

And what if even more additional complications emerge over time? Not necessarily of a technical nature. There are also concerns of a different nature. One of them boils down to the classic adage that generals always prepare for a war that has already been fought.

Critics argue that firing powerful rounds at long range in a future conflict may turn out to be yesterday's news. According to them, the war in Ukraine has, at worst, turned everything upside down, and at best, significantly reshaped the rules of the battlefield.

However, this view is not absolute. The capabilities of the Ukrainians are not the same as those of the Americans. US fire support is far more substantial, so infantrymen do not completely lose the chance to engage the enemy at long range, and at close range, a 6,8 mm bullet will act as a good 'armor piercer.' The bullet's greater stopping power also remains a plus, not a minus. Perhaps the only weak link is the greater weight of the combat kit and the smaller amount of ammunition in the standard combat kit.

So let's hope that the new weapons reform will, one way or another, be resolved without drastic excesses. Let's remember that the previous transition by the US Armed Forces from the old M14

perhaps the shortest service life — a mere seven years, though in some rare cases it is still in use. So even if the M7 fails to prove itself or a better alternative emerges in the near future, replacing

25-round magazine, is approximately 12 centimeters shorter, and nearly half a kilogram lighter than its predecessor. The first batch reached soldiers in April of this year. It is reported that this



'SIG Sauer's' latest offering is the upgraded M7 variant, the XM8.

to the M16 did not happen just anytime, but during the Vietnam War. And this process also faced the difficulties inherent in any rearmament: ranging from logistical challenges to the psychological adjustment of soldiers to an unfamiliar weapon.

Finally, the example of the M14 is also instructive: as a standard weapon in the US armed forces, the M14 had

it would not be particularly difficult.

The latest twist in this story — shown at the manufacturer's own initiative (yes, they took the criticism into account). 'SIG Sauer' has proposed a new variant — the XM8 carbine (not to be confused with the H&K XM8). The XM8 has a

modification will not replace the M7 as the primary weapon, but will primarily be used in areas where firefights are statistically more likely — such as urban or forested terrain. ■





BRONISLOVAS JUOSPAITIS-DIREKTORIUS: 'I WOULD CERTAINLY CHOOSE THIS PATH AGAIN'

Traditionally, the third Sunday in May (May 17 this year) marks the Day of Remembrance for Partisans and Unity of the Armed Forces and Society. On this occasion, we present to WARRIOR readers the memoirs of Bronislovas Juospaitis-Direktorius (December 5, 1925 – December 26, 2021), a partisan of the Vytis District.

Bronislovas Juospaitis was born on December 5, 1925, in the village of Rimaisai, Ramygala District, Panevėžys County. He attended elementary schools in Žudžiai and Barklainiai and a progymnasium in Ramygala. In 1943, he joined the Lithuanian Freedom Army. In August 1944, after receiving a draft notice for the soviet union (USSR) army, he refused to

serve the occupiers and became a partisan in Stasys Eitminavičius-Rupūžėnas' unit. His first baptism by fire took place on January 5, 1945. From 1947, B. Juospaitis was a partisan in the Jonas Kalvaitis-Pažįstamas' platoon of the Vytis District. In 1948, he participated in battles in the Krekenava Forest, and in 1949, in the Pašiliai Forest in his native Ramygala District. In 1950, he was appointed commander of the Vėtra Platoon of the Krikštaponis Detachment of the Vytis District; later, he served as a partisan in the

first area of the Gediminas Detachment of the same district. On March 14, 1951, during a battle near Krekenava, platoon leader Bronislovas Juospaitis-Direktorius was struck by seven bullets. MGB agents believed him to be dead and dumped his body in Ramygala Square. *"On March 14, 1951, it was snowing; eight of my men were killed in the battle, and I myself was seriously wounded. I was hit by seven bullets, presumed dead, and dumped alongside the fallen partisans in Ramygala Square..."*

Childhood and the changing occupations

I was born near Ramygala, in the village of Rimaisai, into a family of farmers. There were four of us children: three brothers and a sister. My sister was the oldest. The eldest of my brothers, Jonas, was killed in 1948 fighting as a partisan. Another brother died after I returned from the labor camp, even though he was younger. Among my brothers, I was the middle child.

My childhood was not easy. I was 10 years old when a fire destroyed as many as five farmsteads in the village of Rimaisai. The village had not yet been divided into isolated farmsteads, and the roofs of the buildings were almost connected to one another. After the fire, only the barn, which stood a bit further away, remained of our farmstead. My father's sister lived in the village of Dvariškiai near Truskava. She was married to a Lithuanian volunteer from 1918 who had been awarded the Cross of Vytis. My aunt had no children of her own. Since our family had lost our home, my aunt agreed to take us in. Her husband, my godfather, who had defended Lithuania as a volunteer in 1918, taught me how to shoot a military rifle. He had one because he was the commander of the Truskava unit of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. He would take me, a ten-year-old, to an old clay building with 1–1.2-meter-thick walls and elongated windows — a former brewery. It served well as a shooting range — a bullet wouldn't penetrate a wall like that. My godfather praised me, saying I'd make a decent marksman. Besides, even with my hands tied, I could reassemble a German *Parabellum* and a Czechoslovakian rifle that had been taken apart. This certainly turned out to be useful later on.

We lived in the village of Dvariškiai for two and a half years. Later, when we decided to return to Rimaisai, we could no longer build there because the village had been scattered into isolated farmsteads.

When the land was divided into individual farmsteads, my father received a plot (41 hectares of land) and began building houses. I graduated from the Barklainiai Elementary School and completed three grades at the Ramygala Progymnasium. As a child, I loved reading. I was allowed to choose books to read. I really liked the

books that described the events of the War of Independence and the oppression of the tsarist era. That had a profound effect on me and shaped the course of my future life.

We were raised in a very religious family. From a very young age, we were taught to work. My parents didn't hire servants; they had a large garden, and we took care of it.

In 1940, I was fifteen. I remember driving from Ramygala after delivering milk to the dairy and encountering the first units of the Russian army. Huge convoys were hauling cannons with horses, while others marched on foot. They looked so repulsive to me: dusty, sweaty, their legs wrapped in rags, shirts untucked over their trousers, canvas belts.

Neither in our village nor in the surrounding area had I ever seen or heard of anyone greeting the Red Army joyfully, with flowers. On Sunday, people coming out of church comforted one another with tears in their eyes and kept saying: "What's going to happen? What's going to happen?"

The Soviet army made a very poor impression. Not only were their uniforms shabby, but their weapons were as well. Arrests began; several people were arrested in Ramygala. As far as I know, Jews were largely involved in these arrests, since they had already gained influence in the district's executive body. As soon as the war began, a Jew in Ramygala shot Matveičikas, a former police officer of independent Lithuania, who was simply walking down the street.

At that time, there were about 15 Russian soldiers in Ramygala who were constantly on guard duty in the fire tower. As soon as the war began, those soldiers raped a young girl and stabbed her with bayonets. Such actions by the Russians turned our people strongly against them.

On June 22, 1941, we welcomed the war the Germans had started against the Russians as a salvation, because we saw no other way out. As soon as the war began, armed volunteer units were organized in the towns, and they immediately took over all control. Those volunteers put on white armbands so the Germans would know who they were.

If a German came to a village and was given eggs or butter, he would often for-



cefully give the person some marks. They tried to pay for every service. However, they despised Jews; they even forbade them from walking on the sidewalks, and Jews were only allowed to walk on the road.

1944. The beginning of the partisan war

In 1944, we met the second Soviet occupation with gloom. Rumors were spreading that people would now be shot or sent to Siberia, so young men in particular went to great lengths to avoid the Russian army and began to go into hiding. There were reports that in some places girls had been raped, in others people were intimidated, livestock was taken away, a young man was shot, and so on.

Since the Russians who arrived in 1940 had caused us no end of trouble, when they invaded a second time in 1944 and announced a mobilization, our men and young people were not willing to lay down their lives for the Bolsheviks and no longer believed the rumors they spread. A little later, groups of Chekists roamed the villages, conducting searches, poking through hay with pitchforks, breaking up floors, and constantly looking for those hiding from the army. That's when we started organi-



zing into platoons. There were plenty of weapons after the war: some brought one kind, others another, though we hadn't yet imagined what those battles would be like: if, for example, the NKVD caught up with us, how would we resist them? At first, there were no leaders either.

As the winter of 1944–1945 approached, I remember a man named Antanas Valikonis coming from Ramygala. Since he had nowhere to hide in town,

he took refuge here in the village with relatives. Later, as a partisan, he went by the aliases *Viršila* and *Slivka*. Since he was older, he was the first to raise the question of where to go for the winter, because not only were the NKVD closing in on us, but here, near Ramygala, there was an airfield with very heavy security, since the war was still raging in the fall of 1944. A. Valikonis-Viršila told us that a partisan unit was being organized: "Think it over.

Those of you who can't stay at home, who are being persecuted, let's go and meet with Captain Eitminavičius."

The next day, we went to the Rodai Pine Forest, which lies between Krekenava and Ramygala. About a hundred men from the surrounding towns and villages had gathered there — from Ēriškiai, Krekenava, and Truskava. Captain Eitminavičius gave a speech and informed us that a partisan unit had already been formed here. It consisted of men from Krekenava and Pašiliai, led by Antanas Žukas. The unit comprised 28 armed men who had set up a camp in the forest.

Captain Eitminavičius explained the entire political situation at the time, inspected the weapons we had brought, and said that 30 people needed to be sent to the villages: they would bring back axes and saws — we would build a camp, since it was already the end of November and winter was approaching. And so that we wouldn't be as visible as a flea on the palm of a hand, we needed to dig trenches and build covered bunkers in the camp so that we could defend ourselves properly in the event of an attack. So the next day we got to work. Moving a bit further away from our former gathering place, we began setting up camp on Gyvātės Hill. A small hill, surrounded by marshes. Around this hill, we dug zigzag trenches, set up machine-gun nests, and built four covered bunkers, each capable of holding 30–40 people. We dug about a meter deep into the ground and built double walls so it would be warm and safe in the winter. These fortifications were quite well-made for the time, though they weren't entirely suited for a partisan movement — after all, there was no way we could hold out for long if surrounded. We set up a kitchen underground; those who were better off

would bring livestock, which we would slaughter and gut right there, and cook our meals on the spot.

We lived calmly in the camp in the Rodai Forest until the end of February. We would sometimes return from the camp to go home to change clothes, get food, and see our families.

In late February 1945, Antanas Žukas' unit was stationed about a kilometer away from us. They were attacked by NKVD troops; the forces were heavily concentrated. As soon as we heard the gunfire, we took up positions in the trenches and prepared for defense. Having stayed awake like that until evening, we debated what to do next: perhaps they didn't know we were here, even though we could see the russians moving through the clearing. It was about 100–120 meters from us. We didn't know how many NKVD men were there, since we had no contact with the outside world. Some in the group said we should wait here until morning, but most decided we should get out of that forest. However, for a group like ours (over 100 people), crossing the clearing in one place isn't so simple, especially in winter: our footprints would be clearly visible in

the snow. The night was bright. We split into four groups; Captain Eitminavičius appointed leaders — just for the time it would take us to get out of the forest — and we agreed to meet in the Upytė Pine Forest. We left quietly, without a fight.

The next day, three groups gathered in the Upytė Forest, but the fourth didn't show up; they had moved to the Raguva Forest. Our liaisons informed us that NKVD troops were still roaming the forest. We waited for them to blow up our bunkers, but we didn't hear a single explosion all day, which meant they hadn't found them. Captain Eitmanvičius said: "Oh! We messed up... We left such a comfortable camp behind!... We shouldn't have retreated."

In the evening, we decided to conduct a reconnaissance mission. Three of us — Drąsutis from the village of Jodikonys (he knew that forest very well), machine gunner Valikonis, who had served in the *Wehrmacht*, and his assistant Vaznonis (who also knew the forest well) — took a horse from a local and rode from Upytė to Jodikonys. They left the horse at someone's farmstead and quietly made their way straight to the camp. There, in one

The first photograph of the partisans. It was likely taken in November 1944. Bronislovas Juospaitis is the fourth from the left in the front row (lying down). Stasys Eitminavičius-Rupūžėnas is the fifth from the left in the middle row (sitting).





STASYŠ EITMINAVIČIUS- RUPŪŽENAS

Stasys Eitminavičius was born in 1908 in the Daugavpils District, in the village of Kurcumas, into the family of Boguslavas Eitminavičius. The Eitminavičiai are an old Lithuanian noble family. The spirit of the struggle for freedom

was always cherished in the family. The men of this family, Stasys' grandfather Major Boguslavas and his uncle Julijonas Eitminavičiai, were participants in the 1863 uprising. Boguslavas was killed in an unequal battle with Russian dragoons in the Podlasie Voivodeship, while Julijonas managed to flee to the West.

In 1918, when the Lithuanian War of Independence began, Stasys was only 10 years old. His older brothers, seventeen-year-old Steponas and fifteen-year-old Juozas, enlisted as volunteers in the Lithuanian Armed Forces. After graduating from the Bikūnai Elementary School, S. Eitminavičius attended the Zarasai Progymnasium and later the Panevėžys Gymnasium. From 1929 to 1931, he completed his compulsory military service in the 3rd Artillery Regiment. He was promoted to the rank of junior non-commissioned officer. On October 20, 1933, he began working for the police. In 1939, after Lithuania regained Vilnius, S. Eitminavičius worked as a police officer at the 6th Precinct of the Vilnius Police, and in June 1940, he was seconded to the Kaunas Police Academy, where he received the rank of senior non-commissioned officer. After the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, the academy was closed.

When the war began, in 1941, S. Eitminavičius worked at the Dūkštas Police Precinct. That same year, he moved to Dusetos, where he served as the precinct chief from 1941 to 1942; and from 1943, as deputy chief of the Zarasai police station. He held the rank of captain.

In 1938, S. Eitminavičius married Stasė Želnytė, who was from the village of Juodikonys in the Ramygala district. In 1942, their son Miglovaras was born.

In 1944, as the front approached, Stasys had every opportunity to flee to the West, but he remained in Lithuania out of principle. He settled at his wife's parents' home near Ramygala, where he immediately began organizing the first partisan units in August 1944.

Partisan memoirs describe him as a brave, courageous, disciplined, and strict commander who believed in the meaning of the struggle and never attempted to leave the battlefield. An opportunity had arisen to obtain documents under a false name and, by leaving for somewhere else, go into hiding. The wife of his brother Steponas, who was living near Šiauliai at the time, had gone to meet with Stasys and suggested this option to him. His reply was: "How dare you suggest this to me? If you weren't my brother's wife, I'd shoot you on the spot."

S. Eitminavičius-Rupūžėnas was killed on October 9, 1947, near his wife's hometown — the village of Juodikonys. The location of his burial is unknown. After his death, in 1948, his wife Stasė and son Miglovaras were exiled to Buryatia-Mongolia.

In 2008, President Valdas Adamkus of the Republic of Lithuania posthumously awarded the police captain and partisan platoon leader Stasys Eitminavičius-Rupūžėnas the Commander's Cross of the Order of the Cross of Vytautas.

spot, two logs had been placed so they wouldn't have to jump over the trench. As they approached, everything seemed in order, but then they heard a metallic clanking sound. One crossed the plank, the other stood with his foot on it, the machine gunner behind him. Just then a shout came from the bunker:

One crossed the plank, the other stood with his foot braced against it, the machine gunner behind him. Just then a shout came from the bunker:

"Who's there?"

The guy in front suddenly fired his automatic rifle, the machine gunner let off a few bursts, and all three jumped back. That's what happened: the NKVD men, having found those bunkers, realized we'd

left, but thought we'd return, so they sat there waiting.

Upon learning that our bunkers were occupied, Captain Eitminavičius couldn't help but curse:

"You poor toad! I see... We've got visitors waiting..."

Captain Eitminavičius loved the curse 'poor toad.' That's why we nicknamed him *Rupūžėnas* [Toad — translator's note]. I've never heard any other curse come from his lips. Even the district commander, Danielius Vaitelis-Briedis, would often jokingly call us the 'Poor Toad' platoon. When we'd go to meet Vaitelis, he'd say, "The Toads have arrived."

The next morning, after hearing four loud explosions, we realized that our bunkers

had been blown up. Since our secret ammunition bunker was still there, we went to check it out. We found the living bunkers destroyed, the logs shattered by the blast, but the ammunition cache had not been found, so we left it alone until spring.

1945. Division into smaller units

As spring approached, there was no longer any point in setting up a new camp. We racked our brains trying to figure out what to do next. With over a hundred people in the unit, it was difficult to hide unnoticed. We gathered near the village of Akolica (about a kilometer into the forest toward Panevėžys). A unit of that size would require an enormous amount of food, so we decided to split into smaller groups. Captain Eitminavičius appointed the platoon commanders.

Kazimieras Vazonis was appointed commander of the *Vėtra* Platoon. This unit's territory included the area stretching from the Krekenava Pine Forest, *Ēriškiai*, and the village of *Palivarkas* — in short, the surrounding areas from which the unit's partisans hailed (there were 28 of them in total). *Antanas Žygas'* platoon consisted of 18 men. They were responsible for the areas of *Ēriškiai*, the villages of *Žvirbliukai* and *Užkalniai*, and part of the *Upytė* Forest. Captain Eitminavičius' unit had 40 men left; I joined it as well. *Vladas Drąsutis* was a non-commissioned officer in the Lithuanian Armed Forces during the years of independence. His group had 26 partisans (though for various reasons, the number in the units never remained constant). Thus, four partisan groups or platoons were formed here: those of *Kazimieras Vazonis-Vėtra*, *Antanas Žygas-Aptiekorius*, Captain *Stasys Eitmanavičius-Rupūžėnas*, and *Vladas Drąsutis-Vytenis*. The main base of operations for the *Rupūžėnas'* platoon was the *Pašiliai* Forest (on the way toward *Ramygala*): *Gudeliai*, *Gudeliukai*, *Raukštoniai*, *Jodikoniai*, *Masiokai*, *Rimaisai* (up to *Ramygala* and up to the *Ramygala-Panevėžys* main road).

We used to meet with the platoons of Lieutenant *Pakšys* and *Užkuraitis*. Each had about 30 fighters. They operated in the vicinity of the *Pašiliai* Forest. In the *Upytė* Pine Forest, Major *Petras Januškevičius-Tėvas'* platoon — about 50 fighters —

Partisans from the Ramygala area. Kneeling in the front row, from left: Kazimieras Kalvaitis and Bronius Baltrūnas. Standing, from left: Jonas Kalvaitis and Bronislovas Juospaitis. Photographed in the summer of 1945.





An above-ground bunker (tent) in the Pašiliai Forest. Photographed during the winter of 1944-1945.

was active. On September 17, 1945, 11 men from the unit were killed after being surrounded by NKVD troops, including Major P. Januškevičius himself.

When we returned from the Upytė Forest to the Pašiliai Forest in the spring, there was still quite a bit of snow in both the woods and the fields. Wherever we walked, we left footprints. We decided we should set up camp closer to a village, which meant splitting our group into two parts. Between the villages of Gudeliai and Jodikonys there is a place called Šilalis. Very dense, though still small, spruce trees grew there. We built a tent out of branches among them, took some hay from the village, covered the roof with it, and covered it with earth. A total of 16 of us settled there. Others moved to the village of Masiokai, some to relatives' homes, or set up hideouts in the Šukeliai Forest. We spent the winter this way until around Easter. Before Easter, we reunited.

A little later, near Gudeliukai Lake, we built a hut covered with earth that could accommodate our entire small group. A former Lithuanian volunteer served

with us; to us young people, who were barely over 20, he seemed very old. He served as the cook so he wouldn't have to go on guard duty or on reconnaissance. One morning, when I stepped out of that dugout, the cook asked what portion to serve; he also asked if I wanted it fatter or leaner. I handed him a small military mess tin, and at that moment I heard someone say in Russian: "Hey, guys, hands up." I turned around: there were two Russian soldiers standing there with automatic rifles. I had a pistol clipped onto my belt, but I had left the automatic rifle inside. I grabbed the pistol and, falling backward, fired several shots at them. The uninvited guests fired a burst of shots. The cook, who was bent over the pot, stayed right where he was. Captain Eitminavičius, who also only had a mess tin in his hands, jumped back inside. The soldiers started firing at our shelter. The bullets passed through the top because there is a thin layer of earth there, but the bottom is thick and frozen solid. The bullets just bounce off it. Everyone had their weapons in hand now; we had to get away. Antanas Rimaitis thrust a machine gun through the door and tried to

push forward, but a bullet from the NKVD cut him down instantly. We dragged him inside by the legs. The captain ordered us to prepare the grenades.

I threw one to one side, he threw one to the other. After the grenades exploded, the standing Russian soldiers were no longer visible. I knelt on one knee and fired round after round to one side, while the captain fired to the other. The captain shouted, asking if everyone had run out of the shed. Mykolas Paliiūnas said, 'Cigas won't come; he's still inside.' Before that, though, the Russians had thrown a grenade at us, but it only filled the hut with smoke. We realized that this was a betrayal. We charged bravely, gathering all our strength, because to get to the other forest, we had to run through a sparse spruce grove, and the forces were, after all, very unequal. Seven of our men were killed then (March 25, 1945). Nine of us broke through the encirclement. The forest wasn't even surrounded, since the NKVD already knew exactly where we were.

I learned a valuable lesson: never leave an automatic weapon behind; always keep it with you. It was clear that the location of

the camp had been betrayed. Our sentry had just gone out to the lookout post. There, the NKVD agents stabbed him to death with a knife.

Partisan weapons

We didn't have any individual rifles in our unit. We had russian *dešimtukai-samozariadkės* (Tokarev automatic rifle — editor's note). We modified the older *dešimtukai*, which were not automatic, ourselves. We had German submachine guns, as well as russian *PPSh* (*Shpagin* submachine gun — ed.) with drum and box magazines. In partisan warfare, the *PPSh* with a box magazine was more convenient because it took up less space. If a russian submachine gun rattles in a forest skirmish, you don't duck, because a bullet hitting even the tiniest twig will veer off course. In short, a submachine gun isn't scary in the forest. Open terrain — that's another story, but among the trees — we used to joke and say, "They're cracking their whips." In the forest, you can only fire in short bursts and at close range. Rifles didn't make much of an impression in combat either, since they fire single shots. But when a machine gun or a *Sturmgewehr* (*MP 43/44* — ed.) goes off, your head instinctively ducks down immediately.

Our partisans were almost always ready for battle and always carried two grenades, mostly German 'eggs' (*M-39* and *M-39n/A* — ed.) or one russian rough-surfaced (*F-1* — ed.), the other smooth (*RPG-42* — author's note), and some German grenades with a handle, but those were very awkward. Every partisan had a pistol, usually a German *Parabellum* or a 9 mm *Walther*. We also had 7 mm pistols, but it was harder to get ammunition for them. Some carried *Afenas* — a weapon of the independent Lithuanian Armed Forces (the Belgian *FN Browning* pistol — ed.). We didn't use *Nagants* because firing this weapon required considerable skill. We had *Sig Sauer* pistols, which the Germans usually used to arm their paratroopers. As they retreated, they left quite a few of them behind for us, and we also got some from the paratroopers themselves. These were the latest German-designed pistols, very elegant and compact. One of our guys had a Spanish pistol. I considered the 9 mm *Walther* to be the best pistol. The *Afenas*

was also an excellent weapon, comfortable to shoot, though a bit heavy (14 rounds!). The *Parabellum* was also very good. We had three different types of them.

There were warehouses of captured weapons in Pajuostė at the time. One Ukrainian officer who had access to the weapons had a wife from Raguva and often visited her parents. From him I received eleven thousand rounds of ammunition for German submachine guns. All of this cost a side of bacon and 500 rubles in cash.

We didn't ration ammunition on the march. Each partisan carried as many rounds and weapons as his strength and health allowed, but no less than a full *PPSh* drum (75 rounds) or box; plus a couple hundred more rounds in their backpacks, since, depending on the situation, you couldn't always take as much as you wanted from the reserves.

Only at the very beginning, when the first partisan units were forming, did we use rifles as defensive weapons. Later, ordinary partisans carried only automatic weapons.

My unit had two German machine guns; later we acquired a Polish-made *Browning* light machine gun. We had *degtyariovkės* (a russian 1928 model *Degtyarev* machine gun — ed.). That's also a good machine gun, made in true russian fashion: even if you pour a handful of sand into it, it still fires. The rate of fire isn't high. But if sand gets into a German machine gun, you have to open it up and clean it out; otherwise, it'll jam and that's it. We also had German anti-aircraft machine guns, where the ammunition was loaded into a closed magazine, which we called *pautai*. The rate of fire of these machine guns was high.

1948. Brother's death

My brother Jonas Juospaitis-Apicierius was killed in 1948, just before the Feast of the Assumption. At the time, we were moving from the Raguva Forest to the Rodai Pine Forest. But my brother, along with another partisan, broke away from us because they had to stop by the Rankelytė sisters, our liaisons, in the village of Raukštoniai. We agreed that we would all meet at the agreed-upon spot. Our fairly large

group marched along the straight road across the meadows into the Rodai Forest. As planned, they stopped by the liaison sisters' place. There they found three more men from our group. The girls fed them, and they slept on the hay for the night. Someone heard about them and tipped off the police. Early in the morning, they were surrounded and all were killed: the two Garuckas brothers — Juozas and Vincas, Kazimieras Drąsutis, Julius Siurba, and my brother. In the morning, our liaison came and said, "Your Joniukas is gone..."

Near the Ramygala cemetery there was a gravel pit where people used to take gravel and sand. They also dumped trash from the cemetery there. So, the police would take the partisans' bodies there, to those gravel pits, and dump them; covering them with only a shovelful of dirt. Before that, the shot partisans were kept lying on the pavement in front of the church.



A week later, the Assumption Day feast took place in Krekenava. I suggested to the commander of another squad, Vladas Drąsutis-Vytenis — whose brother had also been killed there — that now would be a good opportunity to retrieve the bodies of the fallen, since garrisons usually move to where the festivities are taking place and set up ambushes in the woods. But here, closer to Ramygala, it should be quieter. That's what we agreed on.

I got some planks from a neighbor I knew, and two friends built the coffins. I gathered a sizeable group of men to help with the burial. After all, the town was right here. A reliable guard was needed. Girls had scattered flowers so we wouldn't have to search at night for where they were buried. Some of us immediately dug a grave in the cemetery, while others dug up the bodies of the fallen and placed them in the coffins. We marked the coffins with numbers so that their families

could claim them someday. We hitched five wagons, loaded the coffins, and set off. But the wheels still clattered — you could hear them from far away at night. It was dangerous. So, we hoisted them onto our shoulders and moved on, silent and pensive. This was the final journey of our comrades-in-arms and brothers. Their lives were short; they experienced little joy... Machine guns were set up nearby, with men huddled close to them. If Russian soldiers or police appeared, they would have to lie flat on the ground.

The night was too short — we wouldn't have had time to dig large graves, so we dug one wide enough for three coffins and placed the other two on top of it. As we worked, dawn began to break. We had to retreat, because if we were attacked in the fields in daylight, there would be casualties.

As I walked away from my brother's grave, such a deep sadness came over me, such heaviness weighed on my heart. I was left all alone — I had just buried my brother, and my father and mother had already been in Siberia for two years. And my comrade-in-arms Vytenis was heartbroken after burying his brother Kazimieras...

1951. The Final Battle

Throughout the entire period of the partisan struggle, from 1944 to 1951, I took part in many clashes with NKVD troops. One of them was the last.

In 1950, we settled in the Upytė Forest (a forest massif north of Ramygala — ed. note). We built a hut, covered it with earth, and prepared for winter. We managed to stay there quite successfully until the

The author of these memoirs, Bronislovas Juospaitis, is second from the right (squatting) in the photo. His brother, Jonas Juospaitis, is in the front with a gun and a cigarette. Photo taken in the summer of 1945.





A partisan unit led by Bronislovas Juospaitis-Direktorius (third from the left), the author of these memoirs, which took part in the final battles of March 1951. The MGB numbered the partisans for the purpose of identifying those who had been killed and those who had survived.

end of March. Once, a few of us set out to meet the partisan *Šnektis*. We met him near Ramygala.

The next day we returned to camp, where we found our friends in high spirits. They were laughing and telling us about the prank they'd pulled. The snow was still deep, and a hunt was underway. One of the hunters' dogs ran into the camp and slipped into our hut. The men caught it by the tail and tied a dried pig's bladder filled with peas to it. It seems like an innocent prank, but when I found out, I started scolding them. For one thing, I felt sorry for the dog, but also, if hunters spotted the dog in the forest with the bladder tied to it, they would immediately suspect who had tied it there. The following week, the dog's owner, having noticed the dog was missing, went out into the area, presumably hoping to find him.

We had strictly forbidden hunting, and people in all the surrounding areas knew this. Hunters who stumbled upon a partisan

camp, even by accident, faced execution, because we could not vouch for every stranger. Starting in the fall, we distributed proclamations in the surrounding areas stating that hunting was prohibited in the specified forests, and those forests were immediately combed by NKVD garrisons, while we resorted to secrecy: we set up camp in the forests where we had not banned hunting. So those hunters, four men, following the trail of a small dog, stumbled upon our camp. I recognized one of them, a man from Molainiai. One of his sons was a police informant. The others were strangers to me. We questioned each one separately, and they all said the same thing: "I vouch for myself; I won't tell anyone anything, but I can't speak for the others..."

Should we shoot them? They might be good people. Let them go and stay in the camp? That's bad. After all, no one can read their hearts. And it's still March; we're living in a winter camp. Move so-

me nowhere else? Take the risk and stay?

We can see the men are very frightened; they think it's all over, that they won't get out of here alive, since we kept them in the camp during the day. We took their rifles away; you can't keep them armed in the camp. In the evening we lined them up, and I told them: "You know, guys, we don't have a prison here. We can't be sure you won't betray us. We've had similar experiences before: they promise, they swear, trying to save their own skins, but once they're free, they sell us out. We're letting you go but remember — it's solely because of you that we have to abandon this camp."

The men knelt down, apologized, and promised not to repeat their actions. Nevertheless, I decided to let them go. But I warned them: even if they betrayed us, no one would find us, because we were moving out of there.

So, we let the hunters go. The next day,



we left the camp ourselves; we couldn't take any risks. We took three horses from the locals, harnessed them to a sleigh, and moved to the Rodai Pine Forest. We spent the day there. A thaw had begun, the snow was still deep, the horses were exhausted, and in the evening, we met up with Vytautas Vepštas-Paukštelis' group of Krekenava partisans.

Paukštelis knew where our camp was, and I began to tell him why we had left it. Just an innocent joke but look how it ended. He said to me, "Let's go to the Skilviai Forest." So we did. We accepted *Paukštelis*' suggestion.

We had our own horse, and we got a few more, so we set off with our belongings along the snow-covered road toward another forest. We crossed the Nevėžis River and went around Krekenava. When the horses got tired on the way, we decided to rest. We stopped at a farmstead with a house, a barn, and a clay shed. The owner didn't seem suspicious, and *Paukštelis* added that his group

often stayed there — the people were trustworthy. Nearby there was a narrow patch of coniferous trees one could see through. After surveying the area, we decided to stay the night. The important thing was that we were warm. In the morning, a guard ran up and reported: "I heard some movement on the road!" It had just dawned.

We immediately got up, got dressed, ran outside, and right there behind the barn we heard a burst of automatic fire — our lookout had already opened fire on the russians.

At first, we thought there were maybe 20–30 garrison soldiers, and we didn't even consider the possibility of betrayal. As dawn broke, the fighting began. It was difficult for the soldiers to approach the farmstead because of the deep snowdrifts, and we, taking cover behind the foundations of the buildings, had comfortably taken up a defensive position. Realizing that capturing us wouldn't be so easy, they began firing rockets and incendiary bullets into the buildings. First, they set the barn on fire, since it had a straw roof. We rushed into the barn and tried to drive the horses out so we could retreat on them. The farmstead was already surrounded, and crossfire rained down from all sides.

I noticed there was one horse missing, and *Paukštelis* said:

"The farmer wanted to go to the blacksmith in the morning; he asked me for a horse. I let him have it."

Only then did I realize that we had been betrayed.

The fog was creeping along the ground that morning, but as the sun began to rise, the fog also lifted from the ground, and we could already make out our surroundings. Partisan Zolumskis Vytautas-Lūšis apparently lost his nerve: he jumped up, dodged the bullets as if they were bees, and ran across the field toward the forest. He was lucky that time; he wasn't even wounded.

We continued to defend ourselves for a while. Danielius Krikščiuonas was seriously wounded. Two young women were with us here as well — Jadvyga Žardinskaitė and Marytė Štarolytė. Jadvyga tightened Krikščiuonas' shot arm with a bandage, but there was no way to help him further. The

wound was bleeding heavily.

Soon, a bullet hit me on the shoulder. I could no longer lift my arm, but with my finger on the trigger of the automatic rifle, I could still pull it freely. I had six magazines. Jonas Masiokas, a partisan lying next to me with a machine gun, was loading those magazines with ammunition, and thus we were holding our ground, while the NKVD men were firing relentlessly — without stopping. I shouted: "Men, let's wait until the fire dies down! They'll run out of ammo if they keep firing like that."

We noticed that the russians were pressing particularly hard from the barn's side. We opened heavier fire in that direction, but they took the barn and started firing at us from there. I shouted: "Men! Grenades!" I threw a grenade. As I threw the second one, I felt my arm flinch backwards. The fire subsided. I said: "Men! Let's try to break through."

Paukštelis was already dead, Danielius Krikščiuonas had also died, and Jonas Masiokas-Ažuolas was killed. As soon as we got up, Viktoras Mažeika fell immediately. We broke through the first line, but six more NKVD vehicles quickly arrived at that spot and launched a new attack. By that time, I had already walked about 300–400 meters from the farmstead when I felt bullets strike my wrist, my leg, and my chest — they passed through me in five places, pierced both lungs, and blood gushed through my throat, preventing me from breathing. I remember trying to plug my throat with snow to cool it down, but the pressure was so intense — it just burst open. Unable to breathe, I lost consciousness...

The outcome of the battle was tragic. Eleven partisans were killed; three wounded ones were taken alive; four, though wounded, managed to break out of the encirclement. This happened on March 14, 1951.

I, seriously wounded, was taken for dead and thrown into the town square of Ramygala along with the other fallen. I don't know how long I lay there. It was snowing. The faces of my fallen comrades were covered in snow, but the snow melted away from my face. Someone noticed this. It turned out that one was still alive...

Hospitals

For the last few years, maybe three times a week, I dreamed that I was wounded, gasping for air, blood gushing down my throat, but when I woke up, I felt so good — it seemed as if I were completely healthy. This time, it seems I'm having the same dream again. I open my eyes. The room is bright; I see a window in front of me, and a soldier is sitting on the windowsill with an automatic rifle on his lap. I hear someone behind me say that I've woken up. The man sitting by the window approaches me like a shadow, and I close my eyes again. "No, he's still asleep," I hear him say. It's hard to believe, I still think I'm dreaming — I couldn't believe that I'd been captured alive and was in the hands of the NKVD. When they gave me a second blood transfusion, I came to my senses completely and realized where I was.

At night, five or six guards would gather around me, and the officer on duty would come by. It turned out that Marytė Štarolytė, who had also been captured alive, was lying in the next ward. A blond Ukrainian soldier, wounded in the same battle by partisans, would come to check on me with crutches; he would treat me to a cigarette. A man with black hair would also come; he hated me so much he couldn't stop grinding his teeth.

First, I was lucky because someone at the Panevėžys hospital recognized me as Jonas Kliorys. I had never heard of that surname, but it gave me the idea to hide my own surname. I found out later that Kliorys was a partisan from Krekenava. So, I became Kliorys, and whenever questioned, that's how I introduced myself. However, when they began verifying my testimony, they couldn't find any of the people I'd mentioned. Then I took the name Masiokas, who was my comrade and had been killed in the battle where I was captured alive. His mother had died, his father had remarried, and he had been raised by strangers. So, by introducing myself as Masiokas, I wouldn't harm anyone.

They kept me in the hospital for about a month. The operation was performed by surgeon Girdzijauskas. When he came to check on me during a dressing change, he kept marveling that this was the first time he'd encountered a case where he'd practically brought a man so badly woun-

ded back from the brink of death.

After about a month, they took me to Vilnius, to the Lukiškės Prison Hospital. Here, no one was fussing over me. A week passed, then another, as I lay in a ward overflowing with patients, but no one came to change my bandages. The unhealed wounds opened up, as if I had been deliberately abandoned to rot alive. A terrible stench spread. Here, I was greatly helped by Professor Zacharinas, a Jewish surgeon who had run a private clinic in Kaunas during the days of Smetona. He had already been sentenced to 10 years for attempting to fly to Israel. However, his group was tricked, and the plane was forced to land in Minsk. Zacharinas had also recently undergone surgery. Probably fearing he might catch something from me, he started making a fuss, demanding that I be moved to another room or that he would write to the Ministry of Health and the security services. Only then did someone come to dress my wounds. That Zacharinas probably had powerful patrons on the outside. He would give me his prison food ration. Every morning, food was brought to him from the outside. The doctors at the prison hospital started to take me seriously as well.

Interrogations and the trial

It also helped me a great deal that, after my surgeries, I was taken to Lukiškės, where I was eventually placed in a shared ward with other detainees and convicted prisoners who were being interrogated and tortured. Kostas Jokūbaitis from Klaipėda was particularly helpful. He had endured a great deal of torture — all his front teeth had been pulled out, and his muscles had begun to develop gangrene from the beatings. I asked him what I should do, since I was hiding under a false name. And he said: "You won't gain anything by hiding under a false name, because sooner or later you'll be brought face to face with people from your area of operation, and someone is bound to recognize you." This convinced me to reveal my real name soon after. By the way, later on he served as the cook — in court, during transport, and in the camp — I was introduced by three surnames: 'Juospaitis, he is also Masiokas, and Kliorys...'

However, the most important lesson he taught me was a different one. Having endured severe torture, he told me: "If you start talking during interrogations once physical methods are used, then the interrogators will extract everything from you by torturing you even more, even things you think you don't know... Therefore, you must endure all the torture, which won't last forever... And if you're thinking of speaking, then speak right away, before the torture begins, because after that it will be too late..." That was the greatest lesson, which later helped me endure all the interrogations, beatings, and torture in the prisons of Vilnius and Šiauliai.

The interrogator, MGB Col. Mašinkovas, was worse than the most savage beast. For two and a half weeks, I didn't know how I'd return to my cell after his interrogations, but I certainly didn't walk back on my own two feet. I'd wake up drenched in water, completely soaked. The interrogations took place only at night. By that time, I was completely physically exhausted. Once, among the torturers, I saw a woman in a white coat. I thought I might get a little respite. But they tortured me just as cruelly with her there. From Šiauliai — back to Vilnius. They threatened me further: at the Vilnius security service, they would try to force me to say things I knew and those I didn't. In the capital, the first interrogator punched me in the nose because I had refused to sign the interrogation protocols in Šiauliai. I refused to speak to such a scoundrel without a prosecutor present. Then they assigned a new interrogator, Dorochovas, about whom I cannot say a bad word. He treated me quite politely and intelligently. Apparently, that was the task he had been given. I already understood a little Russian, but I didn't speak without an interpreter. While he was translating, I was already thinking through my next answer.

At the Šiauliai prison, interrogator Mašinkovas initially tried to negotiate amicably: he offered 25 years in a labor camp, where 12 months are winter and the rest is summer. Work — and you'll live; don't work — and you'll die like a dog... So, he suggested a deal: "Tell us where the district headquarters is — we'll take off ten years; give up the couriers — we'll knock off five; the supporters who helped with food and information — we'll take off another five. And what's left — just five



years..." He said they wouldn't release me right away, but would give me a few tasks; once completed, they'd let me live in the city, provide a job, and I'd be able to live comfortably and happily. I didn't accept his proposals, so they 'caressed' me for about a month longer. Then came the Vilnius security services. They didn't torture me as brutally there, though once they kept me awake for two days straight. In such a situation, it was terrifying not to give anything away unintentionally, simply without realizing what you were saying. Where, then, did I find the strength and stubbornness to endure it alone, up to the point of losing consciousness?

By the end of 1951, my case was closed, and I was awaiting trial. The trial was held by the Baltic District Military Tribunal. Along with me, they tried Jadvyga Žardinskaitė and Marytė Štarolytė, who had been captured alive, as well as the partisan Andrius Ramanauskas-Komaras from Krekenava, who had been arrested a little earlier. The prosecutor demanded the death penalty by firing squad for me, and 25 years in a labor camp for everyone else. Everything in court was neatly staged — the lawyers for J. Žardinskaitė and M. Štarolytė spoke like prosecutors... I had refused a lawyer right away. They immediately put handcuffs

on me and shoved me straight into the basement of Lukiškės Prison, into a death row cell. There, they began urging me to write a petition for clemency. I categorically refused, because I didn't feel guilty. At first, I thought it was just a joke and that it would all be over soon. On the third day, my nerves became more frayed. I could hear them opening the doors to other cells, leading the condemned out to their deaths; I started to get anxious too: "Is it my turn now? Is it my turn now?.."

However, after some time, the sentence was changed without my request. It was changed to 25 years in a labor camp, five years of exile, and another five years, after serving the sentence, of life without any civil rights.

And it became easier, knowing I wouldn't be shot anymore, but also a bit bitter — after all, I wouldn't be coming back anyway, and how many more years would they torment me before I met my end, though at the time I didn't know or even imagine what a russian-soviet labor camp was.

Over the next fifteen years — I was released in 1966 — I went through the entire ordeal of soviet hell, but today, when my thoughts return to the past, I often find

myself thinking: if someone could give me back my youth and if I faced the same fate again, I would certainly choose this path again, because for us, country boys, there was no other way out back then. Not because I had committed any crime against the soviet system. But the oppression came so suddenly, the terror was so terrible, along with russification, that I, raised and educated in the true Lithuanian spirit, could not bear it all; to me, it was a great humiliation. When I took up arms, I knew very well that I was risking my life, but defending my homeland, my parents, my brothers, and the entire nation was my sacred duty.

The most beautiful period of my life was spent hiding in the forests, fighting desperately in partisan units against an enemy many times more powerful; imprisoned in russian camps. Everything was given to the Homeland, Lithuania, and its people. It is just very painful that many do not understand or appreciate this.

My final opinion is this: those who do not live do not make mistakes. If a nation does not fight for its freedom, it will never have it. Unhappy is the nation that does not have its Unknown Soldier's grave — it has no freedom either. ■

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The Heaviest Spoil of the XIII-Century Lithuanians



One of the most important signs of the formation of the Lithuanian state in the XIII century was the growth and strengthening of the monarch's army. The Armed Forces and its commanders were 'sustained' by raids on neighboring lands. In historical sources, the Lithuanians appear as bands of warlike men raiding and plundering neighboring tribes. The Livonian chronicler Henry of Latvia vividly described the situation of the Padauguvīs tribes: "There were the Livonians and Latgalians, the Lithuanians' fodder and food, just as sheep are in a wolf's jaws."

In the 1250s, the growing power of the Lithuanian King Mindaugas and the consolidation of Lithuanian military potential meant that the Lithuanians were able to carry out campaigns in several directions simultaneously. In the second half of the XIII century, a new target for campaigns and raids was discovered — the eastern edge of Poland, hitherto little known — Mazovia. There was no unified Polish state at that time. The first Lithuanian campaign in Poland documented by sources took place in 1262, when the Lithuanian military, ravaging the lands of Płock, sacked Ujazdów, the estate of the Dukes of Mazovia located in the vicinity of present-day Warsaw. Today, it is part of Warsaw.

On that occasion, the Lithuanians likely returned with much heavier loot. Around that time, heavy doors weighing several tons disappeared from Płock Cathedral — the most important church in Mazovia. These bronze doors of high artistic value, in the Romanesque style, were made in Magdeburg in the XII century. Much later, they turned up 1 000 km away — at the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Veliky Novgorod, in Northern Rus'. In the XX century, Polish historians proposed the theory that these doors were carried off by the Lithuanians who ravaged Mazovia in 1262. And indeed — why shouldn't we assume that this was the work of the Lithuanians? After all, there were virtually no potential 'competitors' capable of carrying out such a raid (and there is little doubt that it was a raid) in the XIII and XIV centuries. For the Lithuanians, this could have been an excellent, albeit heavy, war booty, which they successfully sold to other Christians — the Orthodox Christians of Novgorod. At the same time, this story may shed light on the logistics of Lithuanian military campaigns of that era, which are shrouded in the complete silence of written sources from that time. However, one can imagine the craftsmen and merchants enlisted by the soldiers who dismantled the heavy cargo, found the most favorable land and river routes, and reassembled it at the new location.

Based on: R. Petrauskas, *Lietuviai anno Domini 1262: Kodėl buvo nukirsdintas Mazovijos valdovas Siemovitas? Naujasis Židinys–Aidai*, 2011; K. Almenas, *Katedros durų mįslė, Naujasis Židinys–Aidai*, 2011.