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THE CEMETERIES OF THE SOVIET SOLDIERS KILLED IN THE VILNIUS REGION —THEIR TRANSFORMATION AFTER WORLD WAR II AND THEIR PRESENT STATE **A CASE STUDY**

Abstract

As many as 7465 Soviet soldiers died during fighting against the German troops in July 1944 in the Vilnius region (today's Lithuania). After World War II, the Soviet authorities turned the soldiers' burial sites into cemeteries and war memorials. Located in towns and cities, these places of remembrance served to perpetuate the Soviet perspective on World War II and the Soviet ideology. Nonetheless, the burial sites have been regarded as foreign elements in the region, both culturally and ideologically. After 1990, the Lithuanian government adopted new national and international regulations concerning the burial places of soldiers killed during World War II. In 1992, the local authorities in Nemenčinė (Polish: Niemenczyn) organized an official ceremony during which the remains

of the Soviet soldiers were transferred from the town centre to a municipal cemetery. A red star on the monument was then replaced by an orthodox cross. Such changes may help to relieve the towns and cities from the bitter legacy of the former Soviet ideology. After 2000, using the Lithuanian international obligations, the Russian side began reconstructing and contemporizing the places of remembrance by placing the symbol of the orthodox cross next to the symbol of the red star. This may, in time, change the attitude of the local communities towards such places. However, Lithuanian authorities are inclined to believe that the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers may become a “Trojan horse” and have an adverse effect on Lithuania.

Keywords: the Vilnius region, cemeteries and monuments of the Soviet soldiers, transformation, Soviet ideology, historical memory, Lithuania, international regulations, Nemenčinė, Niemenczyn, orthodox cross

Introduction

The cemeteries of soldiers killed during World War II are special places of remembrance, loaded with an emotional charge. The soldiers’ home country is obligated to protect and maintain the gravesites, but historical circumstances may sometimes make the process difficult. Soldiers’ gravesites are a testimony of the state policy and politics of history of a given country. They demonstrate the state’s attitude towards people who died in combat performing their duty. Cemeteries turn into memorial places when obelisks, commemorative plaques, stelae and monuments are placed on their grounds. The situation gets complicated when such cemeteries are situated on the territory of a foreign and hostile country. In such circumstances, international law (The Geneva Conventions) may offer some regulations.

The gravesites of the Soviet soldiers who died in World War II are scattered in all Eastern and Central European countries. It is a bitter and enduring legacy for Lithuania, Poland and other countries in the region (*Kariai* 2016; *Ochman* 2017, pp. 14–25). It is the aftermath of their former dependence on the totalitarian state of the Soviet Union and the strained relations with its successor, the Russian

Federation. To make things worse, the Russian Federation seems to be using the gravesites for its current propaganda purposes (Putin 2020). This, in turn, has triggered a nervous reaction in the countries in which the gravesites are situated.

This article presents an overview of the present state and the transformation of the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers killed in the Vilnius region, currently located on Lithuanian territory. Geographically, this case study embraces a part of the interwar Vilnius province, which was included in Soviet Lithuania after World War II. The territory (forming a narrow strip of land) includes several dozen towns, names given in Lithuanian and Polish, such as Dūkštas (*Dukszta*), Eišiškės (*Ejszyszki*), Grigiškės (*Grzegorzewo*), Ignalina (*Ignalino*), Lentvaris (*Landwarów*), Švenčionėliai (*Małe Świąciany*), Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*), Pabradė (*Podbrodzie*), Rūdiškės (*Rudziszki*), Rimšė (*Rymszany*), Smalvos (*Smołwy*), Šalčininkai (*Soleczniki*), Švenčionys (*Świąciany*), Trakai (*Troki*), Turmantas (*Turmonty*), Vilnius and the territories (or parts of the territories) of the Ignalina, Zarasai (*Jeziorosy*), Varėna (*Orany*), Sołeczники, Švenčionys (*Świąciany*), Trakai (*Troki*), and the Vilnius regions. About twenty cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers were established in this area after World War II. Apart from individual and mass graves, these cemeteries include artefacts and monuments, such as (stone) obelisks, stelae (made of concrete, in the form of a pyramid or a rectangular prism), concrete or stone monuments often depicting Soviet soldiers (kneeling and holding a banner or standing and bearing a gun in their hands) and marked with Soviet symbols (a red star or a hammer and sickle) along with explanatory inscriptions. In this way, the burial sites were turned into memorial sites and given priority by the communist authorities. In 1990, due to political changes in Lithuania, the status of these sites was re-assessed. One should note that a characteristic feature of the region is a complex multi-ethnic stratum. In some administrative units, the Polish minority has always been the majority. Lithuanian archives were closed due to the pandemic when the article was in the process of being written. Therefore, research into the Lithuanian Central State Archive and the Regional State Archive in Vilnius will be conducted separately.





The Cemeteries of Killed or Murdered Soviet Soldiers—the State before 1990

In the post-war period, many cemeteries and memorial sites commemorating the Soviet soldiers were established in Lithuania. The soldiers were originally buried close to the places where they were killed in action fighting against the German forces. The memorial sites can be divided into two groups: first, the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers killed in action, and second, the burial sites of the Soviet prisoners of war who were taken captive in the early years of World War II. In both cases, they are mass graves. In summer 1944, Germans were forced by the Soviet army to withdraw their troops from the Vilnius region and Lithuania to the West. Many Soviet soldiers were killed during the Soviet-German military engagements in Lithuania (approximately 80,600). These soldiers were buried according to the law in force at the time. They were buried close to the place where they had been killed, that is, in the fields, woods, meadows and villages,

Figure 1. Soviet war cemetery in Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*), Vilnius region, 1956. Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11364





at yards and farms, by the roads, in trenches or ditches. The burial sites were originally picked spontaneously, depending on the circumstances. The burials would take place during military engagements. At this initial stage, the names and numbers of the killed soldiers would be registered. The process continued from autumn 1944 until 1948. The aim was to prepare the sites for the second burial of the Soviet soldiers killed in action (*Kariai* 2016, pp. 27–29, 54).

The second stage of burials took place after the war, that is between 1948 and 1956. This is when the ideological action of transfer of the remains of the Soviet soldiers to the local cities, towns, larger villages and Russian orthodox cemeteries began. The new burial sites were often not related, in any direct way, to the military engagement between the German and the Soviet armies. However, they met the ideological criteria by providing easy access to the graves and enabling the local inhabitants and authorities to pay homage to the victims. It was a centralized action based on the exhumation of the remains from a few or a few dozen original burial sites

Figure 2. Soviet war cemetery in Rūdiškės (*Rudziszki*). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11277



Figure 3. Soviet war cemetery in Rimšė (*Rymzany*). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 10842

and their transfer to a new burial site. The latter would then become a cemetery for all the Soviet soldiers who were the victims of the Great Patriotic War. The Soviet and military authorities would choose the new burial site based on its accessibility. The usual location was a town or a city centre. Sometimes, Russian orthodox cemeteries were singled out for such burials. The remains of other Soviet victims were occasionally buried there, too. These might include Soviet partisans killed in the area, Bolshevik revolutionaries killed in 1918–1920, Soviet soldiers killed in action in 1941, soldiers killed after 1944 while fighting against the anti-Soviet underground movement. Consequently, the new burial sites became the cemeteries of all the people who died for the Soviet authority in a given town or in the local area. Soon afterwards, new obelisks and stelae (made of concrete, in the form of a rectangular prism or a pyramid with a red star) started to appear in the burial sites. The sites were built in such a way as to enable people to pay homage to the new liberators and, at the same time, to emphasize the role and significance of Josif Stalin (*Kariai* 2016, pp. 29–30, 56). Good

examples of such burial sites can be found in Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*) and Rūdiškės (*Rudziszki*), both of which are discussed in this paper.

In 1945 the remains of 16 Soviet soldiers, who had been killed in the area, were brought to Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*). They were buried in the town centre at the cemetery for Soviet soldiers killed in action. The names of the soldiers were placed on the graves. A stone obelisk with a red star and an inscription “Glory to the heroes who died liberating our homeland” was situated nearby (Figure 1) (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11364). Several months later, a few NKVD soldiers were secretly buried in the same place. Since then, the Soviet authorities called the local townsmen to yearly mass meetings organised in front of the cemetery on May 9. The meetings involved parades of the Soviet veterans, laying wreaths, gun salutes, speeches delivered by official party members, leaders of local works, and Komsomol leaders (according to Mieczysław Borusewicz, a resident and the mayor of Nemenčinė, *Niemenczyn*, January 26, 2021, author’s archives, pp. 2, 4).

The circumstances in Rūdiškės (*Rudziszki*) were similar. The remains of 101 Soviet soldiers and partisans killed in the area in 1944 were brought to the town. They were buried in three mass graves in the town centre, in a cemetery measuring 16 by 23 metres. The names of the killed soldiers were placed on the three mass graves. The authorities spared no expense on such ideological enterprises even though post-war times were hard. An obelisk in the shape of a pyramid was erected in the centre. At the top was a red star in an oak wreath. Below, there was a plate with the following inscription in Russian and Lithuanian: “Eternal glory to the heroes who died fighting for the freedom and independence of our homeland! Stalin” (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11277). A similar scenario has taken place in Rimšė (*Rymszany*) (Figures 2 and 3).

A cemetery for the Soviet soldiers in Maišiagala (*Mejszagoła*) (measuring 29.36 by 15.31 m), built in 1946, was situated on a hill just outside the town, 25 meters off the Vilnius–Maišiagala road. Buried there were 123 Soviet soldiers from the 5th Army, killed in July 1944 during the Soviet-German engagements in the area of Maišiagala (*Mejszagoła*), near



Figure 4. Soviet war cemetery in Maišiagala (Mejszagola), Vilnius region, 1955 (© Sigita Lučnienė, 2014). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11362

Vilnius. In 1951, a monument was erected in the centre of the cemetery. It presents a kneeling soldier bearing a standard in his hand (Figure 4). A plate fixed to the monument bears the following inscription in Russian: “Eternal glory to the heroes who died fighting for the freedom and independence of our great homeland!” (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11362).

Such an ideological transformation or “restructuring” of the primary burial sites into cemeteries or memorial sites of the Soviet soldiers who died in glory as the Great Patriotic War heroes (along with all the symbols of Soviet ideology, that is, the five-pointed red star and symbolic monuments), was a deliberate action. The goal was to propagate the myth of these new heroes among the members of a local community, especially among the residents of a given town.



It was an intentional policy of the Soviet Union and a way to educate the so-called Soviet man by impressing this ideology onto his or her memory. This policy blotted out any other elements of the local memory that may have existed before. It started to dominate the memory and the culture of the local communities, which was the goal its initiators were trying to achieve (*Kariai* 2016, pp. 25, 30–31, 262).

The third stage of the Soviet soldiers' burials began in 1956 after Josif Stalin died and Nikita Khrushchev took power. It lasted until 1964. It was marked by the celebrations of the May 9 anniversary, constructing memorials with eternal flames, restructuring and augmenting the former sites, and adding new components to those already present. The elements directly reminiscent of Josif Stalin were removed. An example of the changes taking place at this stage is the cemetery in Grigiškės (*Grzegorzewo*) in the Trakai (*Troki*)

Figure 5. Soviet war cemetery in Grigiškės (*Grzegorzewo*). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11275



Figure 6. Soviet war cemetery Mažoji Riešė (*Mała Rzesza*). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11354

region. Forty soldiers killed in summer 1944 were buried here, fourteen of whom are known by name and twenty-six of whom are anonymous. After a few years, the cemetery was expanded and new elements, such as the eternal flame and a gravestone, were introduced (Figure 5). In Mažoji Riešė (*Mała Rzesza*), the Vilnius region, ninety-three soldiers known by name and fifty-three anonymous were buried (Figure 6) (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object codes 11275, 11354).

The most significant changes took place in Vilnius. The first Soviet soldiers, killed in defence of Vilnius, were buried in the old cemetery in Antakalnis (*Antokol*) on July 9, 1944 (Jonaitytė 1971, p. 15). A memorial of the killed Soviet soldiers was erected in 1945–1951. During the construction process, the old graves were ruined and the uncovered human remains were transferred to mass graves, buried in ditches at the neighbouring so-called Orphans' cemetery at Antakalnis or in the adjacent grounds. The Soviet soldiers formerly buried in other places in Vilnius, for instance, at Ivan Cherniakhovskiy Square (formerly Eliza Orzeszkowa Square,

today: Vincas Kudrika Square), Žvėrynas (*Zwierzyniec*) or Naujoji Vilnia (*Nowa Wilejka*), were also transferred to this new burial site. The eternal flame was lit on the memorial on May 9, 1951. In general, 2902 Soviet soldiers were buried there (Girininkienė 2000, pp. 19, 24). In 1954–1955 the remains of 86 partisans killed in the region of Vilnius, Trakai (*Troki*) and Švenčionys (*Święciany*) were transferred to the same cemetery (Jonaitytė 1971, p. 16). Another rebuilding of the cemetery began in 1959.

The fourth stage of the Soviet soldiers' burials took place in 1964–1990. It involved a renovation of the graves (*Kiriai* 2016, p. 54). Between 1976 and 1984, the memorial at Antakalnis was renovated again and new elements were added to the former structure (Figures 7, 8). (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 15286). In 1976, the remains of 4 Soviet pilots, formerly buried at Polotska Street in Vilnius, were transferred to the cemetery. A pedestal marking the place at the cemetery bears the following inscription: “Poles, Ukrainians and Russians, take off your hats in front of these men, and attentively pay respect to the heroic deeds of the youth” [*Сними же шапку перед ним поляк, украинец и русский и подвиг юношей*

Figure 7. Soviet war cemetery in Antakalnis (*Antokol*) in Vilnius in the 1960s. The Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences





Figure 8. Soviet war cemetery in Antakalnis (*Antokol*) in Vilnius. Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 15286. © Saulius Turskis, 2012

геройский почти вниманием своим!] (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 10641). The burials of the deceased Soviet veterans at Antakalnis in Vilnius took place every year. Apart from those killed in action, among those buried at this cemetery were Soviet writers, poets, artists, revolutionaries and activists. (*Lietuvos* 1993, pp. 156, 158, 160, 212, 213, 214, 215). In effect, the Soviet soldiers' burial site in the Antakalnis cemetery has become a kind of a pantheon of the Soviet authority in Lithuania.

Similar works were carried out at the former Orzeszkowa Square in Vilnius. The latter became the primary burial site of many Soviet soldiers killed in action in Vilnius in 1944. The Soviet authorities decided to bury here general Ivan Chernyakhovskiy, “the Vilnius liberator” who died in February 1945 near Pieniężno/Mehlsack in the East Prussia. The general commanded the 3rd Belarusian front and was in charge of the capture of Vilnius in July 1944. He was also in charge of disarming and capturing the Vilnius troops of the Polish Home Army and its command, including Colonel Aleksander Krzyżanowski. Before that, Chernyakhovskiy cooperated with Krzyżanowski in the capture of the city. Due to this collaborative action and the military engagement between the Home Army and the Germans, the number of Soviet casualties was significantly

lower. The burial of general Chernyakhovskiy took place in spring 1945. Soon afterwards, a tall monument marked with a star was placed there. The graves of the Soviet soldiers at the former Eliza Orzeszkowa Square were put in order and the square was renamed to Ivan Chernyakhovskiy Square (Figures 9, 10).



Figure 9. The original monument of general Ivan Chernyakhovskiy erected in 1946 in Vilnius at the former Eliza Orzeszkowa Square (today: Vinco Kudirkos Square) and the primary burial site of the Soviet soldiers killed in Vilnius. The Wroblewski Library of Lithuanian Academy of Sciences

Figure 10. The primary burial site of the Soviet soldiers killed in Vilnius and the fragment of the the original monument of general Ivan Chernyakhovskiy erected in 1946 in Vilnius at the former Eliza Orzeszkowa Square (today: Vinco Kudirkos Square). The Wroblewski Library of Lithuanian Academy of Sciences





Figure 11.
Ivan Chernyakhovskiy's
monument, unveiled in 1950
in Vilnius at the former Eliza
Orzeszkowa Square
(today: Vinco Kudirkos
Square). The Wroblewski
Library of Lithuanian
Academy of Sciences

After a while, the Soviet authorities decided to build an even more impressive monument and move the remains of the soldiers to the Antakalnis cemetery. The pedestal of the new monument, erected in 1950, has been decorated with bronze reliefs which depict Lithuanians welcoming the Soviet Army and an inscription: “To General I.D. Chernyakhovskiy from the Lithuanian Nation” (Antanavičiūtė 2013) (Wołkonowski 1996, pp. 278–283; Wołkonowski 2017, pp. 81–82) (Figures 11, 12). The top of the pedestal had the form of a tank turret. In 1952, the oldest bridge in Vilnius (the date of the first documented reference is 1386), known as the *Žalioasis tiltas* (*Zielony Most*, “The Green Bridge”), was renamed as Ivan Chernyakhovskiy Bridge and decorated with four groups of statues. One of them, named “On the Guard of Peace”, shows



two armed Soviet men with a standard, gazing towards the West. The homage thus paid to general Chernyakhovskiy, who had no previous relations with Lithuania, was a token of the role he was to play in the shaping of historical memory: he was to become the symbol of the capture (or to use Soviet terminology, the liberation) of Lithuania.

During 1970–1989 the Soviet authorities of Lithuania granted the status of the historical monument of the Soviet republic to three cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers, namely, the Antakalnis cemetery, general Chernyakhovskiy’s burial site in the Old Town in Vilnius, and an obelisk commemorating the Soviet prisoners of war in Aukštieji Paneriai (*Ponary Górne*) in Vilnius. The remaining 21 cemeteries in the area were granted the status of a local historical monument. The latter included the cemeteries in the following towns: Eišiškės (*Ejszyszki*) and Šalčininkai (*Soleczniki*) (the Eišiškės region, since 1972 – the Šalčininkai region), Dūkštas (*Dukszta*), Ignalina (*Ignalino*) and Rimšė (*Rymzany*) (in the Ignalina region), Smalvos (*Smotwy*) and Turmantas (*Turmonty*) (in the Zarasai, Jeziorosy region), Cirkliškis (*Cyrkliszki*), Pabradė (*Podbrodzie*), Švenčionėliai (*Małe Świąciany*) (Švenčionys region), Trakai (*Troki*), Grigiškės (*Grzegorzewo*), Rūdiškės (*Rudziszki*) (Trakai region), Bezdonyš (*Bezdany*), Maišiagala (*Mejszagola*),

Figure 12. Parts of the Ivan Chernyakhovskiy’s monument transferred to Grūto Parkas; visible bronze reliefs showing the Lithuanians welcoming the Soviet Army. © Jaroslav Volkonovski, 2021

Mickūnai (*Mickuny*), Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*), Rudamina (*Rudomino*) (in the Vilnius region), the cemetery of the Soviet prisoners of war in Naujoji Vilnia (*Nowa Wilejka*), in Vilnius, the burial site and the monument commemorating the Soviet pilots at Polotska Street in Vilnius (*Lietuvos* 1973, pp. 6, 8–9, 33, 54–55, 84, 86, 91–94). In 1981 one cemetery, namely the cemetery of the Soviet soldiers killed in the Great Patriotic War in Bezdonys (*Bezdany*), was taken off the list of local historical monuments after it turned out that only one soldier was buried there (*Lietuvos* 1993, p. 219). The remaining cemeteries of the Soviet victims of the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet prisoners of war retained their status until 1990.

During World War II, the German authorities established two prison camps for Soviet soldiers in the Vilnius region (there were 19 prison camps in Soviet Lithuania altogether). The Soviet soldiers imprisoned in these camps were taken prisoner at an early stage of the Soviet-German war in 1941–1942. The German authorities treated the prisoners with extreme cruelty and, consequently, most of them died of famine or exhaustion (12014 casualties in total). The dead were buried on the premises. After the end of the war, the Soviet authorities started commemorating these places, too. However, their attitude towards the prisoners of war was different from that towards those killed in action (surrender was forbidden by Soviet law). Despite this negative attitude towards the prisoners of war, the Soviet authorities have taken some steps to commemorate the victims. In Naujoji Vilnia (*Nowa Wilejka*), ‘a district of Vilnius’, the Soviet prisoners of war were modestly commemorated. In the centre of a walled square there is a modest granite stone with an inscription in Russian and Lithuanian: “Here lie about 4500 Soviet prisoners of war, martyred by the German fascists in 1941–1943” (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 10603). Yet another prison camp was located in Aukštieji Paneriai (*Górne Ponary*) where 7514 Soviet POWs were killed between 1941–1944 (the memorial site commemorating the prisoners was restored after 1990. (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, *Žudynių vietas ir kapų karo belaisvių žūties vietas ir kapai* [Crime scenes and burial sites, gravesites of the prisoners of war], object code 34758).

Legal Resolutions Related to the Cemeteries of the Soldiers Killed in Action Implemented after 1990



After regaining its independence in 1990, Lithuania was subject to political, economic and social changes. The Inspection of Cultural Heritage Protection of the Republic of Lithuania and the Department of Cultural Heritage Protection were founded in the same year. In 1994 both these institutions were restructured and joined together as the Department of Heritage Conservation (since 2005, The Department of Cultural Heritage), subordinate to the Ministry of Culture. A Heritage Register was established in 1995. The register includes historical memorials of the Republic and local historical monuments dating from the time of Soviet Lithuania. The register also includes cemeteries of the killed Soviet soldiers. The status of these places and objects was re-defined in light of the new rules (*Kultūros paveldo departamentas*). At the same time, after 1990, new legal regulations concerning the management of war cemeteries were adopted. The Lithuanian Republic issued legal acts relating to the management and renovation of the memorial sites and monuments that were significant to other states. The first such regulation was adopted on September 17, 2008 (in force until May 2, 2016) by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. It regulated the procedures related to the building and construction permits of the cultural heritage artefacts. Local authorities were responsible for supervising the construction sites in their area. Each case was processed at a fixed time. The Department of Cultural Heritage in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued permits for renovation works and the management of the memorial sites and monuments significant for other states. Such permits were required for conducting construction and renovation works, conservation and restoration, commemorating the memorial sites, renovating the inscriptions and replacing old artefacts by new ones (Order No. ĮV-455 of 2008). The order of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, dated May 2, 2016 No IV-354 “On the approval of the rules for the management of immovable cultural heritage significant to foreign states in the Republic of Lithuania”, revoked the earlier

act and introduced new regulations regarding, among other things, the protection and management of war cemeteries. New procedures concerning the inscriptions on memorial panels were introduced. New details and new names added to the panels had to be verified in the light of Lithuanian archival documents. Permits for such works were to be issued by The Department of Cultural Heritage in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture. Similar rules were laid down with respect to other memorial sites. Local administrations were in charge of the cleaning and repair works related to the artefacts of cultural heritage and they were responsible for monitoring such works (Order No. IV-354 of 2016). A revised legal act was adopted on the June 27, 2018. The latter required that all the information on boards placed near the cultural artefacts should be given in three languages: Lithuanian, English and in the language of the third involved state. Furthermore, the inscription was to be consulted with the Centre for the Genocide Research and the Lithuanian Resistance Movement (Order No. IV-525 of 2018).

New international legal protocols brought about further changes. Lithuania signed these protocols after it has become an independent state. In 1993, Lithuania joined the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949 related to the protection of the war victims (Act no. 515p of 1993) and, then, on May 2, 2000, it ratified the Geneva Conventions, including the 1997 Additional Protocols I and II (Act no. VIII-1657 of 2000). The Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions was especially significant in relation to the issues discussed here (Lithuania signed the Protocol on July 13, 2000; *Treaties*; Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic ratified the Geneva Conventions on May 10, 1954). Paragraph 34 of the Protocol spells out the obligations of a given state towards the remains of persons not being nationals of the country in which they have died as a result of hostilities. Paragraph 1 of Article 34 states that

“[t]he remains of persons who have died for reasons related to occupation or in detention resulting from occupation or hostilities or persons not nationals of the country in which they have died as a result of hostilities shall be respected, and the gravesites of all such persons shall be respected, maintained and marked” (Protocol I 1977, Art. 34.1).

Paragraph 2 of the same Article states that

“the High Contracting Parties in whose territories graves and, as the case may be, other locations of the remains of persons who have died as a result of hostilities or during occupation or in detention are situated, shall conclude agreements in order: (a) to facilitate access to the gravesites by relatives of the deceased and by representatives of official graves registration services and to regulate the practical arrangements for such access; (b) to protect and maintain such gravesites permanently; (c) to facilitate the return of the remains of the deceased and of personal effects to the home country upon its request or, unless that country objects, upon the request of the next of kin” (Protocol I 1977, Art. 34.2).

Paragraph 3 of the same Article was of particular significance, because it stated the conditions resulting from the absence of an agreement between two countries or failure to fulfil the requirements provided for in paragraph 2(b) and 2(c), according to which

“the country where the gravesites are situated may offer to facilitate the return of the remains of the deceased to the home country” (Protocol I 1977, Art. 34.3).

Furthermore, it states that

“[i]f the offer is not accepted, after the expiry of five years from the date of the offer and upon due notice to the home country, the High Contracting Party can apply its own legal regulations regarding the cemeteries and the gravesites”.

However, paragraph 4 of Article 34 introduces further restrictions concerning the exhumation procedures. Notably, it states that

“a High Contracting Party in whose territory the gravesites referred to in this Article are situated shall be permitted to exhume the remains only: (a) in accordance with paragraphs 2 (c) and 3, or (b) where exhumation is a matter of overriding public necessity, including cases of medical and investigative necessity, in which case the High Contracting Party shall at all times respect

the remains, and shall give notice to the home country or its intention to exhume the remains together with details of the intended place of reinterment” (Protocol I 1977, Art. 34).

Article 91 of the same document specifies the responsibility of the countries in case the provisions are violated:

“A Party to the conflict which violates the provisions of the Conventions or of this Protocol shall, if the case demands, be liable to pay compensation. It shall be responsible for all acts committed by persons forming part of its armed forces” (Protocol I 1977, Art. 91).

Moreover, the new Lithuanian state introduced its own legal rules regarding the use of the symbols which propagate totalitarian systems (including the Soviet regime) banning their distribution in public space. Article 524 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Lithuania states that the symbols of a totalitarian regime (specifically symbols associated with Nazi Germany, Soviet Union and the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic) cannot be propagated or demonstrated in public. The list of prohibited symbols includes a five-pointed star and a hammer and sickle. Effective legal sanctions for the use of either is a fine of 50–300 Euros. The only exception to the rule applies to veterans of World War II in original uniforms marked with the prohibited symbols (Act XII-1869 of 2015, Art. 524).



The Cemeteries of Soviet Soldiers after 1990—a Bitter Legacy

After the 1990 transformations, Lithuania rejected the Soviet ideology and relegated the Soviet cultural heritage from its public space. One can go as far as to say that some steps were taken even before they were legally approved. It was a time of political transformation and considerable changes in Lithuania.

In effect of these transformations, General Chernyakhovskiy’s monument has been taken down. It was one of the first artefacts of the Soviet legacy to be removed. However, the problem was



Figure 13. Russian orthodox cross at the Soviet war cemetery in Nemenčinė (Niemenczyn), Vilnius region (© E. Zilinskas, 2011). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11364

that the remains of General Chernyakhovskiy were placed beneath the monument, which made the removal difficult. No such problems hampered the removal of the monument of Lenin (Antanavičiūtė and Mikalajūnė 2012, p. 186), or V. Mickevičiusa-Kapsukas' monument of Lithuanian communists (Antanavičiūtė and Mikalajūnė 2012, p. 62). In the autumn of 1991, General Chernyakhovskiy's remains were exhumed and transferred to the Novodevichy cemetery in Moscow, undoubtedly, under an agreement between Lithuania and Russia. The monument was disassembled on November 29, 1991 and transferred to Voronezh in Russia. It was placed near the railway station there. It is the only monument that continues to be displayed in public, albeit it is now on the Russian territory (Antanavičiūtė and Mikalajūnė 2012, pp. 62, 170). The bronze reliefs depicting "The Lithuanians welcoming the Soviet army" have passed on to



Figure 14. Russian orthodox cross at the Soviet war cemetery in Rūdiškės (Rudziszki), Trakai region (© Kristina Strepickaitė, 2014). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11277

Grūto Parkas, like all the remains of the historical monuments and cultural artefacts from the Soviet period. In 1990, the Vilnius authorities changed the name of General Ivan Chernyakhovskiy Square to the Savivaldybės aikštė, and the Chernyakhovskiy Bridge regained its traditional name: Žaliasis tiltas (*Zielony Most*, “Green Bridge”). Furthermore, the eternal flame has been put down at the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers in Lithuania. It is now rekindled only on May 9, (Spurytė 2010).

At the beginning of the 1990s., during the first democratic elections in Lithuania, people with no communist past got access to political power. Local communities started many initiatives regarding the memorial sites at the time. The town of Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*) is an outstanding example of these changes. Mieczysław Borusewicz, who became the town’s mayor in 1990, gave the following account of the period:

“When I started my work as the mayor of Niemenczyn, I was repeatedly asked by the members of our local community, who were the victims of the Soviet system, if it were possible to transfer the Soviet soldiers’ graves from the town centre



to the municipal cemetery. They argued that, apart from the Soviet soldiers who died in the area of Niemenczyn and were buried there, the cemetery also included the graves of the NKVD soldiers who died after World War II. The latter, they argued, had the blood of innocent local people on their hands. [...] In 1991, I filed a motion to the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, asking for permission to transfer the war cemetery from the town centre to the municipal cemetery.

The permission was granted on the following conditions:

The motion will be supported by the veterans of war from Niemenczyn.

The motion will be supported by the relatives of the dead soldiers who will be officially invited to participate in the burial ceremony.

A plan of renovation works regarding the monument, the gravestones and the fence will be drawn up.

An agreement with the grave exhumers will be signed”

(Report by Mieczysław Borusewicz, the mayor and a citizen of Nemenčinė [*Niemenczyn*], dated January 26, 2021, from the author’s archives).

Figure 15. Russian orthodox cross at the Soviet war cemetery in Naujoji Vilnia (*Nowa Wilejka*) (© Loreta Jatulionytė-Brezgienė, 2011). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 10603

During a meeting with war veterans, M. Borusewicz discussed the issue of the cemetery transfer. He proposed a plan and stressed that the veterans were to choose the location of the burial site within the grounds of the municipal cemetery. In his address to the war veterans, he said:

“Polish legion soldiers who died in 1919 in Niemenczyn are buried at the municipal cemetery. [...] You, the veterans of war, fought heroically during World War II, and you will be buried likewise at the same municipal cemetery, where each of us has an equal rank.”

The mayor has given an account of the remaining part of the meeting and a résumé of the works that followed:

“Thirty war veterans participated in the meeting, twenty-eight voted in favour of the cemetery transfer and two abstained from voting.

[...]

In the autumn, I fulfilled all the requirements: 1. We have

Figure 16. Russian orthodox cross at the Soviet war cemetery in Švenčionėliai (*Nowe Święciany*), Švenčionys region (© Sigita Lučunienė, 2014). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 11239



drawn up a project; 2. We have polished the monument and the gravestones, and fixed a new fence; the red star on the monument was replaced by the symbol of an orthodox cross; in place of the old inscription on the monument base (i.e. “Slava geroyam pавshim v osvobozhdeniyu nashey Rodiny” [Слава героям павшим в освобождению нашей Родины] [Glory to the heroes fallen in the liberation of our Fatherland]) a new one has been carved: “Voynam pogibshym v II-oy Mirovoy Voynе” (Воинам погибшим в II-ой мировой Войне) [To the soldiers fallen in World War II]. I sent letters to the dead soldiers’ relatives in Russia inviting them to come to Niemenczyn to take part in the ceremonial transfer of the soldiers’ remains to the municipal cemetery; all the expenses were to be covered by the local authorities. I received a letter from a sister of one of the pilots, Alexander Balakin from Tambov. She thanked me for the invitation, expressed her support for the project and explained that due to health problems she would be unable to participate in the ceremony. She added, however, that she was planning to go to the local Orthodox Church to light a candle in memory of her brother. As she explained in her letter, her brother was brought up in faith, and she had to make sure that he was buried according to the religious rite of the Russian Orthodox church.” (Report by Mieczysław Borusewicz, the mayor and a citizen of Nemenčinė [*Niemenczyn*], dated January 26, 2021, from the author’s archives, pp. 3–4).

The exhumation process lasted for a week and was conducted at the cemetery chapel. After that, the remains of the Russian soldiers were transferred to the municipal cemetery:

“On the day of the funeral a specially designed truck carried the coffins from the cemetery’s chapel to the burial site where a lot of people gathered to take part in the ceremony. The citizens of Niemenczyn, war veterans, schoolchildren, city councilmen, an official deputy from Russia, and a Russian Orthodox priest from a church in Lipówka gathered to celebrate the occasion. A brass band was playing music during the ceremony. The bells at St. Archangel Michael Church were ringing as the procession made its way from the town centre to the municipal cemetery. The priest from Lipówka initiated and conducted the



Figure 17. Red star and a Catholic cross in Rimšė (Rymszany), Ignalina region (© Tadas Žemaitis, 2014). Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object code 10842

bold decisions and new projects for Niemenczyn. He only bitterly regretted that the media were absent at the ceremony of the cemetery transfer (Report by Mieczysław Borusewicz, the mayor and a citizen of Nemenčinė [*Niemenczyn*], dated January 26, 2021, from the author's archives, pp. 7–8, 12).

entire ceremony at the municipal cemetery. In his homily, he said that the fallen soldiers waited for more than forty years to be buried according to the rite of the Orthodox Church. When I heard his words, I knew I had taken the right decision.” (Report by Mieczysław Borusewicz, the mayor and a citizen of Niemenczyn, dated January 26, 2021, from the author's archives, pp. 5–6).

At the same time, the names of the streets in Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*) changed, too. Sovetskaya Street was renamed as Święciańska Street; Komsomol Street was renamed as Antoni Ilitkiewicz Street (Ilitkiewicz was a former rector of the Divinity School in Vilnius and a doctor of theology; he rebuilt the church in Niemenczyn after it had been burnt); Kolkhozova Street to St. Michael Street; Marytė Melnikaitė Street (a Soviet partisan) to Church Street (this was the original name of the street); Salomea Neris Street (a Soviet poet and activist) to Neris Street (the Lithuanian name of the river Vilia). As the mayor of Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*) said in his report, the period between 1990 and 1995 was the time of

A pivotal role in the entire process was the introduction of the Russian Orthodox cross. The adoption of the cross seems to have been a ground-breaking moment in the complicated process of embracing the bitter Soviet legacy by the local communities. It helped people to find a way to reconcile with the difficult Soviet period. After 1990, orthodox crosses were also introduced on the territory of the former Vilnius province, which used to lie within the borders of the Second Polish Republic. The majority of the population in some towns (for instance, in Nemenčinė [*Niemenczyn*]) in that area, was Polish. Poles formed a substantial number of the inhabitants in Rūdiškės (*Rudziszki*), Naujoji Vilnia (*Nowa Wilejka*), Švenčionėliai (*Nowe Świąciany*) and Rimšė (*Rymszany*) (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, object codes 11364, 11277, 10603, 11239, 10842]) (Figures 13, 14, 15, 16).

A catholic cross was placed at the cemetery of the Soviet soldiers in Maišiagala (*Mejszagola*). In Rimšė (*Rymszany*), an obelisk was decorated with two symbols: a red star and a catholic cross (Figure 17).

The Cemeteries of the Soviet Soldiers Killed in the Vilnius Region—their State after 1990



After 1990, when Lithuania regained its independence, the law regarding the status of cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers killed in Lithuania changed considerably. However, the Lithuanian-Russian relations in the last decade of the 20th century were complicated, which made the renovation works at the cemeteries difficult for the Russians. Russian activities did not go beyond laying flowers and wreaths on May 9. It was not until Lithuania regulated its legal resolutions that the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers received a new status. Most of the cemeteries were granted the status of a single monument of local significance (Table 1, numbers 1–6, 8–16, 18 and 21, identified names and surnames of the killed soldiers—as in the chart). The Antakalnis cemetery and the cemetery in Aukštieji Paneriai (*Górne Ponary*) were granted the status of a regional monument (Table 1, numbers 20 and 22). The monument of the four pilots was granted the status of

Table 1. A list of the Cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers killed in the Great Patriotic War—the Present State

No	TOWN	THE NUMBER OF SOLDIERS BURIED	RECONSTRUCTION	SYMBOLS	STATUS	REGION
1.	Eišiškės (<i>Ejszyski</i>)	33 and 93; known by name – 126	2003, 2011	Monument with a star, panels	L*	Šalčininkai
2.	Šalčininkai (<i>Soleczniki</i>)	130; known by name – 130	2003	Kneeling soldier, star, panels	L*	Šalčininkai
3.	Dūkštas (<i>Dukszta</i>)	150; known by name – 133	1985, 2007	Standing soldier, panels	L*	Ignalina
4.	Ignalina (<i>Ignalino</i>)	334; known by name – 164	2005	Panel depicting the figure of a soldier, panels	L*	Ignalina
5.	Rimšė (<i>Rymaszany</i>)	301, known by name – 258	1985, 2008	Monument with a star and a cross, panels	L*	Ignalina
6.	Smalvos (<i>Smołwy</i>)	794, known by name – 794	1970, 2006	Obelisk with a star, panels	L*	Zarasai
7.	Turmantas (<i>Turmonty</i>)	96, known by name 96	1975, 2006	Standing soldier, panels	L*	Zarasai
8.	Cirkliškis (<i>Cyrkliszki</i>)	317, known by name – 240	1992, 2004	Monumental wall and panels	L*	Švenčionys
9.	Pabradė (<i>Podbrodzie</i>)	46, known by name – 46	2004	Panels	L*	Švenčionys
10.	Švenčionėliai (<i>Małe Święciany</i>)	169, known by name – 110	2002	Wall, Russian orthodox cross, panels	L*	Švenčionys
11.	Trakai (<i>Troki</i>)	51 and 98, known by name – 149	2006	Monumental wall and panels	L*	Trakai
12.	Rūdiškės (<i>Rudziszki</i>)	101, known by name – 101	2005	Pyramid, Russian orthodox cross, panels	L*	Trakai
13.	Mažoji Riešė (<i>Mała Rzesza</i>)	143, known by name – 90	1984, 2006	Monument, panels and stars	L*	Vilnius
14.	Maišiagala (<i>Mejszagola</i>)	123, known by name – 123	2009	Kneeling soldier, star, panels	L*	Vilnius
15.	Rudamina (<i>Rudomino</i>)	232, known by name – 232	2006	Kneeling soldier, panels	L*	Vilnius

No	TOWN	THE NUMBER OF SOLDIERS BURIED	RECONSTRUCTION	SYMBOLS	STATUS	REGION
16.	Nemenčinė (<i>Niemenczyn</i>)	21, known by name – 16	1993, 2006	Monument, Russian orthodox cross, panels	L*	Vilnius
17.	Mickūnai (<i>Mickuny</i>)	154, known by name – 154	2002	Monument with a star, panels	-	Vilnius
18.	Grigiškės (<i>Grzegorzewo</i>)	42, known by name – 16	2002	Obelisk with a star, panels	L*	Vilnius (town)
19.	Antakalnis (<i>Antokol</i>)	4, known by name – 4	-	Monument of pilots with a star, panels	LC**	Vilnius (town)
20.	Antakalnis (<i>Antokol</i>)	2992, known by name – 2992	1984	burial complex, granite panels, stars	RC***	Vilnius (town)
21.	Naujoji Vilnia (<i>Nowa Wilejka</i>)	4500, known by name – none	2006	Obelisk, Russian orthodox cross, panels	L*	Vilnius (town)
22.	Aukštieji Paneriai (<i>Ponary Górne</i>)	7514, known by name – none	2010	Memorial stone, panel	RC***	Vilnius (town)

* Single Historical-Memorial Heritage Object of Local Significance: L

** part of the Historical-Memorial Heritage Complex of Local Significance: LC

*** part of the Historical-Memorial Heritage Complex of Regional Significance: RC

Source: Kultūros Vertybių Registras, *Antrojo pasaulinio karo Sovietų Sąjungos karių palaidojimo vieta* [Burial sites of the Soviet soldiers killed during World War II], object codes: 10519, 10836, 10837, 10838, 10842, 11381, 11383, 11237, 11238, 11239, 11273, 11277, 11354, 11362, 11366, 11364, 11363, 11275, 10641, 15286, 10603, 34758.

a local monument (Table 1, number 19). The Soviet soldiers' cemetery in Mickūnai (*Mickuny*) (number 17) enjoys the status of a single monument; it is marked as the burial site of the Soviet soldiers killed during the war. However, unlike the remaining monuments listed in Table 1, the latter cemetery has never been granted the status of the cultural heritage monument (Kultūros Vertybių Registras, *Kapinės* [cemetery], object code 11363).

Lithuania ratified the Geneva Conventions in 2000. The ratification of the treaty paved the way for the Russian Embassy in Lithuania to initiate the reconstruction of the Soviet soldiers' cemeteries (Table 1, column: Reconstruction) and to retrieve

the names of the killed soldiers from the archives (Table 1, column: The number of soldiers buried). The reconstruction works and the archival research initiated the fifth stage of the restoration of the memorial places. Inevitably, it has caused intense emotions and anxiety among the Lithuanian authorities. It may have been the reason why the reconstruction works have been put on hold since 2017 (*Rusija* 2019).

The attitude of the Lithuanian society towards the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers has been unfavourable, especially since the soldiers have been described as occupiers in contemporary Lithuanian historical books. The criticism concerns the location of the cemeteries in town centres (which is assumed to be the best location possible) and the use of illicit symbols. Owing to recent legal reforms, information boards that ban the use of the sites for spreading ideological propaganda have been put on the cemeteries' grounds (*Sovietiniai* 2017). It is believed that Russia may use the cemeteries as a sort of a "Trojan horse" for its propaganda purposes to the detriment of Lithuania (*Saldžiūnas* 2017). This may, in effect, destabilize the country.

On the other hand, according to some Lithuanian politicians and historians, the problem of the cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers located in Lithuania is insoluble, despite the negative emotions it arouses. Politicians who share this view claim that it is next to impossible to eliminate the enduring Soviet legacy. They also stress that the Russian Embassy has been actively involved in the transformation process and that it has been using the cemeteries for ideological purposes. Less radical politicians claim that the soldiers buried in these cemeteries did not join the army voluntarily. In their view, it was a difficult period in history that, nonetheless, has to be accepted for humanitarian reasons (*Mažutaitienė* 2014). This divergence of opinion precludes any rational debates on the matter.



Conclusions

The cemeteries of the Soviet soldiers killed during World War II in the Vilnius region (20 cemeteries, 7465 buried soldiers, in total) were established in bigger towns and villages, usually in the best possible locations. The Soviet soldiers

killed during World War II have been used instrumentally to impose and propagate the Soviet idea of World War II and the Soviet ideology. The celebrations of May 9 served this purpose and, according to the Soviet authorities, they met the expectations of the Soviet ideologists. Despite the uninventive design and inadequate materials for the construction works, the cemeteries have survived until today, even though they are dull and bare. Nonetheless, they have remained culturally and ideologically foreign to the area in which they were established. Lithuanian authorities have had their concerns about the restructuring process. In their opinion, these cemeteries may be used as a sort of a “Trojan horse”, and this may have a negative influence on Lithuania. After 1990, the Lithuanian authorities regulated the law regarding the burial sites of the soldiers killed during World War II. Lithuania also signed the relevant international legal documents. However, the number of the cemeteries for the Soviet soldiers has not been reduced. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that the number will not change in the future, either. It is worthwhile pointing out, however, that some obelisks are now marked with the symbol of the orthodox cross. Such alterations may gradually change the way the cemeteries are perceived by the local communities. Nemenčinė (*Niemenczyn*) seems to be an exemplar case and a model for future grave transfers to municipal cemeteries (such transfers have already taken place in Trakai [*Troki*], Nemenčinė [*Niemenczyn*] and Vilnius). Grave transfers may, in turn, help to relieve the towns from the bitter and enduring Soviet legacy and Soviet ideology.

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