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Forbidden and sublime forest landscapes: narrated experiences of Latvian national partisan women after World War II*

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At the beginning of the Cold War, tens of thousands of Baltic people headed for the forests. It was the largest and longest such experience of human and forest interaction in the history of the three Baltic countries. The forest was turned into a political concept and had abruptly become a doubly sensitive zone: to the authorities it was a space of revolt subject to their control; to the locals, the forests were transformed into sites of both resistance and shelter when life was endangered. Based on recorded life story interviews, this article examines how women experienced the changes in their native landscapes after World War II in the occupied Baltic states, and what it meant for them to be labelled “forest outlaws”.

Introduction

The end of World War II proved to be a significant turning point in the history of the Baltic states, one that dramatically changed not only the life course of its residents, but also the meaning of the landscape. As the Cold War began, the relatively peaceful forests of the occupied Baltic lands¹ were transformed into sites of both armed resistance and shelter for tens of thousands of people. In these countries, it was the

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¹ Breaching reciprocal peace agreements and international treaties, the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states in 1940–41. Reoccupation occurred in late 1944 and early 1945, and lasted until 1991, when the Baltic nations regained their independence.

longest such experience for such large numbers of people. Women who headed for the forests were simple country women, farmers, students, etc., in other words, ordinary citizens who were targeted by the new powers for annihilation as undesirable “bandits”. The majority of these women were neither neutral nor passive towards the Soviet occupation; they were involved with national partisans who were commonly their family members or neighbours. The women provided them with food and clothing, or information. They choose to flee to the forest to avoid arrest and later persecution.

My study is based on 12 personal accounts, recorded in life story interviews between 2011 and 2013. Oral history is an essential part of the study of history that brings forth silenced voices from social groups whose history has not been written,² but most of all, it serves as a tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of historical memory,³ providing a privileged opportunity to see the diverse and ambiguous understanding of past and personal involvement. Along with oral history this study integrates environmental history, Cold War history, and gender studies in order to reveal what meanings the forest acquired in the post-war Baltic states and the nature of the experiences of Latvian women who joined active partisan groups or lived quiet but officially illegal personal lives in the forest. In principle, men and women had similar forest experiences as they shared living space,⁴ but women’s experiences have been placed at the centre of this research as men’s experiences prevail in the studies of Baltic resistance movements, and women’s reflections on living as outlaws has received far less attention. In this article, the voice has primarily been given to Mihalīna Supe (born 1923)⁵ and her life story, but I polyphonically interweave the voices of other women too.

Historical context: the Baltic national partisans

The end of WWII did not bring peace to people living in the Baltic states. In a sense, the war only started at this point, as people responded to the Soviet occupation by moving to the forests and swamps to fight against the new Soviet power. In the Baltic states, many national partisan organisations⁶ were founded as part of the evolving

² Alessandro Portelli, “What makes oral history different?” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. R. Perks and A. Thomson (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 64.

³ Michael Frisch, *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 188.

⁴ See Vieda Skultans *The Testimony of Lives. Narrative and Memory in post-Soviet Latvia* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 79–97.

⁵ Interviewed by S. Reinsone in Bauska, 15 September 2011 and 17 December 2011.

⁶ Nowadays the term *forest brothers* (*metsavennad* in Estonian, *miško broliai* in Lithuanian, and *mežabrāļi* in Latvian) is used in all three Baltic states as a more or less poetic alternative for “national partisans”, which more typically appears in official usage, although the *forest brothers* themselves preferred the term “partisans” in their internal communication as well as in the organisational documents they produced. See Zigmārs Turčinskis, *Ziemeļvidzemes mežabrāļi: Latvijas nacionālo partizānu cīņas Valkas apriņķī un Alūksnes apriņķa rietumu daļā: 1944.–1953. gads* (Riga: LVI, 2011), 9.

Cold War. Their struggle lasted until the middle of the 1950s in Lithuania and rapidly declined after mass deportations in 1949 in Latvia and Estonia.⁷ The reasons that pushed people to move to forests were various.⁸ One of the most powerful motivations for opposing the occupiers proved to be memories of the terror promulgated by the Soviets in 1940–1941, when a large proportion of the society suffered, especially the most educated and wealthy segments.

The German invasion in the Baltics in 1941 raised hopes of re-establishing the independent states, yet these hopes proved futile. Apart from the forced mobilisation that took place in Latvia and Estonia, there were also volunteers who joined German military formations to fight against the Soviets.⁹ The holocaust against the Jews, Gypsies, and the mentally ill took place, and Soviet activists, members of the communist underground and communist partisans, as well as members of national resistance groups were repressed.¹⁰ Still the German occupation ‘was less oppressive in the Baltic region’ than in neighbouring countries.¹¹

In 1944, when the Soviets advanced into the Baltic states, national partisans started to carry out activities intended to oppose and harm the occupying power. In general, the units of national partisans consisted of ‘ideological enemies of communism, such as nationalists; Nazi collaborators fearing Soviet reprisals, including national guards, deserters from SS units, auxiliary police, and civilians involved in the extermination of Jews, Communists, and Soviet prisoners of war (POWs); those attacked by the Communists as “class enemies”; and most of all, farmers hurt by Soviet agrarian policy.’¹² Members of families terrorised by repressive Soviet agencies joined them. Even though the Soviet Union sought to define their battle against the defiant Balts as a “class struggle” and a war against outlaws, the members of the partisan groups came from diverse political and social backgrounds.¹³ Public opinion at the time held that

⁷ Deportation to Siberia was one of the tactics of political repression. People were forcibly transported en masse to remote regions of the USSR where the able-bodied earned a subsistence wage working in collective farms (*kolkhozy*), gold mines, and lumber camp. See Pavel Polian, *He по своей воле: история и география принудительных миграций в СССР* (Москва: О.Г.И., 2001).

⁸ See Elena Zubkova, *Прибалтика и Кремль*. (Москва: РОССПЕН, 2008), 196–197.

⁹ As mentioned by historian Elena Zubkova, the number of Baltic volunteers willing to join the German Legion was unexpectedly low, e.g. only 500 men volunteered in Estonia. Due to the low number of volunteers, compulsory mobilisation was announced in Latvia and Estonia. See *Прибалтика и Кремль*, 213.

¹⁰ Inesis Feldmanis, “Latvia under the Occupation of National Socialist Germany 1941–1945”, in *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940–1991* (Riga: LVI, 2005), 78.

¹¹ Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 95.

¹² *Ibid*, 98.

¹³ See especially Zubkova, *Прибалтика и Кремль*, 199–201, but also Heinrihs Strods, “Nacionālie un padomju partizāni Baltijā 1941.–1956. gadā: kopējais un atšķirīgais,” *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti* Vol. 17 (2006), 23; Stanley V. Vardys and Judith B. Sedaitis, *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 82; Zigmārs Turčinskis, “Karš pēc kara: Latvijas nacionālo partizāņu cīņas 20. gadsimta 40. gadu beigās–50. gadu sākumā,” in *Karš pēc kara, 1944–1956* (Riga: Latvijas Okupācijas muzeja biedriba, 2007), 91–92.

this second Soviet occupation would also be short-lived and that the West would soon oppose the Soviet Union and insist on freedom for the Baltic nations, as set forth in the Atlantic Charter.¹⁴ People headed for the forests in order to wait out this transition in relative peace and to avoid mass deportations and the daily terror instigated by the authorities.

Estimating the number of participants in the resistance is problematic because the nature of the groups, associations, and individuals constantly changed. As a result, research data varies considerably. According to historians, some 55,000 partisans were living in the Baltic forests in 1944, in the following year the number increased.¹⁵ The number of Lithuanian partisans was disproportionately higher than in the other two Baltic states and the resistance movement was the strongest there. In Estonia, resistance was decentralised and without political control.¹⁶ The partisan movement in Latvia also lacked centralised control. At the beginning of the war the partisans had been organised into larger regional associations, composed of 50–300 individuals; in the later years this movement split into smaller units.¹⁷ Zigmārs Turčinskis's analysis of data found in the former KGB archive reveals the fate of Latvian national partisans: '2420 partisans were killed or committed suicide; 5489 were arrested, of whom 498 were sentenced to death;¹⁸ 4341 accepted the offer of amnesty, most of whom were deported in 1949', and concludes, 'thus according to KGB data, 12,250 people were involved in armed resistance, more than an army division.'¹⁹

Baltic partisans had a large number of supporters. Locals, mostly rural residents, provided them with food, clothing, and in part also with weapons and ammunition salvaged and stored during the war.²⁰ In their effort to disrupt partisan activity, the occupying forces turned harshly upon these networks of support consisting of relatives, parents, spouses, sisters and brothers, and children, whom they arrested,

¹⁴ Dalia Kuodyte and Rokas Tracevskis, *The Unknown War* (Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2006), 17; Zubkova, *Прибалтика и Кремль*, 205–206.

¹⁵ Heinrihs Strods, "Resistance in Latvia 1944–1991", in *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940–1991* (Riga: LVI, 2005), 290; Zubkova, *Прибалтика и Кремль*, 198. For other citations see Mart Laar, *War in the Woods: Estonia's Struggle for Survival* (Washington: The Compass Press, 1992), 24; Vilius M. Leskys, "Forest Brothers' 1945: The Culmination of the Lithuanian Partisan Movement," *Baltic Security & Defence Review* 11 (2009): 58–86; Rodger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 207; Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 115; Turčinskis, "Karš pēc kara", 112.

¹⁶ Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 115.

¹⁷ Strods, "Nacionālie un padomju partizāni", 27; see also Geoffrey Swain, "Divided We Fall: Division within the National Partisans of Vidzeme and Latgale", *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007).

¹⁸ In the Soviet Union, the abolition of the death penalty existed for three years from May 1947 to May 1950, which apparently allowed the lives of a large number of those Baltic insurgents who were tried within this period to be saved.

¹⁹ Turčinskis, "Karš pēc kara", 112–113.

²⁰ Women constituted the majority of civilians in post-war Latvia, besides they constituted also the majority of those who were able to work, as mentions Vita Zelče, "Latvian Women after World War II", in *Women and Men at War. A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz (Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, 2012), 294.

imprisoned, and dealt with morally and physically, turning them, essentially, into hostages with the intent that the partisans would surrender in order to protect their loved ones. Such actions instead increased the influx of people into the forest. In their turn, forest partisans took action against those locals who were – or sometimes were just suspected of being – pro-Soviet collaborators.²¹

Special campaigns were carried out in the Soviet Union to encourage partisans to surrender and legalise their status. Officially that meant registering with the authorities, turning in weapons, and agreeing to live as civilians in accordance with the laws of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the surrendering partisans had to provide weapons and reveal information on units in which they had served and on civilians who had provided help. Those who did not betray their supporters and comrades were arrested. Amnesties helped those who were not “hardcore guerrillas” to return to “normal” life, at least for a while.²²

The official attitude of the Soviets towards the Baltic insurgents was negative and pejorative: they were referred to as bandits, Nazi collaborators, and Western spies.²³ In the Soviet press and movies they were portrayed as the dregs of the capitalist class, enemies of the Soviet Union, and generally immoral people. The role of women in the partisan units was often sexualised and single women were labelled ‘the bandits’ room-mates’.²⁴

‘Forest daughters’ (*meža meitas*)

Increasingly, recent studies examine the experiences of East European women in war,²⁵ but the role of women in the post-war insurgency in the Baltic states has been almost completely neglected so far. For the most part, in the existing research, women’s

²¹ For an analysis of the anti-Soviet insurgency’s activities against local populations see Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 123–138.

²² Statiev mentions that “police files show that most of those amnestied in 1944–1945 were not guerrillas but draft evaders who otherwise might have joined the resistance or peasants who had fled to the forests from fear. The Soviets sought to detach them from the hardcore guerrillas and bring them back”, see *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 202–203. The promise of amnesty, however, in many cases proved to be a trick of the government. Most of those who obtained legal status were later arrested and tried or sent to Siberia “as former bandits”. Heinihs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956* (Riga: LU, 2012), 128–131.

²³ See Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 345; Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš*, 6.

²⁴ This delicate usage of “the bandits’ room-mates” points to the efforts of the authorities in official documents to put forward a “cultural” face, i.e., to avoid coarse language. Even so, the Latvian word ‘*pie dzīvotāja*’ has a negative connotation and could well be translated as ‘the bandits’ whores’. What is more, the women interviewed reported that in the process of being arrested and questioned, they were addressed as ‘whores’. The representation of Ukrainian partisan women in the Soviet media has been studied by Olena Petrenko, ‘Anatomy of the Unsaid: Along the Taboo Lines of Female Participation in the Ukrainian Nationalistic Underground’, in *A Gender Perspective*, 241–262.

²⁵ See *Women and Men at War: A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz (Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, 2012), *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, ed. Nancy M. Wingfield; Maria Bucur-Deckard (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Elisabeth A. Woods, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

participation in the Baltic resistance movements receives only a brief mention, with descriptions of women's primary responsibilities and their participation in specific episodes. There are only a few studies that focus primarily on women's experiences in the Baltic national partisan war.²⁶ Although the Baltic resistance was a men's war, it was also the first war in which ordinary Baltic women of all ages were directly involved. Their presence in the battlefield unsettled the conventional social order to which both they and society were accustomed.²⁷

For the most part, the *meža meitas* did not go into the forest for ideological reasons or to oppose the Soviets, but rather out of fear for their lives and a wish to avoid physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Precise figures as to the number of women living in the forests do not exist in the scholarly literature. It is estimated that the number was almost 500 in Latvia alone, still this figure is based only on the number of women who came to the attention of the Soviet security agencies.²⁸ This is not a large group, indeed, but in a wider context they represent all those women who were engaged with national resistance movements providing various forms of background help to partisans and illegals, including spreading their propaganda.²⁹ As oral accounts testify, there was only one step between home and forest. Most forest women had previously been supporters of the partisans who literally ran into the forest in a moment of panic. The number of women and children³⁰ in the forest increased when word got out about the planned deportations in March 1949. The deportations almost completely destroyed this supportive "background" of the insurgency. All in all, almost 95,000 persons were deported from the Baltic states to Siberia. Most of the deportees were women.³¹

I call the women who participated in the partisan resistance 'forest daughters' (*meža meitas*) – a term they themselves readily accept as an alternative to the official sounding 'national partisans'. The popular term 'forest brothers' (*meža brāļi*) is gender

²⁶ See Žaneta Smolskutė, "Moterų dalyvavimo ginkluotame pasipriešinime 1944–1953 m. ypatumai," *Genocidos i Rezistencija* 20 (2006): 53–62; Ruth Leiserowitz, "In the Lithuanian Woods. Jewish and Lithuanian Female Partisans," In *Women and Men at War*, 199–218; Inese Dreimane "Latvijas sievietes — nacionālās partizānes un nelegālistes 20. gs. 40.–50. gados." In *Meža meitas*, ed. S. Reinsone (Rīga: Diena, forthcoming).

²⁷ There were some women who were active in the economic and cultural fields but a traditional gender model was customary in interwar Latvia. See Zelče, "Latvian women", 289. The situation of women's role in combat was different in the Red Army. See Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Dreimane, "Latvijas sievietes".

²⁹ In Latvia, girls actively participated in secret groups of high school students that promoted anti-Soviet agitation, opposed the Sovietisation of school programmes, and provided practical and informational support to the partisan organisations. Heinrihs Strods, "Latvijas skolu jaunatnes nacionālā pretošanās kustība (1994. gads–50. gadu vidus)," *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti* Vol. 3 (2001).

³⁰ Most of the children had entered the woods together with their parents. Historians are reluctant to specify a precise number but they estimate that as many as 50 children, under the age of 15, could have been living in the Latvian forests. Several were killed during attacks. At least six children were born in the illegal circumstances of the forest. Dreimane, "Latvijas sievietes".

³¹ It is claimed that 94,779 persons were deported from the Baltic. Women constituted 44%, 29% were children and 27% were men. Polian, *He по своей воле*, 139; Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizāņu karš*, 130–134.



Figure 1 Dzidra Leimane in the forest near Cēsis, summer 1951. The State Archives of Latvia (1986/1/21805).

specific and women do not identify with it, although sometimes, when they cannot come up with an answer to the question ‘What were you?’, they lightheartedly quip, ‘forest brothers!’ *Meža meitas* is a poetic rendering for which it is difficult to find a satisfying English equivalent. It is borrowed here from ancient Latvian folksongs, where it refers specifically to the daughters of forest wardens who live in the woods or in a clearing, who know the forest more intimately than anyone else, and who routinely partake of its benefits. These features fit well with how the partisan ‘forest daughters’ talk about themselves.

In the forest, they found themselves in an absolutely male-dominated society. The men led the military groups and illegal communities, made all the decisions, and usually were the ones to maintain contact with the outside. The women were mostly regarded as the civil part of the partisan units in the forest. Still their very presence in the forest marked them as openly aligned against the Soviets. They had, in effect, joined the war, with all its possible consequences.

Gender prejudice played a significant role in the forest. Women were not involved in the planning and execution of military action and, as much as possible, they were not even informed about the movements of the partisans or what actions they had taken. It was considered that women ‘should not know such things’.³² In fact, gender roles were stricter in the forest than in the pre-war and post-war society; women enjoyed a more equal attitude towards them before entering the forest when they undertook the roles of informants and supporters.³³ However, discussing gender roles in the forest,

³² A quote from the wife of the partisan chief Broņislavs Sluckis. See Inese Dreimane, “Ziemeļlatgales iedzīvotāju atmiņas”, *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti* Vol. 17 (2006): 207. See also Leiserowitz, “In the Lithuanian Woods”, 211–213.

³³ Petrenko, “Anatomy of the Unsaid”, 254–255.

all the interviewees expressed understanding or fully supported such subordination, seeing it as a means to protect them and save their lives.

Women's daily responsibilities in the forest differed very little from those they had carried out at home. They managed the domestic side of life: washing clothes, sewing and mending, gathering fuel and food. Women with a medical background assumed care for the wounded and sick. On rare occasions, women took part in the intellectual work of the partisan groups, such as writing poetry and producing newsletters.³⁴ In Latvia, there is only one known instance of a woman being part of the partisan leadership.³⁵ In extraordinary circumstances – during a siege or when relocating – women participated fully in hauling loads, standing guard, helping doctors with the wounded, and wielding weapons when necessary.

Women's participation in combat is attested to by former partisans as well as documented in various Soviet materials. These are, however, exceptional cases and the testimonies are mainly about women who died in battle.³⁶ Several of the interviewees said they were trained to use weapons, but even when they carried guns, for example during relocation or in a battle, none of them reported having had occasion to fire. Many others never learned to use weapons. According to official documents, some 25% of forest women were killed, but the actual number could be lower because the Soviet authorities plausibly had an incomplete record.³⁷ In any event, women were more vulnerable because they were unarmed and it was harder for them to escape in the forest.

The changing post-war landscape

The forest as a shelter for stepchildren and outcasts is a tradition that dates back at least to the Middle Ages. 'Outside of the law and human society one was in the forest',

³⁴ In Latvia alone, 14 illegal newspapers were produced, of which more than half were issued monthly from 1945 until 1947, with a circulation of 10 to 100. Turčinskis, "Karš pēc kara", 95; Heinrihs Strods, "Non-Violent Resistance in Latvia (1945–1985)", in *Regaining Independence: Non-Violent Resistance in Latvia 1945–1991*, ed. V. Blūzma et al. (Riga: Latvian Academy of Sciences, 2009), 69.

³⁵ Valērija Mundure (*Marta Skuja*, 1915–1946) served as a board member of one of the larger partisan organisations, was editor of the newspaper "Tēvijas sargs" (The Homeland Guardian), and a published author. In 1946, Mundure was sentenced to death and executed. Dreimane, "Latvijas sievietes".

³⁶ Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš*, 44–45; Dreimane, 'Latvijas sievietes.' Smolskutē mentions 250 active female fighters in Lithuania, see "Moterų dalyvavimo," 53. However, women's participation in partisan combat was comparatively rare also in other national resistance movements. See Paula Schwartz, "Partisans and Gender Politics in Vichy France", *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 1 (1989): 128; Oksana Kis, "Жіночий досвід участі в національно-визвольних змаганнях на західноукраїнських землях у 1940–1950-х рр.," *Схід / Захід. Історико-культурологічний збірник* 13–14 (2009): 101–25. Cf., whereas in the Greek civil war after WWII, women's participation was comparatively high; they constituted 20–25% of combatants. See Margaret Poulus, "Gender, Civil War and National Identity: Women Partisans during the Greek Civil War 1946–1949", *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 46, no. 3: 418–427.

³⁷ Dreimane, "Latvijas sievietes."



Figure 2 Mihalīna (in the middle) with her sisters at her family farmstead ‘Jaunais Dārzs’ in 1943. Private collection.

notes Harrison.³⁸ Historically, the forests in Latvia experienced the largest presence of humans during times of unrest, and especially in the twentieth century when the forest became home to the 1905 revolutionaries and the refugees of two world wars. Asylum in the forests after WWII dramatically changed people’s lives and relations with the occupying powers. In their stories, the *meža meitas* illustrate the fundamental shift in their lives by contrasting life in post-war Latvia to that of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s, a time they depict in terms of ‘a simple and stable past’. All subsequent periods of life are measured against this multifaceted reference point which also becomes a powerful object of nostalgic desire – a ‘refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present’.³⁹

Interwar Latvia is the scene of the narrators’ childhood and youth, when they themselves were active, when the family was wealthy, and when the farmstead flourished. ‘We lived peacefully’, says Mihalīna, ‘tending to the land, building homes. We named our farm ‘Jaunais Dārzs’ (The New Garden). The house was lovely, with three bedrooms, a kitchen, a large living room with four windows. The yard was fenced and had lots of flowers. We raised wheat, flax. We had enough of everything. We lived well.’ Her sentiments are echoed by Regīna: ‘My father, Karl, was very enterprising. In 1932 he built a new home for the family. It was surrounded by an apple orchard. We had bees, a pond. We grew flax. We had livestock, some 12 head of cattle, including the calves.’⁴⁰

³⁸ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 61.

³⁹ David Lowenthal, ‘Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn’t’, in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. Ch. Shaw and M. Chase (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 21.

⁴⁰ Regīna Tiliba (1931), interviewed by S. Reinsone in Padure, 15 June 2012.

The pastoral tenor and unequivocal optimism that dominate stories about this time create an ideal that renders all other periods of life inadequate. Anthropologist Vieda Skultans has noted that the forest narratives contain a thematic emphasis on the beauty and moral order of the past and the splendour and energy of childhood and youth.⁴¹ Such attachment is viewed by geographer Edward Relph as a kind of *existential insideness* – knowing implicitly that *this* place is where you belong.⁴² Undeniably, this sense was intensified by the subsequent loss of family and home.

Interwar Latvia was a decidedly agrarian land with 65% of the population living in the countryside. Nevertheless, towns and industry were rapidly growing.⁴³ The narratives women share about this period confirm the assertion that the agrarian discourse reveals closeness to nature as a central element of ‘Latvianness’, and maintain the notion of Latvians as a ‘nation of farmers’ construed through the interwar period, especially during the few years of authoritarian regime (1934–1939).⁴⁴ Although forests covered only one-third of the territory, and even though farmland slowly displaced the forests, they remained an integral part of the rural landscape.⁴⁵ Among the women interviewed, only one – the daughter of a small-town paramedic – did not come from a farming family. In their descriptions of life between the wars, the native landscape expressed in their stories symbolically coincides with that of Latvian folksongs. The fields, meadows, coves, birch groves, forests, and little swamps were all a part of daily life. The proximity of the forest to home was a constant feature. There they eagerly picked berries, hunted for mushrooms and nuts, walked on the narrow roads and trails to reach school, the next village, or a neighbour’s house, gathered firewood, cut hay or herded livestock. Spending time in the forests was not a primarily recreational activity but a practical one. The type of activities depended on the season, but in general, the forest was a natural resource and a convenient and pleasant route.

The end of the war ushered in changes in this familiar everyday landscape. Not only had it been destroyed but it had also taken on new meanings relative to personal

⁴¹ Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives*, 82.

⁴² *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 53–55.

⁴³ Marģeris Skujenieks, *Latvijas statistikas atlās* (Rīga: Valsts Statistiskā pārvalde, 1938), 4.

⁴⁴ Katrina Schwartz, “The Occupation of Beauty” *Imagining Nature and Nation in Latvia, East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 21, no. 2 (2007): 261; *Nature and National Identity after Communism: Globalizing the Ethnoscape* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 49–53; see also Edmunds V. Bunkše, “God, Thine Earth Is Burning: Nature Attitudes and the Latvian Drive for Independence”, *GeoJournal* 26, no. 2 (1992): 203–209.

⁴⁵ Skujenieks, *Latvijas statistikas atlās*, 19, 36. After World War II, the area covered by forests gradually increased. In the 1970s, it constituted 40% of the land, but in 2010, 52%. Pauls Beķeris, ed., *Meža nozare Latvijas 20 neatkarības gados* (Rīga: Meža attīstības fonds, 2012), 12. Latvia is located in a mixed forest zone that consists of northern coniferous and southern deciduous trees, primarily pine, spruce, birch, and aspen. Mires comprise 4–5% of the forested land, though one third of Latvia’s forests grow on wetlands (*Latvijas meža resursu statistiskās inventarizācijas I cikla rezultāti*, <http://www.silava.lv/23/section.aspx/View/119> (LVMI Silava, 2010). Regionally forest coverage and size differs: the large forest tracts are to be found in the Kurzeme region (in the Western part of Latvia), while smaller forests are characteristic of the landscape of the Latgale region (Eastern Latvia).

security and spatial boundaries. The occupying forces sought to gain control over society, especially those locals who were regarded as suspicious and unreliable. If the authorities suspected that the father, brother or husband was living in the forest or that any other member of the family had in some way helped them, they could expect that the house would be watched and that at any moment NKVD/MVD or local paramilitaries⁴⁶ could appear to interrogate them, to turn the house upside down searching for hidden 'bandits' and weapons, or to beat or arrest them. Often such suspicions were justified. Thus, even before they themselves entered the forest, most women were accustomed to living with terror and fear.

Deciding to leave for the forest usually happened in a moment of extreme fear and panic. Some of the women fled spontaneously, without weighing the seriousness of their decision and without thinking about what to take along. Usually, they were the ones who felt personally threatened and had neither family nor friends with whom to discuss their fears and figure out what to do. Hilda had just come of age when she found herself alone after her mother was arrested. Her loneliness, compounded by what she had already experienced at the hands of the Soviet security service, intensified her fear. Eventually overwhelmed by her terror, she fled headlong into the forest to join her stepfather's partisan group. Looking back on her past experiences and her past self, Hilda, now in her ninth decade, regrets her hurried flight and thinks that facing the potential danger at home would have been easier than what she experienced in the forest: 'I thought that they would come for me at home, that they would not leave me in peace. [...] Dumb, I was dumb. I ran into [the] forest, but I should have stayed at home to see what would happen.'⁴⁷

Similarly, Lidija, having disobeyed the ultimatum to bring her fiancé out of the forest by a certain date, and fearing that she would again be arrested for not doing so, spent the night in the forest. Heading home in the morning, she saw footprints in the wet grass. Her fears were confirmed. She was being looked for: 'There were footprints all the way to the end of the field. The wet grass was flattened. So, they had gone from my house all the way to the edge of the woods looking for me! [...] I grabbed my large shawl from the counter in the kitchen, I grabbed it, and headed out the door to the forest.'⁴⁸ In describing the footprints leading from her house to the forest, Lidija symbolically drew a new boundary in her familiar landscape: the edge of the forest. This line separated the field, the house, and everything that belonged to the newly dangerous human world from the forest, into which the footprints had not gone and which had become the safest possible shelter. Being the outlaw she will return to visit her home, avoiding to leave her footprints seen. However, the edge of the forest

⁴⁶ Paramilitary groups were raised from local civilians and intended as a supplement to regular security agencies. The relevant military actions against insurgents were taken mainly by internal ministry forces, while paramilitaries were put on guard. For more about the Baltic paramilitary groups see Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 209–229.

⁴⁷ Hilda Miezīte (b.1928), interviewed by S. Reinsone in Ērberģe, 30 January 2013.

⁴⁸ Lidija Kalcenava (1919–2012), interviewed by S. Reinsone in Naukšēni, 10 September 2011.

became a significant element of the new militarised landscape frequently mentioned in the forest narratives, it served both as a symbolic line between two worlds and as a line from where forest dwellers could observe the 'human' world.

For Mihalīna and her two younger sisters things changed suddenly. In June of 1945, when five high-ranking NKVD officers⁴⁹ accompanied by local militiamen arrived to arrest her family⁵⁰ – the parents and three daughters – her quiet life ended and the familiar landscape disappeared forever.⁵¹ The family escaped arrest because the father and his neighbour, with the help of 20-year-old Mihalīna at a critical moment, overpowered the men who had come to arrest them. Fully aware of the potential repercussions and without giving it a second thought, they decided to live unlawfully. Hurriedly packing the essentials onto a wagon, they dumped other valuables, including farm machinery, into the pond. That same day, taking along livestock and a dog, Mihalīna and her family went into the forest to join the partisan group led by her brother. As the stable and predictable life rhythm of home and family came to an abrupt end, life became movement – unpredictable and foreign. Mihalīna became an exile as roots gave way to routes.⁵²

The miserable and the sublime: the forest life of outlaws

Deciding to live in the forest after the war, when the Soviet Union enjoyed apparent peace, meant not only exchanging the dangerous human world for the less uncertain natural world, but also totally changing the nature of social life and permanently destroying relations with the state powers by becoming an opponent, outlaw, bandit. Most of the women interviewed spent a few months up to a few years in the forest, but three of them – Mihalīna, Lidija and Leontīne – separately from each other lived in the forest for nine years. This length of time is all the more striking given that the average was two years.⁵³ It can be explained by the fact that these three lived with their partners in remote areas far from towns, managing to avoid collisions with Soviet persecutors and restricting contact with the outside world. Mihalīna and Leontīne spent the last couple of years in relative peace, but Lidija lived quietly throughout all nine years.

Living in the Baltic forests all year long is no simple task. The winters are extreme, with deep layers of snow and harsh temperatures. In January 1950, when all three

⁴⁹ Pskov region NKVD deputy head, three NKVD officers from Pskov and NKVD head of Viļaka town. "Supes Mikalīnas apsūdzības lieta", *State Archives of Latvia* 1986/1/25488, 214, 338.

⁵⁰ 50.

⁵¹ Mihalīna's family was a desirable target for the NKVD as her brother Pēteris Supe (1920–1946), former senior agronomist of the Abrene district, actively participated in the anti-Soviet revolt. He was the founder and leader of National Partisan Association of Latvia, the first and one of the largest armed national resistance organisations after WWII in Latvia. Turčinskis, "Karš pēc kara", 95–97.

⁵² Andrew Dawson and Mark Johnson, "Migration, Exile and Landscapes of the Imagination", in *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*, ed. B. Bender and M. Winer (Oxford, UK; New York: Berg, 2001), 319.

⁵³ Strods, "Nacionālie un padomju partizāni", 28.

women were in the forest, the average air temperature was -16° C, but at the beginning of January it dropped to -30° C.⁵⁴ When I asked how they survived the harsh weather, the cold winters and rainy autumns, Lidija confessed that their fear of persecution and of ‘the white bear’ (Siberia) exceeded the discomforts and potential dangers of forest life. Her experience differed from that of the others. She was the only one who did not join an armed resistance group but spent all nine years (from 1946 to 1955) hiding with her fiancé, Alfrēds. She recalls their isolated life in the cramped underground bunker with sadness. ‘It was far from romantic, as some have imagined’, she admonishes. Although they managed to live without ever being shot at or pursued, they always knew they were being pursued. Lidija says, ‘I cannot describe how horrible it was. Always being afraid, night and day! A crow caws, a branch snaps — oh my God! I was panic-stricken by everything.’ She compensated for the lack of social contact by writing poetry. Leafing through the notebooks of her naïve poetry reveals the forest as she saw it. This fragment from a poem written on Christmas 1950 describes her painful isolation and her sorrow about having to live in the wild:

Between the damp walls of the dugout,
Which exhale decay and mould,
We crawl like moles in caves,
And time lacerates the deepest wounds.

Laughing, Lidija remembers naming her first bunker, where she spent one year, ‘The Potato Pit’. It was situated in a swampy area. They excavated a deep underground hole, about a half metre above the waterline, built a floor from tree branches and covered it with fern leaves. The ceiling was so low they could only sit, not stand up. A year later, they dug another bunker in a somewhat higher place, but with a similar design. Water seeped into it as well. The right location for a shelter was crucial. It had to be invisible and hard to find. Their decision to build in a swamp, and thus sacrifice even minimal comfort, was based on the hope that no one would think to look for them in such a place. Their expectations were realised – despite the frequent patrols, they managed to remain undetected for nine years. Their shelter was invisible from the outside, concealed by a steep bank on one side and pine trees on top. It was slightly bigger than the first bunker and even had a small tin stove, although the heat it produced was barely sufficient since they lit it only as a last resort. Smoke would have given away their location. Living in almost perpetual darkness, their only source of light was a small kerosene jar that let them spend their days writing, reading newspapers and books, darning socks and mending clothes, and using willow bark to weave footwear for their rare walks outside.

Mihalīna lived in the woods from 1945 to 1954. Compared to Lidija, her life there was much more active, social, and dangerous. She lived through so-called combings,

⁵⁴ The statistics come from the Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Centre, <http://www.meteo.lv> (accessed July 20, 2013).

was chased and fired upon. She carried a weapon for guard duty and relocation. Having witnessed her home being burned down and her siblings and her parents executed, her ties to the outside world had unravelled. ‘I had no one. Who would I go to? What would I have done?’ The forest was the place where Mihalīna could live in relative freedom and in the company of others with whom she identified.

In contrast to Lidija, Mihalīna spent only the last two years living alone with her fiancé, having lived previously as part of a partisan community, most of whose members of course were men. The group moved often. They spent winters in bunkers and in warmer months used small army tents and wood huts. Shelters occupy a negligible place in Mihalīna’s stories and she describes them only in general details. The many years in the forest, the constant threats, and frequent moves produce a narrative that resembles a survival handbook testifying to the human capacity to adapt to life in the wild during times of war.

In the forest Mihalīna discovered that she possessed previously unknown sensory abilities, ones that in any event she earlier did not need, for example, extraordinary hearing and sight that safeguarded her and her companions: ‘When we relocated, I always had to take the lead. I had excellent hearing and eyesight. Sometimes, when sitting by the fire in the camp, if I began to listen carefully, then everyone noticed, fell silent, and watched me. What was that? Was it chekists⁵⁵ or a wolf? One time there were three of us. We were sleeping. I awake – I see the chekists passing nearby. I freeze. I don’t move a muscle. The other two are still asleep. I didn’t wake them to avoid making noise. The chekists go away.’ Mihalīna learned to master the nuances of the forest soundscapes and to figure out what a particular movement of an animal meant: ‘If cranes cry out at night, you know immediately – chekists.’ She also analysed the sounds coming from beyond the forest. For example, the unusually frequent sound of car engines and the barking of dogs warned of approaching danger. The type of forest was crucial because it affected how well sounds and noises travelled and how quickly Soviet attackers were detected.

Life in the forest was a traumatic experience and the stories the *meža meitas* tell share an existential quality. The ‘chekists’ embody the destructive, brutal, and merciless power the women always feared. Lacking in individual identity, they are narratively generalised and turned into an enemy composite without redeeming human features. Their loud and destructive arrival in the forest stands in sharp contrast to the quiet forest to which the forest dwellers have become accustomed. ‘They ploughed through the forest like tanks’, Brunhilda remembers the forest combat.⁵⁶

The forest as both a military arena and a domestic space necessitated learning skills and cultivating sensitivities that would enable forest people to blend into the

⁵⁵ The term “chekists” was commonly used to refer to mainly regular security services’ forces, as local paramilitaries had a different designation (“istribiteli”, “strebuki” and similar), however, the term can be used to refer to all actors that took active part in counterinsurgency.

⁵⁶ Brunhilda Fogeļe (b.1926), interviewed by S. Reinsons in Degole, 29 December 2012.

environment, to remain undetected and inscrutable to those outside the immediate community. They took advantage of all the layers of their surroundings, but especially the underground, which was used for shelter, for storing food and clothing, and for protecting documents and other valuables. ‘The night belonged to us’, says Mihalina as she describes how they relocated during the darkness of night or during the harshest weather; they benefited from the infrastructure of the forest and enlisted new sensitivities for analysing the nuances of the forest flora and fauna. Because they took care not to disturb the natural environment, strove to blend into it rather than try to subdue it, to accept its rules, the forest became a natural ally.

Obtaining food was the primary challenge of life in the forest. The partisans obtained provisions as well as clothing and other necessities by plundering the state stores and dairies, and farms, mostly owned by farmers who had been identified as active supporters of the Soviet regime, but for the most part they received help from local residents. The mass deportations of 1949 to Siberia targeted the relatives and other supporters of the partisans, with the result that living conditions grew even harsher. Typically, the menu was monotonous and poorly balanced – feast or famine. ‘One time they brought us a huge amount of eggs’, Mihalina recalls, ‘but I couldn’t eat more than five. And only hardboiled. Others swallowed them raw. We ate the eggs and then again had nothing.’ Food was especially hard to procure during prolonged times of attack, when they were surrounded and could not leave the forest and had to make do with what they had on hand or with what the forest could provide. ‘If worse comes to worse in your life, just don’t eat blueberries!’ cautions Brunhilda, describing her experience during a siege. ‘For a whole week, we didn’t have anything to eat except blueberries. I remember to this day how the whites of all of our eyes turned blue. Can you imagine?’

The same clothing was worn for years, until it wore out. The biggest problem was obtaining blankets, warm clothing, and footwear for the winter. What is worse, in the event of an unexpected attack, people fled with only what they were wearing, leaving all the other clothing behind. This happened to Mihalina: ‘When you have to flee, you have only what’s on your back. I once had to leave my boots in the bunker. I had to run in my socks, but I somehow survived. When you run in the snow in socks, the snow is wet, the socks freeze.’

Even though they faced physical hardships, food shortages, and inadequate clothing, the women maintain that living in the forest was healthy and that people were rarely sick. What is more, they cared for their personal hygiene and clothing and kept their bunkers tidy. ‘In the woods from 1944 until 1953. No lice, no fleas, not once. No insects at all. Tell me, is that not a miracle?!’ asks Leontīne rhetorically.⁵⁷

Along with the testimonies about the tough living conditions and the constant need to be cautious, alert, and prepared to flee, the pastoral and mythical dimension of the forest landscape emerges as a significant narrative motif. Contrary to the domestic and

⁵⁷ Leontīne Augustāne (b.1922), interviewed by S. Reinsone in Jaunjelgava (Latvia), 06 July 2012.



Figure 3 Mihalīna with her fiancé Arvīds in Vecumi forest, 1952. Private collection.

military side of life, the chance to observe nature and the creatures who live there elicits pleasant memories, allowing the *meža meitas* to look back upon the time not only as a tragic period but also as an opportunity to interact fully with the natural world.⁵⁸ In their narratives, the forest is more than a place to live; it resonates with emotional, mythical, and symbolic meanings they understand personally. They express this immersion in accounts of daily contact with wild animals who seem undisturbed by their human presence.

The forest and its inhabitants are not a ‘static backdrop’⁵⁹, but are regarded as co-inhabitants in everyday life. In the stories, contact with the forest creatures is humanised, creating the impression that the people and the animals are equals who amicably share the territory. The theme of the forest as a helper to people in need has its roots in ancient Latvian mythology and is connected to the image of the *Meža māte* (Forest Mother), who ensures the ecological and moral order, protects vegetation, birds, animals, and humans who find themselves in the woods. She embodies natural justice, and although the narratives the *meža meitas* tell do not directly refer to the presence of this mythological being, the idea of natural justice does appear. Stories about the logically inexplicable protection they receive at critical moments speak to the mythical dimension they experienced in the forest.

Mihalīna looked upon surviving unharmed in the forest for so many years as a miracle. ‘I encountered the chekists about six times, eye to eye. They shot at me, but I survived. They didn’t hit me. In 1950, they riddled my scarf with bullets, and my coat,

⁵⁸ For the famine aspect of the forest see especially Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives*, 93–97.

⁵⁹ Chris Pearson, *Scarred Landscapes: War and Nature in Vichy France* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

too. The sleeves were shot to pieces. Others were shot at and killed, but I survived. How can that be?’ she rhetorically asks. Mihalīna’s home was in north-eastern Latvia, the region where it was common for whole families to move into the forests in 1944 and 1945 to wait out the occupation. During her nine years in the forest, Mihalīna witnessed the death of family members, friends, neighbours, and many acquaintances. ‘People from all groups died. Died, died, died, only I remained alive’, she says, and truly, she was among the very last.⁶⁰ In the summer of 1954, after two years of living together in the forest, her fiancé was killed and she was left to emerge from the forest alone. Mihalīna encapsulates her years in the forest as follows: ‘I lived for nine years among the wolves.’ To be among the ‘wolves’ is not just a metaphor. It signifies a survival strategy, which Mihalīna and others learned during their presence in the forest.

Descent into a new human world

The longer the women lived in the woods, the longer they were separated from the world outside, the less they regarded their forest life as a temporary transition and began instead to perceive it as exile, as enforced separation from home.⁶¹ Narratively, life in the forest ended suddenly and violently – with an attack, a battle, or siege.

Teenager Regīna’s life in the forest ended in the spring of 1952 with a horrific family tragedy. During an MGB army attack, Regīna witnessed the suicide of her sister and her husband, while her other sister and brother, who lived in a different bunker, were shot there. Regīna recalls: ‘That moment, when they shot themselves, was horrid. There was the smell of gunpowder in the air, but to me, it seemed like the smell of blood.’ Lifting the bodies up from the bunker remains an indelible scene in Regīna’s memory. She saw six dead bodies laid out on the ground, together with all the belongings and weapons in the bunker. The wind blowing in her sisters’ hair made it impossible to believe they were dead.

The former NKVD/MGB archive preserves photographs of this scene.⁶² Careful staging foregrounds the ostensible banditry: a pistol has been positioned on top of each corpse, including each woman’s, and has even been pressed into the hands of some. The women’s skirts are carelessly pulled up, and the men’s trousers have been unzipped and pulled down. As a warning to the supporters of the ‘bandits’, the corpses were paraded in open trucks around local villages. Staging was a widespread tactic of intimidation throughout the Baltic and elsewhere.⁶³

When describing their last days in the forest, the arrests and the direct contact with the persecutors, the women more often than before dwell on their personal appearance and the paradoxical incommensurability between them and the authorities – the

⁶⁰ In 1954, only a few partisans continued to hide in the forests and communication among them was non-existent.

⁶¹ Dawson and Johnson. *Migration, Exile and Landscapes*, 319.

⁶² The MGB report of the attack: State Archives of Latvia 1986/2/10433, 251–259.

⁶³ Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 251.



Figure 4 Regīna's sisters, brother and three other partisans killed by MGB soldiers, April 1952. The State Archives of Latvia (1986/A2/10433).



Figure 5 Mihālina in the Central Prison in Riga, 1954. The State Archives of Latvia (1986/1/25488).

delicate, long-haired, exhausted women versus the throngs of soldiers ready to destroy or rule over the 'bandits'. Hilda describes herself sarcastically: 'A lone dreadful bandit – a young girl with long dark hair.' Leontine recalls how she looked when she was arrested: 'I was like a young child, with long, tangled hair, skinny. In nine years, my hair had grown down to my hips.' Almost all the *meža meitas* who spent a prolonged time in the forest mention the length of their hair, raising a symbolic association with freedom and ferocity.



Figure 6 Mihalina (the first from the left) at road construction work in Vorkuta, Siberia, 1956. Private collection.

The Soviet court sentenced Regīna to 25 years in a correctional prison in Mordovia (USSR).⁶⁴ She remembers feeling listless not only about what had happened to her but about what might still lie ahead: ‘Such numbness . . . all that horror, the recent arrest, the sight of all those who had been killed . . . I was crying all the time. I did not care where they sent me, to Russia or elsewhere . . .’ Mihalina describes a similar response. In the forest, she lived in constant awareness of her family’s death and the expectation of her own. “‘We’ll free you! You are young, pretty, we’ll get you a permanent! You’ll find a husband’”, the interrogator offered in exchange for her collaboration. ‘I said, “I don’t want anything. I don’t want a permanent, or a husband. I want nothing.” Then they said, “We’ll shoot you!” Oh! but that gave me the greatest joy! What do I have to live for, when my entire family has been destroyed? So that I could get a perm? As if I were a child . . .’ She spent seven years in a Gulag camp.

After their time in the forest, life for most of the *meža meitas* led to the Gulag camps,⁶⁵ where they worked as convict labour. When they returned to Latvia, they were not allowed to live in or near their former homes. As they themselves point out, however, they did not wish to go home, not only because of painful memories, especially for those whose families were destroyed, but also because of the negative social attitudes toward them. Almost half of the women interviewed do not have children or grandchildren, and consequently about half of them live alone in old age.

In their stories about returning to human society, the forest stands as a symbol substitute for the old world, now lost to them and also the last place where

⁶⁴ See Lidia Doronina, *Chronicle of the Women’s Camp in Mordovia, USSR* (Amsterdam: Publishers Second World Press, 1985).

⁶⁵ For details of the Gulag camps, see Viktor Zemskov, “ГУЛАГ (историко-социологический аспект),” in *Социологические исследования*, no. 6 (1991): 10–27, no. 7 (1991): 3–16.



Figure 7 Mihālīna, September 2011. Photo by Sanita Reinsone.

they lived among family and friends. Arrest not only meant the loss of freedom but it was also a starting point of one's own life, separated from former companions, who often were the *meža meitas'* natal family or husbands.

Since returning to Latvia in 1960, Mihālīna has not once been to the forest.⁶⁶ 'When my colleagues would invite me to go mushrooming, I just asked them to greet the pine trees for me', she laughs. The forest continues to belong to a painful past, one she cannot forget, yet does not want to remember. The forest where Mihālīna and her family found refuge became a symbol for her lost paradise and a substitute for the home where she was born and where she spent happy interwar years. Into that forest, she transported the moral order and the family-centred life of the past, and when members of her family, her fiancé, and other companions were killed there, they too become part of the forest landscape. After her years in the forest, she seems to experience what Relph refers to as *existential*

⁶⁶ Her refusal to go to the forest would be unusual, since berry picking and mushroom hunting in Soviet Latvia was not only a popular leisure activity, but also a necessity in times of scarcity.

outsideness and homelessness, no matter where she finds herself,⁶⁷ and she carries the lost, now imagined, home along with her as an object of nostalgia.

Conclusion

‘Latvian culture is a nature culture’, asserts geographer Edmunds Bunkše, ‘made up from the concrete details of close interactions with the land, sea, forest, and sky.’⁶⁸ Forests, being a significant part of the rural landscape, since time immemorial have provided locals with essential seasonal benefits. Apart from the practical usage there is also a mythical dimension of the forests. Ancient Latvian folksongs conjure up idyllic forest landscapes and tend to personify trees, wild animals, and birds, while folk legends for their part, undermine this pleasant image of the forest and remind us of its ambivalence. But a landscape regarded as familiar and safe can suddenly also become alien, unsafe, and frightening: a forest visitor can be led astray by forest spirits, bogged down, tricked into a river, stranded on a steep bank, or senselessly circle around one tree for a whole night having no sense of reality.⁶⁹

Historically forests have had a variable meaning as well. They have served as a hiding place for those in conflict with the ruling powers and law, and for those who do not fit in with the rest of society. In times of serfdom, defiant peasants run into forests and hide there, as did the revolutionaries of 1905. ‘Dark’ woods were a suitable hideout for the criminals,⁷⁰ and mass murders of Jews and Gypsies by the Nazis also took place there. The forests also served as a temporary home for the refugees of the two world wars.

At the beginning of the Cold War, many thousands of people flooded into the Baltic forests in order to resist what they perceived as Soviet occupation and to seek shelter. Their actions resulted in the largest and longest such experience of human and forest interaction in the history of the three countries. Baltic women fled to the forest to escape intimidation and physical coercion by the new powers; they joined active partisan groups or lived quiet illegal lives. They also became involved in the first war in which Baltic women were on the front lines. Having gone into the woods to seek temporary shelter, they in effect were civilians who ended up in a war zone without weapons or training for battle.

During the Cold War, the forest not only acquired a new political meaning, becoming a political concept and a metaphor of anti-Soviet resistance, but, in a sense, widened also in geographical terms as it marked various locations within and nearby forests where the Baltic resistance took its place – various types of forest, birch groves,

⁶⁷ Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 51.

⁶⁸ Edmunds V. Bunkše, “God, Thine Earth Is Burning: Nature Attitudes and the Latvian Drive for Independence”, *GeoJournal* 26, no. 2 (1992): 203.

⁶⁹ Sanita Bērziņa-Reinsons, “Apmaldīšanās stāsti: priekšstati interpretācija, stāstījumu poētika” (PhD diss., University of Latvia, 2012).

⁷⁰ A popular Latvian song *Forests, forests, dark forests* is devoted to a legendary Latvian criminal Kaupēns who carried out robberies and murders in 1920s.

swamps, meadows, clearings, ravines, little roads, ditches, as well as distant farms, cellars, and barns. More than likely, interactions with the forest changed for everyone in the Baltic, whether or not they were involved in the partisan activity. The forest had become a doubly sensitive zone: to the authorities it was a space of revolt subject to their control; to the locals, it provided shelter when normal life had become dangerous. Collecting firewood, berry picking and mushroom hunting along with other traditional activities could no longer be regarded as innocent seasonal tasks. Any trip to the forest could be looked upon with suspicion and could prompt aggression, by either the Soviet authorities or the forest partisans. Despite the dangers connected to personal safety, in the stories shared by the Latvian women, forests are also described as pleasant, peaceful, safe and familiar everyday environments, an integral part of their native landscapes. The forest became the last space onto which the moral order and national ideals of the social world that no longer existed could be transposed, especially during the early post-war years.

To conclude, in the first decades of the Cold War, the militarised Baltic forest was a crucial political actor that provided inconvenient tension for the new Soviet powers; until the 1990s the Baltic forest insurgents became an enduring euphemism whose political meaning was misrepresented and linked to flagrant banditry. During the Soviet period, for a significant part of local society, the forest was a place that symbolised lost freedom and the rejection of the Soviet occupation, but for the forest daughters it was also both the place where loved ones were killed and the gateway to further personal persecution and hard labour in the Gulag camps.

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