

Latvian Women – Participants in the National Armed Resistance, 1940s–1950s

INESE DREIMANE

Mag. hist. Historian. Latvia

✉ miuma@inbox.lv

This article provides an insight into the participation of Latvian women in the armed national resistance movement after the Second World War. It is found that at least 414 Latvian women participated in the national partisan war of 1944–1956. Unlike men, they did not participate in military operations, but performed housekeeping work and medical duties.

Women joined national partisan groups to avoid arrest because they had previously been partisan supporters. There were cases where women went to the forest because their family members were already there. In several cases, new families were also formed in the forest and children were born.

Keywords: Latvia, women, partisans, occupation, resistance.

This article provides an insight into the participation of Latvian women in the armed national resistance movement after the Second World War. It is found that at least 414 Latvian women participated in the national partisan war of 1944–1956. Unlike men, they did not participate in military operations, but performed housekeeping work and medical duties.

Women joined national partisan groups to avoid arrest because they had previously been partisan supporters. There were cases where women went to the forest because their family members were already there. In several cases, new families were also formed in the forest and children were born.

The specific purpose of the study is to provide an insight into the involvement of women in the national armed resistance movement of Latvia. The aims of the research are as follows:

1. To determine, as precisely as possible, the number of women involved in the national armed resistance movement, as well as the reasons for their involvement.
2. To study the conditions of living illegally, the role of women in the course of the national partisan war and their eventual fates.

The subjects of the research are women who, after the Second World War, became participants in the national partisan war in communist-occupied Latvia.

The research uses unpublished archival documents, published and unpublished memoirs of participants in the national partisan war, and scientific research by other authors on the armed national resistance movement.

The degree of research is to provide a general insight. It is desirable to continue the research in the future to obtain facts about specific groups of national partisans and the involvement of women in them.

There is a saying: 'War has no female face' though women are sometimes forced to take part in it. Due to research of sources and literature it is now known that during the period 1944–1956 almost 414 women either took part in, or illegally lived with, the Latvian national partisan groups. That represents 3% of all 13,000 national partisans. The number may rise in the future, if the research on the resistance movement is continued. Just over half of these women – 219 – were arrested, and 105 passed away. Some of these women died in the battlefield and from severe injuries. There are also those who committed suicide or died before trial or during imprisonment. At least 20 of these women, following legalisation, were deported between 25 and 27 March 1949. They were mostly deported with their families, and because of this the number of people who suffered from the repressions keeps increasing. At least 28 women managed to legalise themselves successfully. But the fate of 29 women is still unknown; in some cases even their names are unknown, but that does not change the fact that they took part in the forest brother's groups.

Out of all of these women there were 13 girls, who were younger than 15. Ten of them lived in the forest with their parents; two were given to foster care or adopted. One girl was born on the day when the particular partisan group was being destroyed and died the same day, but another disappeared without a trace during a similar situation. Two girls were born, when their mothers were already imprisoned. From the girls who lived in the forest, three died and one was injured.

Many supporters of the national armed resistance were women. They were the partisan family members, girlfriends, distant relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. A total of 2,772 were arrested and many were deported. It can be seen that the number of women who were supporters of partisans is much greater than the number of women who went into the woods or were living illegally.

It must be mentioned, that these numbers are not 100% precise – they are based on information that was obtained during research. Only the number of arrested women is more precise, because of the available statistics. Also, the number of examples used to illustrate the facts is not large, due to the scope of the paper.

Reasons to Join Partisan Groups

After the war, national resistance was mainly organised and carried out by men. From the summer of 1944 after the Red Army reoccupied Latgale, Vidzeme and most of Zemgale, many men and teenagers had to begin living illegally. This was because of their unwillingness to cooperate with the mobilisation and fight in the Red Army, and fear of arrests because the communist regime began repressions almost immediately. At the beginning, the illegals lived and hid either individually or in small groups, hoping that the situation would soon change and they could go back to their normal lives.

Unfortunately, nothing changed for the better and illegals, who were mainly nationalists, began uniting in organised groups with the focus on fighting the communist occupation's power. They were sure that after the defeat of Nazi Germany, allies – the USA and Great Britain – would turn to the USSR. There was similar hope towards the neutral Sweden. Armed groups of men were getting ready to fight the Russian army to drive them away from the territory of Latvia in case of a new war.

The occupation regime ruthlessly turned against national partisans and their families. Relatives of those, who went into the forest, were arrested by Chekists and imprisoned as hostages, and they were regularly beaten up. Chekists were hoping this would force those in the forests to willingly turn themselves in, though that happened very rarely. More often, wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of partisans and illegals would go into the forest. This was not due to ideological considerations, but because they wanted to escape from arrests, beatings and sexual violence. Many women went into the forest after being arrested and let go to make their husband or boyfriends, who lived in the woods, surren-

der. They knew that it would not be possible but they also knew they would not be able to take the physical and mental torture again.

One of the first women who joined the national partisans was Leontīne Slucka ('Ina'), the daughter of Viļaka hospital paramedic Vilhelms Romāns. During the war, Leontīne's husband Bronislavs Sluckis ('Indulis') worked on the Viļaka parish board and in the autumn of 1944 he was arrested as a 'German supporter'. Chekists were hoping to recruit him as an informer and they let him go for a short period of time. Bronislavs used this as an opportunity to move into an illegal state, because he did not want to become a traitor. For Leontīne, there was no threat of arrest yet, but she did not want to live separately from her husband as they were recently married. For that reason, by the end of 1944, Leontīne joined her husband at the national partisan camp at Viļaka parish in Bronti forest. Soon afterwards her parents and both sisters followed, because Chekists were turning their repressions against whole Romāns family.¹

Another reason that made women and children go into the forest was the deportations. It was mainly the action of 25 March 1949, and those who moved to living illegally, were mostly family members of arrested or legalised partisans, and thus were under threat of deportation. Aina Eiklone, daughter of Valka county Sinole parish partisan group leader Ludolfs Eiklons, managed to escape the deportation. She was not living at home at that time, but her mother was deported. A few days later, Ludolfs came out of the forest to take his daughter to the group. Viļaka county national partisan's Francis Dukovskis' sisters Malvīne and Tekla went through arrests, interrogations and torture in 1945, when their brother deserted from the Red Army. In 1949 both sisters lived with their father's brother, who was deported on 25 March. Chekists did not take women with them, but they were afraid because they believed that arrests and torture would follow again. That is why they contacted national partisans and joined Aleksandrs Plešanovs' ('Boļšaks') group, and running away with them was their relative Anastasija Čigure.²

Illegal Life

At first, life in the forest can sound romantic, but the reality was much harsher. Initially, a person had to deal with the psychological shock that was caused by such sudden and fundamental change. It was not just leaving home for unknown length of time, but the possibility of never meeting relatives again, or very rarely. National partisan lives were led by a strong conspiracy and everybody, including women, had to accept it. They also had to

¹ Interview with Leontīne Augustāne, February 2002; Zigmārs Turčinskis, 'Latvijas Nacionālo partizānu apvienības izveidošanās un darbība Stampaku periodā (1944. gada oktobris–1945. gada marts)', in: *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti*, Rīga, vol. 10, 2004, p. 447.

² Interview with Francis Dukovskis, July 2004; Zigmārs Turčinskis, *Ziemeļvidzemes mežabrāļi. Latvijas nacionālo partizānu cīņas Valkas apriņķi un Alūksnes apriņķa rietumu daļā 1944–1953. gads*, Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 2011, pp. 218–221.

adjust to it being cold and wet in the bunker because it was not always possible to warm it up. During the summer forests were filled with mosquitos, horse flies and other insects, which could not be avoided. There were practically no amenities in the forest.

Many of the women who joined the partisan groups only had basic items with them, but some did not even have that. Because of that, they had to share their items, to accommodate others with clothes, socks and shoes at least in the beginning. As time went on, with the help of family members or supporters outside the forest, the situation could be improved. But, if women had to go to the forest during late autumn or winter, then this option was limited, because partisans tried to leave the bunker as rarely as possible, so as not to leave footprints that might attract attention.

Every new partisan group member meant that the living space would get smaller and there would be less food. That is why everybody had to count on some inconvenience and had to bear the situation with patience. This was especially the case with stationary winter bunkers. When it was warm, it was possible to build a simple branch hut or a tent, but it was impossible to expand the bunker. Every inhabitant, regardless of gender – no matter whether they wanted it or not – had to squeeze closer together, because turning the newcomers down meant they would be arrested or killed.

The same applied to food. As the number of group members was growing, partisans tried to get more food, but sometimes they had to live with what they had and endure hunger. Food for partisans was the most important and sometimes the most painful topic. National partisan Maigonis Lapacinskis remembers that he was always thinking about where to get food. Brunhilda Foglele used to be angry at those group members who went to meet supporters and were fed there with homemade food: “To us, they would bring bread and a small amount of meat that was given to them”.³ The outrage was justified, because the food of those who lived in the forest was the same: bread, smoked meat, potatoes, porridge for example. Sometimes it was possible to hunt forest animals, but partisans had to be careful about shooting. If bunker or summer camp was close to water, they went fishing. They sourced dairy products from supporters or requisitioned them from dairies.

Hygiene was a really important question for forest dwellers. Dirt and insects were not allowed, which is why everybody made sure they were able to wash themselves and clean their clothes. On top of all that, women had to take care of their personal hygiene needs, and that of their children. Judging by pictures that were taken in forest, national partisans took good care of themselves; it can be seen from their clean clothes and from the inside of the bunker, also from men’s shaved faces and women’s hairstyles.

Women in the national partisan groups usually worked on domestic chores. Their du-

³ Conversation with Maigonis Lapacinskis, October 2000; Conversation with Brunhilda Foglele, November 1999.

ties were cooking food, cleaning and mending clothes. Women who had a medical education or at least some knowledge of it, took care of the injured or sick group members. Doctors were highly valued. In 1946, the partisan from the Kabile group Antonija Žmudiņa ('Black Rider'), who was a trained nurse, treated seriously injured Osvalds Pētersons from a different partisan group for five months.⁴

Women were usually not involved in military actions, food requisitioning or attacks on the occupation regime's collaborators, and were not taken along to meetings with members from other groups. This was done to assure safety: partisans believed that in case of an arrest women and girls would 'break down' faster and confess. Therefore, it was considered better if women knew as little as possible about how the group operated.

Women did have some duties. Standing guard at the bunker was obligatory for all members of the group. They were given partisan codenames, and they were sent out to collect food from supporters. In those cases when a women had her personal documents with her, she was given a liaison officer's duties.⁵

Women usually had no weapons although sometimes exceptions were made with a pistol or a revolver for potential self-defence. Rifles, machine guns and 'heavy' machinery were left to men; because of height and weight advantages they were able to use them more effectively.

During life in the forest there were also relationships, including romance. There were married people in the groups, who overcame the difficult aspects of illegal life together, defended each other during the occupier attacks and sometimes died or were arrested together. At the same time, new relationships formed in the forest, because many national partisans were young people and began illegal life before starting a family. For some, love became a support in uncertainty and loss, caused by illegal life and the communistic regime's repressions. After their family's deportation, the national partisan commander of Smiltene parish Aleksandr Sarja ('Saša') lived in the forest with Olga Ozoliņa. Both died on 24 February 1950, after a traitor disclosed the location of their bunker. Mihalīna Supe ('Kaija')'s only support after the death of her family was her group member Arvīds Viksiņš ('Jaunais'). Both lived together from 1946 to 1954, when Arvīds was killed at their hideout by Chekists.⁶

Legalisation

One of the options to leave the forest and return home was by official legalisation – le-

⁴ *Uz ežiņas galvu liku...: traģiskās partizānu cīņas Latvijas mežos pēckara gados, 1. grāmata*, edited by Aleksandrs Kalvāns, Rīga: Daugava, 1993, p. 347.

⁵ Interview with Leontīne Augustāne, February 2002; interview with Mihalīna Supe, March 2002; Tālvāldis Bāliņš [et al.], *Pretestības kustība okupācijas varām Latvijā: atmiņās un dokumentos No 1941 līdz 1956. gadam*, Rīga: Sol Vita, 1997, p. 189.

⁶ Interview with Mihalīna Supe, March 2002.; Zigmārs Turčinskis, *op. cit.*, p. 232, pp. 252–253.

aving the bunker or the hiding place, and contacting the authorities. Usually, those who chose this way were people who went into the forest to escape the mobilisation for the Red Army. They were not involved in active armed fighting against the occupation regime, which is why after the war ended there was no need for illegal life. Because of their legalisation, their family members – including women – who hid from repressions, could come out of the forest. Those who believed that national partisan's fighting was not useful⁷ were also legalised.

Unfortunately, despite the promises of the authorities, nothing ended with just legalisation and it was not important if it was a man or a woman who applied, because they were usually arrested. That could happen right after applying, or later. For example, Vilma Augstkalne ('Vilma') stayed in a forest alone, because over the years the group she joined at Alūksne county Mālupe parish was destroyed. She legalised herself on 14 September 1953 and was immediately arrested. Another Mālupe parish partisan, Magda Liepace ('Ilzīte'), did the same in 1946. She managed to live freely for almost two years; the arrest followed on 12 April 1948.⁸

Another repressive measure the occupying regime used on legalised partisans, was their deportation with all family members on 25 March 1949. All together, there were 13,095 people deported from Latvia, who fell into the so-called nationalist category. It included both legalised national partisans and those people whose family members had been brought to trial.

There were also some lucky legalisation cases, where physical repressions did not follow. That was possible, if a woman had lived illegally for a short time and it was hard to incriminate her with something. Also, those women who had become legalised by the end of national partisan war from 1956–1957 were not repressed. The last women who legalised themselves in Latvia's territory were Ksenija Mičule and Tekla Mičule, who together with three male family members, announced themselves to the authorities on 13 February 1957. The Mičuļi group lived in a forest at Viļaka parish from 1945, periodically changing their location. The reason for legalisation was Ksenija Mičule's health, which did not allow her to continue to live in the forest without medical help; at the same time, the rest of their family members legalised themselves.⁹

⁷ Heinrihs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956*, vol. 1, Rīga: Preses nams, 1996, pp. 235–237; Zigmārs Turčinskis, op. cit., pp. 88–92, p. 232.

⁸ Zigmārs Turčinskis, op. cit., p. 169, p. 205; *No NKVD līdz KGB. Politiskās prāvas Latvijā 1940–1986: Noziegumos pret padomju valsti apsūdzēto Latvijas iedzīvotāju rādītājs*, edited by Rudite Viksne and Kārlis Kangeris, Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 1999, p. 451.

⁹ Heinrihs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956*, vol. 1, Rīga: Preses nams, 1996, p. 245; *Aizvestie: 1949. gada 25. marts*, vol. 1, prepared by Andra Āboliņa, Rīga: Latvijas Valsts arhīvs, 2007, p. 391; Ada Slavieša, *Memoirs*, [online], in <http://www.dzivesstasts.lv/lv/free.php?id=20920> (16-08-2023).

Arrest, Investigation, Trial

During the research so far, it has been revealed that in Latvia there were 219 women arrested as national partisans or illegals; this number can be viewed as fairly accurate. Some women were arrested during anti-partisan operations or during forest searching, but some were arrested at supporters' houses or at illegal hiding places.

On 25 February 1950, Chekists attacked a bunker led by Jānis Indāns and Jānis Grāversons at Jēkabpils county. The number of attackers was huge: 12 partisans fought 550 Chekists, but the battle was long and cruel. Chekists only managed to arrest one person, Hilda Vietniece, because she did not fight and remained in a bunker. Another 11 partisans were killed.¹⁰

Ērika Launīte was arrested with help from partisan Jānis Vanags ('Kaminskis'), who was recruited as a Cheka agent. During the meeting on the evening of 12 December 1946, Vanags together with four other agents detained Launīte and did not allow her to leave. After that, one of the agents went to get a car and Launīte was taken to Tukums, where the NKVD (Rus. Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del – 'People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs') were already waiting for her.¹¹

Arrest was followed by an investigation, which took place over several months. Chekists tried to get information from those arrested about partisans who were still hiding, locations of their bunkers and the names of supporters. During the interrogation, arrested people had to endure threats, verbal abuse and physical violence. Torture methods used often became the cause of death of the arrested. Georgīna Irbe died in 1946, at Pleskava prison. Before going to the forest, she lived in Kacēni parish that was lost to Russia. Helēna Mac-kute ('Egle') during the time of her arrest in September 1950 drank sodium hydroxide and died at Rīga Central prison's hospital on 4 January 1951. Florentīna Kalēja ('Parra'), while arrested, bit a poison ampule, which Chekists had not found in her clothes.¹²

Two national partisans were given a death sentence and executed. One of them was Valērija Mundure ('Marta Skuja'). From the summer of 1945 she took part in the 'Association of Latvian Fatherland Guards (partisans)', which covered a large part of south Lat-gale. Valērija was the partisan's newspaper *Fatherland Guard* editor and she published her poems and articles in it. The death sentence was carried out on 17 September 1946 at

¹⁰ Heinrihs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956*, vol. 1, Rīga: Preses nams, 1996, p. 336; *Nezināmais karš: latviešu nacionālo partizānu cīņas pret padomju okupantiem, 1944–1956*, edited by Liene Apine and Aleksandrs Kiršteins, Rīga: Domas spēks, 2012, p. 361.

¹¹ Tālvāldis Bāliņš, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–192.

¹² Information given by Sēlija national partisan movement researcher Gunārs Blūzma; list of arrested women, made by author; *Uz ežņas galvu liku...: traģiskās partizānu cīņas Latvijas mežos pēckara gados*, 2. grāmata, edited by Aleksandrs Kalvāns, Rīga: Daugava, 1995, p. 124, p. 126; Tālvāldis Bāliņš [et al.], *Pretestības kustība okupācijas varām Latvijā: atmiņas un dokumentos no 1941. līdz 1956. gadam*, Rīga: Sol Vita, 1997, pp. 135–136.

Rīga Central prison. The other was Agate Sprukule, who was arrested at Viļaka parish on 7 March 1950 and was shot dead at Rīga Central prison on 6 April 1951.¹³

Death in the Forest

One of the most tragic aspects of life in forest was death during Chekist attacks or a battle. It is known that this was the case for 103 women – national partisans from 1945 to 1953. Most of them were killed during battle or at the hideout; at least three of them committed suicide. Three, to not fall into the arms of Chekists, were killed by their group members, because that was a previous deal between partisans. It is known that at least two women died from injuries while being detained and put in hospital. Many of these women's burial places are still unknown.

Battles with Chekists were cruel: if it was not possible to escape from a siege, then partisans fought until the end, trying to make their lives more expensive, killing as many attackers as possible. During those times, not only men fought heroically, but also women and teenagers.

For a long time, 18-year-old Vera Rublovska, her 16-year-old brother Ojārs Rublovskis, together with other partisans from their group fired on Chekists in the 29 May 1945 battle, but they were killed. Their father, the group's commander Rūdolfs Rublovskis was badly injured and Chekists threw him in the carriage on to his children's bodies. He died during the journey. Partisans who were killed were displayed for recognition at Vidaga centre at Sikšņi elementary school where Vera and Ojārs had been pupils.

Herta Liepiņa blew herself up in Liepna parish's Strauti forest on 1 April 1951, to avoid surrender. She had previously told her group members that she would not fall into the arms of Chekists alive, because during the arrest previously she had been heartlessly beaten and did not want to relive that. Chekists managed to capture Herta's brother Alberts Liepiņš ('Lapiņš') and Jānis Timša. Her remains were put into a box and taken away from the battlefield. Unfortunately, it is still unknown where they were buried.¹⁴

Alongside Latvians during the national partisan battles, women of other nationalities were also killed. Currently, it is known that there were seven Lithuanians, one Russian woman and one Polish (or Belarusian) woman. The most information available currently is about the Russian woman Nina Trofimova from the Alberts Irbe ('Vanags') group. She died at Abrene county at the Kacēni parish, which was lost to Russia in June of 1946, when Chekists besieged the partisan's summer camp. During the battle Eduards Irbe, Emma Pokusa

¹³ Investigation file of Sprukule Agate Jezupova, Rīga, 1950, in: *Latvian State Archive*, fond 1986, op. 1., file 29482, p. 10–11, p. 84, p. 189, p. 245; list of arrested woman, made by author; Heinrihs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956*, vol. 1, Rīga: Preses nams, 1996, p. 189, pp. 192–193, pp. 195–196, p. 206; Heinrihs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956*, vol. 3, Rīga: Preses nams, 2003, pp. 248–257.

¹⁴ Interview with Velta Bukša, July 2003; Zigmārs Turčinskis, *op. cit.*, p. 52, pp. 54–55.

and a partisan with the codename 'Džons' were also killed. Chekists did not even bury the remains: after two months, Trofimova's remains were found by berry pickers.¹⁵

The national partisan war did not end with a victory, though for 12 years it did not let the communist occupation regime to take root in Latvia. Even later, when active resistance ended, memories of the partisan war remained, along with the awareness that Latvians could stand against violent foreign regimes if needed. This awareness helped people during the Awakening years and is still important today.

¹⁵ Investigation file of Vorslova Bronislava Petrovna, Riga, 1945, in: *Latvian State Archive*, fond 1986, op. 1, file 16144, vol. 1, pp. 239–241, and vol. 3, p.17; Information given by Sēlija national partisan movement researcher Gunārs Blūzma; *Uz ežiņas galvu liku...: traģiskās partizānu cīņas Latvijas mežos pēckara gados, 2. grāmata*, edited by Aleksandrs Kalvāns, Rīga: Daugava, 1995, p.124; *Nezināmais karš: latviešu nacionālo partizānu cīņas pret padomju okupantiem, 1944–1956*, edited by Liene Apine and Aleksandrs Kiršteins, Rīga: Domas spēks, 2012, pp. 386–387; Tālivaldis Bāliņš, op. cit, p. 308, p. 319, p. 321, p. 326.

Inese Dreimane

Latvijos moterys – tautinio ginkluoto pasipriešinimo dalyvės

Santrauka

Straipsnyje apžvelgiamas Latvijos moterų dalyvavimas ginkluotame nacionaliniame pasipriešinimo judėjime po Antrojo pasaulinio karo. Nustatyta, kad 1944–1956 m. nacionaliniame partizaniniame kare dalyvavo ne mažiau kaip 414 latvių moterų. Priešingai nei vyrai, jos nekariaudavo, bet dirbdavo buitines darbus ir teikdavo medicininę pagalbą.

Moterys prisijungdavo prie nacionalinių partizanų būrių, kad išvengtų suėmimo dėl to, kad praeityje buvo partizanų rėmėjos. Pasitaikė atvejų, kai moterys į mišką ėjo todėl, kad ten jau buvo jų šeimos nariai. Kartais miške buvo kuriamos naujos šeimos ir gimdavo vaikai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Latvija, moterys, partizanai, okupacija, pasipriešinimas.