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► **To cite this version:**

Alain Blum, Amandine Regamey. THE HERO, THE MARTYR, AND THE ERASED RAPE (LITHUANIA 1944-2000). *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 2014, *Gendered Laws of War*, 39, pp.105 - 128. hal-01390325

HAL Id: hal-01390325

<https://auf.hal.science/hal-01390325>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2016

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Belin | « [Clio](#) »

2014/1 No. 39 | pages 105 - 128

ISSN 1252-7017

This document is a translation of:

Alain Blum and Amandine Regamey and Translated by Helen Tomlinson, « Le héros et la martyre ou le viol effacé (Lituanie 1944-2000)? », *Clio* 2014/1 (No. 39), p. 105-128.

Available online at :

http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CLIO1_039_0105--the-hero-the-martyr-and-the-erased.htm

The English version of this issue is published thanks to the support of the CNRS

How to cite this article :

Alain Blum and Amandine Regamey, « Le héros et la martyre ou le viol effacé (Lituanie 1944-2000)? », *Clio* 2014/1 (No. 39), p. 105-128.

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The hero, the martyr, and the erased rape (Lithuania 1944-2000)

Alain BLUM & Amandine REGAMEY¹

On 10 June 1959, Elena Spirgevičienė,² a resident of Kaunas in Lithuania, lodged a complaint with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. She was enraged that the title of Hero of the Soviet Union had been posthumously awarded to a certain Alfonsas Čeponis, a Soviet partisan killed in 1944 during a Gestapo operation. Yet, according to Elena Spirgevičienė, this man did not deserve the title: he was part of a criminal gang who had raped her, murdered her sister, and had attempted to rape and then killed her daughter, Elena Spirgevičiūtė. This story, which remains controversial to this day, embodies the complexity of the situation in a territory occupied by the German army during the Second World War and in which Soviet partisans waged a long guerrilla war until the

¹ We wish to thank Masha Cerovic, Thomas Chopard, Juliette Denis, Emilia Koustova, Vanessa Voisin and two anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback, which greatly contributed to this article. We also wish to thank Arturas Jagolevičius and Česlovas Spirgevičius, who kindly granted us an extended interview.

² Note about names: the majority of names mentioned in these documents are Lithuanian. When the source language is Russian, the name has been transliterated into Cyrillic. For our part, we use Lithuanian spelling: Čeponis (transliterated into Cyrillic as Чепонис) or Spirgevičiūtė (transliterated as Спиргевичюте). Readers should also note that Lithuanian surnames contain a suffix reflecting a person's status: a man's surname does not change when he marries, and often ends in "is" or "as". An unmarried woman, however, will generally take her father's surname with the suffix changed to "tė", while a married woman takes her husband's surname, with the suffix changed to "nė". Thus, Elena Spirgevičienė is the wife of Stasys Spirgevičius; their daughters are Elena Spirgevičiūtė and Sabina Spirgevičiūtė-Šultienė (married to a man named Šultis), and their son, Česlovas Spirgevičius.

arrival of the Red Army. These partisans – heroes in the Soviet Union – were termed “bandits” by the German authorities.³ The story also crystallizes the permanent tension that existed between the Lithuanian population and the Soviet authorities, which annexed the country in August 1940,⁴ shortly before the German invasion, and then recaptured it towards the end of 1944.

The war was beset by conflicts between various groups: the German army and its local ancillaries, the Lithuanian police and administration installed by the Germans; structured groups of Soviet partisans – whether local or from Russia – who enjoyed considerable autonomy from general staff headquarters in Moscow;⁵ and troops of Lithuanian partisans such as the Lithuanian Freedom Army (LLA: *Lietuvos laisvės armija*), which fought against the German and then Soviet troops.⁶ Lithuania was also marked by extreme violence against civilian populations: deportations carried out by the Soviets in June 1941, just before the German invasion;⁷ extermination of Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their Lithuanian ancillaries;⁸ and multiple exactions committed by the German armies⁹ but also by Soviet and Lithuanian partisans. What is more, the situation in Lithuania differed from that in Bielorussia or Ukraine: Soviet partisans were far fewer in number, and often came from outside Lithuania. Following recapture by the Red Army, civilian populations were once again subjected to several large waves of deportations, which continued until 1952.¹⁰ After the war, many Soviet partisans became “combatants for the defence of the people”:¹¹ presented as self-defence groups, these

³ Cerovic 2012.

⁴ The Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed on 21 July 1940 by a government installed by the Soviets, and officially integrated into the USSR on 3 August 1940 (Zubkova 2008).

⁵ On this subject, the most recent studies include Cerovic 2012 and Statiev 2013.

⁶ Zubkova 2008; Anušauskas 2001; Statiev 2013.

⁷ Blum, Craveri and Nivelon 2012.

⁸ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis 2006.

⁹ Dieckmann, Toleikis and Zizas 2005.

¹⁰ See, for example, Blum, Craveri and Nivelon 2012; Tininis 2008 and 2009; *Sound Archives – European Memories of the Gulag*.

¹¹ Бойцы защиты народа.

armed groups often acted as ancillaries to the Ministry of the Interior in the fight against the Lithuanian resistance to the Soviet occupation and during large-scale deportations, notably from 1947 onwards.

Two opposing narratives thus came head to head in 1958–1959, when the affair related in the documents published here occurred (cf. this volume, *Documents*). A Soviet narrative – public, dominant, and devised at a very early stage – commemorated the Soviet partisans and sought to emphasize the Lithuanian origins of a number of them, thereby reiterating that these territories – annexed in August 1940 – were part of the USSR. Thus, in 1958, on the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the Komsomols – the Young Communist League – three young Lithuanians, all of whom were members of the “Committee of the Clandestine Urban Komsomol Organization of Kaunas”, were posthumously decorated with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest distinction in the USSR. Aside from Alfonsas Čeponis, who is discussed here, the men were Juozas Aleksonis and Gubertas Borisa, names that sound perfectly Lithuanian.¹²

Another narrative, in contrast, circulating by word-of-mouth, celebrated the Lithuanian partisans who had fought *against* the Soviet troops since 1944. These partisans, or “forest brothers”, carried out many one-off armed actions against the Soviet authorities or Communist Lithuanians who collaborated with the new authorities. Resistance to the Soviet occupation lasted much longer in Lithuania than in the other Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia. Despite the large-scale deployment of Interior Ministry troops and repeated deportations – particularly in rural areas, where support for the “forest brothers” was strong – this resistance continued until 1952–1953. Labelled “bandits” by the Soviet authorities, they quickly came to be seen as heroes in Lithuania, which today celebrates them in numerous monuments, commemorative plaques, ceremonies and publications.¹³ Elena Spirgevičienė’s complaint, written in 1959, draws on this narrative. It is possible that the backdrop of the Khrushchev Thaw and the emergence of a less monolithic memory

¹² Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR no. 207/5, Moscow, 1 July 1958.

¹³ Anušauskas 2012.

of the war in the Baltic countries¹⁴ may have played a role in her decision to write the letter, but may also help explain why Moscow ordered Vilnius to respond. On the other hand, the custom of making complaints is an old one, as is the transfer of certain complaints from one body to another.

We will endeavour here to examine both the narrative of the heroic fighter constructed by the Soviet authorities around the figure of Alfonsas Čeponis, and the process of contesting and deconstructing this narrative led by Elena Spirgevičiūtė's mother, which instead evokes the figure of a common bandit. The examination of her complaint at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party was to end with a reaffirmation of the heroic narrative, while also progressively transforming plaintiff into suspect and erasing the question of the rape itself entirely from the record. Lastly, we will see how the second narrative nevertheless survived within Lithuanian dissident movements before returning to centre stage at the time of Lithuanian independence, thereby constructing a new figure of the martyr, centred on the rape attempt.

The Soviet heroism of the combatant

From 1944 on, internal Komsomol reports and newspaper articles¹⁵ highlighted the heroic actions of Čeponis, the young Komsomol. The group of Soviet partisans to which he belonged had dynamited German trains from November 1943 onwards, killed many Nazis, liberated Jews from the Kaunas ghetto, and organized the escape of prisoners of war and several internees from the infamous Kaunas Ninth Fort, one of the sites for the mass execution of Jews and scores of other pro-Soviet Lithuanians.¹⁶

¹⁴ Tcherneva and Denis 2011.

¹⁵ LYA, fond K-41, inv. 1, d. 530, ff. 51-53, article from *Komianimo Tiesa*, 4, 5 December 1944.

¹⁶ This is described in *Le Livre noir* [The Black Book] (Ehrenburg & Grossman 2003: 314-325).

Death made Čeponis both a hero and a martyr,¹⁷ for, though outnumbered, he had single-handedly resisted a group of German soldiers and chosen suicide over capture by the Gestapo. In September 1944 an official report recalled:

Komsomol (Sasha) Čeponis was killed on 24 January 1944 in Siūlu Street, in the neighbourhood of Šančiai in Kaunas. The Gestapo and the German police surrounded his apartment and, though injured, he returned fire for 5 hours and killed several Gestapo officers. When the Gestapo began to throw grenades at the apartment, he caught them and threw them back out of the window right among the Germans. Then the German torch bearers decided to burn down the house where he was resisting. He refused to surrender and committed suicide.¹⁸

This story was recounted, down to its very last detail, in one report after another. In one report, which probably dates from late 1944, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Komsomol relates that Čeponis “had single-handedly resisted the enemy assault for five hours” and that “when the police began to launch grenades through his window, Com[rade] Čeponis caught them mid-air and threw them back at the police”.¹⁹ On 2 July 1945 he was

¹⁷ It should be remembered that *подвиг* in Russian signifies both an act of heroism and the sufferings of martyrs, and that, historically, the two terms are related (Regamey 2007).

¹⁸ “Комсомолец Чепонис (Саша) погиб 24 января 1944 г. в гор. Каунас, район Шанчяй, на ул. Сюлу. Он был окружен гестапо и немецкой полицией в своей квартире, там его ранили он 5 часов отстреливался, убил несколько гестаповцев. Когда гестаповцы начали бросать гранаты в его квартиру он ловил их и отбрасывал через окно в гушу немцев. Тогда немецкие факельщики хотели поджечь дом, где он защищался. Он не желая сдаться в плен – застрелился”, RGASPI, fond M-1, inv. 53, d. 231, ff. 115: report by the secretary of the clandestine Central Committee of the Komsomol of the southern region of Lithuania to the Central Committee of the Komsomol of the USSR, “On the clandestine work of the organization of Komsomols in the southern region of Lithuania”, 3 September 1944, Vilnius.

¹⁹ “Когда полицейские начали кидать через окно гранаты т. Чепонис подхватывал их на лету и выкидывал их обратно в полицейских”, Central Committee of the VLKSM, report on the work of the Komsomol in the SSR of Lithuania behind enemy lines between 1941–1944, signed by the secretary of the CC of the LKSM,

posthumously awarded the Order of the Patriotic War 1st Class. The award was officially presented in Vilnius on 9 July 1945.

In a report dated 6 March 1958, probably intended to justify future awards, it is noted that in December 1943 Čeponis was apparently severely wounded during an encounter with a “Hitlerite patrol”, after dynamiting a train with a group of partisans. After taking refuge in a village, he is thought to have been treated in Kaunas, and then taken to his parents’ house.²⁰ It is therefore likely that the visit to the Spirgevičius family described in the plaintiff’s letter took place between the attack in which Čeponis was injured and his return to his mother’s house.

The sources available make it difficult to ascertain the exact chain of events. Nevertheless, we can assume that the injured Čeponis’s return home was not immediate and that, after the train attack (which may have taken place in late December), the small group of partisans hid in the town, where they attempted to obtain provisions and support from the population. The KGB investigator Miknevičius would make the case for this version of events in his statements to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party. Miknevičius declared that on 2 January 1944, the group had gone to Kundrotense’s house in Gėlių Rato Street, situated approximately one kilometre away from Tvirtovės Street where the Spirgevičius family lived (doc. 2).

While official sources do not suggest that the group went into hiding in Kaunas after this attack, they do describe another encounter with civilians. Despite Čeponis’s injury, it seems that the group of partisans did come to the aid of villagers who were being pillaged by police officers in the pay of the Germans.²¹ This episode is taken up in “Faithful heart. True story”, published in 1958 in issue 9 of the

Macevičius, undated (probably late 1944), RGASPI, fond M-1, inv. 53, d. 231, f. 125.

²⁰ Information on the activity of the clandestine Komsomol organization of the city of Kaunas during the Great Patriotic War, RGASPI, fond M-1, inv. 53, d. 231, ff. 137–157, signed by the secretary of the CC of the Lithuanian LKSM, A. Ferensas, to the organizer in charge of the CC of the VLKSM, Com[rade] Iatsevich, 6 March 1958.

²¹ *Idem.*

journal *Smena*, the journal of the Komsomol Central Committee.²² In this romanticized account, the partisans, after routing the officers, knock insistently on the door of a house. The old woman who opens the door cries: “Jesus-Maria, they’re folk from round here!” Only the fact that she announces this “in a reproachful tone of voice” to someone hidden behind her suggests that, in the village, not everyone had the same confidence in the partisans.

In this account, Čeponis appears both as a brave, trustworthy comrade and as a good brother and son, concerned for his mother, who runs herself ragged nursing him and prays for him “in a fervent murmur”. Imagined as the incarnation of a Lithuanian society still in thrall to its prejudices, Čeponis’s mother would nevertheless receive a telegram from the Komsomol’s Central Committee dated 11 July 1958, congratulating her on having “reared a valiant and hardy fighter for the good of the people”.²³

The publication of this article in *Smena* also shows the extent to which the Soviet authorities, and more specifically the Komsomol, strove to mobilize support by evoking this hero. This mobilization had repercussions. When a programme dedicated to Lithuania’s Komsomol heroes was broadcast on state television on 17 July 1958, one of the programme makers, who had met Čeponis’s mother, lashed out at the fact that:

Čeponis’s family live in rooms whose walls are chequered with bullets and grenade shrapnel. The tattered wallpaper dates back to the Hitlerian occupation. [Moreover] a certain female citizen installed by the Hitlerian administration [occupies one of the bedrooms, which she is trying to appropriate], and for seven years she has poisoned the life of Hero Čeponis’s mother. It is a scandal!²⁴

²² Konstantin Vorobev, “Верное сердце. Бель”, *Smena*, 9, 1958, p. 10–12.

²³ RGASPI, fond M-7, inv. 2, d. 1315, f. 1.

²⁴ “[...] семья Чепониса живет в комнатах, стены которых сплошь изрешечены пулями и осколками гранат, ободранные обои времен гитлеровской оккупации! [...] В одной из двух комнат до мая месяца этого года жила некая гражданка, вселенная туда гитлеровской администрацией, [...] семь лет она травила мать Героя Чепониса! Это безобразие!”, letter from G. Nikitin to the CC of the Komsomol, 22 July 1958, RGASPI, fond M-7, inv. 2, d. 1315, f. 6.

It was against this backdrop of mobilization and lingering tension surrounding the German occupation that Elena Spirgevičienė sent her letter to the Central Committee of the CPSU.

Murder, pillage and rape: the return to criminal banditry

In her letter, Elena Spirgevičienė's account of her encounter with the partisans breaks with this heroic narrative. Her argument is couched in the language of factual demonstration and aims above all to convince. She provides a multiplicity of details, writing for example that the partisans wanted her to kneel down in front of the cupboard before killing her, and recalling how, through fear, she waited an hour after the group left before checking that her daughter was indeed dead. Her painstaking account of events makes it possible to trace an internally consistent story.

To support her account, Elena Spirgevičienė adduces various reasons why she is “one of the people” and highlights what makes her a good Soviet citizen: she comes from a poor, working-class and uneducated family and, after the Soviet takeover, her husband worked for the Ministry of the Interior (anti-aircraft defence unit). She draws on Soviet discourse of the period, using stereotyped expressions such as the “difficult days of the German occupation” and “the days of our liberation were approaching”. Furthermore, it is likely that her children, who co-sign the letter, assisted her in drafting the letter, for her son was studying in Russia at the time and was proficient in the language.²⁵

It is the members of the Spirgevičius family who therefore emerge as exemplary Soviets, and not Alfonsas Čeponis and his accomplices – whom she describes as bandits.²⁶ This was a commonly used word in the post-war Soviet Union,²⁷ and was used to refer to individuals who had taken up arms against the Soviet power. The disrepute heaped on such individuals was due not only to the violence they were accused of committing but also to the fact that the political

²⁵ Interview with Arturas Jagolevičius (Bishop at Kaunas, judge in the ecclesiastical tribunal overseeing beatification) and Česlovas Spirgevičius (Elena Spirgevičiūtė's brother), carried out by Alain Blum in Kaunas on 3 June 2013.

²⁶ Бандит.

²⁷ Werth 2007.

nature of their struggle was not recognized, thereby creating an immense gulf between these “gangs” and “true” partisans, who had been organized quasi-militarily during the conflict against the Nazis. Here, the Soviets exploited a widely used technique of discrediting groups engaged in armed resistance against the established authority.

However, Elena Spirgevičienė uses this term to refer to common law banditry, which also existed under Soviet criminal law. By calling the partisans bandits, she thereby revives a meaning ascribed to this term by the Germans during the Second World War.²⁸ While it is impossible to know whether this coincidence was deliberate, it contrasts with her desire to present herself as a model Soviet citizen.

Elena Spirgevičienė thus describes the violence in the language of ordinary criminality, as if disregarding the wartime context. Though the city of Kaunas was still occupied by the Germans (Soviet troops would not arrive until July 1944), Elena Spirgevičienė portrays the police intervention at Čeponis’s mother’s home as that of a legitimate police force seeking delinquents. She even hints that it was because of this crime that the police were pursuing Čeponis before he was killed. In Elena Spirgevičienė’s account, then, a Gestapo intervention against a partisan who had attacked a train is transformed into the arrest of a criminal wearing a suit stolen from her husband (again, this civilian clothing places him outside any combative context).

There is nothing, in the mother’s account, to impute the actions of Čeponis and his companions to the war or wartime conditions – aside from the fact that they are armed. In her account, the men come to indulge in a relentless binge of food, drink, “pawing at the women”, looting and gratuitous killing. All the crimes are described in equal terms by the mother in a surprisingly deadpan sentence. Her own rape is referred to in an aside, almost incidentally, as the almost logical conclusion to the pillage and drinking²⁹ that came before: “One of them demanded that we show them where the pork fat and other foodstuffs were kept. I took them to the storeroom. They took

²⁸ Cerovic 2012; Denis 2008.

²⁹ For the central role of alcohol in incidents opposing Soviet partisans and civil populations, see Cerovic 2012: 332.

everything and raped me.”³⁰ This emphasis on the pillage reiterates the common law criminality of this act.

The plaintiff therefore devotes less than one complete sentence to the rape itself. We do not know if she was raped by several members of the gang, or just one, and the only other piece of information she gives is in an aside to explain that she survived: the fact that one of the rapists intervened on her behalf.

To make sense of this laconic account, we need to consider how rapes committed during the war were discussed in Lithuanian society at this time. We know that rapes committed by groups of Soviet partisans in the territories they controlled cannot be considered “as isolated incidents”.³¹ Is the plaintiff trying to minimize the shame associated with rape by saying as little about it as possible? Or, on the contrary, was her experience similar to Attina Grossman’s description of the rape of German women by Soviet troops in 1945:

while frightful and horrific, it seemed to provoke no guilt (...). Rape was just one more (sometimes the worst, but sometimes not) in a series of horrible deprivations and humiliations of war and defeat.³²

For this woman, the plundering of her food supplies, depriving her and her children of their means of subsistence in the depths of winter, must have been highly traumatic.

Many authors also underline the difference between how men and women in Germany experienced and talked of the rapes.³³ Here, what is striking is the absence of men, and especially the husband, from the account. We do not know, from reading this complaint, whether he was present or not – even though the brother’s account, published later, suggests that he was also there.³⁴ It is difficult to know whether this omission is due to his wife’s sense that he was unable to do anything to protect her, to the fact that he had died long before the

³⁰ “Один из них потребовал показать, где находится сало и другая еда. Я повела их на чердак, где оно было. Они там все забрали и изнасиловали меня”, LYA, фонд 1771, inv. 190, d. 12, f. 37.

³¹ Cerovic 2012: 334.

³² Grossmann 1995: 53.

³³ Naimark 1995; Burds 2001; Grossmann 1995.

³⁴ Spirgevičius 1992.

complaint was written, or even to the desire not to draw attention to the husband's dubious activities (cf. *infra*). In any case, the impression created is of a world of defenceless women and children faced with the intrusion of armed men.

From plaintiff to suspect

In her letter, Elena Spirgevičienė says that she had contacted the party committee of the city of Kaunas, which did not believe her or investigate her statements. She then wrote directly to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow, and it was on the orders of the latter that the Lithuanian Communist Party convened an inquiry. The results were published in a letter written by the secretary of the Central Committee dated 29 October (doc. 3), after a meeting of the Central Committee held on 23 October 1959 (doc. 2). The discussions at this meeting and the resulting letter show the progressive dismantling of all the arguments put forward by the plaintiff; indeed, it is she who finds herself in the dock.

Some of the participants at the meeting expressed doubts about Čeponis: Genrikas Zimanas, who himself commanded a brigade of partisans during the war, acknowledged that complaints had been received against them, “that they were drinking” and posed a risk to the other partisans (“it might bring the police down on Murava”), to such an extent that he suggested that the group should be dissolved. Liaudis, chairman of the KGB, mentioned “two further such incidents” said to involve Čeponis's group, and Sniečkus, the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, stressed that “if the shadow continues to hang over him, it will be difficult for us” (doc. 2).

What is remarkable is that these doubts are echoed in a letter to the secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party dated 29 October 1959, which admits to “isolated cases of breaches in partisan discipline”, though, in the end, the reference to “unjustified risks” is crossed out by hand (doc. 3). For the rest, however, the letter formalizes the rationale that emerges from the discussion and ends by not only clearing Čeponis but also transforming the plaintiff into suspect.

The pillage denounced by Elena Spirgevičienė is not denied, but is justified as a wartime necessity and described as an operation to

secure food supplies. The report presented to the Central Committee mentions that the partisans “demanded food” (while “forgetting about” the drink) and simply acknowledges that “as the partisans left the home of Spirgevičius, they took food and some items of clothing away with them” (doc. 3). This justification nevertheless contradicts the official code of conduct that prevailed at the end of the Second World War: pillage was reprimanded all the more severely³⁵ in those territories where Soviet general staff feared eruptions of violence and exactions, knowing that they were not welcomed as a liberating force.³⁶ Almost 15 years after the end of the conflict, pillage and theft, it seems, were no longer problematic in the eyes of the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Sniečkus: “if they took things, they needed them” (doc. 2). His one concession is to recognize “disciplinary infringements” attributable to the fact that “there was no political leadership”, an accusation often levelled at the partisans. Political considerations (“they were fighting for the Soviet power”) prevail, particularly since “one cannot, of course, fight and keep one’s hands perfectly clean” (Sniečkus, doc. 2).

To what extent was it acceptable for a partisan to get his hands dirty? It seems that this question hinges on the issue of rape itself. Sniečkus, the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, stresses this when he states his aim of “discovering whether she is lying or not (...). Earlier she was saying that they had been raped, but then she recanted.” It seems acceptable for partisans to kill “as an act of self-defence, and not with the aim of rape and burglary” (doc. 3). The question, then, is whether Elena Spirgevičiūtė, Elena Spirgevičienė’s daughter, was raped or not.

For this committee of men, all of whom had experienced war, partisans committing rape was certainly not a novelty. While complaints were few and far between both during and after the war, rapes were nevertheless openly invoked in revenge attacks between groups of partisans, or lamented in reports by the security services.³⁷ On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind the mindset that

³⁵ Cerovic 2012.

³⁶ Denis 2008; Cerovic 2012.

³⁷ Cerovic 2012: 332-337; Burds 2009.

prevailed both within the army and among partisan fighters at this time: the idea that war is all-effacing, that it is legitimate for a fighter to satisfy his desire, and that women in the occupied territories and behind the lines had lost all sense of propriety and threw themselves at soldiers.³⁸ Fifteen years later, was rape considered a more serious offence? It is true that, in the immediate post-war period, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR toughened rape sentences by the decree of 4 January 1949, but this reflected a general trend of late Stalinism.³⁹

Faced with the difficulties inherent in any rape inquiry (lack of material evidence, confrontation of two irreconcilable narratives)⁴⁰ the members of this committee chose to systematically reject the victim's arguments, insisting on the absence of proof and witnesses. The entire episode took place at the plaintiff's house, while her own rape is unproven because it hinges on her complaint alone. It is not possible to confront the parties involved because "all the participants in this operation were killed during the war".

The mother was also reproached for not having spoken out before (no doubt in reference to a statement made in 1949 by an arrested priest, Father Pranas Račiūnas, who had been in contact with her since 1947, and who had not mentioned the rape⁴¹) – without taking into account all the taboos and reticence associated with revealing this rape and the possible fear of tarnishing her daughter's memory. In addition, she was asked to provide no further details, although she could have done so during this cross-examination. Another, particularly fallacious argument is put forward: if the Soviet

³⁸ Cerovic 2012: 332-337; Budnickij 2012: 405-422.

³⁹ Solomon 1996. From a strictly legal point of view, according to the penal code of 1926 – in force until 1960 – rape was punishable by a sentence of 5 years in prison, or up to 8 years if committed against a minor or if it led to the victim's suicide. However, article 157 was amended by decree in 1949, and rape became punishable by internment in a camp for between 10 and 15 years, or 15 to 20 years for the rape of a minor or gang rape. The penal code enacted in 1960 reduced the length of sentences (3 to 7 years in prison) while maintaining this distinction between rape and gang rape or rape of a minor (5 to 15 years in prison).

⁴⁰ Desprez 2012: 50.

⁴¹ Cf. below.

partisans had committed rape and murder, the Germans would have seized the opportunity to reveal this publicly – yet they did not.

Lastly, it is asserted that Čeponis could not have taken part in the violence because he was injured (Staras, doc. 2), and as if to further preserve his memory, it is finally “established” that Elena Spirgevičiūtė and her aunt Stasia Jukaitė were killed by a partisan named Griša – the only member of the group for whom the inquiry is unable to identify a surname (doc. 3).

The issue of the rape is thereby erased from the record as it were, and all that remains is to justify the death of the two young women, or rather, as Sniečkus openly asserts, to “prove that her daughter was killed as a political enemy” (doc. 3). It is therefore claimed that the young women were killed because they were collaborating with the Germans and presented an immediate danger to the group of partisans. It was wartime, and the fact that the aunt, Stasia Jukaitė, ran away is interpreted as a sign that she wished to report the group to the police. It is also claimed that Elena Spirgevičiūtė “spied on the partisans” (doc. 2) and that in a cross-examination in 1949, even her mother had stated that “her daughter had been killed because she had wanted to inform the police” (doc. 2).

But, above all, the argument shifts to another register, one widespread in the USSR: that of discrediting the plaintiff and her family in terms of lifestyle and in social and religious terms. The war was in the past and the notion of the enemy, in the national sense of the term, could no longer be used to discredit a woman giving evidence in 1958 and who was a Soviet citizen. Nevertheless, several references are made to collaboration with the Germans – Spirgevičienė “had nationalist and anti-Soviet leanings” – and the fact that her husband had plundered the bodies of dead Jews deepened the stigma, especially as at the end of the 1950s there was a surge in the arrests of Lithuanians who had participated in the extermination of the Jews.

The main smear, however, is that of being a class enemy: the plaintiff was no doubt conscious of this risk, for she had anticipated it by couching her letter in the language of “one of the people”. The accusation is nonetheless bolstered by the religious dimension: her closeness to and connection with Račiunas, who, as a priest and internee, was a class enemy on two counts.

The conclusion was therefore categorical: the plaintiff was the guilty party, who had to be “unmasked” – a standard term in Stalinist rhetoric and one taken up by the first secretary of the Lithuanian party. If Sharkov, a member of the bureau of the party’s Central Committee, wished to reopen the inquiry, it was not to carry out more extensive investigations into the crimes and rapes committed. He had two objectives, both of which would transform the plaintiff into suspect: to determine her motives for writing the letter, which tarnished the name of a Hero of the Soviet Union (the possibility that he might not be a hero was thus not considered) and to ascertain whether someone else – no doubt an enemy of the Soviet Union, given that she was close to priests – had suggested the idea to her.

The sanctification of the victim in Lithuanian nationalist discourse

Despite the complaint and the inquiry launched in 1959 – and which, it seems, involved the cross-examination of scores of witnesses⁴² – Alfonsas Čeponis remained a Hero of the Soviet Union. His mother received assistance from the Komsomol organization, which repaired her apartment and transformed one of its rooms into a museum.⁴³ Siūlų Gatvė Street, where he was killed, was renamed Čeponis Street, and a boat in the fishing fleet was also named after him.⁴⁴

On the other hand, a Lithuanian opposition to the Soviet Union immediately crystallized around the figure of the murdered young woman, and her memory became a parallel, alternative memory, one anchored in an opposition to the Soviet occupation that drew heavily on religion.

Although her mother, Elena Spirgevičienė, wrote in her letter that after the crime all was forgotten until that fateful day in 1958 when

⁴² While the second document reproduced here clearly refers to these witnesses, we have not been able to identify any trace of the inquiry itself.

⁴³ Letter dated 14 August 1958 from the deputy director of the Komsomol department for agitation and propaganda to G. Nikitin (in response to his complaint of 22 July 1958), RGASPI, fond M-7, inv. 2, d. 1315, f. 7.

⁴⁴ http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=7938. A website dedicated to the Heroes of the Soviet Union.

she discovered the honours paid to Čeponis, history tells a slightly different story. Death immediately made Elena Spirgevičiūtė a symbol, albeit on a very local scale initially. The funerals of Elena Spirgevičiūtė and her aunt drew a large crowd, as can be seen in photos taken that day.⁴⁵ An obituary relating the crimes was published in a local newspaper.⁴⁶

In 1947, Father Pranas Račiūnas retrieved the young woman's diary from her mother, whom he met at her daughter's grave.⁴⁷ He made several copies of this diary and circulated it along with her biography. Pranas Račiūnas was arrested on 4 June 1949⁴⁸ and questioned by an investigator from the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior, the MGB. The diary was seized by the MGB upon his arrest and included in his dossier.⁴⁹ Accused, among other things, of "criminal ties to a Vatican agent and member of the American secret service, a certain Labergé",⁵⁰ Račiūnas was sentenced to 25 years in a special Interior Ministry camp.⁵¹ During the lengthy cross-examinations, which continued from June to December 1949, Elena Spirgevičiūtė was mentioned, in passing, on 7 July. The investigator questioned him on the documents found at his home and in particular those he had copied. He then mentioned Elena's diary. Pranas Račiūnas replied: "I wanted to write a book about

⁴⁵ These photos are kept in the family photo album belonging to Elena's brother, Česlovas Spirgevičius, and reproduced in his book (Spirgevičius 1992). The funeral took place in Saint Antanas Church, close to the victim's home. She was then buried in the former cemetery of the city of Kaunas on Vytautas Avenue. The cemetery was later demolished, and Elena's remains were moved to the cemetery in Eiguliai (Eigulių kapinės) in 1957 (Spirgevičius 1992).

⁴⁶ Article published on 12 January 1944 in *Ateitis* [*The Future*], a newspaper then published in Kaunas.

⁴⁷ Interview with Arturas Jagolevičius..., *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ LYA, fond K-1, inv. 58, d. 45424/3, s.b.

⁴⁹ "Decree to add physical evidence", 30/11/1949, LYA, fond K-1, inv. 58, d. 42424/3 s.b., l. 63. No trace of the diary can be found in the dossier and it is not in the possession of either Elena's brother or the bishop sitting as a judge on the beatification tribunal, each of whom possess only a copy made by Father Račiūnas. One of these was published in *Mirtis atejo iš muravos* (Spirgevičius 1992).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 75.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, f. 82.

Spirgiavičute (*sic*), tragically killed at the hands of plunderers.”⁵² The term “bandit” is not used – but another crime-related term is used in its place.⁵³ Other priests would later take up the issue, gathering testimonies that are now conserved at the Kaunas archbishopric.⁵⁴

A new phase emerged in 1977, corresponding to the development of a very entrenched dissident movement within the Lithuanian Catholic Church. That year Elena Spirgevičiūtė, along with other female students, was described as a victim in the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*. Founded by Father Sigitas Tamkevičius, now Archbishop of Kaunas, this samizdat played an essential role in the Lithuanian dissident movement. In this publication, the young women are already likened to martyrs, for “there have already been many martyrs for their faith, and young women who have sacrificed their life to defend their chastity (the students Elena Spirgevičiūtė, Stasė Lukšaitė, Danutė Burbaitė, and others)”.⁵⁵ Thus it can be said that from the mid-1970s onwards Spirgevičiūtė was identified as a martyr whose purity and faith in Catholicism contrast with the violence of the Soviet occupiers.⁵⁶

We did’nt find any references to this story in writing between 1977 and 1988. But it was invoked from the outset of the independence movements that emerged during perestroika, and for

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, f. 152, cross-examination of Pranas Račiūnas, son of Jurgis, on 7 July 1949, conducted with a Russo-Lithuanian interpreter. The term used is грабитель.

⁵³ We do not know the exact term used by Račiūnas, as his statement is a Russian translation of an oral statement made in Lithuanian. In addition, it is highly likely that the investigator did not wish to transliterate the word “bandit”.

⁵⁴ Interview with Arturas Jagolevičius..., *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ *Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika [Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania]* 28, 29 June 1977.

[http://www.lkbkronika.lt/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=482:issue-no-28&catid=35:chronicles&Itemid=373]

⁵⁶ This type of discourse is not unique to Lithuania. In Hungary, “the Hungarian Catholic Church has used narratives of rape to symbolize the destruction of a Christian nation by a barbarous, heathen force. The Catholic bishop of Győr, Vilmos Apor, ‘martyred’ following his unsuccessful attempt to protect Hungarian women at his palace from Soviet troops, was promoted by the Church for beatification (this was granted in 1997).” (Mark 2005: 141).

the first time in 1988, by a journalist close to the Sąjūdis,⁵⁷ the movement that led Lithuania to independence. Shortly after Lithuania regained its independence, inquiries into several Soviet partisans were launched to investigate instances of violence against civilians.⁵⁸ Čėponis Street reverted to its original name, Siūlų gatvė. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Elena Spirgevičiūtė was put forward for beatification. Indeed, the Archbishop of Kaunas, Sigitas Tamkevičius, promptly requested that the young woman be included in a list of individuals to be beatified, a request that was accepted by Pope John Paul II as part of a wider process of beatifying a number of victims of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe.⁵⁹ Elena's brother convinced the municipality of Kaunas to donate the land on which the house where she was killed once stood (the house itself was demolished in the 1970s) to erect a statue to his sister bearing angel's wings (cf. photograph at the end of the article). The statue, financed by her brother, was inaugurated on 17 October 1998 in the presence of a municipal representative and Sigitas Tamkevičius, and took the form of a largely religious ceremony. Towards the end of 1999 Elena Spirgevičiūtė was officially placed on the list of individuals to be beatified. The first session of the beatification tribunal was held in Kaunas Cathedral on 15 January 2000.⁶⁰

From the point of view of the Church and nationalist discourse, however, some victims make better symbols than others, and it is striking that in the case of the Spirgevičius family, only the attempted rape of the young woman is mentioned, while that of the mother is not referred to at all. Indeed, these conditions (or rather assumptions) – the fact that the young woman was a virgin and resisted, and that she preferred death to dishonour – are essential in her being seen as a “martyr of purity”. The mother's traumatic experience has no place in this discourse, which casts doubt on women who survive rape (by assuming that if they had genuinely resisted, they would be dead). The presumed chastity and virginity of the young woman are

⁵⁷ Article reproduced in Česlovas Spirgevičius, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Whewell 2008.

⁵⁹ Interview with Arturas Jagolevičius..., *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

considered as proof of resistance and appear essential here in conveying a sense of purity, itself essential in expressing the religious dimension of the affair.⁶¹ This, in any case, is the point on which Bishop Arturas Jagolevičius insists:

In Russian we speak of a person's purity, chastity, virtue, which in those times was already very relative [...] Since the time of the first Christians, of the Emperor Diocletian and all the others, how many young women have been killed! That has a religious and even political importance, for the Soviet authorities have revealed these partisans' true colours. If they kill an innocent young woman, it becomes quite a different story if she has retained her innocence, in Russian, her virtue, in Lithuanian, *dorybė*, a virtue which becomes more precious with every passing year, since those around us underestimate it. And so these are, how shall I put it, heroic examples.⁶²

Conclusion: two martyrs, a hero and a saint

This story is not simply one of rapes and crimes perpetrated by Soviet partisans, or of a remarkable complaint lodged in 1959. Its resonance, both throughout the Soviet era and after Lithuanian independence, also makes it the story of two clashing images: Soviet victim *v.* victim of Soviet power, Lithuanian man *v.* Lithuanian woman, martyr *v.* martyr. In the Soviet narrative, Čeponis carried out many acts that were indispensable in making him a hero (dynamiting trains, attacking

⁶¹ No doubt another essential factor was the young woman's prediction that she would die, which conferred upon her an aura of quasi-supernatural foresight. According to one story, which was already being told in the 1950s for it is recounted by Ferensas, secretary to the CC of the Lithuanian Komsomol, she blessed her parents, then told them "you will live, I will be killed" (doc. 2).

⁶² "Ну, как сказать, вот по-русски, это чистота человека, чистоплотность, это целомудрие, вот это добродетель которое в эти времена уже очень такая относительное дело [...] А вот, это, еще с времен первых христиан когда, когда там были эти император Доклециан и все они, и сколько девушек погибло и это время это тоже, как сказать, ну и религиозное значение и даже политическое потому что советская власть показала свое лицо, что за партизан, чем они занимаются. И если невинных девушек убивают тут, но другое что она свою невинность сохраняла, свою невинность, как вот такая по-русски добродетель, по-литовски *dorybė*, что с каждым годом становится все ценнее потому что вокруг нас все обесценивается уже. Ну вот, и так сказать это примеры так, героические", interview with Arturas Jagolevičius..., *op. cit.* [00:25:53–00:27:56] (Transcribed segment of the interview).

German patrols, etc.), but the act that really seals his heroic stature is sacrificial – when he commits suicide to avoid arrest by the Gestapo. Similarly, in the Lithuanian narrative, Elena Spirgevičiūtė is ascribed all the moral qualities that are indispensable in making her appear an exceptional and religious figure, whose death is also interpreted as a sacrifice.

The rape is at the core of these different narratives, and whether it is acknowledged or denied, judged or elucidated, it gives the events their meaning. Initially presented as one crime among countless others, it is then denied by the Soviet authorities before being placed at the argumentative core of the nationalist discourse. In Spirgevičienė's letter, the act is mentioned in passing: her rape and the attempted rape of her daughter are accorded no special prominence compared to other crimes committed by the "bandits", but contribute to forming an image of the violence of the partisans, of which civilians are the victims. On the other hand, in the discussion within the Lithuanian Central Committee, it is the rape itself that disconcerts, for it is the only accusation that cannot be turned on its head by invoking the arguments of necessity, wartime conditions and security requirements. The choice is therefore made to deny the rapes by exploiting the silence of witnesses and using the plaintiff's contradictions to prove she was lying. What is more, the plaintiff is transformed into a suspect, and her talk of rape into an attempt to discredit a hero of the USSR. Finally, in a third development, the opponents of the Soviet regime, and then those involved in Lithuania's successful struggle for independence, actually take up and present the rape as a crucial issue, but evoke *only* the attempted rape of the young woman, thereby transforming her martyrdom into a symbol of the martyrdom of the entire country under Soviet occupation.

Translated by Helen TOMLINSON

Archives

Lithuanian Special Archives (LYA: Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas), Vilnius.

This archive contains the following police records:

Fond K-1, inv. 58, d. 42424/3: Investigation file into Pranas Račiūnas.

State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Moscow:

Register of the Heroes of the Soviet Union.

Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow:

Fond VLKSM (Komsomol):

Fond M-1, inv. 53, d. 231: Assessments, reports, plans, proposals and other documents of the Central Committee of the LKSM on the activity of clandestine Komsomol organizations in Lithuania, meeting minutes with partisans.

Fond M-7, inv. 2, d. 1315: dossier of the Hero of the Soviet Union Alfonsas Čeponis.

Sound Archives – European Memories of the Gulag

<http://museum.gulagmemories.eu>

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A statue in honour of Elena Spirgevičiūtė and her aunt, Stasė Žukaitė, at the corner of Studenkų and Taikos Streets in Kaunas (© Photograph Alain Blum).

This statue was erected in October 1998 on the exact site of the house where the family lived, on land donated by the city authorities. The victim's brother and Sigitas Tamkevičius, now Archbishop of Kaunas, were the driving force behind the project.