

Rytas Narvydas

Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, Lithuania

LITHUANIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN WESTERN COUNTRIES AFTER WWII

After the end of WWII, millions of officers and soldiers of the German armed forces and its Axis allies were imprisoned behind barbed wire. In spring 1945, about 8 million Germans alone were in the hands of Western Allies. The Americans classified this army of prisoners as Disarmed Enemy Forces (DEF), a term which is not used in international law¹. This mass of people included Lithuanians, who sided with the Third Reich by sheer fate.

WWII saw unprecedented mobilisation on both sides of the front. Between 1 June 1939 and 30 April 1945, the German army recruited 17,893,000 people. A total of 21% of all German citizens (of the size of the country in 1939) were mobilised. This was a high-level mobilisation, the tension of which was albeit diminished by the economies of the occupied lands, their natural resources and the use of their population, as well as prisoners of war (POWs). At least 1.8 million nationals of other countries were mobilised to serve in the Wehrmacht and SS units. This figure does not include those who served in a wide range of other military institutions, security and similar detachments and divisions (another some 1,100,000 people). In addition, there was quite a large auxiliary personnel in the rear areas and branches formed from prisoners of war and citizens of occupied countries. There were also the so-called ‘voluntary assistants’ (*Hilfswillige*), which included drivers, convoy attendants, auxiliary workshop and kitchen labourers, etc. On average an infantry division would be made up of up to 10% such ‘volunteers’ as compared to the number of members of the regular army and up to 50% in transport convoys. A number of foreigners served in the military aviation and navy auxiliary units².

During the Nazi occupation, Lithuanian citizens were used for police battalions (security battalions called *Schutzmannschaft*), other police units (squadron, individual companies and crews), and construction battalions. In 1943–1944, all these formations suffered significant losses, they were pulled from the Eastern Front back to Lithuania, re-formed and sent to Germany, where they

¹ "Eine schöne Zeit"? // <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFde/inhalt/0,1872,1022094,FF.html> (2002 03 16); vertimas į rusų kalbą: Мы были в плену у янки // <http://www.inosmi.ru/full/153726.html> (2002 07 26)

² Гуркин В.В., Круглов А.И., Кровавая расплата агрессора // Военно-исторический журнал, 1996 май-июнь, №. 3, с. 30-32

were usually tasked with the construction of fortifications and other ancillary functions. In 1944, two battalions were formed in Dresden from Lithuanians who served in the Reich Labour Service and supplemented with the remaining police battalions. They were sent to Yugoslavia and Italy. In autumn of the same year in Danzig (Gdansk), Lithuanian volunteer infantry regiments (*Litauische Freiwilligen Infanterie Regiment*) were formed³.

In early 1944, the formation of a Lithuanian Local Detachment began [106 members who were taken from the training battalion ended up in Luftwaffe], which recruited around 12,000 volunteers. In May the same year, Germany liquidated the detachment and deported about 3,500 volunteers to Germany⁴. In summer 1944, a Homeland Security Detachment was formed in Samogitia. After a battle with the Soviet army, around 1,000 of its troops retreated to East Prussia, where the Germans formed construction pioneer companies and used them for building various fortifications. At the beginning of 1945, they fell into the encirclement of the Soviet Army near Gdansk and Gdynia, but several companies were moved by ships to the environs of Lübeck⁵.

As many as 15,000 Lithuanians were mobilised to auxiliary Wehrmacht services (*Hilfswillige*) and another 15,000 – to work in the General District of Lithuania and the Reich. A total of 5,400 served in the Wehrmacht, 12,000 – in the Luftwaffe, 400 – in Reich Labour Service, and 15,000 in the Todt Organisation⁶. The Germans failed to form a Lithuanian Waffen-SS legion, but there were Lithuanians, who joined Latvian Waffen-SS legions⁷. Lithuanians who repatriated in 1940–1941 were also mobilised in the German army. Among 56,000 Lithuanian repatriates and political refugees there were 200 officers⁸.

The total estimated number of Lithuanians who served in the German armed forces, including police formations, according to different authors, range from 25,000 to 50,000 men⁹. It is not clear how many of them perished, fell into Soviet captivity or managed to desert. At the moment it is not known how many Lithuanians were captives of the Western Allies. According to *Lietuvių enciklopedija (Lithuanian Encyclopaedia)*, there were around 500¹⁰ Lithuanian prisoners in Italy, 500–600¹¹ in Norway, and around 2,000¹² in Belgium in 1945. The following data is provided in the newspaper *Žiburiai* published in Augsburg: in mid-1946 there were over 800 Lithuanian

³ Stankeras P., *Lietuvių policija 1941 - 1944 metais*, Vilnius, LGGRTC, 1998, p. 179.

⁴ *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. XV, Boston, 1968, p. 120.

⁵ *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. XV, Boston, 1968, p. 120-121

⁶ Stankeras P., *Lietuvių policija 1941 - 1944 metais*, Vilnius, LGGRTC, 1998, p. 186-187.

⁷ Stankeras P., *Lietuvių policija 1941 - 1944 metais*, Vilnius, LGGRTC, 1998, p. 181-189.

⁸ Raštikis S., *Lietuvos likimo kelias. Iš mano užrašų*, IV tomas, Čikaga, 1982, p. 339-340.

⁹ Taagepera R., *Lietuva, Latvija, Estija 1940-1980: panašumai bei skirtumai // Kauno aidas*, 1989 01 12+ Bubnys A., *Vokiečių okupuota Lietuva (1941-1944)*, Vilnius, LGGRTC, 1998, p. 404.

¹⁰ *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. IX, Boston, 1956.

¹¹ *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. XX, Boston, 1960, p. 437-438.

¹² *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. II, Boston, 1954.

prisoners in the American occupation zone, around 200 in France, and there could have been around 400 in Yugoslavia¹³.

The figures specified above need to be verified and more detailed data should be collected. So far we have managed to find nominal lists of prisoners of war made by Rev. P. Jatulis. In 1946, there were 340–350 Lithuanians in British captivity in Italy: around 170¹⁴ in Rimini and its environs (Northern Italy by the Adriatic Sea) and another 80 in the camps of Venice, Naples and other locations¹⁵. There were around 90 in the American camps¹⁶. In 1945, Lithuanian POWs were recruited to the Polish II Corps that operated within the British Eighth Army. In early March, a group of 85 Lithuanians were drafted for service to the Polish Commando Company under a contract¹⁷. *Lietuvių enciklopedija* specifies 200 men who served in Polish units¹⁸. The list compiled by Rev. Jatulis contains the names of over 100 Lithuanians who served in Polish units in 1946¹⁹. Thus, there were at least 550 men in captivity in Italy in 1945, of whom about 200 were soon released. Ironically, some of them had to guard their countrymen in captivity in the summer of 1946 when, the guard duties of the camp in Rimini were taken over from the British by Polish units, which also contained Lithuanians²⁰. Furthermore, in 1946 there were around 30 Lithuanians²¹ in Egypt and another 11 in Malta in the British POW camps²².

Žiburiai published several nominal lists of Lithuanian POWs. In spring 1946, there were around 10²³ Lithuanian men in Tübingen, in the summer of the same year there were at least 30²⁴ in Regensburg (Bavaria), in the autumn there were around 50²⁵ in Dachau camp, and around 85²⁶ men – in Münster. The camps were under American control and in total there were at least 175 Lithuanians there. The number could have been bigger, as in March 1946 around 2,000 Lithuanians were moved from Cedelghem camp in Belgium to Germany alone²⁷. In autumn 1945, around 150 Lithuanians were moved from the British camp in Troll near Trondheim (Norway) to Cedelghem.

¹³ Lietuvių belaisvių paleidimas. Iš lietuvių gyvenimo // *Žiburiai*, 1946 06 15, Nr. 24, p. 8.

¹⁴ Lietuvių karo belaisvių sąrašas. 1946 04 25 // VUB RS F267-149.

¹⁵ Lietuvių karo belaisvių sąrašas. 1946 04 25 // VUB RS F267-149.

¹⁶ Lietuvių karo belaisvių sąrašas. 1946 04 25 // VUB RS F267-149.

¹⁷ J. Rutkievičius, 1945 metų sąjungininkai // *Karo archyvas*, t. XVII, 2002, p. 199.

¹⁸ *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. IX, Boston, 1956, p. 182.

¹⁹ Lietuviai kariai kurie randasi anglų VIII-toje armijoje lenkų II-rame korpuse (sąrašas) // VUB RS F267-2235.

²⁰ Martinionis A., Rytų fronte – atkalkūs mūšiai, Vilnius, 2000, p. 77-78.

²¹ Lietuvių karo belaisvių sąrašas. 1946 04 25 // VUB RS F267-149.

²² Lietuvių belaisvių Egipte ir Maltoje sąrašas // VUB RS F267-573.

²³ Lietuviai belaisviai ieško savo giminių // *Žiburiai*, 1946 04 20, Nr. 16, p. 11.

²⁴ Paieškojimai // *Žiburiai*, 1946 06 22, Nr. 25, p. 9; Paieškojimai // *Žiburiai*, 1946 06 29, Nr. 26, p. 8; Lietuviai karo belaisviai, atvežti į Regensburgą, ieško šeimų ir artimųjų // *Žiburiai*, 1946 07 06, Nr. 27, p. 7.

²⁵ Karo belaisviai // *Žiburiai*, 1946 09 07, Nr. 36, p. 7.

²⁶ Paieškojimai // *Žiburiai*, 1946 12 14, Nr. 46, p. 7.

²⁷ *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, t. II, Boston, 1954.

Around 350 prisoners of war from Lithuania were released from Svelvik camp in Germany and were given the status of displaced persons²⁸.

By mid-1946, all Lithuanians were released in the French occupation zone in Germany and later in France²⁹. They were held by the French in Maily-le-Camp³⁰, a camp near Versailles in Bad Kroisnache near Frankfurt am Main³¹, Andernach near Koblenz³² and elsewhere. Around 150 Lithuanians from Andernach joined the Foreign Legion³³. Thus, in 1945–1946 at least several hundred Lithuanians were held by the French, although the exact data are not available.

According to approximate estimates, it may be assumed that the total number of Lithuanians captured by Western Allies exceeded 2,500 and there could even have been as many as 3,000 or more.

Captivity was a difficult ordeal. On the one hand, the allies were not ready to provide food and adequate accommodation for millions of people. On the other hand, captives were used for reconstruction and clearing of mines and many perished³⁴. Cases of inhumane and cruel treatment of captives also occurred. General Stasys Raštikis witnessed such behaviour in Regensburg and said the conduct of American troops was absolutely disgraceful and very un-gentlemanlike³⁵.

Let me provide a few quotes that describe the poor nutrition and living conditions of prisoners:

‘In fact, it was not a camp, but an open field fenced in with barbed wire. POWs were kept in inhumane conditions here. They did not have any bed linen, let alone tents. Prisoners tried to dig into the ground like moles and lived in dirty pits with no protection from the rain. It was only much later that the Americans began to slowly improve these inhuman conditions’ (Gen. Raštikis about the camp in the suburbs of Regensburg)³⁶.

‘There was a large POW camp near the Dutch border, in the environs of the town of Vezel. I think there were around 150,000 people there <...>. The zone had huge farm barns. They could accommodate only a small portion of the prisoners, while the rest lived in the open air. There were about 120 of us, Lithuanians. <...> No food was provided in the first days. There was also very little water. <...> Finally, they started issuing famine rations: a kilo and a half of bread for 20

²⁸ Palukaitis Pr. J., *Lietuvių periodika Vakarų Europoje 1944 – 1952*, Vilnius, 1993, p. 249.

²⁹ *Lietuvių belaisvių paleidimas. Iš lietuvių gyvenimo // Žiburiai*, 1946 06 15, Nr. 24, p. 8.

³⁰ Palukaitis Pr. J., *Lietuvių periodika Vakarų Europoje 1944 – 1952*, Vilnius, 1993, p. 250-251.

³¹ Eidukaitis J., *Sudužusios viltis*, Kaunas, Judex, 2002, p. 53.

³² Vytis-Vrublevičius Bruno, *Lietuviai legionieriai Vietname*, Toronto, 1968, p. 13.

³³ Vytis-Vrublevičius Bruno, *Lietuviai legionieriai Vietname*, Toronto, 1968, p. 18.

³⁴ "Eine schöne Zeit"? // <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFde/inhalt/0,1872,1022094,FF.html> (2002 03 16); vertimas į rusų kalbą: Мы были в плену у янки // <http://www.inosmi.ru/full/153726.html> (2002 07 26).

³⁵ Raštikis S., *Kovose dėl Lietuvos (kario atsiminimai)*, II tomas, Los Angeles, 1957 (antras leidimas – V., 1990), p. 460.

³⁶ Raštikis S., *Kovose dėl Lietuvos (kario atsiminimai)*, II tomas, Los Angeles, 1957 (antras leidimas – V., 1990), p. 465.

people, a teaspoon of sugar for 3 people and 1 potato for 2 people. A month later, Germans were separated from POWs of other nationalities. We were taken under the charge of the British. Food improved: we received good soup and bread twice a day' (J. Miltenis' story about the beginning of captivity)³⁷.

'In the camps in Germany life is even harder: German food, living in stables, unusually cold weather, daily work for Germans in private apartments, sweeping the streets and uprooting stumps in the forests, and as payment for the work – a military loaf of bread, a couple of grams of butter for 30 people and that's all' (a letter from an unknown author to Rev. Jatulis, end of 1946)³⁸.

The fate of POWs from the Baltic countries was for a long time unclear. At the Yalta Conference on 11 February 1945, Western Allies and the Soviet Union agreed regarding forced repatriation of Soviet citizens, but western countries did not consider citizens of Lithuania and other Baltic countries, and also of western Belarus and Ukraine as citizens of the USSR, so forced repatriation was not applied in their regard³⁹. This position was maintained, almost without exception, by the British and Americans, but the French, fulfilling the agreement of 27 June 1945 with the Soviet Union, forcibly repatriated a certain number of Lithuanians⁴⁰. The situation of the POWs was complicated by the status of aliens while in the service of the German armed forces, because the allies were inclined to treat them as volunteers and collaborators, thus POWs were concerned about a possibility of being transferred to the Soviet Union. Lithuanian committees, the Lithuanian Red Cross and other organisations and individuals made efforts to prove that the Lithuanians had been forced into service. For instance, in May 1945, the Lithuanian Committee in Regensburg delivered a letter to Colonel Lieutenant D. L. Hobson⁴¹ to this end, in Italy this issue was handled by the Central Committee for Care of Lithuanians (Rev. V. Pavalkis, K. Gabriūnas, J. Macevičius, Edmundas Karanauskas and Stasys Lozoraitis Jr.), Rev. Jatulis, Dr. K. Ginietis and others⁴². Similar steps were probably taken in other locations.

It is not clear, however, what criteria were used in order to release POWs. By mid-1946, the British and the French released some of their prisoners, later the Americans did the same⁴³. Some POWs (160 men) from Italy were moved in September 1946 to Münster in Germany⁴⁴. Many of them still had to wait several months behind barbed wire. Those who had relatives, other persons, organisations or camps of Displaced Persons that agreed to collect them or promised to do so were

³⁷ Martinionis A., Rytų fronte – atkākļūs mūšiai, Vilnius, 2000, p. 28-29.

³⁸ Išrašai iš kun. P. Jatuliui rašytų laiškų // VUB RS F267-149.

³⁹ Земсков В.Н., Рождение "второй эмиграции" (1944-1952) // Социологические исследования, 1991, Nr. 4, с. 5-6.

⁴⁰ Bartusevičius V., Lietuviai pabėgėliai Vokietijoje 1944 – 1951 (daktaro disertacija, VU IF NIK), Vilnius, 1999, p. 38.

⁴¹ Raštikis S., Kovose dėl Lietuvos (kario atsiminimai), II tomas, Los Angeles, 1957 (antras leidimas – V., 1990), p. 465.

⁴² Krasauskas R., Italija // Lietuvių enciklopedija, t. IX, Boston, 1956, p. 182-183.

⁴³ Lietuvių belaisvių paleidimas. Iš lietuvių gyvenimo // Žiburiai, 1946 06 15, Nr. 24, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Kun. P. Jatulio 1947 01 13 laiškas // VUB RS F267-149.

released. However, Lithuanian Committees often avoided accepting POWs to their camps. In a letter to Rev. Jatulis one of the prisoners wrote about their motives: ‘<...> in Germany we heard the following as regards our situation from our fellow citizens: allegedly all of us were soldiers, so we became hooligans, etc. although they forgot that we were still left here and there were a couple of hundred of us in captivity, whereas there were 20,000 of them and all of them were now innocent and good and free, and were discussing us’⁴⁵. More similar complaints could be cited.

⁴⁵ Išrašai iš kun. P.Jatuliui rašytų laiškų // VUB RS F267-149.