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# THE CREATIVITY OF TRAUMA REPRESENTATION THROUGH MONUMENTS

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**Abstract.** Based on a multimodal discourse analysis, the article explains how non-martyrological monuments dedicated to the anti-Soviet resistance reflect emerging tensions regarding the role of certain partisan movement figures during the Holocaust. The search for an answer to this question is encouraged by public debates sparking off every now and then on the role of some participants in the partisan movement during the Nazi occupation and, more specifically, during the Holocaust. The article links monuments as creative collective memory practices to the theoretical perspective of ontological security with the view that monuments are one of the practices creating a narrative that supports ontological security and connects the past (collective memory) with the present and the future.

**Keywords:** ontological security, monuments, memorials, collective memory, state identity.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1996, a monument to Juozas Krikštaponis, commander of the Lithuanian partisan district "Vytis", was unveiled in Ukmergė, Lithuania. However, a few years ago, it started to stir up debates mainly on ambiguous activities of Krikštaponis during the Holocaust. High-ranking politicians also joined the discussion calling for the monument to be removed from the public space, while the de-Sovietization commission under the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania obliged the municipality of Ukmergė to dismantle the monument in 2023. The main reason behind this decision and the ensuing discussion lies in the intersecting lines of memory: on the one hand, Krikštaponis was one of the leaders of the anti-Soviet resistance; on the other hand, as shown by documents from the Lithuanian Special Archives and the Lithuanian Central State Archives, as well as by the conclusions of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, he undoubtedly took part in the Holocaust and was involved in the killing of civilians during that period (Pocius, 2022). Nevertheless, the monument still stands, revealing the tension between the historical narrative of partisan resistance and the role played by some participants of that movement during the Nazi occupation – in other words, their involvement in the Holocaust.

Historically and analytically, the tension that becomes visual through the monument is associated with the memory of two traumatic events, i.e. the Soviet occupation and the

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Holocaust. The same tensions in Lithuania can be observed not only in the memorialization of Krikštaponis but also in the commemoration of Jonas Noreika-Generolas Vėtra, Kazys Škirpa, and other historical figures.

The partisan movement and its memory have received academic attention. From a historiographical standpoint, the most extensive research addressing this topic has been carried out by Gailius (2009), Petrauskienė (2017), Jurkutė (2016). In historiography, the problematics of the partisan war are generally linked to the impact of Soviet narratives, focusing on how the suppression of discussions about partisans during the Soviet era has shaped contemporary collective memory of the partisans.

Particularly noteworthy are the studies by Trimonienė, who analyzed the commemoration of resistance participants and victims of Soviet genocide (2006, pp. 180–202), and Jakulytė-Vasil, who examined Holocaust monuments in Lithuania and highlighted the dominance of memorials dedicated to Soviet repressions over Holocaust memory (2013, pp. 133–143).

Although limited in scope, the academic literature allows us to identify problematic aspects related to the memory of the Holocaust and the anti-Soviet resistance, primarily connected to the partisan movement. For example, reviewing the memory of the partisans, Noreika noticed that "sometimes the same person had the role of a freedom fighter, a Nazi collaborator and a murderer of civilians" (Noreika, 2018, p. 11). Similarly, Davoliūtė's review of the partisans' perception in popular memory highlighted debates about the potential participation of some partisans in the Holocaust (Davoliūtė, 2017). Going even further, analyzing the 'fighting and suffering' narrative related to partisans in the context of the events in Ukraine, Budrytė stated that although "the crisis in Ukraine gave a 'new life' to the already existing memory about the anti-Soviet partisans in Lithuania <…> the fact that some anti-Soviet Lithuanian partisans participated in the Holocaust has been an extremely painful topic, especially in the aftermath of the crisis in Ukraine" (Budrytė, 2021).

Despite the growing academic focus on the construction of historical narratives – particularly the portrayal of ambiguous events or figures in dominant memory discourses – there is a recognized concern that the lack of pluralism and the one-dimensional representation of history may have negative consequences for both the state and society at national and international levels (Mälksoo, 2015; Kramer, 2017; Belavusau, 2018). In Lithuania, when constructing the narrative of anti-Soviet resistance through the remembrance of partisans, the issue of their relationship with the Holocaust remains unresolved. As Budrytė notes, "The story about the Holocaust still has not been fully adopted by Lithuania, its impact on the state and society is huge, and it has intersected multiple times with the story about the Soviet crimes" (Budrytė, 2022, p. 13).

This article aims to contribute to the academic literature by examining how the narrative of the anti-Soviet resistance and partisan movement, created through monuments, either integrates or excludes the aspect of the Nazi occupation, coinciding with the Holocaust. Taking non-martyrological monuments commemorating the partisan movement as the main object of analysis, the primary goal of the article is to examine how the historical narrative of the anti-Soviet resistance – constructed through the remembrance of the partisan movement (often referred to as the 'struggles and sufferings' narrative) – reflects, or does not reflect, the partisan movement's controversial relationship with the Holocaust.

The study analyzes a group of monuments that actively commemorate the anti-Soviet resistance through the memorialization of partisans who fought for Lithuania's freedom and independence during the Soviet era.[1] The analysis is based on a detailed examination of monuments characterized by long-lasting material expression (concrete, granite, stone, etc.) in Lithuania's public spaces, built between 1990 and 2019.[2] Following Charles Merewether's definition, these monuments can be understood as real historical statements – monuments dedicated to actual historical figures, groups, periods, or events (Merewether, 1999, pp. 182–191). These monuments were selected following the interpretation of James E. Young, who perceived monuments and memorials as the dominant means of expressing memory culture and reflecting the prevailing tendencies of a state's collective memory (Young, 1993, p. 2).

Multimodal discourse analysis is employed as the primary methodological approach. This research adopts the position that monuments, through their spatial-volumetric (i.e., sculptural) plastic expression, as well as their aesthetic features, represent creative practices of collective memory, through which the collective remembrance of the anti-Soviet resistance and the partisan movement is constructed.

## 2. Monuments as creative practices shaping collective memory: an ontological security perspective

Today's concept of ontological security, as applied to explain the domestic and foreign policies and behavior of states in the international arena, originated from the individual level and disciplines such as psychology (Laing, 1960) and sociology (Giddens, 2000; Giddens, 1984). Following Ronald Laing, the transfer of psychological principles of ontological security from the individual level to the level of states and international relations was developed by Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2017, pp. 12–30). When applied to states, ontological security can be understood as the security of state's identity, which defines what it is and how a certain state and the world around it is perceived.

As the security of a state's identity, ontological security includes two dimensions: internal (*Self*) and external (*Others*). The internal one is directed to the state's perception of itself, and the external one expresses its perception of the surrounding world. Clear representation of these dimensions defines a state's identity, including its behavior and position in relation to other states. Kathrina Bachleitner defines it as specific routines: the integrity of the *Self* through establishing routines with *Others* and routines with the *Self* (Bachleitner, 2021, p. 15). Thus, in this context, the perception of the *Self* and the surrounding world that constitutes a state's identity must be formed and consolidated through daily, repetitive, and routine practices.

[1] The analysis focuses on monuments located in public spaces in Lithuania, such as city and town squares and other public areas. It does not include martyrological sites (monuments marking places of death, burial, or execution) or monuments situated in cemeteries, churchyards, forests, stadiums, sculpture parks, homesteads, private or enclosed courtyards. Additionally, the analysis excludes wooden monuments, crosses, roofed pillars (Lithuanian: stogastulpiai), chapel pillars (Lithuanian: koplytstulpiai), commemorative stones, standardized memorial markers, and memorial plaques.

[2] For more details, see: Viktorija Rimaitė-Beržiūnienė, "Paminklai Lietuvoje: valstybės tapatybės konstravimas" [Monuments in Lithuania: Shaping State Identity] (PhD diss., Vilnius University, 2022).

The most common form of this type of practice is collective memory and various creative means of expressing it. Collective memory functions as a "social process which transmits group identity through time" (Bachleitner, 2021, p. 24). Through its different creative expressions, it is described by ontological security researchers as a source that links the past, the present, and the future in the state's self-awareness and the continuity of this self-awareness.

As a means of orientation, memory must be understood as a faculty of both remembering and forgetting (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 68). Being "central to the creation and preservation of collectives" (Gustafsson, 2014, pp. 71–86), collective memory plays an essential role in forming the dimensions of ontological security. Analytical reading of collective memory practices provides an opportunity to identify the definitions of *Self* and *Others* and the state of ontological security in the context of state identity. Thus, looking at the monument as a dominant creative expression of collective memory, one can see how ontological security is formed.

Ontological insecurity is related to a reduction in social cohesion and fragmentation of society. The condition of ontological insecurity in a state can provoke distrust in state institutions and lead to questioning their activities (Wozniak, 2016, pp. 1063–1082). Therefore, ensuring ontological security is extremely important for maintaining the internal cohesion of the state and developing bilateral or multilateral relations. However, recent academic literature has observed a growing tendency in the Eastern-Central European region to link preferred narratives of the past with the political goals of states and their status-seeking efforts in the global environment (Mälksoo, 2021, pp. 500–501). This leads to the politicization of memory and the securitization of history, presenting an exclusionary, one-dimensional historical narrative that fails to address historical tensions.

Practical trends in Central-Eastern Europe indicate that historical narratives lacking pluralism and inclusivity – constructed through monuments and other collective memory practices – often operate counterproductively. If the dominant narrative is shaped in a one-dimensional manner and fails to embrace pluralism, it leads to ontological insecurity rather than fostering ontological security, reduces social cohesion, and negatively affects the international behavior of states (David, 2019; Subotić, 2018). In the current geopolitical environment, marked by the threat posed by Russia, the strengthening and maintenance of ontological security emerge as critically important factors for fostering communal ties, enhancing social cohesion, and ensuring communities' resilience to both domestic and external challenges.

## 3. Monuments to the partisans: the creativity of representing Anti-Soviet resistance

The analytical approach to monuments is based on multimodal discourse analysis, focusing on their visual and verbal (inscriptions and publicly available descriptions) modalities. It emphasizes the specifics of visual practices in collective memory and leads to a complex analytical approach that includes visual discourse. The visual form and expression of the monument, as well as the verbal discourse surrounding it, consists of the text engraved on the monument, descriptions of the monument, and other related texts. As noted by Abousnnouga and Machin (2010, p. 132), since the discourse surrounding monuments consists of

various elements, it is essential in the course of analysis to rely not only on the monument as a text in itself but also on information that is external to the text (monument).

The analysis follows the view of Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who argue that when analyzing visual practices, the focus should not be limited to individual images or words. It should also consider the specific *syntax*, i.e. how visual objects, the words on and about them, and the historical, cultural, and political context form statements revealing certain meanings (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 1–5). Consequently, the analysis is not solely concerned with individual visual symbols, creative expressions or specific descriptions of monuments. It is based on the specific relationship between images and words, as well as creative choices.

During the analytical process, firstly, a list is compiled of all monuments erected in Lithuania since 1990 related to the partisan movement. Then, the visual elements (creativity, features, symbols, etc.) and verbal elements (meanings communicated through inscriptions and descriptions) of the monuments are analyzed. Finally, to answer the question how the collective memory narrative created through monuments (dis)integrates the aspect of the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, the second stage of the analysis looks for repetitions and regularities characteristic of all analyzed monuments.

### 3.1. Analysis of monuments

Of all the monuments commemorating real events, personalities or groups of personalities, 96 monuments erected between 1990 and 2019 directly address the partisan movement in the context of anti-Soviet resistance. Interestingly, some monuments memorializing the partisan movement, in some exceptional cases, include inscriptions indicating later dates associated with the end of the partisan movement[3]. For example, the year 1955 is inscribed on the monument dedicated to the Vyčio District partisans of the Kėdainiai region, as well as on the monument in Stalgėnai. The year 1965 is inscribed on the monument dedicated to the partisans of the Kardo Unit of the Žemaičiai District, which operated in the Kretinga region.

Considering the recent tensions related to the controversial actions of certain partisan movement representatives during the Holocaust, it should be noted that some monuments dedicated to partisans include inscriptions referring to the Nazi occupation period, which coincides with the years of the Holocaust in Lithuania. A quarter of all the analyzed monuments refer to the period of anti-Nazi resistance without distinguishing between the Soviet and Nazi occupations; moreover, neither the inscriptions nor their descriptions mention the potentially controversial points of intersection between these two occupations. The descriptions typically link the dedication to occupation in general, without making a distinction or providing explanations about the activities carried out by the partisans involved in anti-Soviet resistance during the Nazi occupation.

When examining the non-martyrological monuments erected during Lithuania's restored independence, one can generally find only one object that directly addresses both the Soviet and Nazi occupations. The most illustrative example is the memorial "In Memory of Sacrifices

[3] Historically, the Soviet occupation of Lithuania began in 1940 and lasted till 1990, with the Nazi occupation intervening from 1941 to 1944, including the Holocaust. Thus, the Soviet occupation is dated from 1940 to 1941 and again from 1944 to 1990. The Lithuanian partisan war, which was an anti-Soviet resistance, lasted until 1953.

of Political Prisoners and Exiles of Communist and Nazi Occupation", which was erected in Klaipėda in 1993 and supplemented in 1997. In other words, aside from this exception in the overall sample of monuments, the focus of these monuments is on the Soviet occupation and the resistance against it, heroizing the partisans as fighters for the statehood of occupied Lithuania. The main meanings conveyed by these monuments are related to the struggle for an autonomous, free and independent Lithuanian state, with Russia portrayed as a hostile power that destroyed the existence of a free and independent Lithuania.

At the analytical level, the memorials to partisans neither address nor seek to resolve or explain the potential memory tensions. This position is also reinforced by the fact that the Nazi occupation, not just as the Holocaust period, is not commemorated through memorial objects. Moreover, the dates on some monuments commemorating partisans indicate the break that coincided with the Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944. In this case, the potentially controversial activities of some partisans during the Holocaust are silenced. Neither the visual expression of the monuments nor the surrounding verbal discourse correspond to the memory tensions arising from the role of some partisans or leaders of the partisan movement during the Holocaust.

In terms of the visual expression of the monuments, it is noteworthy that symbols of statehood and Catholicism dominate, appearing in the plastic elements of the monuments. The most employed visual symbols are the Columns of Gediminas and the Vytis Cross. Within the discourse of partisan monuments, these statehood-related symbols clearly demonstrate that the partisans, during their anti-Soviet resistance, fought for a vision of Lithuania whose origins reach back to the medieval period. It is also significant that these symbols highlight not only medieval connections but also ties to the modern Lithuanian state established in the interwar period. Both the double cross and the Columns of Gediminas gained widespread prominence in the official symbolism of the Lithuanian state during the first half of the twentieth century (Akmenytė-Ruzgienė, 2018).

The use of the sword symbol in the visual design reinforces the motif of the partisan struggle for a free and independent Lithuania (with the most representative examples found in Gelvonai, Troškūnai, Perloja, and Darbėnai). However, it is important to emphasize that the descriptions of these monuments do not include any references to the potentially controversial aspects of this struggle, such as the involvement of certain partisans in activities during the Holocaust.

From a visual perspective, a particularly significant group of monuments consists of those that resemble gravestones. Many monuments erected during the first five years of restored independence strongly evoke cemetery memorials in both their plastic form and inscriptions, which include names, surnames, and – when known – years of birth and death (such monuments can be found in the villages of Stalgėnai, Trūskava, Vabalninkas, Traupis (Figure 1), Važdėlės (Figure 2), Barvydžiai, Narvydžiai, Jonelaičiai, Leliškiai, and etc.). Within the broader discourse, these monuments can be interpreted as an attempt to properly honor and mourn partisans who could not be appropriately buried or publicly mourned during the Soviet period.



**Figure 1.** Monument to the partisans of the Antanas Juzukėnas (Juozukėnas)-Liūtas squad of the Vyčiai district in Traupis town (source: photo by the author)




**Figure 2.** Monument to the partisans in Važdėlė village (source: photo by R. Trimonienė)

Monuments featuring altar-like visual forms (for example, Monument to partisans who died between 1944 and 1950 in Riogliškiai village (Figure 3) or Monument Altar dedicated to the Vytautas military district partisans in Utena (Figure 4)) also confirm the respect for the participants of the partisan war and the proper commemoration of their memory – something impossible during the Soviet era.

The focus on distancing from the Soviet Union is also strongly expressed visually through the use of Catholic symbolism. Moreover, in the written discourse surrounding the monuments, the motifs of "the fight for the homeland," "sacrifice for the homeland," "freedom," and "independence" are repeatedly emphasized as well, while the notion of the *Other* – essential



**Figure 3.** Monument to partisans who died between 1944 and 1950 in Riogliškiai village (source: photo by V. Almonaitis)



**Figure 4.** Monument *Altar* dedicated to the Vytautas military district partisans in Utena (a modern interpretation of an altar) (source: photo by the author)

for ontological security – is constructed through the portrayal of the Soviet Union as a hostile force. Within the discourse shaped by these monuments, members of the partisan movement are heroized, with an emphasis on their struggle and sacrifice for Lithuania's freedom and independence. However, the tensions present in Lithuania's public sphere regarding the potentially controversial actions of some partisan movement members during the Holocaust – under the Nazi occupation – are neither addressed nor acknowledged.

In this way, highly significant historical issues are not addressed but simply silenced. As a result, the tensions that arise in discussions about the role of some participants of the partisan movement during the Holocaust remain unresolved. The narrative created through monuments commemorating the anti-Soviet resistance with dominating monuments to the partisans fails to see the grey shades of history. This narrative is usually characterized by a plethora of binary oppositions: 'good'/'evil', 'black'/'white', 'friend'/'enemy', etc. It overlooks the fact that a freedom fighter or a partisan could have also been a Nazi collaborator, or that a Nazi collaborator could have saved Jews and fought for a free Lithuania.

## 4. Conclusions

Monuments dedicated to the memory of the partisan resistance are used to create a narrative that supports ontological security in Lithuania. This group of monuments is highly significant, as it reflects the history of Lithuanian statehood dating back to the medieval period and reinforces the political, moral, and historical importance of the partisan struggle. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed that monuments dedicated to the partisan movement do not address the problematic aspects related to the potentially controversial actions of some partisans during the Holocaust, nor the associated debates in the public sphere.

From the perspective of ontological security, the analysis reveals why efforts to construct a unified narrative about the partisans – intended to foster societal cohesion – face criticism and public debate. A narrative that lacks pluralism and exclusively emphasizes the heroization of partisans fails to be inclusive and open, thereby hindering certain societal groups from identifying with the dominant collective memory narrative.

When tensions arising because of the role of some partisans in the Holocaust remain unaddressed and silenced in debates about monuments and other objects of collective memory, there are certain threats to the successful development of ontological security. As a result, a part or parts of society may tend to lose the sense of identification formed through creative collective memory practices, thereby not ensuring ontological security. This not only fosters a favorable environment for societal fragmentation but also allows internal and external actors to actualize 'forgotten' and 'silent' meanings, and in this way bring about the preconditions for ontological insecurity within society.

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