

Manvydas Vitkūnas

**Belarusian Themes in the Lithuanian Military Press (1919–1940):
the case of the military magazines *Karys* and *Kardas***

Key words: Belarusians, Belarus, Lithuania, military press, magazine, interwar period

Summary

The article examines how issues related to Belarus and Belarusians were reflected in the Lithuanian military press from 1919 to 1940. This article provides an overview and a brief analysis of materials related to the Belarusians and Belarus published in two military magazines, namely *Karys* and *Kardas*. Four main categories of articles and informational reports could be distinguished: 1) historical articles (mostly about the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) discussing the shared history of the Lithuanian and Belarusian nations; 2) information on the Belarusian national struggle for self-determination and independence, as well as life of the Belarusians in Polish-occupied territories and the Belarusian SSR; 3) information on the Belarusian national units within the Lithuanian Armed Forces; 4) other information, such as life of the Belarusians in the Republic of Lithuania, etc. The Belarusian topic was widely covered in the Lithuanian military press. Magazines such as *Karys*, *Kardas* featured dozens of articles, at least a hundred informational reports, and hundreds of references related to the Belarusians and Belarus. The image of the Belarusians in the Lithuanian military press was almost always positive. They were portrayed as a nation historically and culturally close to Lithuanians. Lithuanians and Belarusians fought for their freedom together for centuries against many stronger enemies or defended their rights to ethnic, cultural, and historical identity using non-military means. A particularly strong impetus for the promotion of the positive image of Belarusians in the Lithuanian military press (and public opinion) came from their active involvement in the Lithuanian War of Independence from 1918 to 1920. The image of the Belarusian soldier as a comrade-in-arms, a defender of Lithuania, and a loyal citizen of the Lithuanian Republic was maintained until the Soviet occupation in 1940. This was supported not only by publications in the press but also by active involvement of the professional military personnel, as well as many Belarusian officers, non-commissioned officers, and reserve soldiers in the social life of Lithuania. The Lithuanian military press represents an important source for further research into the Lithuanian-Belarusian relations, particularly the history of the Belarusian units in the Lithuanian army

Baltkrievu tēma Lietuvas militārajā presē (1919–1940): militāro žurnālu *Karys* un *Kardas* piemērs

Atslēgas vārdi: baltkrievi, Baltkrievija, Lietuva, militārā prese, žurnāls, starpkaru periods

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā analizēts, kā jautājumi, kas saistīti ar Baltkrieviju un baltkrieviem, tika atspoguļoti Lietuvas militārajā presē no 1919. līdz 1940. gadam. Pētījums sniedz pārskatu par materiāliem, kas publicēti divos militārajos žurnālos – *Karys* un *Kardas*. Var nošķirt četras galvenās rakstu un informatīvo ziņojumu kategorijas: 1) vēsturiski raksti (galvenokārt par Lietuvas Dižkunigaitijas vēsturi), kuros aplūkota lietuviešu un baltkrievu tautu kopīgā vēsture; 2) informācija par baltkrievu nacionālām cīņām par neatkarību, par baltkrievu dzīvi Polijas okupētajās teritorijās un Baltkrievijas PSR; 3) informācija par baltkrievu nacionālajām vienībām Lietuvas bruņotajos spēkos; 4) cita informācija, piemēram, par baltkrievu dzīvi Lietuvā u. c. Baltkrievu tematika Lietuvas militārajā presē tika plaši atspoguļota. Tādos žurnālos kā *Karys* un *Kardas* tika publicēti desmitiem rakstu, simtiem informatīvu ziņojumu un atsauču, kas bija saistīti ar baltkrieviem un Baltkrieviju. Baltkrievu tēls aplūkotajā laika posmā Lietuvas militārajā presē gandrīz vienmēr bija pozitīvs: baltkrievi attēloti kā tauta, kas vēsturiski un kulturāli ir tuva lietuviešiem. Lietuvieši un baltkrievi gadsimtu gaitā kopā cīnījās par savu brīvību pret daudz spēcīgākiem ienaidniekiem vai aizstāvēja savas tiesības uz etnisko, kultūras un vēsturisko identitāti. Īpaši spēcīgu impulsu baltkrievu pozitīvā tēla veidošanai Lietuvas militārajā presē (un sabiedriskajā domā) sniedza aktīvā iesaistīšanās Lietuvas Neatkarības karā no 1918. līdz 1920. gadam. Baltkrievu kareivja kā ieroču brāļa, Lietuvas aizstāvja un uzticīga Lietuvas Republikas pilsoņa tēls tika saglabāts līdz pat padomju okupācijai 1940. gadā. To veicināja ne tikai publikācijas presē, bet arī profesionālo militārpersonu, kā arī daudzu baltkrievu virsnieku, instruktora pakāpes karavīru un rezerves karavīru aktīva iesaiste Lietuvas sabiedriskajā dzīvē. Lietuvas militārā prese ir nozīmīgs avots turpmākiem pētījumiem par Lietuvas un Baltkrievijas attiecībām, jo īpaši par baltkrievu vienību vēsturi Lietuvas armijā.

Introduction

On 16 February 1918, the Council of Lithuania proclaimed the restoration of an independent Lithuanian state with its capital in Vilnius. The Lithuanian nation's path to independence and the formation of the Lithuanian state faced enormous challenges and a series of external threats from the Bolshevik Russia, the German-Russian militants led by Bermont-Avalov, and also Poland. The Polish political elite, for the most part, hoped to see the country within the borders of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and stood against the independence of Lithuania (as well as that of Belarus and Ukraine). Due to looming external military threats, Lithuania faced an urge of creating its military forces, although initially, the country's leaders had only

considered establishing a militia, arguing that the Lithuanian people were living in peace and harmony with all their neighbors.

On 23 November 1918, Augustinas Voldemaras (1883–1942), the Minister of National Defense, issued the executive order establishing the 1st Infantry Regiment. This date is considered the day of the reestablishment of the Armed Forces of Lithuania (Surgailis 2024, 24).

Several Belarusian units operated within the Lithuanian Armed Forces from late 1918 to 1923. The formation of the 1st Belarusian Infantry Regiment began in Vilnius on 1 December 1918. Three weeks later, it was relocated to Grodno. The regiment was disbanded on 15 June 1919, after most of its troops were disarmed by the Poles in Grodno. Some officers and soldiers retreated to territory controlled by the Lithuanian forces and joined other units. The regiment included a Belarusian cavalry squadron, which withdrew to Kaunas almost entirely. Later, it participated in battles against the Poles losing 13 soldiers in combat and was also assigned to guard the contact line with the Bolsheviks along the Daugava River. The squadron was disbanded on 15 October 1919. In Kaunas, the Belarusian Military Bureau was opened on 14 January 1919. It had a reserve company and was responsible for assisting soldiers of Belarusian nationality, registering volunteers, and assigning them to units within the Lithuanian Army. On 16 March 1919, the 1st Separate Belarusian Company was formed. It took part in battles against the Bolsheviks, advancing from Panevėžys to the Daugava River. On 25 June 1919, the reserve company at the Belarusian Military Bureau in Kaunas was reorganized into the 2nd Belarusian Company. It participated in battles against the Bolsheviks near Ilūkste, Latvia. On 10 October 1919, the 1st and 2nd Belarusian Companies formed the Belarusian Separate Battalion with Major Alexander Ruzhantsov (*Аляксандр Ружанцоў, Aleksandras Ružancovas*, 1893–1966) as its first commander. The battalion was reorganized several times alternating between company and battalion status. It was tasked with guarding the contact line with the Bolsheviks along the Daugava River. In 1920, it was temporarily stationed in the Braslav region and various locations in eastern Lithuania. In the autumn of that year, it took part in battles against the Polish forces. From late 1920, the battalion was stationed in Kaunas and was disbanded in 1923. A total more than 30 soldiers from Belarusian national units were killed in the Lithuanian War of Independence (1918–1920), and more than 20 suffered serious injuries (Surgailis 2020, 240).

The analysis of the contents of the publications

Close historical ties between the Lithuanian and Belarusian nations, the political realities of the time, and the presence of Belarusian national units within the Lithuanian Armed Forces were reflected in the Lithuanian military press during the period of 1919–1940.

Several military magazines were issued in Lithuania during the period from 1919 until the first Soviet occupation in 1940. The most notable among them and the source of the information for this study and following were the magazines “The Word of the Military” (*Kariškių žodis*) and “The Warrior” (*Karys*), which was highly popular not only among soldiers but also among students and the public in general. Additionally,

there were the officers' magazine "The Sword" (*Kardas*), as well as "The Trumpet" (*Trimitas*), the magazine of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (*Šaulių sąjunga*), and "The Cadet" (*Kariūnas*), the journal of the military school. Various military units also produced numerous small print publications, and, alongside the popular magazines, specialized periodicals were issued including the military compendium "Our Handbook" (*Mūsų žinynas*) and the military-historical collection "The War Archive" (*Karo archyvas*). All of the aforementioned periodicals, among others, published articles and information related to the Belarusian issues.

The Lithuanian Army also published newspapers in Belarusian, including "The Guard of the Fatherland" (*Варта Бацькаўшчыны – Varta Baćkaŭščyny*) and the journal "Military" (*Вайсковы – Vajskovy*) once in a fortnight. Additionally, the Belarusian battalion issued the mimeographed newspaper "The Aurora Ray" (*Сьветазар – Svietazar*). From 19 January to 30 June 1920, fifteen issues of *Varta Baćkaŭščyny* were published in total. However, the last issue was confiscated by the military censorship for its allegedly anti-Lithuanian views, and the newspaper's editor Alexander Ruzhantsov was held accountable. The journal *Vajskovy* was initially printed using a mimeograph and later became part of the Lithuanian magazine *Karys*. The Belarusian text was printed using the Latin alphabet. The journal was published from 1 May 1921, till 16 April 1922. Meanwhile, *Svietazar* was published from 27 September 1921, to 18 April 1922. Another notable publication was the "Braslav Wall Newspaper" (*Braslavskaya Stennaya Gazeta*), which was issued by the officers of the Belarusian unit of the Lithuanian Armed Forces while they were stationed in the Braslav region in 1920 (Błaszczak 2008, 77-85). The Belarusian military press in the Lithuanian Army serves as an important source for understanding the history of the Belarusian national units within the Lithuanian Armed Forces.

This article provides an overview and a brief analysis of materials related to the Belarusians and Belarus published in the two journals, namely *Karys* and *Kardas*. While preparing this article, the author used descriptive, analytical, and systematic methods.

After thoroughly reviewing the journals *Karys* (from 1919 to October 1920 it was titled "The Word of the Military" (*Kariškių žodis*)); in total, 1,105 issues were published until June 1940) and *Kardas* (338 issues were published between 1925 and 1940), dozens of articles and news notes mentioning Belarusians were found.

For this publication, we selected 65 articles and news items on the Belarusian-related topics that were sufficiently informative. Of these, 32 appeared in *Karys* (a journal intended for all soldiers and the general public), and 24 in *Kardas* (a journal primarily dedicated to the officers).

Four main categories of articles and informational reports can be distinguished:

- 1) historical articles (mostly about the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) discussing the shared history of the Lithuanian and Belarusian nations;
- 2) information on the Belarusian national struggle for self-determination and independence, as well as life of the Belarusians in Polish-occupied territories and the Belarusian SSR;

- 3) information on the Belarusian national units within the Lithuanian Armed Forces;
- 4) other information, such as life of the Belarusians in the Republic of Lithuania, etc.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Lithuanian spoken language and press usually used the ethnonym *gudai* and the toponym *Gudija* to refer to Belarusians as a people and Belarus as a country or territory. These terms are still used today but less frequently, as the ethnonym *baltarusiai* and the toponym *Baltarusija* have become more prevalent. Until the mid-20th century, the term *gudai* was sometimes also used to refer to Ukrainians, and such instances can be found in the Lithuanian military press (Urbšienė 1931, 170).

Historical articles discussing the shared history of the Lithuanian and Belarusian nations

In the first category of articles, the ancestors of Belarusians were predominantly portrayed as a significant part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's population that contributed many distinguished figures to the state. They are depicted as an integral part of a once-great and powerful country – a common homeland for the ancestors of Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. We found only one text portraying the Belarusian ancestors as hostile people whom the ancient Lithuanians allegedly fought against. However, this was not a scientific or journalistic article but a text of fiction. In the plot of that short historical story, ancient Lithuanian warriors prepare for a military campaign and suggest burning the settlements of the *gudai* (Belarusians), but their duke rejects this idea and instead leads the campaign against the Poles.

Historical ties with Belarusians were often recalled not only in the context of the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Kastantas Ostrogiškis..., 1922, 37), but also in relation to the uprisings of the late 18th and 19th centuries, as well as other historical events.

Various articles featured a consistent assessment that Belarus is Lithuania's closest neighbor (even though, after the Polish occupation of the Vilnius region, there was no direct border between the Lithuanian Republic and the Belarusian SSR). Belarusians were viewed as very close to Lithuanians in terms of identity and culture (Manskis 1923, 17-18). Undoubtedly, this was primarily connected to the shared historical past. Another neighboring people toward whom there were significant sympathies were Latvians.

Information on the Belarusian national struggle for self-determination and independence, as well as life of Belarusians in Polish-occupied territories and the Belarusian SSR

The second category was quite extensive. A significant amount of information was published between 1919 and 1921, covering topics such as the attempts to establish the Belarusian People's Republic, the army of Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz (1883–1940) (Minską užėmė 1920, 417), and the armed resistance of the Belarusian

population against the Poles. However, it should be noted that there were very few articles on these subjects – just numerous short reports, often several in a single issue.

The tone of the publications, in the vast majority of cases, can be described as sympathetic. It was often noted that, like Lithuanians, Belarusians faced stronger neighbors who tried to undermine their independence and prospects of a peaceful life. Russia and Poland were portrayed as imperial countries, while Belarusians and Lithuanians were presented as victims of their neighbors' imperialism. The recurring idea was that Lithuanians were fortunate as they managed to create their independent state, while bigger nations, such as Belarusians and Ukrainians, were hindered in achieving this goal by Poland and Russia (Vasario 16-toji..., 1939, 89). When describing the situation in the territories occupied by Poland, the dissatisfaction of Belarusians with the current situation was emphasized, along with their desire for greater national autonomy (Spalių 9..., 1926, 434). In 1922, the magazine *Karys* informed its readers about the memorandum of the representative of the Belarusian People's Republic, Alexander Tsvikevich (*Аляксандр Цвікевіч*, 1888–1937), to the League of Nations regarding the occupation of Belarusian lands, whose population had been evacuated during World War I and replaced by Polish settlers (Gudų memorialas 1921, 474). The magazine also published the text of the memorandum from the representatives of the Belarusian People's Republic to the participants of the International Genoa Conference (Gudų memorialas Genujos..., 1922, 246-248). There were also publications of the news about the cooperation between the Belarusian People's Republic and the Lithuanian Republic, congratulatory messages (for example, regarding Lithuania's entry into the League of Nations) (Gudų sveikinimas 1922, 485) and reports on the activities of the Belarusian organizations in Czechoslovakia (Gudų tautinis..., 1921, 425) and other countries.

From 1920 to 1939, there were frequent reports about the oppression of the Belarusian people (Pleirys 1921, 297), Belarusian schools (Persekioja gudų... 1921, 460), cultural organizations, and Belarusian publications (Gudų darbuotė 1921, 401) in the territories under the Polish occupation. Polish priests were reported to be engaged in the Polonization of Belarusian Catholics (Gudai skundžiasi..., 1921, 342-343). Since the Lithuanians in the Vilnius region experienced similar oppression, the situation of Belarusians was described with great sympathy. It was also noted that representatives of Belarusian and Ukrainian organizations took part in patriotic events organized by Lithuanians in the Polish-occupied Vilnius (Laisvės šventė..., 1939, 247).

There were reports about the non-violent resistance of the Belarusian public to Polish policies in the Vilnius region including the protests by representatives of the Grodno Belarusian organizations (Gardino gudų ..., 1921, 54) or the boycott of the Polish elections to the Vilnius Sejm in 1922 by Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Jews (Rutenbergas 1933, 205). Also, there were reports that Jews, Lithuanians, and Belarusians in the territories occupied by Poland demanded broader rights to use their national languages (Užsienis 1927, 338). In 1921, the magazine *Karys* reported on armed resistance by Belarusian peasants against Polish authorities (Iš Vilniaus 1921, 390), particularly in the Ashmyany District (Gudijos sukilimas 1921, 331). That same year, it was reported that Belarusians were destroying newly established border

markers along the Polish-Soviet border which divided Belarus (Gudai sieną... 1921, 378).

In 1921 and 1922, the mass arrests of leaders of the Belarusian workers' organizations in the Vilnius region carried out by the Polish authorities were admitted (Gudai ir lenkai 1921, 54). In 1927–1928, the press covered the trial of the leaders and activists of the Belarusian *Hromada* organization carried out by the Polish authorities (Pasaulio žinios 1928a, 248; Pasaulio žinios 1928b, 506; Užsieniai. Lenkija 1928, 106).

In 1925, within its press review, the journal *Kardas* quoted the article from the newspaper *Lietuva* wherein the Belarusians and the Ukrainians were called the closest friends and allies of Lithuania. The author called on representatives of all three nations to unite in the struggle for freedom, emphasizing that these peoples shared “common enemies and many common causes” (Raštų apžvalga 1925, 16).

An interesting conclusion was made by the author of the article published in the *Kardas* magazine in 1940. Analyzing the reasons for the rapid defeat of Poland in 1939, he came up with the theory that one of the causes of the Polish army's lack of combat effectiveness was the low motivation of the ethnical minorities, namely the Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans, and Lithuanians, serving therein. According to the author, the representatives of the “subjugated nations” were unwilling to defend Poland's interests, whereas soldiers of the Polish ethnicity defended their homeland with remarkable bravery (Šarvuotininkas 1940, 65).

In 1938, information appeared that on 25 March, the 20th anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918 was celebrated, and a festive event was held on Lithuanian radio.

“They [Belarusians], like Lithuanians, declared Belarus independent on 25 March 1918, but unfortunately, this fifteen-million nation was, by the will of fate, defeated and is now scattered across Latvia, Lithuania, the Soviet Union, and Poland. During the event, the friendly relations between the Lithuanian and Belarusian nations were emphasized,” wrote the magazine *Karys* (Lietuvos gudai paminėjo..., 1938, 389).

The Lithuanian military press provided little information about the life of the Belarusians in Soviet Russia, and later in the Soviet Union. In 1922, there were reports about the Belarusian SSR border changes, namely, the transfer of the Gomel region and other territories to it, as well as the situation of the Christians in the Belarusian SSR, including the permission of Patriarch Tikhon to hold services in Belarusian in Orthodox churches (Sovietų Gudijoje 1922, 110). The trip of Alexander Chervyakov (Александр Чарвякоў, 1892–1937), a representative of the People's Commissariat Council of the Belarusian SSR, to the Genoa Conference was also covered (Iš gūdų gyvenimo, 1922, 110).

Belarus and Belarusians were most frequently mentioned within reports about the armed forces of the Soviet Union and their development. In 1927, the magazine *Kardas* informed its readers that, according to M. Zakharov's book “National Construction in the Red Army”, the 2nd Belarusian Rifle Division was established in Minsk. However, all commands therein were given in Russian (Raštų apžvalga 1927, 100). In 1928, the magazine *Kardas* reported that Belarusians made up 4.2 per cent of all personnel in the Red Army (Užsieniai. SSSR, 1928, 248). In 1933, *Kardas*

published a note about the visit of a group of Soviet historians (including Belarusians) to Warsaw, where an international congress of historians took place (*Rusu mokslininkai...* 1933, 148). In 1938, there was information about the strengthening of the Belarusian Military District (*Rusija. Stiprinama...* 1938, 470).

Belarusians were frequently mentioned in Lithuanian military publications at the end of 1939. There were reports about the Western Assault (or the Polish Assault) of the Red Army into Ukrainian and Belarusian lands (*Girtus* 1939, 474), as well as plans to relocate Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians from the German-occupied Poland to the Soviet Union (*Lenkijos gyventojų...* 1939, 1365).

However, in articles and reports related to the reunification of the Vilnius region with Lithuania, Belarusians were mentioned even more frequently. Since the fall of 1920, when the Polish side treacherously violated the Polish-Lithuanian agreement signed in Suwałki on 7 October 1920, and occupied Vilnius and the Vilnius region a few days later, the return of these lands was considered one of the main goals of the Lithuanian Republic and its people. The press and radio consistently voiced demands to return Vilnius to Lithuania calling on the nation not to forget about the temporarily lost Lithuanian capital. This informational campaign (including the one in Belarusian) was also reflected in military publications (*Visos tautos...* 1937, 1187-1188).

In October 1939, the city of Vilnius and part of the Vilnius region were returned to the Lithuanian Republic. On 27–28 October, units of the Lithuanian Armed Forces entered Vilnius. Numerous reports mention that representatives of the Belarusian community and national organizations (along with Jewish, Tatar, Russian, and other ethnic groups) welcomed the return of Vilnius to Lithuania during the official celebrations (*Istorinis žygis...* 1939, 520).

Information on the Belarusian national units within the Lithuanian Armed Forces

The third section is particularly interesting and serves as an important source for the military history in general. The Lithuanian military press contains dozens of articles and reports about Belarusian units in the Lithuanian army and individual servicemen. It can be confidently stated that Major A. Ruzhantsov was either the author or the initiator of a significant portion of these publications, but other authors also contributed.

The articles provide information not only about the combat path (*Kraunaitis* 1928, 62) and daily life of Belarusian servicemen but also about their individual fates.

Even after the disbandment of the Belarusian units, numerous articles in the Lithuanian military press continued to recall Belarusians who took part in the defense of Lithuania. Over the years, the military press increasingly published obituaries or reminiscences of deceased comrades from the Belarusian units of the Lithuanian army. In 1922, Major A. Ruzhantsov wrote a short article about Senior Non-Commissioned Officer Akim Sazonov (*Акім Сазонаў, Akimas Sazonovas*, 1897–1922) of the Belarusian unit. A native of the Lithuanian town of Jonava, he joined the 5th Belarusian Company in Kaunas in 1919, later serving in the 1st Separate Belarusian Company. During battles against the Bolsheviks near Daugavpils, he lost a leg but, after treatment

in a hospital, returned to his comrades. Moving with crutches, he served as a telephone operator. He was later transferred to Kaunas, where he served for over a year in the honorary company of disabled soldiers at the Military Museum. He died on 18 May 1922, due to careless handling of a hand grenade (Ružancovas 1922, 246).

That same year, A. Ruzhantsov wrote an obituary dedicated to Captain Stanislaw Bondor-Narushevich (*Stasys Bondoris-Naruševičius*, 1889–1922), an officer of Belarusian nationality. He organized resistance against the Bolsheviks in the Braslav region but, after the area had been occupied by Polish forces, withdrew along with Lithuanian troops and later served in the quartermaster service of the Lithuanian Army (A. Ą. Kapitonas Stasys Bondoris 1922, 38). In 1936, the journal *Karys* published an article about Evdokija Daugelienė (*Eudokija Daugėlienė*), a native of the Vitebsk Governorate who married a Lithuanian. Prior to 1918, she worked as a nurse in the military hospital in Kaunas and continued her medical work during the German occupation. During the Lithuania's War of Independence, this Belarusian resident of Lithuania provided medical assistance to Lithuanian soldiers. After the war, she was awarded the Grand Duke Gediminas Order of the 2nd Degree and the Lithuanian Independence Medal (B-us St. 1936), 560-561). In 1939, an article was published about Non-Commissioned Officer Romualdas Ragavichius (*Romualdas Ragavičius*), who began his service in the Lithuanian Army in 1919 in the 1st Belarusian Infantry Regiment in Grodno and later served in the Belarusian Separate Battalion and other units (Vienas seniausią... 1939, 619).

In 1934, the journal *Kardas* published an article dedicated to Lieutenant Jury Pliska (*Юры Пліска, Jurgis Pliska* 1895–1919) of the Belarusian Battalion, who died in combat against the Bolsheviks in 1919 in what is now Latvia (Karininkas Jurgis Pliska 1934, 333). In 1935, *Kardas* printed an obituary for Orthodox chaplain Father Yoann Korchinsky (*Ян Карчынскі, Jonas Korčinskis* 1864–1935), who had previously served as the chaplain of the Belarusian Battalion before becoming a chaplain in the Lithuanian Army (A. A. Jonas Korčinskis 1935, 307).

In 1926, Major Vladas Žutautas (1896–1941) wrote an article about the condition of the Kaunas military cemetery stating that three soldiers of the Belarusian Battalion were buried there (Žutautas 1926, 71-72).

In 1938–1939, Zenonas (Zenas) Gerulaitis (1894–1945) published several articles providing detailed information on the episodes of the Belarusian Battalion's participation in battles against the Bolsheviks in 1919. These articles also included biographies of some of the soldiers who distinguished themselves in these battles (Gerulaitis 1938, 410; Gerulaitis 1939, 613-614). In 1936, the journal *Karys* published the article by Lieutenant Juozas Kubiliūnas (1909–1980) detailing the participation of the 1st Separate Belarusian Rifle Company in battles against the Bolsheviks near Chervonka (in Latvia) during which the company officer Georgiy Plisko was killed (Kubiliūnas 1936, 395). The same year, another article was published about the servicemen of this company, with photographs of two comrades – a Lithuanian non-commissioned officer Vladas Širvaitis and Belarusian Alexey Sokolov. Both had distinguished themselves in battles against the Bolsheviks, and Sokolov later became an active member of the Riflemen's Union. This raises the question of how a

Lithuanian serviceman ended up in a Belarusian unit. Such cases were not uncommon. Specifically, this serviceman came from a Polonized Lithuanian family, spoke very little Lithuanian but was fluent in Polish and Russian, so he was enlisted in the Belarusian unit (Taikli ugnis... 1936, 334-335).

Sometimes people of other ethnic origins (Lithuanians, Russians, Jews, etc.) were enrolled in Belarusian units either due to their inability to speak Lithuanian or simply due to a shortage of Belarusian recruits. But in general, the Belarusian units were genuinely Belarusian not only by name.

Among the foreigners who joined the Belarusian battalion, a Chinese soldier named Chinsha (in Lithuanian *Petras Činša*, 1896–1930) had perhaps the most exotic story. According to an article published in 1921 in the magazine *Karas* where he was referred to as *Čin-Šai-Li-Tai* (Qin-Shay-Lee-Tay), this soldier grew up in Minsk and joined the Lithuanian army in 1919 enlisting in the Belarusian unit. His comrades loved their Chinese fellow soldier, who was known for his cheerful personality, and they called him “Vasilij Yankovich Činša”. He fought against the Bolsheviks and later against the Poles in 1920. During a battle near Giedraičiai (in the Molėtai district), while on a reconnaissance mission, the Chinese soldier was captured by Polish cavalry. The surprised Polish soldiers were puzzled by the presence of a Chinese soldier in the Belarusian battalion of the Lithuanian army. When asked how many Chinese soldiers were in the Lithuanian army, he reportedly made up a story, saying that Lithuanians were forming a Chinese corps. When he was exchanged as a prisoner of war and returned to Lithuania, he continued to serve in the Belarusian battalion. After leaving the army, he settled in Kaunas (Kinai Lietuvių armijoje 1921, 140). He died in 1930. The obituary published in *Karas* in 1930 provides slightly different biography of this Chinese soldier. According to this version, he was born in 1896 in China, in the city of *Činda* (likely referring to Qingdao). He was abducted by the Russians, and some officer brought him to Russia. The Chinese man served as the officer’s servant and, along with his master, ended up as a prisoner of war in German captivity during World War I. After being released in 1919, he found himself in Lithuania, where he joined the Lithuanian army and served in the Belarusian battalion. He was captured by the Polish forces, and when asked about his nationality, he told them that the Lithuanians were “forming a Chinese corps”. However, at the first opportunity, he escaped from captivity and returned to Lithuania. He continued to fight, was wounded, and after the war he lived in Kaunas. He converted to Catholicism, married a Lithuanian woman, and later passed away. His funeral was attended by military chaplain Adolphas Sabaliauskas (*Adolfas Sabaliauskas*, 1873–1950), Lieutenant General Vladas Nagevichius (*Vladas Nagevičius*, 1880-1954), and his former commander Alexander Ruzhantsov who shared memories about the Chinese soldier who had defended Lithuania (*Iš savanorių gyvenimo* 1930, 570). As can be seen, the details in the articles from 1921 and 1930 differ significantly. The more reliable biographical facts seem to be those provided in the obituary in 1930.

The multicultural atmosphere that prevailed in the Belarusian units was reflected in some publications, too. For instance, in 1921, the magazine *Karas* published an article about the Belarusian cultural event held at the Kaunas garrison house. Soloists

and the Belarusian military choir performed Belarusian songs (such as *Viasna Idze, Chamu Zh Mnie Nia Piets', Dobry Viechar, Dziauchyna*) followed by performances of Gypsy dances and even the Lezginka. The party lasted well past midnight and ended at 5 a.m. (Gudų vakaras 1921, 67).

In the same year of 1921, *Karas* published an article titled *Regarding Our Belarusians*, in which an anonymous author signed as “S” criticized Belarusian servicemen in the Lithuanian army for singing Russian rather than Belarusian songs while marching through the city. “There is a question, – do these soldiers really not know how to sing in their native language? Of course, they do, but despite the command’s ban on singing Russian songs, they continue to sing them daily,” the author complained. He also pointed out that in 1919, at the wake of the formation of the Belarusian units, some of their commanders did not even want to hear about the Belarusian language. “But those people were defeated. Under difficult frontline conditions, the native language prevailed once again. Now, since October of the last year [1920], most Belarusians find themselves in the best national conditions, yet their native language is still being neglected,” the author lamented (Dar dėl mūsų gudų 1921, 149).

Another report of the *Karas* journal tackled the same topic in 1921: “On October 10, a football match took place in Kaunas on the Vytautas’ Hill between the team of the Belarusian Separate Battalion, *The Union*, and the team of the Autobattalion. *The Union* lost with a score of 5:0.” However, the author of the item was less concerned about the loss of the Belarusian team and more puzzled by the choice of the name of their team. “It is unclear why the players chose a name completely foreign to the Belarusian language and incomprehensible to most of the team members,” the author remarked in surprise (Iš gudų gyvenimo (1921a), 520).

Intensive educational and cultural activities were carried out in the Belarusian units. In the Belarusian Separate Battalion, these matters were supervised by a special Commission for Culture and Education which included several officers and non-commissioned officers from the unit. Soldiers attended educational and entertainment events, listened to political education lectures (such as “Bolshevism and Its Significance” or “Why We Are Fighting the Poles”), and received literacy training. The battalion’s library contained books not only in Belarusian and Lithuanian but also in Russian, Polish, and Yiddish (Atskiras gudų batalionas 1921, 133).

Jews often ended up in the battalion for the same reason – some of them were not sufficiently fluent in Lithuanian. In 1939, the journal *Karys* published an article about Chaim Silkiner (*Chaimas Silkineris*), a soldier of the Belarusian Separate Battalion who bravely fought against the Bolsheviks near Daugavpils (Nutildė prieš baterija 1939, 1464).

In 1926, the newspaper *Kardas* published data on the literacy levels of Lithuanian Army recruits. Among soldiers of the Belarusian nationality, 30 per cent were illiterate (unable to read or write). For comparison, the illiteracy rates were: 26 per cent among Lithuanians, 16 per cent among Jews, 25 per cent among Russians, 18 per cent among Germans, 50 per cent among Poles, and 100 per cent among Roma. Additionally, 50 per cent of Belarusians had not attended school but could read and

write, 10 per cent had the primary school education, and another 10 per cent had received education of a higher level. By 1924, there were no illiterate Belarusian recruits; however, 40 per cent of them did not speak Lithuanian (Kareivių švietimas 1926, 332-335).

Sometimes, military publications addressed issues affecting Belarusian servicemen. In 1926, a reader writing under the pseudonym “Pain” (*Skausmas*) highlighted the situation of several Lithuanian army servicemen of foreign nationality – mostly Belarusians – who had been serving for seven years without receiving Lithuanian citizenship. Some of them had even been awarded Lithuanian military orders but were still required to carry foreign passports.

“It certainly looks strange: they hold ranks in the Lithuanian Army, even though, by law, non-citizens are not eligible for military ranks. Those who fought for our independence and were awarded the Cross of Vytis still haven’t received Lithuanian citizenship – it’s absurd. Meanwhile, there are non-Belarusian foreigners who arrived to Lithuania later but have already been granted citizenship. Legally, everyone should be equal. Belarusians who fought for Lithuania’s independence must be granted Lithuanian citizenship,” the author urged (*Skausmas* 1926, 361-362).

In 1938, Lithuania celebrated the 20th anniversary of its armed forces (1918–1938). Among the many congratulatory messages broadcasted by the Lithuanian Radio on Lithuanian Armed Forces Day, 23 November 1938, and published in the journal *Karys*, was a message from the National Union of Belarusians of Lithuania (*Lietuvos gudy tautinė sąjunga*):

“Shoulder to shoulder with our Lithuanian brothers, Belarusians fought against common enemies on the battlefield. And now, as we congratulate the Lithuanian Armed Forces, we, Belarusians, stand ready as one, should the Supreme Commander of Lithuania call upon us, to defend Lithuania’s freedom and fight for the independence of our homeland. Long live the Lithuanian Armed Forces! Long live its commanders!” (*Visuomenės ir kariuomenės...* 1938, 1391).

“The Supreme Commander of Lithuania” referred to President Antanas Smetona (1874–1944).

Other information, such as life of Belarusians in the Republic of Lithuania

The fourth section, which covered information about the lives of Belarusians in the Republic of Lithuania and other related topics, is quite limited. Most often, military publications mentioned issues related to the work of the Minister for Belarusian Affairs (*Gudy reikalų ministras*), a position that existed from 1918 to 1923 (*Iš gudy gyvenimo* 1922, 110). In November 1921, the leading column of the journal *Karys* was titled “On the Belarusian Question”. The article provided a brief overview of the history of the Belarusian nation emphasizing the oppression of Belarusians by Russian and Polish authorities, the rapprochement of several Belarusian activists with Lithuania, the inclusion of Belarusians in the State Council of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Valstybės Taryba*), and the appointment of Jazep Varonka (*Язэп Варонка, Juozapas Voronko*, 1891–1952) as Minister for Belarusian Affairs in the government of the Republic of Lithuania. “The core idea of this agreement lies in the principle that Lithuanians and

Belarusians must give a hand to one another and move forward together,” wrote *Karys* (Baltgudžių klausimu 1921, 537).

Conclusions

The Belarusian topic was widely covered in the Lithuanian military press. Magazines such as *Karys*, *Kardas* featured dozens of articles, at least a hundred informational reports, and hundreds of references related to Belarus and Belarusians. The image of Belarusians in the Lithuanian military press was almost always positive. They were portrayed as a nation historically and culturally close to Lithuanians. Lithuanians and Belarusians had fought for their freedom together for centuries against stronger enemies or defended their rights to ethnic, cultural, and historical identity through non-military means. A particularly strong impetus for the promotion of the positive image of Belarusians in Lithuanian military press (and public opinion) came from their active participation in the Lithuanian War of Independence from 1918 to 1920. The image of the Belarusian soldier as a comrade-in-arms, a defender of Lithuania, and a loyal citizen of the Lithuanian Republic was maintained until the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940. This was supported not only by publications in the press but also by the active involvement of professional military personnel, as well as many Belarusian officers, non-commissioned officers, and reserve soldiers in the social life of Lithuania. The Lithuanian military press represents an important source for further research into Lithuanian-Belarusian relations, particularly the history of the Belarusian units in the Lithuanian army.

Source and literature list

- A. Jonas Korčinskis (1935). *Kardas*, Nr. 14: 307.
A.†A. Kapitonas Stasys Bondoris – Naruševičius (1922). *Karys*, 4: 38.
Ališauskas (1939). *Zarasų kautynės*. *Karys*, 36: 1049-1051.
Atskiras gudų batalionas (1921). *Karys*, 12: 133.
Baltgudžių klausimu (1921). *Karys*, 46: 537.
B-us St. (1936). *Moteris, daug padėjusi artimui nelaimėje*. *Karys*, 23: 560-561.
Dar dėl mūsų gudų (1921). *Karys*, 13: 149.
Gardino gudų protestas (1921). *Karys*, 5: 54.
Generolas Balachovičius (1920). *Karys*, 46: 429.
Gerulaitis Z. (1938). *Būrio vadui žuvus, stojo į jo vietą*. *Karys*, 14: 410;
Gerulaitis Z. (1939). *Grioviais užlindo į priešo užnugarį*. *Karys*, 21: 613-614.
Girtus V. (1939). *Naująją įvyktą akivaizdoje*. *Kardas*, 19: 474.
Gudai ir lenkai (1921). *Karys*, 19: 54.
Gudai sieną naikina (1921). *Karys*, 32: 378.
Gudai skundžiasi Šv. Tėvui (1921). *Karys*, 29: 342-343.
Gudijos sukilimas (1921). *Karys*, 28: 331.
Gudų darbuotė (1921). *Karys*, 34: 401.
Gudų memorialas (1921). *Karys*, 40: 474.
Gudų memorialas Genujos konferencijai (1922). *Karys*, 21: 246-248.
Gudų tautinis susirinkimas (1921). *Karys*, 36: 425.

- Gudų vakaras (1921). *Karys*, 6: 67.
- Istorinis žygis į Vilnių (1939). *Kardas*, 21: 520.
- Iš gudų gyvenimo (1921a). *Karys*, 44: 520.
- Iš gudų gyvenimo (1921b). *Karys*, 48: 571-572.
- Iš gudų gyvenimo (1922). *Karys*, 9: 110.
- Iš savanorių gyvenimo (1930). *Karys*, 29: 570.
- Iš Vilniaus (1921). *Karys*, 33: 390.
- Kareivių švietimas (1926). *Kardas*, 21–22: 332–335.
- Karininkas Jurgis Pliska (1934). *Kardas*, 17: 333.
- Kariuomenės šventė Vilniuje (1939). *Kardas*, 21: 568.
- Kastantas Ostrogiškis Lietuvos vyriausiasis etmonas (1922). *Karys*, 4: 37.
- Kinai Lietuvių armijoje (1921). *Karys*, 12: 140.
- Kraunaitis (1928). Kavalerija nepriklausomybės 10 metų sutiktuvių šviesoje. *Kardas*, 4 – 5: 62.
- Kubiliūnas (1936). I-os gudų kuopos kautynės ties Suseklių kaimu. *Karys*, 17: 395.
- Laisvės šventė laisvoje žemėje (1939). *Karys*, 8: 247.
- Lenkijos gyventojų mainai (1939). *Karys*, 55: 1365.
- Lietuvos gudai paminėjo 20 metų apsisprendimo sukaktį (1938). *Karys*, 13: 389.
- Manskis J. (1923). Kam reikalingi mums Vilnius ir Klaipėda? *Karys*,. 2: 17-18.
- Minską užėmė (1920). *Karys*, 44: 417.
- Nutildė prieš baterija (1939). *Karys*, 58: 1464.
- Pasaulio žinios (1928a). *Kardas*, 16–17: 248.
- Pasaulio žinios (1928b). *Kardas*, 16 – 17: 506.
- Persekioja gudų mokyklas (1921). *Karys*, 39: 460.
- Pleirys J. (1921). Lenkai ir Vilnius. *Karys*, 26: 297.
- Raštų apžvalga (1925). *Kardas*, 12: 16.
- Raštų apžvalga (1927). *Kardas*, 5 – 6: 100.
- Rusija. Stiprinama vakarų siena (1938). *Kardas*, 20: 470.
- Rusų mokslininkai Varšuvoj (1933). *Kardas*, 8: 148.
- Rutenbergas G. (1933). Vilniaus reikalai kaip tarptautinės teisės delikto atitaisymo problema. *Kardas*, 11: 205.
- Ružancovas (1922). A. a. vyr. puskarininkis Akimas Sazonovas. *Karys*, 21: 246.
- Skausmas (1926). Skaitytojų balsai. Svarbi žinutė. *Kardas*, 23: 361–362.
- Sovietų Gudijoje (1922). *Karys*, 9: 110.
- Spalių 9 dieną minėdami (1926). *Kardas*, 28: 434.
- Šarvuotininkas (1940). Dėl straipsnio “Lenkijos katastrofos priežastys ir vokiečių lenkų karo pamokos.” *Kardas*, 3: 65.
- Taikli ugnis – laimėjimo laidas (1936). *Karys*, 14: 334-335.
- Urbšienė M. (1931). Ukrainiečių tautinis judėjimas XIX a. *Kardas*, 11: 170.
- Užsieniai. Lenkija (1928). *Kardas*, 6: 106.
- Užsieniai. SSSR (1928). *Kardas*, 16 – 17: 248.
- Užsienis (1927). *Kardas*, 23: 338.
- Vasario 16-toji ir mūsų uždaviniai (1939). *Kardas*, 4: 89.
- Vasiliausias A. (1939). Zarasų operacijos 1919 m. *Kardas*, 18: 453.

Vienas seniausių 2 pėst. D. L. K. Algirdo pulko karių išėjo atsargon (1939). *Karys*, 20-21: 619.

Visos tautos protas ir širdis okupuotame krašte / (1937). *Karys*, 42: 1187-1188.

Visuomenės ir kariuomenės sveikinimai skaityti per radiją lapkričio 23 d. (1938). *Karys*, 48: 1391.

Žutautas V. (1926) Kauno karių kapinės. *Kardas*, 9: 71–72.

Błaszczak T. (2008). Baltarusių spauda Lietuvoje 1918 – 1940 metais. *Laikas ir žodis. Studentų mokslo darbai*. Kaunas, Nr. 1: 77-85.

Surgailis G. (2020). *Lietuvos kariuomenės gūdų kariniai daliniai 1918 – 1923 m.* Vilnius: Generolo Jono Žemaičio Lietuvos karo akademija.

Surgailis G. (2024). *Lietuvos kariuomenės istorija. Tomas 1, Nuo sukūrimo iki sunaikinimo, 1918-1941.* Vilnius: Generolo Jono Žemaičio Lietuvos karo akademija.