

Memorial Hills of Crosses in Lithuania: Memory and Identity

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Abstract: This article examines the memorial hills of crosses in Lithuania as significant *lieux de mémoire* that help to sustain historical memory and national identity. By analysing the intentions of founding these hills and of erecting memorial monuments, the ornamentation, symbols, iconography, and inscriptions of these monuments, the study reveals how traditional cross-crafting serves to commemorate the victims of Soviet repression, partisans, deportees and important historical events. The research highlights the importance of universal symbols of suffering and the struggle for freedom in representing traumatic and heroic historical realities while also discussing symbols and motifs relevant to sustaining national identity. Furthermore, the documentary nature of the inscriptions serves to restore historical truth and document Lithuania's path to independence. Ultimately, the article concludes that these sites are still actively used to record new stages of the nation's history.

Keywords: sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), national identity, cross-crafting, partisan resistance, Soviet occupation

Introduction

The distinctive cultural landscape of Lithuania is characterized by the widespread presence of crosses and other small-scale religious architectural monuments. In some areas they form specific types of sacred site commonly known as hills or hillocks of crosses. While some of these sites are linked to pre-Christian sacred places, others have emerged more recently. The Hill of Crosses, a prominent sacred site in northern Lithuania, is well-known both within Lithuania and abroad. However, the majority of these hills of crosses are known primarily at a local level within Lithuania.

Hills of crosses can be categorised into two main types based on their nature: religious and memorial. Religious hills of crosses typically function as votive sites. These places of vows are often situated on significant terrain, such as a natural mound or a location known for its extraordinary features, for example, a spring believed to possess healing power. However, not every spiritually important site leads to the formation of a hill of crosses; their emergence represents a specific manifestation of folk piety. Some of these religious hills date back to the 19th century or even earlier. Most such sites are associated with specific stories and legends, often involving apparitions of the Virgin Mary or miraculous recoveries. Crosses at these votive sites are erected as offerings, either in hope of divine grace or as expressions of gratitude. Religious people believe that making an offering at such a location is helpful in securing God's favour.

Memorial hills of crosses predominate among those that were more recently established. These sites primarily emerged during the period of the National Revival (1988–1991) or in the subsequent years. These hills of crosses are mainly dedicated to the memory of those who died fighting for Lithuania's freedom from Soviet occupation. They are typically established at sites of partisan burials, or at other locations that evoke significant or painful historical events, such as the deportations to Siberia or more recent occurrences related to the struggle for independence.

In this article, I will specifically focus on these memorial hills of crosses and their characteristics. The object is viewed as *lieux de mémoire* (place of remembrance) in Pierre Nora's words (Nora 1989). According to Nora, first of all there must be a will to remember (Nora 1989: 19), so one of my aims is to examine the intentions behind constructing crosses on such hills. In addition,

I seek to analyse the symbols and images adorning these monuments, and to reveal the ideas they represent. This article is based on historical sources and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lithuania in 2020 and 2026.

Historiography. Lithuanian scholars have drawn attention to religious hills of crosses. Their historical development has been discussed by Rita Trimonienė (Trimonienė 2010) and Gabija Surdokaitė-Vitienė (Surdokaitė-Vitienė 2024). The greatest scholarly focus has been directed toward the most famous site of this kind in Lithuania, the Hill of Crosses (Lith. *Kryžių kalnas*), located in the Šiauliai district. The bibliography is extensive, therefore I will not list it here, as the subject of this article concerns memorial hills of crosses. I will limit myself to mentioning only a few researchers who have made significant contributions to the historical, artistic, and social studies of the Hill of Crosses, for example Alfonsas Motuzas, Vytenis Rimkus, Gabija Surdokaitė-Vitienė, Darius Liutikas, and Dangiras Mačiulis. A comprehensive historical overview and bibliography of research on the Hill of Crosses are provided in the article by G. Surdokaitė-Vitienė (2020).

Although more attention has been paid to religious hills of crosses, memorial hills have not been fully acknowledged and discussed in Lithuanian academic literature. The only comprehensive article is dedicated to the history and artistic expression of the Merkinė Hill of Crosses (Burinskaitė 2002). An overview of both religious and memorial hills of crosses has been published by the author of this article (Urbonienė 2020). Meanwhile, researchers in other countries broadly discuss clusters of memorial crosses or sites of tragic political events marked by other signs and objects (Santino 2006; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011; Viggiani 2014).

Sources. The article draws on field research material collected in 2020 during the Cross-crafting Paths project (*Kryždirbystės keliai*), implemented by the Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO in collaboration with the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute. The fieldwork involved visits to both religious and memorial hills where crosses are erected. Data was also gathered from published sources and through interviews with local residents. The crosses and other monuments on the hills were documented by a professional photographer; a selection of these photographs is available on the project website (<https://kryzdirbysteskelias.lt/about/>). Additionally, the author of this article took photographs of the objects held in her personal archive. The hill of crosses at the site of the Battle of Kalniškė was studied in 2026.

This article analyses and synthesises material collected from nine specific hills: the Merkinė Hill of Crosses, the Kalniškė Hill of Crosses, the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow, the Mikniškė Hillock of Sorrow, the hillock of crosses near the Sixth Fort in Kaunas, the hillock in Lukšiai dedicated to the memory of deportees and political prisoners, the hill of crosses near the TV Tower in Vilnius, the Utena Hill of National Suffering, and the Baltic Way Valley of Crosses in Pasvalys.

Reasoning and Intentions Behind the Formation of Memorial Hills of Crosses

The hills of crosses analysed in this article were established primarily during the final years of the Soviet era – the National Revival period (1988–1989) – and the first years of restored independence (1990–1992); only one was established in later years.

Two main groups of intentions for founding these hills can be distinguished. The first (and primary) group consists of hills established to commemorate those who died for Lithuania's freedom and to honour the memory of post-war partisans¹. Such hills are usually established at the sites of mass graves of fallen partisans or at their burial/reburial sites (the Merkinė Hill of Crosses, the Utena Hill of National Suffering, and the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow). Some are established at the sites of battles between partisans and Soviet forces (the Kalniškė Hill of Crosses) while some are established at designated locations (the Mikniškė Hill of Sorrow and Lukšiai Hill).

The second group consists of hills established to commemorate significant events that occurred from the beginning of the National Revival period onward. Most often, such hills formed spontaneously in specific locations. For instance, the site may be directly associated with the event being memorialised (the hill near the TV Tower in Vilnius, the Baltic Way Valley of Crosses). Alternatively, they may emerge at sites formerly occupied by Soviet symbols (the hill near the Sixth Fort in Kaunas).

I will begin the overview of the origins of the first group of hills with the **Merkinė Hill of Crosses** (Fig. 9). This hill of crosses in the town of Merkinė is the largest memorial to the partisans of the south Lithuania territory who died fighting for Lithuania's freedom against the occupying Soviet regime. This significant site was established on the very ground where the bodies of partisans,

killed between 1945 and 1953, had been buried. In a deliberate attempt to conceal this evidence, Soviet authorities constructed a secondary school stadium on the site in 1972. However, during the National Revival period, the stadium was closed, and the formation of a memorial site began. The first memorial cross was erected here in 1989, and subsequently, the number of memorial crosses has steadily increased each year. Crosses are dedicated to the fighters who died for freedom and also to those who perished in exile in Siberia. The hill now bears over 200 crosses. Annually since 1989, the traditional commemorative festival honouring partisans and their supporters has taken place on this hill.



Figure 1. The Hill of National Suffering in Utena. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

In Utena, the Hill of National Suffering (Fig. 1) was established on a hill on the south-western shore of Lake Dauniškis, at the site where, between 1944 and 1954, the remains of the Vytautas Military District partisans who died in Utena district were secretly buried. Among them were the remains of the partisan squad leader Jonas Žemaitis (pseudonym Maumedis), who died on 17 March 1948 in Katlėriai (Utena district) (Memorialas tautos kančioms atminti, <https://kryzdirbysteskelias.lt>). During the 1992–1999 period, fifteen wooden crosses dedicated to the memory of the partisans were erected on the hill (Utenos miestas, <https://www.genocid.lt>). Commemorations of the partisans' deaths, the events of 13 January, and other national remembrance dates are also held here annually.

The Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow was established on a small hill where the remains of partisans from the Birutė, Geležinis Vilkas, and Žalgiris units of the Tauras Military District, who died in the vicinity of Veiveriai between 1944 and 1953, were buried. Additionally, the remains of partisans transferred from various mass-burial sites were interred here between 1989 and 1990 (Veiverių miestelis, <https://www.genocid.lt>). Every year in June, solemn commemorations of the anniversaries of the deaths of the Tauras Military District partisans are held on the hill. The community also gathers here during national holidays to mark important dates.



Figure 2. Hill of crosses in Kalniškė forest. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2026.

On 16–17 May 1945, one of the largest battles between Lithuanian partisans and the Soviet occupiers took place in Kalniškė forest, Lazdijai district. Approximately 100 to 120 partisans, led by Jonas Neifalta (pseudonym Lakūnas), fought while surrounded by the significantly larger of the NKVD border regiment, managing to break through the encirclement. Several hundred soldiers of the occupying army were killed, and many more were wounded. More than 40 partisans from the Dainava Military District perished (Kalniškės mūšis, <https://www.genocid.lt>). On 13 May 1991, a monument was unveiled on a hill at the site of the battle although a few days later (21 May) it was blown up by pro-

Soviet individuals. Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of local people, it was rebuilt as early as 29 May (constructed by Jurgis Nevulis) (Paminklai, <https://www.genocid.lt>). Soon after, crosses dedicated to the memory of Lithuanian partisans began to be erected here, and by 2006, a hill of crosses had formed (Fig. 2). Every year on 16 May, a solemn commemoration of the Battle of Kalniškė is held at the site.

Memorial hills are also established in designated locations. These may be sites situated near the place where a prominent partisan fell, or they may be purposefully selected for their convenience and accessibility to the public. For example, in the village of Mikniškė (Šakiai district), the Hill of Sorrow was established in 1989 near the site where the deputy commander of the Tauras Military District partisans, Pranas Runas (pseudonym Daugirdas, 1916–1951), perished. This hillock primarily serves to commemorate the suffering and historical grievances of the local community. It currently bears nearly 20 crosses, which have been erected to honour deceased partisans and those who perished in exile.



Figure 3. Symbolic hill in Lukšiai. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

In Lukšiai, a symbolic hillock with iron and wooden crosses was established in 2014, symbolising the cemeteries of deportees in Siberia (Fig. 3). Its founder,

Vidas Cikana, chose a location for this symbolic hill that is easily accessible to all the town's residents. It is situated in the town centre, opposite the churchyard of St Joseph's Church, allowing locals to visit it at any time. The site is also clearly visible from the main street used by people passing through from other towns and villages. Consequently, they also frequently stop as they drive by to visit the site (personal communication, 2020).



Figure 4. The hillock of crosses in Kaunas. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

The second group of hills of crosses commemorating recent events in Lithuanian history is represented by three memorial sites. One such site is the hill of crosses in Kaunas (Fig. 4) located near the Sixth Fort. This particular hill of crosses stands as a symbol of the National Revival era, having emerged spontaneously around 1990 with the erection of the first cross. This first cross, and subsequently the entire hill, became a symbol of the victory of Christianity and nationhood over the Soviet occupation, as it was established on the very site where a Soviet tank had stood from 1964 to 1989, an object that, for the residents of Kaunas, embodied the Soviet occupation. The same phenomenon of demolishing many of the monuments erected in memory of the Soviet army was seen across Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. By erecting the first cross

on the site of the tank, the residents of Kaunas symbolically reclaimed and sanctified the ground where this symbol of evil had once stood. Or, as Ewa Ochman noted, the removal of Red Army monuments was to represent a clear break with the communist past and to symbolically perform a moral judgement on the supporters of communism (Ochman 2010: 516). Shortly afterwards, more crosses appeared, built by residents of Kaunas to express their hope for the restoration of Lithuania's independence. Commemorations of significant historical dates are held on the site, such as the anniversary of the Baltic Way (23 August) and the Day of the Withdrawal of the Soviet army from Lithuanian territory (31 August).

The Baltic Way Valley of Crosses (also known as the Pasvalys Valley² of Crosses) was also established at the site of the event—along the Via Baltica highway, where the Baltic Way³ human chain took place in 1989. Participants in the campaign, representing Pasvalys and several other Lithuanian districts (Biržai, Joniškis, Pakruojis, Klaipėda, Radviliškis, Akmenė, and Šiauliai), began erecting crosses here in 1989 to commemorate their involvement (Baltijos kelio kryžių slėnis, <http://www.pasvalia.lt>). Solemn annual commemorations of this event are held in the valley.



Figure 5. The Hill of Crosses at the Vilnius TV Tower. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2024.

Another hill of crosses commemorating the most recent tragic events in Lithuanian history is located at the Vilnius TV Tower (Fig. 5). The location is also directly related to the event being commemorated. The memorial began to form spontaneously in the immediate aftermath of the night of January 13, 1991, when 14 individuals lost their lives defending the TV tower and other important buildings. The following day, people started lighting candles at the Vilnius TV Tower to honour those who died due to the aggression of the Soviet army. Very quickly, small crosses, statues, rosaries, and other devotional items were placed there. Subsequently, several larger crosses were erected, initiating the formation of a distinct hill of crosses, all dedicated exclusively to the victims of these events. Over time, the original wooden crosses and sculptures deteriorated and were transferred to the Lithuanian National Museum for restoration. After the restoration, these artifacts were placed on permanent exhibition at the Museum of Occupation, which is located within the TV Tower. To ensure the continuity of the memorial, in 2014–2015 five new wooden crosses were erected, replacing the original crosses. Annual commemorations of Defenders of Freedom Day (13 January) are held at the hill, drawing large crowds of Vilnius residents.

Ornamentation and Symbolism

Religious monuments consisting of small-scale architecture predominate in the memorial hills of crosses, with crosses being the most common form. These are crafted from wood (the most prevalent material), metal, and stone. Other forms of traditional Lithuanian cross-crafting monuments such as roofed pillar-type crosses (*stogastulpis*), column shrines (*koplytstulpis*), ground-standing shrines (*koplytėlė*), and miniature shrines affixed to trees are also present, though they are less frequent. The cross remains the dominant monumental form. Some crosses are almost devoid of ornamentation, while others are very modestly decorated. Ornate crosses, some of which are exceptionally richly decorated, stand out on these hills. In certain places some crosses are distinguished by their unique construction or ornamentation. For example, on the Merkinė Hill of Crosses, iron crosses composed of two or three branches resembling genealogical trees are particularly striking (Fig. 6). They are inscribed with dates of death and serve as powerful reminders of the tragedies experienced by many families in the Dzūkija region (south-eastern Lithuania), where a significant

number of villagers joined the partisan resistance. No crosses in the form of genealogical trees have been recorded at the other memorial hills discussed.



Figure 6. Memorial cross on the Merkinė Hill of Crosses. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

Furthermore, the cross-crafting monuments on some of the hills possess distinct regional features. For instance, the Utena Hill of National Suffering is dominated by ornate wooden crosses characteristic of the eastern Aukštaitija region (north-eastern Lithuania) (Fig. 1), where the town of Utena is located. The cross-crafting tradition of eastern Aukštaitija is distinguished by tall, massive crosses with square-section shafts divided into two or three tiers by cornices. The ends of the arms are trefoil-shaped or finished with a triangular profile; the edges of the shaft and arms are decorated with geometric carvings, and a small altar-shaped shrine is formed around the centre of the cross. The form and ornamentation of these crosses were established in the region by the prominent cross-crafter Antanas Deveikis (1842–1932) from the village of Antalė. Inspired by his work, other craftsmen living not only in Utena but also in the surrounding districts (Anykščiai, Rokiškis and Ignalina) adopted similar designs.

Cross-crafters from Suvalkija (south-western Lithuania) were particularly fond of decorating crosses with the tulip motif. This tradition has endured to the present day; consequently, the memorial hills located in the Suvalkija region such as the Lukšiai symbolic hill, and the Mikniškė and Kalniškė hills of crosses feature monuments adorned with this motif (Fig. 3). The tulip motif was widely prevalent in the folk textiles of Suvalkija and was also occasionally found in cross ornamentation. Adopted from folk art and popularised in early 20th-century Lithuanian art and architecture by professional artists, the tulip motif came to be regarded as a key element of national ornament and a cornerstone of the national style during the interwar period (Šatavičiūtė-Natalevičienė 2014: 400). By the 1920s and 1930s, cross-crafters were using this motif extensively, and its popularity in the ornamentation of cross-crafting monuments remains significant to this day.

Cross-crafting monuments representing all of Lithuania's ethnographic regions have been erected at the Vilnius Hill of Crosses near the TV Tower to emphasise the determination of all Lithuanians to defend the state against hostile forces. These five monuments reflect the traditions of cross-crafting in different ethnographic regions of Lithuania (Fig. 5). The region of Samogitia (western Lithuania) is represented by a small chapel housing a Pietà sculpture. The Aukštaitija region is represented by a column shrine housing a sculpture of Jesus of Nazareth. A cross bearing the instruments of Christ's torture is characteristic of Dzūkija region. The double cross, continuing the tradition of the Caravaca crosses, is dedicated to invoking divine protection for Lithuania's hard-won freedom in the face of ongoing threats. A chapel carved in a modern style with a large sculpture of the Pensive Christ testifies to the continuation of the cross-crafting tradition in the modern world. Together, they symbolise the pain of the Lithuanian people and honour those who lost their lives in the events of January 13th.

The cross-crafting monuments erected on the memorial hills are dominated by ornaments, symbols and iconography characteristic of traditional Lithuanian cross-crafting; however, exceptional decorative elements are also present. Most notably, signs of Lithuanian statehood are extensively used: the Pillars of Gediminas, the Double Cross of the Jagiellonian dynasty, and occasionally the Coat of Arms of Lithuania (Vytis). Almost every monument features the Pillars of Gediminas, the Double Cross, or a combination of both.

These signs of statehood are often combined with oak leaf motifs (Fig. 7). In many cultures, the oak tree is seen as a symbol of power and authority and associated with the gods and goddesses of thunder, lightning and fertility. In Greek mythology, the oak was considered the tree of Zeus, and in Roman mythology, that of Jupiter (Becker 1995: 32). In Lithuanian mythology, the oak is linked to the god Perkūnas, the protector of warriors. Examples from Lithuanian folklore suggest that the soul of a warrior finds refuge in the oak tree, thereby granting the tree the archetypal function of mediator for the continuity of life (Klimka 2010: 67). Furthermore, since antiquity, the oak has been regarded as a symbol of strength, masculinity, and endurance due to its hard and durable wood. In the 18th century, it became a symbol of heroism, and since the 19th century, oak leaf wreaths have been woven for victors (Becker 1995: 32). Consequently, oak leaf motifs were highly appropriate for representing the resilience and determination of the population in their struggles for freedom and independence. This symbolism is also reflected in the inscriptions on monuments on the hills of crosses, where fallen freedom fighters – heroes – are compared to oaks: “Here rest the oaks of our Homeland” (inscription on a monument on the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow).



Figure 7. Memorial cross on the Kalniškė Hill of Crosses. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2026.

The national, patriotic and statehood symbolism in the ornamentation is further complemented by the Lithuanian tricolour flag (yellow, green and red) depicted on some of the crosses. Furthermore, tricolour ribbons are frequently tied around the crosses on these hills (Fig. 7). The crosses are adorned with these ribbons not only during national holidays and commemorative days but also on ordinary days. This demonstrates the constant attention and respect shown by the public towards these sites of memory; it is also a declaration of patriotism and national identity.

It is also worth noting that there are monuments adorned with specific symbols that recall the events commemorated there. For instance, to emphasise the struggle of the Lithuanian people for freedom, some craftsmen incorporate a chain motif into the cross's decoration, symbolising freedom fettered by the Soviet regime.

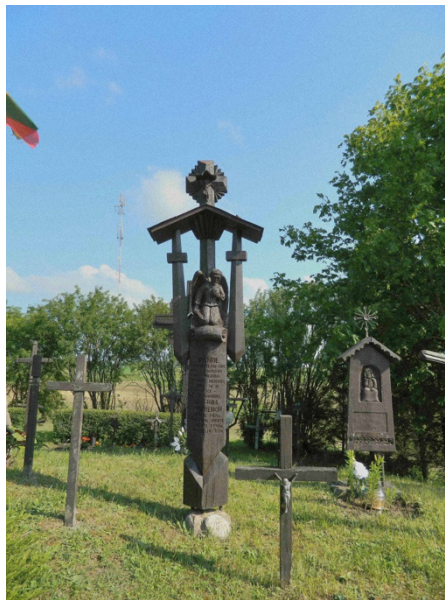


Figure 8. A column shrine in the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

A column shrine featuring two swords and a kneeling angel figure stands on the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow (Fig. 8). The swords incorporated into the cross can be interpreted in two ways. The first, symbolic, interpretation relates to the image of the rider-warrior (Vytis) depicted in the Lithuanian coat of arms. The sword is a warrior's weapon, representing loyalty, the defence of the Homeland, and justice. The second interpretation is linked to the Christian faith, where the sword is a symbol of victory over evil (Satan). In Christian iconography, the sword is an attribute of Saint Michael, one of the most important archangels, symbolising him as a warrior fighting against the forces of evil (Metford 2001: 174). With this specific monument, the craftsman combined both symbolic meanings of the sword: it is a symbol of the courage of the partisans who died for Lithuania's freedom and the defence of the Homeland, and, simultaneously, a symbol of the struggle against evil.

Monuments featuring an incorporated bell also occur (such as one in the hill of crosses near the Sixth Fort in Kaunas) (Fig. 4). The bell has the universal meaning of signalling something or warning of disaster. It also has the power to drive away evil forces, stops the spread of epidemics and redirects storms and other natural elements (Klimka 2012: 100–101). Since the national rebirth period at the end of the 19th century, the symbol of the bell has become a herald of freedom in Lithuanian culture, for example being found in the title of the newspaper *Varpas* (The Bell, 1889–1905), which promoted ideas of national revival and liberation, the principles of democracy, and civil rights and freedoms, while condemning the russification policy of the Tsarist authorities. Professional sculptors also incorporate the bell motif into their works. For instance, two monuments honouring the victims of January 13, 1991 in Vilnius, the eight metre bronze sculpture *The Sacrifice* (2005, sculptor Darius Bražiūnas, architect Artūras Asauskas), featuring a woman standing on a bell with arms raised to the sky, and a tall obelisk topped with a bell (2017, sculptor Romualdas Kvintas). Professional and folk artists use this well-known and easily understood symbol because it is a reminder of the crucial days in Lithuania's struggle for freedom and symbolises restored independence and freedom from occupation. The metaphor of the Bell of Freedom also appears in the inscriptions on the crosses (for example, the inscription on a cross on the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow: "Can you hear, brothers who died for the Homeland, how the bell of freedom rings?").

Furthermore, other elements recalling historical events are also employed. When creating the symbolic hill of exiles in Lukšiai, Vidas Cikana incorporated railway tracks, serving as a reminder of the mass deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia in freight wagons. The broken fence surrounding the Lukšiai hill symbolises the native homes that people were forced to abandon. Additionally, a bunker has been installed in the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow to represent the life and struggle of the partisans during the post-war years.

Iconography

As the cross is the prevailing memorial monument on the hills under discussion, the iconography is not particularly diverse. Among the images of saints, the Crucifix (the figure of the Crucified Christ) predominates, as it is found on almost every cross which, as previously mentioned, is the dominant type of monument on these hills. However, to convey a specific idea or heighten the emotional impact, craftsmen also carve images of the Blessed Virgin Mary into some of the crosses, such as the Pietà, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Grace, and Our Lady of Lourdes. Images of the Blessed Virgin Mary related to the semantics of pain prevail, specifically the Pietà and Our Lady of Sorrows.

One of the most memorable monuments featuring a Pietà sculpture stands on the Merkinė Hill of Crosses. It is a column shrine carved by the craftsman Adolfas Teresius, positioned slightly apart from the main cluster of crosses and thus clearly visible to all visitors (Fig. 9). The central focus of the monument is a Pietà sculpture set within the shrine. The shrine column is dedicated to Juozas Vitkus-Kazimieraitis (1901–1946), the commander of the partisans of southern Lithuania, and symbolises the immense pain and loss endured by the Lithuanian people. The vibrant polychromy of the sculpture further intensifies the emotional impact of the Pietà – the suffering mother – which in this context also serves as an allegory for a suffering Lithuania.



Figure 9. A column shrine with a Pietà sculpture (by Adolfas Teresius) on the Merkinė Hill of Crosses. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

Pietà sculptures are also found on the crosses on the Kaunas hill, as well as in the ground-standing shrine at the hill near the Vilnius TV Tower. The image of the Pietà at these memorial sites is to be interpreted as a symbol of the suffering endured by the Lithuanian people during the years of Soviet occupation and the losses sustained during the events of 13 January.

The theme of the Pietà was one of the most popular in Lithuanian folk sculpture during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The composition, depicting the Mother of God holding her deceased Son Jesus on her lap, symbolises a mother's grief over the loss of her children. According to researchers, the image of the Mother of God suffering due to the death of her Son was deeply resonant with generations of Lithuanian village women, whose sons perished in wars, uprisings, or while defending their land against occupiers (Matušakaitė 1996: 179; Rimkus 1995: 10). This iconography-driven concept led to the predominance of images of Our Lady of Sorrows and Pietà compositions in monuments erected in cemeteries, at sites of death, and in memorials to the uprisings against Tsarist Russia (Urbonienė 2015: 96). This conception has persisted to the present day, as evidenced by its depiction in memorials honouring Lithuanian freedom fighters and those who died in the struggle for the homeland. One of the most

famous monuments depicting the Pietà was created by renowned Lithuanian sculptor Stanislovas Kuzma and is located within the memorial at Antakalnis Cemetery in Vilnius, dedicated to the memory of those who fell during the events of 13 January.



Figure 10. A cross with the sculpture of Our Lady of Sorrows on the Utena Hill of the Nation's Suffering. Photo by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

The sculpture of Our Lady of Sorrows is also frequent and is closely related to the theme of the Pietà. Here, however, Mary is depicted alone, her hands clasped over her chest, which features a heart pierced by seven swords (symbolising the Seven Sorrows of Mary). Notably, the image of Our Lady of Sorrows on the cross is often larger than the figure of the Crucifix. This emphasis on the Sorrowful Mary embodies the desire of both the commissioners and the craftsmen to highlight the meaning of grief for the fallen and the suffering of mothers who have lost their sons. For example, on one of the crosses on the Utena Hill of the Nation's Suffering, a large figure of Our Lady of Sorrows is carved below a small Crucifix (Fig. 10). This cross was erected to commemorate four partisans who died in 1948.

Iconographic themes of Jesus Christ, apart from the Crucifix, are not abundant. However, the image of the Pensive Christ (*Rūpintojėlis*) is used in the monuments at the memorial hills of crosses (Fig. 4–5). The image depicts a sitting and contemplating Jesus, with his head resting on his hand, with a crown of thorns. It is one of the most popular depictions of Jesus in Lithuanian folk sculpture of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This image remained popular even during the Soviet era, and its prevalence only increased during the National Revival period. In contemporary Lithuanian cross-crafting, this image is exceptionally common. It is placed within small shrines, shrine columns, and roofed poles erected near homes, in public spaces, and in cemeteries. In Lithuanian village culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the image of the Pensive Christ was associated with a personal relationship with God and individual prayer; He was perceived as a God contemplating His own suffering and as a God who cares for His people. This concept gave rise to the Lithuanian name *Rūpintojėlis*, which in some parts of Lithuania was also given as *Aprūpintojas* (Provider) or *Dievo rūpestėlis* (God's Little Care) (Urbonienė 2015: 54–55). The early 20th century saw the emergence of another association with this image, that of the search for symbols of Lithuanian national identity and distinctiveness prompted by the national liberation movement. Through the efforts of Lithuanian intellectuals, cultural figures, and public activists, the image of the concerned, sorrowful Christ was associated with the hardships endured by the Lithuanian nation. By the first half of the 20th century, the Pensive Christ (*Rūpintojėlis*) had already become a national symbol that resonated with the nation's spirit (Urbonienė 2015: 56; Surdokaitė-Vitienė 2015: 108–109), and its depiction spread into professional art. Increasingly, this image appeared not only in private monuments within farmsteads but also in monuments in public spaces (Urbonienė 2015: 57). Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, the image of the Pensive Christ ceased to be merely an object of intimate prayer and became a symbol giving meaning to historical events. *Rūpintojėlis* as a symbol of national identity and distinctiveness did not fade during the Soviet era, it became particularly strong during the period of the National Revival and the first years of regained independence (1989–1993). Even today, the figure of the Pensive Christ is very popular, and it is frequently purchased as a souvenir to be gifted to relatives from abroad or other guests (Urbonienė 2025: 171–173). Since the plot of the Pensive Christ belongs to the theme of the Passion of Jesus and also expresses national identity, this image was very suitable for depiction

in monuments erected on memorial hills of crosses, especially those where the sacrifice of freedom fighters is honoured.

Sculptures of Christ Carrying the Cross, Christ Blessing, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Jesus of Nazareth are also found among the monuments of the memorial hills. The choice of themes related to the Passion of Jesus Christ (such as Jesus of Nazareth or Christ Carrying the Cross) is mainly for the reasons already discussed, i.e. these are images symbolising suffering and are highly appropriate for sites such as cemeteries, places of death, or other locations associated with loss of and grief for deceased loved ones.

The images of Jesus (Christ Blessing, the Sacred Heart of Jesus) and the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Grace) that embody the idea of divine love are probably chosen as expressions of God's mercy, protection, and blessing for the fighters who fell here and in other locations. The image of God the Father on the Merkinė Hill of Crosses can also be attributed to this concept of divine love and mercy.

There are remarkably few images of patron saints on these memorial hills. Isolated examples include St John of Nepomuk and St George. This is understandable, as in memorial hills dedicated to the memory of partisans and other tragic events of the struggle for freedom, the symbolism of suffering is the primary link between the dead and the living. The images of patron saints, whose functions relate to help and protection in daily life, would be too utilitarian in this context—symbolising assistance rather than existential states such as suffering or anxiety. The exceptions I have mentioned (St George, St John of Nepomuk) only prove the rule, as these saints have a direct connection to struggle and resistance. In Christian iconography, St George symbolises the fight against evil (Satan), personified by the dragon. In the context of the hills under discussion, he becomes a symbol of the struggle against the occupier. The choice of the image of St John of Nepomuk is to be interpreted through his role as a priest and confessor as he is regarded as the protector of the secrets of the confession. Under conditions of resistance, silence was the greatest virtue, as the betrayal of fellow fighters meant death and dishonour; thus, the choice of this saint's image for a monument on a memorial hill acquires a new, political meaning.

The image of an angel on the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow is also noteworthy (Fig. 8). The sculpture of the angel – depicting him kneeling, holding a lowered sword in one hand, with the other hand placed over his heart – can be

attributed to the imagery of both the struggle against evil and endurance in the face of suffering. The sword in his hand indicates a connection with St Michael the Archangel, fighter against Satan. Thus, as with the image of St George, this sculpture symbolises the struggle against the occupier. Meanwhile, the angel's posture (kneeling with a bowed head) and gesture (hand placed over his heart) symbolise grief for the freedom fighters who fell in battle.

Inscriptions and dedications

In the monuments erected on memorial hills to honour the memory of the fallen, inscriptions commemorating the sacrifice of freedom fighters predominate. Examples include: "To the Heroes of Lithuanian Freedom", "Eternal Glory to the Partisans of Lithuania", "To Those Who Died for Lithuania's Freedom", "To Those Who Died for the Homeland, Lithuania", and "To the Defenders of Lithuania".

There is also an abundance of inscriptions dedicated to specific individuals, providing the name and surname of the deceased along with their dates of birth and death; frequently, the exact date and location of death are also recorded. For example, an inscription on a cross on Kalniškė Hill identifies specific individuals who fell in the Battle of Kalniškė: "The Dambrauskas brothers died here / Jeronimas-Ažuolas 1921 / Klemensas-Tauras 1924 / Vincas-Jaunutis 1926–1956". On the Veiveriai Hill of Sorrow a dedication on one monument indicates that it was erected to commemorate the partisans of the Iron Wolf (*Geležinis Vilkas*) detachment of the Tauras military district who died on 9 June 1946 in Pagraižys forest (the names of the fallen are also inscribed on the monument).

Over time, some hills began to feature crosses unrelated to the memory of fallen freedom fighters. These are dedicated to prominent political and public figures whose contributions to consolidating restored Lithuanian statehood are significant. Such examples include crosses for the Lithuanian diplomat and politician-in-exile Stasys Lozoraitis (a cross erected in 1994 on the hill of crosses near the Kaunas Sixth Fort, and another in 1996 in the Baltic Way Valley of Crosses), and for President Valdas Adamkus (a cross on the Mikniškė Hill of Crosses). In addition, some sites include crosses dedicated to pivotal

historical events, such as the 1918 Act of Independence and the 1990 Act of Restoration of Independence.

On hills not associated with the commemoration of tragic events, some crosses mark significant occasions and important historical events. For example, on the hill of crosses near the Kaunas Sixth Fort, there are crosses commemorating Pope John Paul II's visit to Lithuania in 1993, the events of 13th January and the Medininkai massacre⁴ of 1991. One cross is dedicated to the nations that were the first to recognise Lithuania's independence (Moldova, Iceland, and Denmark)⁵. Standing in the same location is a cross dedicated solely to the Kingdom of Denmark (erected in 1991).

There are also crosses with more abstract dedications devoted to the National Revival, Lithuania's freedom, Independent Lithuania, and Peace, as well as expressions of gratitude to God for regained liberty: "To the Lithuanian National Revival", "We thank God for the restoration of Lithuania's Independence", "30 Years of Our Freedom", "100 Years for Restored Lithuania", "To Independent Lithuania", "May Peace Prevail on Earth", and "Peace on Earth". Furthermore, crosses are erected to commemorate specific events of significance to the local community. For instance, in the Baltic Way Valley of Crosses, the community of Pasvalys erected two crosses (in 1993 and 1995, created by Arūnas Grušas) as tokens of gratitude to the people of Norway and Sweden for the material aid provided to the residents of Pasvalys during the first years of regained independence. To emphasise the gratitude of the local people, the craftsman decorated them with traditional Swedish and Norwegian national ornaments (personal communication, 2020). The respect is further emphasised by the bilingual inscriptions on these two crosses. One is in Lithuanian and Swedish saying "God bless our Swedish friends. Grateful residents of Pasvalys. Founded by the Pasvalys Central Hospital. 1995". The other is in Lithuanian and Norwegian saying "God bless our Norwegian friends. The residents of Pasvalys. 1993".

Conclusion

The memorial hills and hillocks of crosses in the Lithuanian landscape serve as *lieu de mémoire*, helping to maintain historical memory and national identity. The primary intentions for creating these sites were to honour post-war Lithuanian partisans, their supporters, and members of the resistance movement as

well as those who died in exile in Siberia or suffered Soviet repressions. Public commemoration of these individuals was impossible for a long period during the Soviet era; thus, the desire for a place to gather, mourn, and honour significant people materialised into the creation of memorial hills of crosses. Additionally, some hills were established to commemorate significant events that occurred from the beginning of the National Revival period onward.

Hills commemorating those who died for Lithuania's freedom are usually established at the sites of mass graves of fallen partisans, their burial or reburial sites, the locations of battles between partisans and Soviet forces, or other designated locations. Hills of crosses commemorating certain significant event in the history of the re-established independent Lithuanian state are often formed spontaneously in locations associated with the event being memorialised.

It should be noted that in the hills located at the sites of partisan deaths, burials, or reburials, crosses dedicated specifically to the partisans predominate. On hills established to commemorate important events not directly associated with the deaths of partisans, crosses are also erected for prominent figures or with abstract intentions such as freedom, revival or peace. This reflects a desire to preserve the memory of the partisans and their struggle in an exclusive manner, using crosses to sacralise a space dedicated solely to their memory. In the words of P. Nora, "the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial" (Nora 1989: 19).

Memorial hills frequently feature elaborate and decorated religious monuments adorned with sculptures, various ornaments, and symbols, alongside very simple, undecorated crosses. Individuals seeking to honour the victims of the Soviet regime and those who died fighting for Lithuanian freedom – particularly family members – often strive to erect aesthetically significant monuments.

The decoration and symbolism of the monuments on these memorial hills exhibit a distinct emphasis on national identity, evidenced by the extensive use of ethnic ornamentation, state symbols, and other elements representing nationhood (such as tricolour ribbons). State symbols such as the Pillars of Gediminas, the Double Cross of the Jagiellonian dynasty, and the Lithuanian Coat of Arms (Vytis) are present on almost every cross. Other prevalent ornaments include oak leaf motifs, which symbolise the nation's strength and determination during its struggle for freedom and independence, and the tulip motif which is associated with national folk art. Furthermore, symbols highlighting the heroic

nature of the struggle (the sword) are employed alongside motifs and elements reflecting historical realities, such as chains, bells, bunkers, and railway tracks.

Sculptural themes symbolising suffering, pain, and sorrow dominate the monuments. The most common depictions include the Crucified Christ, the Pietà, the Virgin Mary of Sorrows, and the Pensive Christ. Images of patron saints, who traditionally perform functions of intercession, domestic aid, or protection, are extremely scarce in these memorial hills, giving way instead to universal images of suffering and grief. The experiences of partisans and deportees were perceived as the nation's Way of the Cross; consequently, the suffering Christ (the Crucified, the Pensive Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, or Christ Carrying the Cross) ceases to be a distant, abstract God and becomes a God who is close, compassionate, and understanding of human pain. The depictions of the Virgin Mary embodying suffering (the Pietà, Mary of Sorrows) serve as a direct reference to Lithuanian mothers who, standing by the desecrated bodies of partisans cast into town squares or being deported with their children in freight wagons to Siberia, endured the same anguish as Mary at the Cross with her Crucified Son. Thus, the painful memory of the nation is given meaning through the symbolism of suffering and pain.

Inscriptions and dedications are a significant element of these monuments, as they reveal the intentions behind the erection of each cross. These inscriptions specify the person, date, or event being commemorated, thereby helping to maintain historical memory and national identity. Furthermore, due to these inscriptions, the memorial hills of crosses acquire a documentary character, where the texts serve as historical testimonies. This documentality (names, dates, and locations) serves not only as a form of familial remembrance but also as the restoration of historical truth following decades of enforced silence.

The inscriptions also demonstrate that the community used these hills to record the essential stages of liberation from Soviet occupation, from the partisan struggle and deaths in the forests and the deportations to Siberia, to the restoration of the Lithuanian state in 1990 and its subsequent international diplomatic recognition. Finally, the inscriptions indicate that the memorial hills have become a constantly renewed space of memory. Crosses dedicated to the Centenary of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania (2018), or marking the 30th anniversary of regained independence (2020), testify that these sites are still actively used to record new stages in the nation's history. The annual

commemorations held at these hills also sustain historical memory, strengthen national identity, and foster patriotism.

Notes

¹ Post-war partisans refers to participants in the guerrilla warfare conducted between 1944 and 1953 against the Soviet Union's occupation of Lithuania. In 1944–1945, approximately 30,000 armed men gathered in the forests, determined to fight until the independent Lithuanian state was restored. Starting in the autumn of 1944, small partisan units began to merge into larger formations, which later evolved into districts (*apygardos*). A district consisted of 2–5 detachments (*rinktinės*), which were further divided into companies, platoons, and squads. Two to three districts formed a region (*sritis*). This decade-long resistance is also referred to as the Lithuanian War, the Resistance, or the Partisan War. Throughout this period, there were at least 50,000 active participants in armed resistance, while approximately 100,000 Lithuanian residents participated in the resistance movement, together with members of underground organisations and supporters. During the armed resistance, 20,000 partisans died (*Antisovietinis pasipriešinimas*, <https://www.genocid.lt>). When the Soviet authorities suppressed the resistance movement many resistance participants, if they were not killed, were sentenced and deported to Siberia.

² Pasvalys district is a region of plains, therefore the crosses near the motorway were erected on a level meadow. For this reason, this memorial site came to be known as the Valley of Crosses rather than a hill of crosses. The Valley of Crosses serves the same functions as other memorial hills of crosses and thus has been included in this study.

³ The Baltic Way was a peaceful mass demonstration organised by the national movements of the three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) on August 23, 1989. The intention was to condemn the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939) and to express a unified aspiration for liberation from Soviet occupation. On that day, the residents of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia formed a human chain, holding hands on the Vilnius–Riga–Tallinn highway, stretching for about 650 kilometres. About 1 million people from Lithuania participated in the demonstration, with a total of about 2 million residents of the Baltic States overall (*Baltijos kelias*, <https://www.vle.lt>).

⁴ The Medininkai Massacre took place on 31 July, 1991, at Lithuania's Medininkai border post, when officers from the Riga special purpose militia unit (OMON, subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR) carried out an assault. During the attack, six Lithuanian border officials were murdered, one died later in hospital, and only one severely wounded customs officer survived (*Medininkų žudynės*, <https://www.vle.lt>).

⁵ According to the act of 11 March 1990, the Lithuanian Restorative *Seimas* declared the independence of Lithuania from the Soviet Union. Moldova was the first to recognise Lithuania's independence while it was still part of the Soviet Union on May 31, 1990. However, Lithuania was recognised internationally only after almost a year (Iceland did so on February 11, 1991), after which Lithuania was recognised very quickly by Denmark (February 28, 1991). Other major world powers began to recognise Lithuania from the end of May 1991.

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