

# Memorialising Historical Events in the Urban Space: Temporary Memorials, Monuments and Rituals

*Skaidrė Urbonienė*

*Lithuanian Culture Research Institute*

*skaidreu@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** In commemorating certain events, especially tragic ones relating to the deaths of people, temporary memorials, showing people's respect for the dead, or expressing other feelings, thoughts or ideas, usually appear at the sites of these events. The article deals with temporary memorials put up at the time of the events of 13 January 1991, in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the permanent monuments that replaced them afterwards. Citizens use these sites for memorial services, mourning and other commemorative rituals on the date of the event and other relevant dates. The article analyses the message that is transmitted through these memorials, and their significance in the city's rituals.

**Keywords:** 13 January, temporary memorial, spontaneous shrine, permanent monument.

## Introduction

In Lithuania, as in many other countries, people erect small wooden or metal crosses, or put flowers and light candles in places where somebody has died in an accident, or where some other tragic death has occurred. Sometimes various small objects, such as notes, pictures, photographs and other memorabilia, are placed there. All these objects on the site of a tragic death create a kind of temporary memorial, which is an expression of grief and compassion, or other thoughts in connection with the tragic death. These places have an easily understandable symbolic meaning, that someone died here in an accident or another tragic event.

In this article, I analyse the temporary memorials and permanent monuments that relate to the tragic events that followed the reestablishment of the independent Lithuanian state and its proclamation on 11 March 1990. By these events, I mean

the events that took place between 11 and 13 January 1991, and especially the events of 13 January, which is sometimes referred to as Bloody Sunday. I focus attention on the memorials (temporary and permanent) dedicated to the 13 January events in the city of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The aim is to discuss the message transmitted through these memorials, and their significance in the city's rituals.

Data concerning these memorials was gathered from photographic material, recorded and printed evidence, and memoirs, and also online media. This is the first attempt to discuss the topic of temporary monuments in Lithuania. It clearly requires a more thorough examination in the future. Lithuanian researchers have not yet paid attention to temporary memorials, or to the memorials dedicated to 13 January. We can find articles and monographs in Lithuanian historiography which discuss the memorialisation of historical events such as the First World War and the Second World War, and the proclamation of Lithuania's independence in 1918, but no attention has yet been paid to the memorialisation of 13 January 1991, or to people's attitudes to the January events. Even in the publication *Vilniaus paminklai: kaitos istorija / Vilnius monuments: a story of change* (2012), no monument relating to the events of 13 January is included. Meanwhile, researchers in other countries discuss broadly the temporary memorials connected with sudden or traumatic deaths, which have occurred due to car accidents, political events and terrorist attacks (Santino 2006, Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011a, Viggiani 2014).

### **An overview of the events**

Lithuania declared its independence from the Soviet Union on 11 March 1990. From that day, 11 March became a national holiday, called the Day of the Restoration of Lithuania's Statehood. The following period was difficult, with a shrinking economy, energy shortages, and high inflation, due to the economic blockade imposed by the Soviet Union. The leaders of the Soviet Union, and pro-Soviet groups in Lithuania, were unhappy with the proclamation of independence. Thus, the political situation was unstable.

The Soviet Union sent in special military units at the beginning of January 1991 in order to restore Soviet rule in Lithuania. On 11 January, Soviet troops occupied the buildings of the Department of National Defence and the Press House in Vilnius. Tanks appeared on Vilnius' streets on the evening of 12 January. The intention was to seize strategic objects: the Television Tower, the building of the Radio and Television Committee, and the Supreme Council of Lithuania (parliament). The new Lithuanian government then called on citizens to protect the parliament and other important public buildings, including radio and television centres. People all over the country responded to this call: thousands gathered at these buildings to defend them. Many people from other cities, towns and villages came to help

the residents of Vilnius. Soviet military forces began a crucial crackdown on the night of 13 January. The fiercest attacks on the supporters of independence took place at the Television Tower and the Radio and Television Committee building. In their storming by the Soviet army, 14 civilian protesters died, and hundreds were injured. Although some objects were seized, the ultimate aims of the operation (occupying the parliament, provoking strife between Lithuanian citizens of different nationalities, presenting these events as a struggle between two armed sides) were not achieved. Occupations and military raids continued for several months following the attacks, but no large open military encounters took place after the January events.

January 13 became an official commemorative day, the Day of the Defenders of Freedom. It marks the successful public defence against brutal Soviet aggression, thanks to the immense sacrifice, determination, beliefs and unity of the people. The Day of the Defenders of Freedom is considered one of the most crucially important and most meaningful days for the Lithuanian state.

### **Temporary memorials**

In the aftermath of these violent events, in the next few days, temporary memorials, consisting of lighted candles, green twigs and flowers, began to appear on the spots where people were killed, at the Television Tower and the building of the Radio and Television Committee. They were soon supplemented with small crosses, holy pictures, statuettes of saints, rosaries, notes and photographs. A large wooden sculpture of the Sorrowing Christ (made by an unknown craftsman), one of the most popular images in Lithuanian folk sculpture, stood out among the various memorabilia around the Television Tower. Since the time of the national liberation movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this particular image of Christ has borne the meaning of a national symbol, expressing the Lithuanian spirit, the nation's rural culture and values, and the sufferings of the Lithuanian people during the long period of Imperial Russian rule. It was popular as a national symbol in Soviet times as well. It is therefore no wonder that the sculpture of the Sorrowing Christ was placed at the Television Tower after the tragic events, and became a spontaneous shrine: a lot of flowers, candles, holy pictures and rosaries were placed around it. Later, several crosses (including one with a sculpture of the Sorrowing Christ) were erected next to this sculpture at the newly formed Hill of Crosses on the slope of a hillock at the foot of the Television Tower. There were various kinds of wooden crosses: some were very simple, and some were decorated. Some of them had inscriptions dedicated to the victims of 13 January. One was decorated with portraits of the defenders of the Television Tower who died.

Another location where a temporary memorial appeared was the building of the Radio and Television Committee. This was also defended by hundreds of people during the January events, and its defence claimed one victim. In the morning of 13 January, people began to light candles and put flowers, green twigs, small crosses and other religious items in front of this building, in honour of the civilian who died there, and the other victims who died at the Television Tower. Later in 1991, this spontaneous temporary memorial was replaced by 24 wooden crosses, dedicated to the victims of 13 January and several other episodes in 1991. People continued to use the place for mourning and commemorative purposes long afterwards (to pray, remember and light candles, and to put flowers, rosaries, holy pictures and photographs).



Fig. 1: Crosses at the building of the Radio and Television Committee in Vilnius. Photograph by Viktoras Kapočius, 1991, Lithuanian Central State Archives.

Thus, in the cases discussed, sites of death were marked by flowers, candles and crosses, and other small religious items and personal memorabilia, such as notes, pictures and photographs. All these items at the site of tragic death create a temporary memorial that can be defined as a spontaneous shrine. I use this term according to Jack Santino's definition: spontaneous shrines are "temporary memorials that people construct, on their own initiative, to mark the site of untimely deaths. These memorial assemblages are usually made up of flowers, candles, personal memorabilia, and notes, as well as religious icons. [...] People often use these sites to hold vernacular memorial services and other rituals of commemoration, at the

time of the deaths and on significant dates thereafter [...]. They are a kind of folk shrine. [...]. Spontaneous shrines are created, when possible, at the actual sites where the deaths occurred, or as close to them as possible” (Santino 2011: 98–99).

Another important place to mention during the January events is the parliament. From the beginning of January, thousands of people stood on guard around the building and at barricades. When the news reached them about the casualties, people started lighting candles.

The barricades that surrounded the parliament building also became a kind of temporary monument. A lot of posters, various inscriptions and slogans appeared on them. Later, some of the posters were collected and taken to museums or archives. Many of them, as well as slogans and inscriptions on the barricades, were photographed, and some were published. On the basis of this material, several groups of inscriptions and slogans that reflected people’s attitudes can be distinguished. One group testifies to the aspiration for freedom and independence (“Freedom for Lithuania”, “We support the Lithuanian Parliament”, “We want to live in independent Lithuania”, “We are for freedom and peace”, “Peace will triumph over war”, “We will die, but we shall remain faithful to freedom”) (Girdvainis 2011: 66–67, 84, 101). Another group of slogans criticised the Soviet army’s actions (“Soviet Army go home”, “The army will not defeat the Nation”, “The Soviet army is an army of assassins”) (Girdvainis 2011: 121, 140). A third group of inscriptions honoured the victims of 13 January (“Eternal honour for those who died for Lithuania’s freedom and independence”, “Flowers of victory will grow from the sacrifice of people”, “Glory to the victims”) (Girdvainis 2011: 154–155). Some inscriptions put the responsibility for the mass killings on Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union. People were especially angry because he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (“Gorbachev, the Nobel Peace Prize is not for you”, “Think of the Nobel Prize as you shed blood”, “Gorbachev, Hell is waiting for you”), and some comments revealed people’s views of local collaborators as well: they were called butchers, murderers and degenerates (Girdvainis 2011: 177, 198–199, 222).

The posters and slogans on the barricades were supplemented by Lithuania’s tricolour flags, pictures or small objects with state symbols (the Vytis coat of arms, the Columns of Gediminas, the double cross of the Jogaila dynasty), as well as cartoons, children’s drawings, defaced Soviet passports and military call-up cards, and discarded Soviet medals, orders and other awards. Soon afterwards, portraits of victims and photographs depicting the scenes of the tragic events on the night of 13 January appeared on the walls of the barricades. Makeshift wooden crosses were put up on Parliament square in honour of the people who died (Figure 2), alongside a small altar with holy pictures, where people prayed and lit candles asking for God’s help in their difficulties. Many rosaries, holy pictures and other memorabilia were soon hung on them. In addition, a temporary wooden monu-



ment dedicated to Iceland, consisting of three roofed crosses, was put up there in February. That was how people expressed their gratitude to the first state to recognise Lithuania's independence.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 2: A roofed cross dedicated to the victims of 13 January in front of the barricades at the parliament building in Vilnius. Photograph by Algimantas Cimbolaitis, 1991, Lithuanian Central State Archives.

The slogans, inscriptions and various material signs of grievance and loss, expressing the feelings and the mood of ordinary people, were a witness to people's attitude to the events, and to their determination to fight for an independent state, and expressed a demand for accountability and justice.

These objects by the parliament building created a huge temporary memorial that lacked the aura of a 'shrine' and did not mark a site of death, but with their expression of pain at the losses, they reflected political elements and a form of protest. This temporary memorial by the parliament building corresponds with the definition of a grassroots memorial. As the editors of the book *Grassroots Memorials. The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death* point out, "grassroots

memorialization is understood as the process by which groups of people, imagined communities, or specific individuals bring grievances into action by creating an improvised and temporary memorial with the aim of changing or ameliorating a particular situation” (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011b: 2).

## Permanent memorials

In all the discussed sites, which are especially important to the Lithuanian nation and state (and not only to one person or family), the temporary memorials were replaced by permanent memorials and monuments.

The remodelling of these memorial sites was undertaken by the Vilnius city authorities. At the premises of the Television Tower, the spontaneous shrines that marked the sites of people’s deaths were replaced by small nominal granite obelisks and newly planted trees. The spontaneously formed Hill of Crosses survived until 2014. Because the wooden crosses and the sculpture of the Sorrowing Christ were in very bad condition, it was decided by official initiative to take them to the Lithuanian National Museum for restoration. These memorabilia are now on display in a museum on the ground floor of the Television Tower, and, together with documents and photographs, they tell the story of the January events. In addition, in 2005, an eight-metre-high bronze sculpture called *The Sacrifice* (by Darius Bražiūnas), dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives for freedom, was unveiled at the Television Tower. It depicts the stylised figure of a young woman standing on a huge bell with her hands raised to the sky. The words of the Lithuanian national anthem are engraved at the bottom of the bell.

The Hill of Crosses did not remain empty. At the end of 2014, the city authorities organised the building of five new wooden monuments. Events, dates and tragic deaths traditionally used to be marked in Lithuania by wooden crosses, as signs of grief or gratitude and memory relating to Christian religious practices. Accordingly, monuments reflecting the cross-crafting traditions of the different ethnographic regions of Lithuania were constructed. The region of Samogitia (west Lithuania) is represented by a chapel with a sculpture of the Pietà (by the woodcarver Steponas Kaminas), the Aukštaitija region (northeast Lithuania) is represented by a pillar shrine with a sculpture of Jesus the Nazarene (by the woodcarver Adolfas Teresius). Saulius Lampickas made a typical cross from Dzūkija (southeast Lithuania), with the instruments of Christ’s torture and an image of the Crucifixion. The woodcarver Klemensas Lovčikas carved a tall and lavishly ornate double cross. He deliberately chose the form of a double cross. The double cross (called a St Benedict Cross or Caravaca Cross) is popular in the Lithuanian cross-crafting tradition, and was believed to protect against major disasters, such as plague, war or famine. This cross was often used for monuments commemorating the first ten-year anniversaries of

Lithuania's independence (1928 and 1938). On the Hill of Crosses, this double cross not only symbolises respect for the victims, but also expresses a prayer to protect the state's freedom. The fifth monument, a chapel carved in a modern style with a big sculpture of the Sorrowing Christ (by Rimantas Zinkevičius), testifies to the continuation of the cross-crafting tradition in the modern world. The renewed Hill of Crosses was consecrated during a commemoration service on 12 January 2015.



Fig. 3: The consecration of the renewed Hill of Crosses by the Television Tower in Vilnius.  
Photograph by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 12 January 2015.

At the building of the Radio and Television Committee, the 24 wooden nominal crosses eventually decayed, like those at the Television Tower. The city authorities transferred these material commemorative signs to the National Museum of Lithuania too, in order to preserve them. In 2017, a new memorial, of which the main part is a six-metre granite obelisk with a bell on top (by Romualdas Kvintas), dedicated to the memory of the defenders of freedom, was unveiled on 12 January at an official commemoration service.

The main symbolic element of the two above-mentioned permanent monuments (the sculpture *The Sacrifice* and the granite obelisk) is a bell. In societies and cultures around the world, bells have many meanings and purposes. The bell has the universal meaning of a signal to announce something or warn of disaster; it also has the power to drive away evil forces. On those tragic January days in 1991, a small bell calling people to Holy Mass was installed at the spontaneously formed memorial in front of the building of the Radio and Television Committee. That is why the artists used this well-known and easily understood symbol of a bell,



which reminds us of the tragic but crucial days in Lithuania's struggle for freedom, and symbolises restored independence and victory over the forces of aggression.

The barricades around the parliament were removed in 1992, except for some pieces that were left around the side of the building. A permanent memorial was put up there in 2008. This is a shatterproof glass structure displaying parts of the defensive barricades, and original wooden crosses, chapels and sculptures, which stood on the square as temporary memorials. Photographs of the events, along with posters, pictures and other memorabilia, are also exhibited, together with documentary evidence of the January events. The square by the parliament is now empty, save for a few small granite blocks that mark the places where the barricades once stood. This empty space, or, as qualified by Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, a void, remains as a meaningful space for memorialisation (2011b: 20), since the annual commemorative events there keep the space (or void) meaningful.

## Rituals

The rituals performed at the temporary memorials during the January events had a mourning function, and consisted of lighting candles, putting down flowers, religious items and various other memorabilia on the sites of death, and praying and attending Holy Mass.

Since 1992, people have gathered at the Television Tower, the building of the Radio and Television Committee, and the parliament, every year on 12 January, in memory of those who died for Lithuania's freedom. On that evening, huge memorial bonfires burn, as reminders of the day when the country's freedom was defended; flowers and candles are placed at the sites of death, and on the graves of the victims in cemeteries. People still sometimes light candles and bring flowers on other days of the year, but the main commemoration takes place annually on the eve of the events, on 12 January. In recent years, the forget-me-not movement has grown up. Its slogan is: "We remember why we are free". On these days (12 and 13 January), people wear small blue forget-me-nots as symbols, and lay them on the sites of death and on the graves of the victims. Visiting memorials and cemeteries is followed by attending Mass, and official commemorative events.

## Concluding remarks

In all these cases, temporary or permanent memorials used to mark and still mark the places of the most crucially important and meaningful happenings for the Lithuanian state. Along with this meaning, they mark horrible events, people's deaths. As Hege Westgaard pointed out, through symbols, flowers, candles and other

memorabilia, a space of tragic death is aestheticised, it is redefined, and reclaimed. It changes from being a place of horror to a place of recall (Westgaard 2006: 170). In Vilnius, the places of horror discussed here became places of remembrance and national pride, where freedom was protected by human sacrifice.

In their time, the spontaneous shrines at the Television Tower and the Radio and Television Committee, and the grassroots memorial at the parliament, attracted many people all year round; not only those who were involved in the events, but many passers-by as well. Official memorials and monuments that replace temporary memorials are usually more formal, they are not so heartfelt, and do not arouse such deep feelings; therefore, over time, they have a tendency to become invisible, or, according to James E. Young, the construction of an official memorial marks the first stage of forgetting (quoted from: Santino 2011: 105). However, in the case of Vilnius, it is not the memorial itself that is important. Many people do not actually notice the monuments now standing in these sites. Nevertheless, these sites of memory are still well attended on commemorative days (12 and 13 January). This shows that people still remember, and that the sites are important and relevant, not only to individuals, but to the nation as well. Speaking about the memorialisation of 13 January, it could be said that it is not the monument that matters but the site itself. The sites discussed here have a special symbolic meaning to the citizens of Lithuania, whether they are marked by a monument or not.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On 4 February 1991, just three weeks after the attacks, Iceland became the first country to officially recognise the Republic of Lithuania as a sovereign independent state, and diplomatic relations were established between the two nations.

## References

- Girdvainis, Juozas (ed.). 2011. *Dainuojanti revoliucija Vilniaus barikadose* [The Singing Revolution at the Barricades in Vilnius]. Vilnius: Knygų kelias.
- Young, James E. 1993. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Margry, Peter Jan, and Sánchez-Carretero, Cristina (eds). 2011a. *Grassroots Memorials. The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Margry, Peter Jan, and Sánchez-Carretero, Cristina. 2011b. Rethinking Memorialization: The Concept of Grassroots Memorials. In *Grassroots Memorials. The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death*, (eds.) Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, 1–48. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Mikalajūnė, Eglė, Antanavičiūtė, Rasa (eds.). 2012. *Vilniaus paminklai: kaitos istorija / Vilnius monuments: a story of change*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla.

- Santino, Jack (ed.). 2006. *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Santino, Jack. 2011. Between Commemoration and Social Activism: Spontaneous Shrines, Grassroots Memorialization, and the Public Ritualesque in Derry. In *Grassroots Memorials. The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death*, (eds.) Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, 97–107. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Viggiani, Elisabetta. 2014. *Talking Stones. The Politics of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Westgaard, Hege. 2006. 'Like a Trace': The Spontaneous Shrine as a Cultural Expression of Grief. In *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, (ed.) Jack Santino, 147–175. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

## Biographical Note

**Skaidrė Urbonienė** is a senior researcher at the Department of Sacral Art Heritage of Lithuanian Culture Research Institute. She graduated in history from Vilnius University, received her doctoral degree in the humanities (art history) at the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2009. Her main research interests are cross-crafting tradition and heritage, socio-cultural, artistic and identity issues of folk art. She has published over 70 articles and reviews in these fields, compiled 3 catalogues, curated several exhibitions and is an author of two books: *Folk Religious Sculpture in Lithuania (19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)* (2015); *Monuments Commemorating Lithuania's Statehood: Cross Crafting in the Interwar Period* (2018, co-author Skirmantė Smilingytė-Žeimienė).