SOCIAL BANDITRY AND NATION-MAKING: THE MYTH OF A LITHUANIAN ROBBER*

I

SOCIAL BANDITRY AND NATION-BUILDING

On 22 April 1877, at the St George's Day market, a group of men got into a fight in a local inn at Luokė, a small town in north-western Lithuania. Soon the brawl spilled into the town's market square. After their arrival, the Russian police discovered that what had started as a scuffle had turned into a bloody *samosud* (literally, self-adjudication), in which a mob of several hundred men and women took the law into its own hands. The victim of the mob violence lay dead on the square with a broken skull. According to a police report, he was 'the greatest robber and horse thief of the neighbouring districts', a local peasant called Tadas Blinda.[1] As an outlaw, Blinda was buried together with suicides 'beyond a ditch' in an unconsecrated corner of the cemetery in Luokė.[2]

Today in Lithuania Blinda is largely remembered as a popular legendary hero, 'a leveller of the world', who would take from the rich and give to the poor. He is a national and cultural icon whose name is found everywhere: in legends, folk songs, politics, films, cartoons, tourist guides, beer advertising, pop music, and so on. This article, therefore, begins with a puzzle: how did this peasant, who was killed by the mob, become 'the Lithuanian Robin Hood', a legendary figure whose heroic deeds are inscribed deep in contemporary Lithuanian culture?

In *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969), Eric Hobsbawm proposed a comparative model of social banditry that included colourful figures such as the English Robin Hood, the Polish–Slovak Juro Jánošík, the Russians Emelian Pugachev and Stenka

* I am very grateful to Peter Gatrell and Stephen Rigby for their generous comments on this text, and for references and corrections.

[1] 'A Report by the Governor of Kovno Province to the Governor-General of Vilna of 27 April 1877', in Kazys Misius, 'Tado Blindos mirtis' [The Death of Tadas Blinda], *Mūsų kraštas*, no. 1 (1993), 138–9.

[2] Regina Žukienė, 'Iš senų prisiminimų apie Tadą Blindą' [From Old Memoirs about Tadas Blinda], *Žemaičių saulutė*, 2 May 1997, 4.

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Razin, the Bulgarian Panayot Hitov, the Argentinian Mate Cosido, the Brazilian Lampião, and many others.[3] Hobsbawm's pioneering study remains a classic example of how we might understand heroic outlaws and their roles in modern societies.[4] According to Hobsbawm, social banditry is a form of social protest that is typical of, but not necessarily confined to, peasant societies. Social bandits 'remain within peasant societies, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even liberation leaders', even if the authorities view them, instead, as common criminals.[5] They are also prone to emerge in societies either in transition from one social order to another (mostly from agricultural society to industrial), or 'in times of pauperization and economic crisis'.[6]

Hobsbawm's interpretation was hotly debated by some historians who suggested that the element of social conflict associated with banditry received undue emphasis while obscuring the links that bandits maintain with established elites for their self-protection and self-empowerment.[7] Moreover, it was noted that only a few historal figures corresponded to Hobsbawm's model of an archetypal social bandit.[8] His critics argued that bandits' deeds played only a minor role in their elevation as public heroes, by contrast with what people really thought of them.[9] In other

[3] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London, 1969); Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 2nd edn (London, 2001). All subsequent references to Hobsbawm's *Bandits* are to the 1969 edition.

[4] Hobsbawm introduced at least three kinds of outlaw: the classic 'social bandit' such as Robin Hood; the 'avenger' (the person who placed himself beyond the law in order to take revenge for some deed); and the *haiduk* (the primitive resistance fighter): see Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 15. He was also interested in understanding other social movements, including those of a millenarian kind.

[5] *Ibid.*, 13.

[6] *Ibid.*, 17.

[7] Anton Blok, 'The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xiv (1972), 502; Pat O'Malley, 'Social Bandits, Modern Capitalism and the Traditional Peasantry: A Critique of Hobsbawm', *Jl Peasant Studies*, vi (1979); Brent D. Shaw, 'Bandits in the Roman Empire', *Past and Present*, no. 105 (Nov. 1984), 4–5, 49–51.

[8] Richard W. Slatta, 'Eric J. Hobsbawm's Social Bandit: A Critique and Revision', *A Contracorriente: A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America*, i, 2 (2004), 24.

[9] Billy Jaynes Chandler, *King of the Mountain: The Life and Death of Giuliano the Bandit* (DeKalb, 1988); Donald Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, 1986); Phil Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford, 1988).

words, Hobsbawm's concept of what social bandits actually did was criticized for being based upon their myths (largely a product of the writings of middle-class authors) rather than their own actions.[10] Today some of this criticism seems a little misplaced, since Hobsbawm clearly recognized the difference between the bandit and his mythical image by suggesting that 'he [Robin Hood] is invented even when he does not really exist'.[11] At the same time, Hobsbawm subsequently acknowledged that his discussion 'fails to distinguish . . . between what is said about the active bandit now and about the remembered bandit; about the local and remote bandit'.[12] While writing this article, I tried to keep this distinction in mind, together with Hobsbawm's later work on nationalism and the invention of tradition.[13]

It is self-evident that many social bandits were turned into popular heroes (or even invented outright) by their respective legends. For instance, the American frontier outlaws Jesse James and Billy the Kid were transformed into heroic outlaws by their legendary representations, though in reality both were brutal criminals.[14] But such legends played a much more significant social role than simply that of heroic folk tales. The most notorious case, of course, is of Robin Hood, whose legend (together with the myth of King Arthur), according to Stephanie Barczewski, played a critical role in the formation of national identity in nineteenth-century Britain. According to her, the 'Englishness' of Robin Hood was established in at least two ways: first, through the rise of the academic discipline of English studies in which the Robin Hood ballads were granted status within the English canon; and secondly, his ethnicity was altered to bring him 'into line with contemporary racialist notions of the superiority of the Saxon race'.[15] Robin Hood was made into a Saxon hero fighting the 'foreign' Norman conquerors, due to the fact, as she notes, that his legend's basis in reality has always

[10] Slatta, 'Eric J. Hobsbawm's Social Bandit', 24.

[11] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 48.

[12] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Social Bandits: Reply', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xiv (1972), 595.

[13] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990).

[14] Kent L. Steckmesser, 'Robin Hood and the American Outlaw', *Jl American Folklore*, lxxix (1966).

[15] Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford, 2000), 232. For the construction of the idea of Robin Hood as a Saxon hero, see also Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford, 1994), ch. 5.

been a matter of considerable doubt: 'interpreters have been free to mould them as they saw fit, reshaping them as current circumstances demanded'.[16]

I believe that this myth-making effort deserves greater attention than it is accorded in the current literature on social banditry. Whereas Hobsbawm sought to establish the connection 'between the ordinary peasant and the rebel', because, according to him, this is precisely 'what makes social banditry interesting',[17] I follow Barczewski in being more concerned with the relationship between the myth of social banditry and nation-making. This article aims in part to expand the geography of social banditry by introducing to English-speaking audiences the Lithuanian bandit Tadas Blinda (1846–77), who is totally unknown in the West but who enjoys the reputation of a heroic outlaw in contemporary Lithuania. However, its larger ambition is to examine the association between social banditry and nation-making, in which social conflict played a significant role. In brief, my argument is that patriotic elites helped to create a wide range of 'national myths' in peasant-based societies, including the bandit myth.

To be sure, Hobsbawm himself had much to say about the connection between national independence movements and social banditry. According to him, 'national liberation bandits' such as the Sicilian Salvatore Giuliano, the Avar and Dagestani Imam Shamil, the Hungarian Sándor Rózsa and others are common enough 'in the situations where the national liberation movement can be derived from traditional social organization or resistance to foreigners'.[18] However, I would like to develop his argument further. Indeed, where the process of nation-making followed the lines of social conflict (particularly among peasant-based and non-dominant East European societies),[19] social-banditry myths sometimes played a significant role in articulating national (and class) boundaries of ethnic communities. In the early phase, during the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, these rebellion myths

[16] Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity*, 14.

[17] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 13.

[18] *Ibid.*, 88–9.

[19] 'Non-dominant' here means those societies which were part of multi-ethnic Russian, German, Habsburg and Ottoman empires, but whose elites were excluded from their ruling political establishments. This term was introduced by Miroslav Hroch. See, in particular, Miroslav Hroch, 'Nationalism and National Movements: Comparing the Past and the Present of Central and Eastern Europe', *Nations and Nationalism*, ii (1996), 36.

were moulded by the ideas of a single and homogenous 'ethnic nation' that was based on a native peasantry. Later on, in the Soviet era, the official agency often used them to transmit an ideological message based on the notion of 'the class struggle'. Thus, peasant bandits were often mythologized to become 'social rebels' fighting the affluent (who, of course, often happened to be hated foreigners). What was common in both cases was that the element of social struggle was unduly strengthened in the bandit myths to give them ideological credibility. Popular stories about these outlaws served as fertile ground for different myth-makers seeking their own cultural and political empowerment.

Indeed, national (and later socialist) elites saw these myths as powerful instruments of social and political mobilization on the threshold of the modern era. In other words, these narratives were used as a sort of bonding material to be shared by most members of modern peasant society.[20] Gradually these myths entered the collective memory and became parts of both their identity and the egalitarian heritage of their society. The myths functioned as grassroots alternatives to grand meta-narratives of nation-making (myths of a 'Golden Age', military valour, native territory, national 'renewal' and others).[21] As a result, the success of nation-making can be partly explained by the fact that 'primordial' elements, such as stories of banditry, have been used as its building material.[22] These myths, often modelled on real historical criminals of the pre-modern era, are a significant testimony to the continuing process of building and maintaining national identities.

Although the bandit myths were largely the product of a 'mass' (commercialized) culture, as narratives often based on folklore, they had a particular appeal to peasants. Even if many literary sources on bandits projected the values of urban middle-class writers who saw in them romanticized heroes,[23] peasants had

[20] For the significance of national myths, see, especially, Anthony D. Smith, 'The 'Golden Age' and 'National Renewal', in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood* (London, 1997), 36, 48–52.

[21] For a taxonomy of national myths, see George Schöpflin, 'The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths', *ibid.*, 25–6.

[22] On the significance of primordial elements for modern nationalism, see, especially, Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London, 1998), 170–99.

[23] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 10; R. W. Slatta (ed.), *Bandidos: The Varieties of Latin American Banditry* (New York, 1987), 3 (editor's introduction); Linda Lewin, 'Oral Tradition and Elite Myth: The Legend of Antônio Silvino in Brazilian Popular Culture', *Jl Latin American Lore*, ii (1979).

their own reasons for embracing them. Among the motives that prompted a peasant audience to accept these bandits as heroes are the following: the fact that bandits often personified rebellion against hated authority;[24] bandits' freedom from the responsibilities of law and society offered a prospect of a different social order; where state control was weak, bandits themselves were often seen as the authority that inspired respect and fear;[25] bandits were considered as agents of justice, even restorers of morality;[26] peasant attitudes towards a crime (for instance, stealing from landlords) often resembled the attitudes of bandits (especially in societies with a high level of social oppression).[27] Indeed, peasants often did not regard crimes committed against those outside their community as serious as crimes that were committed against those within it. No wonder that most bandit gangs operated in borderland regions where they could prey on a number of peasant communities at once and could escape authorities by crossing frontiers.[28]

There are several cases where historical bandits were successfully transformed into national or class heroes. For instance, the Slovak bandit Juro Jánošík (1688–1712), who preyed not only on Hungarian landlords but also on local peasants and who operated on the Slovak–Polish border, was made into a Slovak national hero in the course of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. This period saw more than fifteen poems, ten prose works, seventeen articles and scholarly studies, three paintings and at least two pieces of music devoted to Jánošík.[29] Hobsbawm noted, 'Nobody who is insignificant has several hundred songs made about him, like Janošik'.[30] According to a Slovak historian, 'his

[24] For example, Emelian Pugachev and Stenka Razin inspired generations of Russian peasants in their struggle against slavery and oppression: see, especially, John T. Alexander, *Emperor of the Cossacks: Pugachev and the Frontier Jacquerie of 1773–1775* (Lawrence, 1973); A. Sakharov, *Stepan Razin: khronika XVII veka* [Stepan Razin: The Chronicle of the 17th Century] (Moscow, 1973).

[25] Blok, 'Peasant and the Brigand', 500.

[26] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 37.

[27] Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Evanston, 2003), 175.

[28] *Ibid.*, 178–9; Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 16–17.

[29] For an extensive bibliography on Jánošík, see, especially, Cyprian Tkacik, 'The Slovak Robin Hood in the Light of Documentary Evidence and Popular Legend', *Slovenské Pohl'ady*, v, xlv, nos. 1–2 (1929).

[30] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 114.

name is imperishable in the history of his people'.[31] Indeed, besides several Slovak museums filled with his personal paraphernalia (including his hatchet, now in the national museum at Bratislava), in today's Slovakia there are at least twelve localities that carry his name. Moreover, in the Soviet period the myth of Jánošík continued to be exploited both as popular entertainment and as a story that contained an element of 'class struggle'. At least two films were made about Jánošík in Czechoslovakia (1962 and 1963), and a film (1974) and a popular TV series (1975) in Poland.

In Russia, according to Jeffrey Brooks, popular writers and journalists placed the bandit at the centre of literary and imaginative life in the course of the nineteenth century.[32] In contrast to Americans, who could look back on James Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye,[33] the bandit became a dominant hero of the Russian adventure story. Figures like Emelian Pugachev, Stenka Razin, Vaska Churkin, Bolotnikov and others became 'heroes fixed in the popular imagination — partly because the bandit was already a familiar figure in Russian oral culture'.[34] It did not matter that some of them, like Churkin, who in real life 'was an unheroic thug and bully' and 'went around extorting money on threat of arson' were half-fictional characters.[35] Hundreds of writers and journalists who turned to historical epics and Cossack songs about Stenka Razin popularized him among peasants and workers throughout Russia by the end of the nineteenth century. In early Bolshevik culture, Razin, Pugachev and Bolotnikov were honoured as ideological icons along with the names of Marx and Engels.[36]

If we take into account what Hobsbawm said about societies where 'social bandits' are more likely to emerge, then Lithuania provides an almost ideal setting. Late nineteenth-century Lithuania was a typical East European society in transition from the agricultural to the industrial order. On the north-western periphery of the Russian empire, it was an economic backwater that featured a high degree of social conflict between Lithuanian-speaking

[31] Tkacik, 'Slovak Robin Hood', 15.

[32] Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 171–213.

[33] That is Natty Bumppo, the hero of *The Last of the Mohicans*, also known by various other names in Cooper's novels (including Deerslayer, Leatherstocking and Pathfinder).

[34] Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 174.

[35] *Ibid.*, 177.

[36] James von Geldern, 'Putting the Masses in Mass Culture: Bolshevik Festivals, 1918–1920', *Jl Popular Culture*, xxxi (1998), 128, 136.

peasants and Polish and Russian overlords. It also had a strong tradition of political opposition to Russian rule: the two so-called Polish uprisings of 1831 and 1863 tried but failed to re-establish the historical Polish–Lithuanian state that existed between 1569 and 1795.[37] Administratively, Lithuania was divided into Vilna, Grodno, Suvalki and Kovno provinces, the last two bordering East Prussia. The region was characterized not only by social unrest and widespread banditry that accompanied it, but also by the developing ethnic conflict between Lithuanians and Poles. This conflict largely followed the lines of the social division between peasants and landlords.

As a historical figure, Blinda was a product of this tradition of nineteenth-century banditry and social unrest. However, after his violent death in a lynch-mob trial, Blinda's image soon began to diverge from his historical reality. Every historical epoch, from the period of 'national awakeners' in the late nineteenth century to the Soviet regime, painted his story in its own colours. Blinda was transformed from a horse thief into the highly popular, yet mythical 'noble bandit'. Today he is part of Lithuanian identity, a witty and stubborn peasant chap ready to resist social injustice and foreign yoke. What is striking and begs an explanation is the endurance of his myth and its capacity to adapt to different ideologies and historical periods. Therefore, I now proceed from the divergence between the historical bandit and the mythical bandit to trace the roots of the myth and its transmission throughout different historical periods.

II

HORSE THIEF OR SOCIAL BANDIT?

Blinda's life story presents a serious challenge to the historian. Even though his name is known to virtually every child in Lithuania, there is a dearth of reliable records about his life. To date there has not been a single scholarly book on the Lithuanian outlaw — merely a few articles written by local historians.[38] Only

[37] Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795–1918* (Seattle, 1974), chs. 6–9; Norman Davies, 'The January Insurrection in Poland, 1863–1864, in the Light of British Consular Reports', *War and Society*, iv (1984).

[38] Jonas Andriusevičius, 'Dokumentai apie Tadą Blindą' [Documents about Tadas Blinda], *Mokslas ir gyvenimas*, no. 7 (1973); Jonas Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis: legendų ir menininkų išliaupsintas Tadas Blinda atsiminimuose ir

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meagre official records survive, produced respectively by the Russian police and a local Catholic church, including: his church marriage record; a request by his widow to call the banns for her second marriage, after Blinda's death; the testament of his parents; a police report about the robbery committed by Blinda in 1876; and a brief mention of his close family in a church register book of 1881.[39] How, then, can anyone write a biography of this famous villain, with only a few pieces of genuine evidence at their disposal?

This is not to say that there is a complete lack of sources on Blinda. In fact, a dozen recorded testimonies survive from contemporaries who knew him, saw him or heard from others about him. However, most of these testimonies agree only to disagree with each other on the character of the man and the nature of his deeds. Often they incorporate what was produced about Blinda by several Lithuanian writers much later. Therefore, the historian has no choice but to try to trace the history of the myth itself: to sift through the images of Blinda created by his relatives, writers, ethnologists, film and music-makers, and all those who wrote and spoke about him. And it seems that his afterlife was more intense and significant than his life itself.

Tadas Blinda was born into a family of free Samogitian peasants in the village of Kinčiuliai in Kovno province, north-western Lithuania in late 1846.[40] His family background and early years had nothing that might have anticipated the glorious career of a noble robber. The Blindas enjoyed quite a privileged social position among other peasants of the area. Their status as 'state peasants' implied that they had no manorial obligations to local landlords and instead had only to pay their state dues. Moreover, Blinda's father, Tadeušas Blinda, was quite a well-to-do farmer, who owned about forty hectares of land and also served as a state

(n. 38 cont.)
dokumentuose' [The World that Was Left Unlevelled: The Legendary Tadas Blinda in the Light of Memoirs and Documents], *Šiaurės atėnai*, 13 Dec. 1997; Danguolė Želvytė, 'Dar kartą apie "razbaininką", "svieto lygintoją" Tadą Blindą' [Once More about the 'Robber' and 'World Leveller' Tadas Blinda], *Žemaičių žemė*, no. 4 (2001).

[39] Jonas Andriusevičius, 'Tado Blindos pėdsakų beieškant' [In the Footsteps of Tadas Blinda], *Kraštotyra*, no. 20 (1986).

[40] *Ibid.*, 82. Samogitia (in Lithuanian, *Žemaitija*) is a historical region of north-western Lithuania known for its distinct dialect, folk culture and a long tradition of paganism and military resistance to the German crusaders during the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. After the last partition of Poland–Lithuania in 1795, it became part of the Russian empire.

forester. It is likely that as a state official he was literate. The fact that the Blindas were relatively wealthy is evident from a long and detailed testament left by his mother Elžbieta Blindienė on 15 January 1867. Her inventory included 'three horses, six cows and other smaller cattle including four bull-calves . . . and four pigs, three goats, six geese'.[41] Among other things received by the son were a horse cart, a sledge and a big wall-clock, a rare item in a Lithuanian peasant farm.

Since his parents were quite elderly, Blinda inherited the whole farm at the young age of twenty, while providing his parents with a substantial pension. As a young peasant male, Blinda would have been expected to marry as soon as possible, in order to expand the smallholding. A young bride would bring in an extra pair of hands and would be a potential childbearer. Thus Blinda duly got married on 7 February 1867 to an 18-year-old peasant girl, Barbora Viktoravičiūtė, from a nearby village. The wedding register preserved in the local church of Luokė is the last surviving record describing him as a person on the right side of the law.[42] We know that Blinda and Barbora had three daughters, Ieva (b. 1869), Ona (b. 1872) and Marijona (b. 1876), who all married after their father's early death. Interestingly, his wife remarried just seven months after his death. Most of his contemporaries seem to agree that he was a tall, strong and handsome fellow, well respected by his neighbours. Like his father, Blinda seems to have been literate. According to several testimonies, in his early twenties, Blinda was elected by peasants as an elder (*starosta*) of his native county (quite untypical for such a young man, but perhaps this reflected his social status).[43] The verifiable facts end at this point and henceforth we have to rely on the numerous oral testimonies left by Blinda's contemporaries.

Why would someone of such a social and material standing choose a career as an outlaw? Several oral testimonies speculate that Blinda had a younger brother Antanas who was expelled from a local Catholic seminary and subsequently became a prisoner in Siberia. However, it is not clear whether his brother was involved in the Polish rebellion of 1863, as some accounts suggest, or exiled

[41] Gitana Bartuškienė, 'Tadas Blinda — apylinkės nuotakų svajonė' [Tadas Blinda — The Dream of the Region's Brides], *Lietuvos žinios*, 18 and 19 Feb. 2002.

[42] Andriusevičius, 'Tado Blindos pėdsakų beieškant', 85.

[43] Kazimieras Dauginis, *Istorinis-folklorinis montažas: Tadas Blinda* [Historical-Ethnographical Portrait: Tadas Blinda] (Telšiai, 1977), 69.

for being the brother of an outlaw.[44] But there is little doubt that the heroic perspective that Blinda cultivated fed, at least in part, on the motive of personal revenge for his brother.

The legend tells that at some point, in Luokė, Blinda became involved in a personal conflict with Duke Mykolas Mikalojus Oginskis, a noted landlord and rich estate-owner in north-western Lithuania.[45] After the duke ordered his servants to flog a couple of insubordinate peasants in public, Blinda, as the village elder, refused to allow this. The popular story has it that in a moment of anger Oginskis lashed out with a whip and struck at Blinda himself. But Blinda ripped the whip from his hands and lashed back. The conflict did not end there. The duke sought revenge against Blinda with the help of Russian officials. Eventually, this forced Blinda to leave his home and seek refuge in the adjacent Bivainės forest.[46]

In many respects, his semi-mythical transformation from loyal peasant to rebellious outlaw closely resembles other similar narratives of social banditry in which an act of social injustice typically precedes a personal grievance.[47] A social bandit, as a rule, finds himself in a wilderness (wood, mountains, jungle, prairie or steppe) which is usually a classic setting for a romantic hero and often seen as a repository of national spirit. The imagery of forest and wilderness is a dominant feature in the tales about social bandits who are in essence romantic characters. We may recall, as Simon Schama pointed out, that the idea of 'English freedom [was] set in the truest and most picturesque of English scenery, forest scenery', where Robin Hood felt at home.[48] In the Blinda myth, one of the central elements is a secret oath of allegiance and revenge that his gang members have to swear at the ancient pine

[44] Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis', 8; Jonas Bulota, 'Tadas Blinda — herojus ar vagis?' [Tadas Blinda — a Hero or a Thief?], *Jaunimo gretos*, no. 6 (1994), 26.

[45] Mykolas Mikalojus Oginskis (1849–1902) came from an old and powerful family of Oginskiai whose roots date back to the sixteenth century. Among the Oginskiai there was a Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a high treasurer, a marshal, a chief of Samogitia, and other powerful figures.

[46] Gitana Bartuškienė, 'Geras žmogus špyga taukuota' [A Darn Good Man], *Lietuvos žinios*, 19 Feb. 2002; Bronius Kviklys, 'Luokė', in Bronius Kviklys (ed.), *Mūsų Lietuva* [Our Lithuania] (Vilnius, 1989–91).

[47] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 36; Paul J. Vanderwood, 'Nineteenth-Century Mexico's Profiteering Bandits', in Slatta (ed.), *Bandidos*, 22–4.

[48] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1995), 138.

tree in the Bivainės forest.[49] In general, forest imagery was also one of the essential features of early Lithuanian nationalism, best expressed in the poem of Antanas Baranauskas *Anykščiai Wood* (1859), today regarded as a pioneering work of Lithuanian national literary tradition.[50]

This, then, is how the element of social conflict entered the story, and how Blinda was transformed into an outlaw. There is no historical record to confirm or refute the veracity of this face-to-face confrontation, though it neatly reflects the mood of the historical period. After the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861, peasants gained their personal freedom in Kovno province as well. However, the reform did not alleviate the tensions between the predominantly Polish and Russian landlords and the Lithuanian peasantry.[51] The latter did not gain legal title to the land; instead of corvée, they now had to make redemption payments for the land they worked. Most importantly, the social relationship between landowners and peasants remained the same after the reform, which meant that the peasant was still economically dependent on his landlord. The local overlords, along with the inefficient and heavily understaffed Russian police, still meted out justice to peasants. No wonder that in 1861 and 1862 there were more than three hundred peasant disturbances in Lithuania.[52] The Polish rebellions of 1831 and 1863 involved large numbers of peasants, particularly in north-western Lithuania.[53] Although there is no evidence to suggest that the 1863 rebellion affected Blinda (he was seventeen then), his family lived in the area that was a hotbed of social insurgency.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the spread of banditry in the Lithuanian provinces (there were thirty-six bandit gangs in Lithuania during the period) coexisted with the tradition of

[49] Today dozens of visitors are still taken to the pine tree, which is regarded as a local tourist attraction. The fact that in Blinda's lifetime the tree itself must have been just a sapling does not seem to diminish the popularity of the myth.

[50] Antanas Baranauskas, *Anykščių šilelis* [Anykščiai Wood] (Vilnius, 1977). Nineteenth-century Russia is another case of the constitution of national identity through the native landscape. See, especially, Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 2002), 19–26.

[51] In north-western Lithuania there was also a high number of Lithuanian-speaking landowners. However, they were increasingly Polonized during the nineteenth century.

[52] Zigmantas Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, trans. S. C. Rowell, Jonathan Smith and Vida Urbonavičius (Vilnius, 2002), 183.

[53] Wandycz, *Lands of Partitioned Poland*, chs. 6–9.

peasant rebellion.[54] In at least one case, the leader of a bandit gang (a member of the gentry called Savickas, who was caught by the police in 1835 and was described as 'responsible for all robberies in Samogitia') was also a participant in the 1831 uprising.[55] The bloody suppression of the 1863 rebellion by the Russian Count Mikhail N. Muravev (which earned him the nickname of 'the Hangman') sent thousands to Siberia but did not extinguish peasant banditry, which accompanied the rural anarchism. As late as the 1880s, Kovno province had one of the highest horse-theft rates in the Russian empire.[56]

Putting aside revenge motives (which are supported only by the oral testimonies), it seems that Blinda had no desire to run his extensive farm. Perhaps he sought to realize his higher social aspirations or found peasant life too dull. In any event, he preferred to rent his lands out and to disappear from home for weeks at a time.[57] Those lengthy escapades took him from the local forest of Bivainės, where he apparently assembled a small gang of peasant and ex-military outlaws, to the Russian–Prussian border, where they traded stolen goods. These exploits earned him the glory of a heroic bandit.

The daring escapades that have been attributed to Blinda and his gang range from stories rich in historical detail to half-fictional accounts full of adventure and daring. Among the first there are quite a few which tell that Blinda would never rob the poor, but would provide money for those peasants who suffered arson or other calamity. Thus he would give money to a peasant widow to buy a new cow or bring food for the starving poor. Allegedly, he accumulated treasure in the Bivainės forest that is still undiscovered.[58] It seems that the robber had a dark sense of humour: thus he would take a peasant horse left unattended in bad weather to teach a lesson to an absent-minded owner.[59] He specialized in stealing

[54] Rima Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi: XVIII a. pabaigos – XIX a. pirmosios pusės elgetos, valkatos ir plėšikai Lietuvoje* [Unwanted and Dangerous: Beggars, Vagabonds and Robbers in Lithuania during the End of the 18th – the First Half of the 19th Centuries] (Vilnius, 2000), 91.

[55] *Ibid.*, 101.

[56] See, in particular, Christine D. Worobec, 'Horse Thieves and Peasant Justice in Post-Emancipation Imperial Russia', *Jl Social Hist.*, xxi (1987), 285.

[57] 'An Interview with Kotryna Augustinavičiūtė', in Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis', 8.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] Gitana Bartuškienė, 'Tado Blindos anūkas didžiuojasi savo seneliu' [A Grandson of Tadas Blinda is Proud of his Grandfather], *Lietuvos žinios*, 22 Dec. 2001.

horses which later were either profitably sold to horse dealers in Samogitia or smuggled across the border into East Prussia.

Blinda, like Robin Hood and other social bandits, was also a master of disguise. One of the stories tells that during a mass police search in the town of Ūbiškės, a Russian officer on guard on the road kissed the hand of an unknown travelling priest who later turned out to be Blinda himself. Another account goes that a certain Dominican monk arrived from Vilnius at a local monastery in Kretinga to collect an offertory. No wonder he turned out to be Blinda himself, who later distributed money for the poor during the Catholic mass in Samogitian towns.[60] These legendary accounts greatly contributed to the myth of the Lithuanian robber. As we shall see, they would be used as creative material by various intellectual myth-makers in the course of the twentieth century.

III

UNGALLANT RETRIBUTION: DEATH OF A HERO

There are no official records suggesting that Blinda's gang ever actually killed anyone. His heroic reputation seems, however, to have been tarnished by a police report of 1876, which tells that on the night of 17 October a gang of robbers attacked the property of a peasant Kazimieras Brasas in the Telšiai region. They tied up the peasant and his wife and tortured him by stabbing a needle in his chest and scorching his body with burning straw until they got thirteen silver roubles from him. The victim claimed to the authorities that one of the robbers was the peasant Blinda from the Šiauliai region.[61] Whether the victim attributed the crime of other bandits to Blinda or whether the authorities believed it was Blinda who committed the robbery because he was already seen as a criminal threat, cannot be resolved.

The most serious challenge to Blinda's later heroic image came after the discovery of the above-mentioned official police report of his death, which happened in Luokė. In the late nineteenth century, Luokė was a small trading town of regional importance with

[60] Bartuškienė, 'Tadas Blinda — apylinkės nuotakų svajonė'.
[61] 'Report by the Governor of Kovno Province of October 1876', Lithuanian State Archive, Vilnius, Fond 378, file 94, 387: cited in Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*, 133.

a population of about 1,500 (a third of it Jewish). It had a church, about twenty shops, a dozen inns and a mill. As late as 1993, a Lithuanian archivist discovered a document concerning Blinda's violent death in a lynch-mob trial that took place at the St George's Day market on 22 April 1877.[62] The report, produced by a police chief of the Šiauliai region for his superiors, revealed that there was much hidden beneath the surface of the popular myth of the peasant hero. For instance, it was noted that Blinda got into a fight with 'persons unknown' in the inn owned by a local Jew. Several Russian police officers, including a local police chief, arrived at the place to stop the brawl:

> They [the police] started to chase away the onlookers, but the people who were present at the square, men, women and children, after hearing that it was Blinda who had been attacked, all rushed to the scene of the brawl and proceeded to hit him with anything to hand, while shouting that he must be beaten to death.

Moreover, the angry crowd used stones to attack the policemen who had apparently tried to disperse the mob: 'the local police chief Alekseev was hit in the head by a stone, lost consciousness and had to be carried away'. Interestingly, the mob also assaulted an Orthodox priest from a neighbouring village, 'who was trying to appeal to their conscience', but was pelted 'with stones and dirt'. Only after a local Catholic priest arrived and addressed the crowd, was the wounded Blinda carried into an inn. But the angry mob did not scatter; they threw stones at the windows of the inn and threatened to burn it down if Blinda was not handed over for a lynch-mob trial. The Catholic priest tried to sneak out with the wounded man through a back door into the garden, but the crowd captured Blinda and 'started beating him in the head with sticks and stones' until he was dead.

The report concluded: 'the participants of the brawl were not locals but those who had come to the market from other parishes of Telšiai. There were about three hundred people involved, all in a rage. The police identified seven persons who had attacked Blinda, of whom five were arrested', while another two were detained later. A number of personal testimonies provide further details which seem to confirm that the robber faced mob justice. One account

[62] 'A Report by the Governor of Kovno Province to the Governor-General of Vilna of 27 April 1877', in Misius, 'Tado Blindos mirtis', 138–9.

notes that 'he was attacked by all those who were robbed by him'.[63] Another witness observes that 'women picked up cobble stones and rained them on his head'.[64] A certain old woman came up to the unconscious Blinda and 'struck him on the head with a basket of eggs screaming: "Bastard, you took my mare!"'[65]

The same witnesses also suggest that Blinda himself, who used to appear in Luokė quite often and was known for his liking of the Jewish inn, provoked the brawl at the inn. According to some accounts, he used to come up to any table and go off with customers' drinks: after he did that on the market day, he was struck on his head with a metal lock by a local blacksmith (or a farmer in other versions).[66] The abundance of such accounts seems to suggest that Blinda did not enjoy the same popularity among his contemporaries that he was to acquire in later times. He was perceived rather as an arrogant and awkward criminal for whom the ordinary peasant should not feel any sympathy.

However, other testimonies indicate that the inn was a trap for Blinda. Presumably several men hired by Oginskis with tacit police approval awaited the arrival there of the well-known robber.[67] In another account, Blinda tried to protect the Jewish innkeeper against rowdy rich farmers who refused to pay for their drinks and was provoked into a fight.[68] But in yet another testimony the basket of eggs smashed on Blinda's head was transformed into something else: 'landlady Granaveckienė brought an apron full of stones and tipped them over his head'.[69] The version of a staged assault seems to be partly confirmed by the fact that those arrested were soon released from the Šiauliai prison with the help of Oginskis himself.[70]

Perhaps the police report should not be taken for granted as well: it is not clear how in such a massive brawl involving hundreds

[63] 'An Interview with Antanas Jonušas', in Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis', 8.
[64] 'An Interview with Kazimieras Grinaveckas', *ibid.*
[65] 'An Interview with Jeronimas Micius': A Personal Archive of Kazimieras Dauginis, Telšiai (private collection belonging to Dauginis' daughter Dalia Pilypavičienė).
[66] 'Interview with Grinaveckas'; see also 'An Interview with Pranas Sudaris', in Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis', 8.
[67] 'An Interview with Jonas Blažinauskas', *ibid.*
[68] 'Interview with Jeronimas Micius'; Žukienė, 'Iš senų prisiminimų apie Tadą Blindą'.
[69] 'An Interview with Emilija Lemežienė', in Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis', 8.
[70] Želvytė, 'Dar kartą apie "razbaininką", "svieto lygintoją" Tadą Blindą'.

the police could have known that those who attacked Blinda were not locals. Maybe the local police chief, when producing the report, tried to minimize his accountability to his superiors by showing that the lynch-mob trial was staged by strangers, and not locals? Also, as one witness suggests, the possibility that the police themselves could have been involved in the violence against the wanted criminal Blinda should not be overlooked.[71]

What is clear, however, is that in the late nineteenth century horse theft was a common occurrence in Samogitia. Indeed it was widespread across many parts of the Russian empire, along with mob killings of the horse thieves by peasants.[72] According to official data, Kovno province had the sixth highest number of horse thefts (722 for the period 1888–93) in the empire after Orenburg, Kiev, Perm, Samara and the Don region.[73] In the first half of the nineteenth century, Lithuania had a number of robber bands, each averaging eight or nine members.[74] Horse theft was particularly widespread on the frontiers such as the Baltic and North-Western provinces: the ease of unhindered travel across provincial boundaries, the proximity of foreign borders, a small and inefficient police apparatus (in the late nineteenth century the empire had less than nine thousand policemen for a peasant population of ninety million) were factors that made horse theft a social plague for peasantry.[75] Even if the majority of horse thieves came from outcast groups such as gypsies, Jews, and particularly Old Believers as in the case of Lithuania, they also included large numbers of local peasants.[76] According to Christine Worobec, Kovno province was especially noted for the fact that some rich peasants and even lower nobility participated in horse theft, which was a lucrative trade there, with a network of hiding places and inns for the exchange

[71] 'Interview with Emilija Lemežienė'.

[72] Vladas Sirutavičius, *Nusikaltimai ir visuomenė XIX amžiaus Lietuvoje* [Crime and Society in 19th-Century Lithuania] (Vilnius, 1995), 63.

[73] Worobec, 'Horse Thieves and Peasant Justice', 285.

[74] Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*, 151.

[75] Worobec, 'Horse Thieves and Peasant Justice', 282–5.

[76] In the first half of the nineteenth century the ethnic make-up of the thirty-six robber bands in Kovno and Vilna provinces included 49 per cent Russians (mostly Old Believers), 41 per cent Lithuanians, 6 per cent Jews, 3 per cent Poles and 1 per cent gypsies. Most of the gangs were ethnically mixed. See, in particular, Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*, 94. Old Believers are a religious group who became separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1667 as a protest against church reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon. Old Believers continue liturgical practices which the Russian Orthodox Church maintained before the implementation of these reforms.

of stolen horses.[77] This network was dominated by local Jews and Old Believers, who, at least in the minds of victimized peasants, were held responsible for most of the horse thefts.[78] Often the criminals forged protective links with corrupt officials, which made recovery of stolen property more difficult.[79] We should not, therefore, preclude the possibility that Blinda had some ties with the police. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how he managed to carry out his robberies for ten years when an average lifespan for such gangs in Lithuania was from several months to a year.[80]

From the perspective of the peasant, horse theft was one of the most serious crimes against property, since the loss of a draught animal could result in the virtual destruction of a peasant household. In addition, in late nineteenth-century Russia, a mere 10 per cent of stolen horses were recovered.[81] As a rule, most of the gangs of thieves operated outside their native areas and were seen by peasants as outsiders, not locals. If the official criminal law provided only what was seen as lax punishment to horse thieves (common sentences for horse theft were from one to two years in jail), then peasants often took matters into their own hands. This meant a community trial or even a lynch-mob trial, which could involve an elaborate public torture or an outright killing of a horse thief.[82]

In any case, even if Blinda was indeed the victim of a plot, there is little doubt that in the end he faced the spontaneous fury of hundreds which culminated in a mob killing. The crowd violence against him in Luokė suggests that Blinda was not regarded as a petty criminal to be handed over to the authorities, nor that he was a social leveller who deserved to be protected.

[77] Worobec, 'Horse Thieves and Peasant Justice', 282.

[78] The Jews and Old Believers together dominated almost 80 per cent of the black market in Lithuania: see *ibid.*; Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*, 114–15.

[79] Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*, 116.

[80] *Ibid.*, 97. The role of the Jewish innkeeper is also quite enigmatic in the story of Blinda. It is very plausible that Blinda had strong personal 'business' links with the local Jewish community. Moreover, he seemed to feel quite safe in Luokė because he used to spend some time with his family at home, instead of hiding in woods. The local community protection was essential for bandits' long-term survival.

[81] Worobec, 'Horse Thieves and Peasant Justice', 284.

[82] Stephen P. Frank, 'Popular Justice, Community, and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870–1900', in Ben Eklof and Stephen P. Frank (eds.), *The World of the Russian Peasant: Post-Emancipation Culture and Society* (Winchester, Mass., and London, 1990), 134–6.

IV

THE BIRTH OF THE MYTH

Despite the presence of a large number of different criminal gangs in early and mid nineteenth-century Lithuania, it seems that banditry did not have any popular appeal at the time. In 1851 a contemporary described the judicial killing of the leader of one of the well-known gangs, Raudonkrūtinis (The Red Chest), as an act of justice against the person who was a parasite and 'has fallen into such debauchery and villainy'.[83] As late as 1912, a clerical newspaper reminded readers that robbers like Blinda killed many people and expressed a hope that 'such Blindas would never appear again'.[84] Even in the early folk tradition, Blinda was described as 'an angry wolf' whose violent death brought peace to the Bivainės forest.[85]

However, by the late nineteenth century, an emerging nationally minded Lithuanian intelligentsia came to see some of these criminals as popular heroes, that is social bandits. Thus, in 1884 one of the prolific figures of the early Lithuanian movement, Martynas Jankus, already described Raudonkrūtinis, who controlled a gang of about twenty people and was involved in numerous robberies and smuggling, as a defender of the poor.[86] In 1910 a patriotic Lithuanian newspaper claimed that the bandit gangs were rebellious ex-serfs who sought peasant emancipation, and in fact it was 'the servants of landlords' who labelled them as petty criminals.[87]

The motives of such views on local banditry may be explained by the radical cultural and political outlook of the intelligentsia. In the late nineteenth century, Lithuania's nascent secular intelligentsia, which originated largely from the peasantry, found themselves in political and social isolation.[88] Due to their social and cultural background, they were not accepted among the dominant Russian and Polish elites. At the same time, after years spent at Russian universities, they also felt estranged from the traditional peasant

[83] Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*, 127.
[84] *Šaltinis*, no. 47 (1912), 750.
[85] Želvytė, 'Dar kartą apie "razbaininką", "svieto lygintoją" Tadą Blindą'.
[86] *Lietuviškas Aušros kalendorius 1885 metams* [The Lithuanian Dawn Calendar for the Year 1885] (Tilžė, 1884), 25–8.
[87] Dagyvas, 'Iš priežasties' [For a Reason], *Rygos garsas*, no. 5 (1910).
[88] Tomas Balkelis, 'In Search of a Native Realm: The Making of the Lithuanian Intelligentsia, 1883–1914' (Univ. of Toronto Ph.D. thesis, 2004).

world.[89] Many lingered on the social margins of Russian society without adequate employment and tried to make their living as writers and journalists. They were a new semi-urban elite whose major hope was to forge 'national culture' that would strengthen their position vis-à-vis the dominant Russian and Polish cultures. The fact that the birth of the national project in Lithuania followed the lines of a social conflict (since most landowners were either Polish or Russian) played into the hands of these early patriots who saw a great mobilizing potential in the oral peasant tradition.

However, from their patriotic perspective, embracing peasant culture as a basis for the new Lithuanian identity was rather problematic as an ideological project. After all, as people educated at imperial universities, the intelligentsia saw themselves first of all as liberal (or socialist) reformers.[90] They largely embraced a highly paternalistic view of peasantry that needed to be persuaded to abandon its uncivilized and morally debasing habits (such as drinking, debauchery, uncouth manners, religious prejudice, illiteracy). In their view, only those aspects of peasant culture that fostered social emancipation and patriotic consciousness should be embraced and cultivated.[91]

The myth of Blinda was born as a result of the creative efforts of two Lithuanian writers from exactly that milieu. In 1900 the writer Lazdynų Pelėda (1872–1957) collected popular stories about Blinda with the aim of writing a story called 'A Leveller of the World', hated by landowners and worshipped by peasants.[92] Pelėda was known as a realist story-writer, interested in social problems of the countryside. To her disappointment she soon discovered that Blinda's legacy was quite ambivalent. She collected some oral accounts which suggested that Blinda's mother allegedly had been seduced by a priest of Luokė. The theme of seduction seemed to be just another mythical account providing an excuse for Blinda's revenge. Nevertheless, afraid that her story

[89] Dalia Marcinkevičienė, *Vedusiųjų visuomenė: santuoka ir skyrybos Lietuvoje 19 a. – 20 a. pradžioje* [The Society of the Married: Wedding and Divorce in Lithuania in the 19th – Early 20th Centuries] (Vilnius, 1999), 101.

[90] In this respect the Lithuanian intelligentsia, being a product of the Russian educational system, was similar to the Russian intelligentsia. For accounts of the political and cultural outlooks of the latter, see, for instance, Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London, 1978); Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford, 1988).

[91] Balkelis, 'In Search of a Native Realm', ch. 5.

[92] Lazdynų Pelėda, *Raštai* [Collected Works], 7 vols. (Vilnius, 1954–5), vii, 444–5.

might produce a backlash among the conservative clergy, she sent all her collected materials to another writer, Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis (1852–1916).

Landsbergis, son of a Lithuanian landowner, raised in the Polish cultural tradition, and educated as a lawyer at Moscow University, saw an opportunity not to be missed. Having spent his early post-study years working as a telegraph clerk in the remote Crimea, he literally converted to the Lithuanian cause in his early thirties after he had read some of the patriotic Lithuanian press.[93] Almost overnight he became an active patriot: he abandoned his professional career in the Crimea to come back to Lithuania in 1885 where he learned the Lithuanian language (his mother tongue was Polish) and also managed to convert to his cause his second Polish wife, who was of gentry origin. His biographer noted that Landsbergis was known among his contemporaries for 'his family reform that happened over three days': 'he demanded that his wife hire a Lithuanian wet-nurse and teach their children a sufficient knowledge of the Lithuanian language'.[94]

Soon Landsbergis had made his name amongst his contemporaries as a severe critic of the local Polish-Lithuanian gentry. He was known for his strong-worded journalism: 'if today [Polish-Lithuanian] landowners do not want to recognize the nature of their nation's movement, and . . . having been acquainted with it, they still hold to their rotten gentry tradition, then . . . I have no shame in calling them scoundrels'.[95] Landsbergis's writings were a typical expression of the radical political views of the ethnic Lithuanian intelligentsia who abhorred the local Polish-speaking gentry for their 'betrayal' of the Lithuanian language and people. The patriotic Lithuanians rejected not only any possibility of a political alliance with them, but also sought to rewrite their common Polish–Lithuanian history by placing an undue emphasis on the pagan period of the late medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania and by rejecting later Polish influences.[96]

In 1907 Landsbergis wrote a play entitled 'Blinda, the Leveller of the World' which amply reflected his radical outlook and had an

[93] Vytautas Maknickas, *Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis* (Kaunas, 1936), 12.

[94] *Ibid.*, 15.

[95] *Varpas*, no. 6 (1885), 2.

[96] For the historical Polish–Lithuanian debate, see, especially, Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven, 2003).

explicit political undertone. The play was a mixture of wild adventures of the heroic robber Blinda and satirical caricatures of Polish landowners. In its preface, the author admitted that he merged various popular stories about Samogitian robbers (including the above-mentioned Raudonkrūtinis) in order to create the single character of Blinda.[97] Landsbergis's robber, portrayed as a defender of lay people, was stripped of most of his historical features, while new fictional elements were added: thus, in the play Blinda married his wife in a wood, not in church, and swore revenge against landlords at an ancient pine tree. In the play, Blinda dies after being betrayed, but there is no mention that he was killed by a mob.

Although the play lacked any significant dramatic conflict, and all characters were schematic and psychologically primitive, including Blinda himself, it was full of carnivalesque gimmick, disguise, romance, stunts, chases and singing. In spite of this, as one critic noted, the play was basically a direct illustration of the author's journalism:[98] for its underlying idea was to embody in the character of Blinda the nation's resistance to oppression by Polish landowners (in the play depicted largely as drunk, crooked and lusty rascals). Even their invented Polish-sounding names embodied various negative features — Titnaginskis (literally 'skinflint'), Protokolskis ('petty bureaucrat'), Veršinskis ('cowman'). The play also contained the satirical portrayal of a Jewish innkeeper as well as a gypsy (both help Blinda to sell his loot, but the Jew does it for personal profit, while the gypsy is his honest accomplice). The two foreign characters were stereotypical incarnations of peasant prejudices about these ethnic groups. In this type of 'ideological project', packed with adventure, dancing and caricatures, there was little space for the hero's personal drama or for a psychological portrait.

No wonder that the play received immediate popular acclaim with a Lithuanian audience after its staging in Vilnius in 1907. As one of its early critics noted, 'the play is definitely one of those theatrical works well-suited to a rural audience'.[99] The public seemed to be extremely excited by its dynamism, and first reviews were highly positive.[100] Its success was repeated by further staging across Lithuania, and even in St Petersburg (1908 and 1913), and

[97] Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, *Raštai* [Collected Works] (Vilnius, 1972), 18.
[98] Maknickas, *Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis*, 131.
[99] *Ibid.*, 127.
[100] *Viltis*, no. 24 (1907).

Riga (1910), while in 1909 the play came out as a book which was also translated into Latvian.

Although Lazdynų Pelėda and Landsbergis were aware of popular accounts of Blinda's life, their literary elaborations had very little in common with the historical robber. What they created in essence was the product of an increasingly urban culture. Blinda's story appealed to these early authors primarily as an ideological weapon that could be used against their political rivals (the Polish elite). It became a means of their self-empowerment through the creation of a canon of Lithuanian 'national culture'. More importantly, this mythologized narrative based on the values of 'rootedness' was set in the context of local social conflict and, therefore, could be used as an effective way of mobilizing popular support for the Lithuanian national project.

The play was so widely admired that some of its elements (such as the oath scene by the pine tree) also entered local folklore, further adding to the confusing legacy of the historical Blinda. In the inter-war years, a number of ethnographers recorded several versions in different regions of Lithuania of a song about Blinda.[101] Although initially described as an original folk song, it turned out to have been written by the little-known K. Stiklius (b. 1880) in the first decade of the century.[102] In the song, modified by numerous performers over the course of time, Blinda became transformed from a horse thief into a heroic robber:

We are the little robbers
From the Bivainės wood,
We are the poor
Of the Lithuanian fields!

When landlords do wrong to us,
We will assault their estate and kill them.[103]

By 1930 Blinda had firmly entered Lithuanian popular culture, and had become one of the best-loved heroes of theatrical plays and fictional accounts. In 1936 a Lithuanian travel guide described Luokė as a place where 'the great leveller of the world' was buried,[104] while extracts from a novel about Blinda were

[101] *Lietuvių tautosakos apybraiža* [An Outline of Lithuanian Folklore], ed. K. Korsakas (Vilnius, 1963), 224–5.
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] Bartuškienė, 'Tadas Blinda — apylinkės nuotakų svajonė', 4–5.
[104] 'Šatrija ir Blindos kapas' [Šatrija and the Tomb of Blinda], *Laiko žodis*, no. 8 (1936).

published in the popular press.[105] Landsbergis's play continued to attract crowds: by 1925 the People's Theatre in Kaunas staged it for the second time with a choir and a large wind orchestra.[106]

By 1939 Blinda had also captured the minds of Lithuanian artists: sculptor Kazys Mockus, known for his wooden sculptures of Catholic saints, carved a wooden image of the Lithuanian robber. The artist admitted that he modelled the sculpture on Blinda's description in the folk song: thus in the sculpture, Blinda, as a deliverer of popular justice, is shown with a whip in his hand and wearing a military hat. Today the sculpture is part of the collection of the local regional museum in Telšiai.[107]

Why was Blinda's myth more durable than others? The inter-war years saw one attempt to find him a bandit rival in Lithuania. A local bank robber, Stepas Rickus (b. 1904), came to be compared with Blinda for allegedly giving money to those victims of his robberies who turned out to be poor.[108] Rickus also had a play published about him in 1934, but he never captured the popular imagination the way that Blinda had done.[109] His legend did not survive beyond the inter-war years because it lacked an element of social conflict. After all, Rickus was perceived as a semi-urban renegade (a kind of Lithuanian Al Capone), not as a romantic peasant hero fighting for social justice.

V

THE HEROIC SOVIET ROBBER

Paradoxically, the greatest boost to the robber's myth came not in the inter-war years but rather in the Soviet era. The needs of nation-making had altered dramatically with the change of the political regime. The myth of the Samogitian hero was gradually stripped of its nationalist features because the theme of class struggle became the new focus. The Soviet authorities did not shy away

[105] Bulota, 'Tadas Blinda — herojus ar vagis?', 25.

[106] Maknickas, *Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis*, 197.

[107] Vitas Valatka, 'Skulptūrėlė "Tadas Blinda"' [The Sculpture 'Tadas Blinda'] (1963), <http://zam.mch.mii.lt/Mokslas/Skulpt_Tads_Blinda.htm>. Accessed 2 Aug. 2006.

[108] Saulius Bartkus, *Požiūris* [The Viewpoint], Lietuvos Televizija [Lithuanian TV], Jan. 2007.

[109] Stasys Žemaitis, *Rickus — garsus Lietuvos plėšikas* [Rickus — The Famous Robber of Lithuania] (Biržai, 1934).

from fostering those forms of 'national culture' in Lithuania that countered the historical influence of the Polish-Lithuanian gentry or the Catholic Church. The primordial 'ethnic' Lithuanian tradition, based strictly on folklore and 'pagan values', was something to be tolerated since it weakened the historical memory of interwar statehood and Western influence.[110] The story of Blinda seemed to be particularly attractive since, in the eyes of the local Soviet authorities, it had a politically mobilizing potential among all social groups. From the official viewpoint, the national heroic myth could be inverted into the socialist one. Although Blinda's dubious historical legacy prevented him from becoming an archetypal Soviet hero, along the lines of Stenka Razin or Emelian Pugachev, his myth was subjected to 'ideological reworking'.[111]

The Soviets sought to exploit the myth as early as summer 1940 when the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania took place. Some 'ethnographic expeditions' travelled to the countryside to rediscover new features of the social bandit. As one contemporary recalled:

> One summer day in 1940 several young fellows came from the capital to Luokė where we lived. Someone told them to seek an interview with my 82-year-old grandfather . . . After the journalists asked him whether he remembered Blinda and whether Blinda was indeed a social leveller . . . [my] grandfather recalled . . . that [Blinda] would indeed take from everyone, but he never heard that he would give [anything] away.[112]

Despite his ambiguous historical legacy, the Soviet authorities did their best to preserve the image of Blinda as 'people's hero' and 'leveller of the world'. In fact, the oral accounts claiming that Blinda was just a regular horse thief 'became associated with the people's enemies and priests, who virtually tried to dishonour the harbinger of Soviet rule in Lithuania'.[113]

The violent period between 1941 and 1953 did not see much in the development of the myth. One of the reasons for this was that the Soviet state spent years attempting to crush 'banditry' in

[110] Nerija Putinaitė, *Šiaurės Atėnų tremtiniai* [Exiles of North Athens] (Vilnius, 2004).

[111] For typical cases of Soviet myth-making, see Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez and Richard Stites (eds.), *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington, 1985); Yuri Druzhnikov, *Informer 001: The Myth of Pavlik Morozov* (New Brunswick, 1997); Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London, 2005).

[112] Žukienė, 'Iš senų prisiminimų apie Tadą Blindą', 4.

[113] Bulota, 'Tadas Blinda — herojus ar vagis?', 26.

post-war Lithuania.[114] Blinda, with his reputation as a heroic bandit, presumably could evoke ambivalent responses among the population in its struggle against the Soviet occupation. However, in 1957 one of the best-known Lithuanian novelists Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas published a novel, *The Rebels*, in which he described the peasant insurgence against local landlords in the 1863 Polish–Lithuanian rebellion from the Marxist perspective of class struggle. In the novel Blinda re-emerged as a Samogitian bandit playing the role of a harbinger of the rebellion: thus under his inspiration a serf's son becomes a rebel.[115]

In 1958 the old Landsbergis play was given a new lease of life on the stage of the Academic Theatre in Vilnius, the central theatrical venue of socialist Lithuania, while a number of regional historians and ethnographers tried their best to publish half-fictional memoirs about Blinda. By 1963, one of the Soviet collective volumes of Lithuanian folklore presented Blinda 'not as a simple and egotistical robber, but as a people's avenger against landlord oppressors'.[116] In 1968, the satirical magazine *Šluota* (The Broom) ran a series of comic strips on a healthy-looking and robust peasant fellow Blinda who would make fun of cunning, licentious and corrupt landlords and priests.[117] Blinda's transformation into a Soviet cartoon character was a safety valve that revived his heroic adventures through a touch of popular humour.

Yet none of these cultural representations of the newly revived myth achieved as much fame as a TV film series *Tadas Blinda*, made in 1973. It was this that had the deepest impact on the revival of the myth. The film featured an array of young talented Lithuanian actors whose careers were suddenly elevated to local stardom status. The effect was that the actor who played the robber, Vytautas Tomkus, became virtually epitomized as Blinda himself in public consciousness. His Blinda was a strong-willed, vengeful, ruthless but at the same time passionate, amusing and loyal character. In contrast to Landsbergis's robber, the film created a

[114] For the anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania after the Second World War, see Stanley Vardys, 'The Partisan Movement in Postwar Lithuania', *Slavic Rev.*, xxii (1963); Arvydas Anušauskas (ed.), *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States*, 2nd edn (Vilnius, 2001); Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, 2001).

[115] Bulota, 'Tadas Blinda — herojus ar vagis?', 26.

[116] *Lietuvių tautosakos apybraiža*, ed. Korsakas, 225.

[117] 'Blinda — svieto lygintojas' [Blinda — The Leveller of the World], komiksų serija [series of cartoons], *Šluota*, nos. 1–9 (1968).

dramatic hero, torn between his desire for revenge and the scale of destruction that follows it. Shot at several different attractive locations in Lithuania and featuring extensive scenes of fighting, horse racing, romance and wild dancing, the film soon became one of the most popular Soviet Lithuanian films ever made.

The script, produced by a young, up-and-coming novelist Rimantas Šavelis, further added to the myth. The film developed a large number of new characters with their own life stories: his true-hearted accomplices: a gypsy and peasant Motiejus; a landowner's daughter, Kristina, who falls in love with the noble bandit; a renegade landless peasant, Kuliešius, who betrays Blinda for money; and many others. On television Blinda not only knew how to kill and rob, but also how to make love. Thus the film included a well-shot and sensual love scene in the lake between Blinda and his beloved Morta, played by a young, rising Lithuanian starlet Vaiva Mainelytė. The emergence of women lovers and bandit romance can be compared with the role of Maid Marian, who was added to the Robin Hood stories in the sixteenth century.[118]

Most importantly, the film thrived on the themes of social justice, peasant rebellion and revenge against landlords, predictably depicted as dull and mean characters in the storyline. One of the central 'ideological' scenes is the famous oath of allegiance sequence when every new member of the gang has to swear his 'eternal revenge against the rich and his duty to protect the poor'. Thus one of the bandits who steals a mare from a poor peasant is punished by the rest of the gang in a humiliating scene: he has to kiss the mare's bottom. Indeed, the film's popularity was also determined by a great deal of dark peasant humour, folk music and other elements of popular culture.

The visual element offered by the film opened up new imaginary spaces for the mythical bandit hitherto represented as a literary figure. Moreover, the film reinforced in a new way the connection between the national bandit myth and the Lithuanian rural landscape. Numerous scenic shots of vast meadows, hills, woods, lakes and rivers have become a natural setting, 'a spiritual home' for the freely roaming peasant hero and his gang. As the English greenwood served as a symbol of 'English freedom', the natural

[118] J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood*, revised edn (London, 1989).

backdrop for Robin Hood,[119] the Lithuanian country landscape offered a mythologized setting for collective nostalgia by referring to the mythical pagan past of pre-modern Lithuania.[120] In the film, Blinda, like Robin Hood, was depicted as a child of nature rather than culture: like Robin and his men who dress in green, Blinda and his gang wander freely in the forest dressed in peasants' linen shirts.[121]

Interestingly, in the film the character of Blinda is presented as a former rebel: he spends four years as a peasant rebel in Wallachia before returning to Lithuania. Male camaraderie is the second most important theme in the film, which lasts longer than the numerous romances between the bandits and local women. Yet, the film-makers were sensitive to the public's taste: thus the relationship between the bandits and the Church is treated diplomatically. In an assault scene on a local landlord, a Catholic priest who happens to be on his estate is respectfully taken home instead of being flogged as was the fate of other landowners. This represented a clear break with the pre-Second World War image of Blinda who often made fun of Catholic priests, who were seen as part of the social and political establishment. The pre-war Jewish character also disappeared from the film.

While the film took on a life of its own, acquiring cult status within a few years, in 1987 Šavelis reworked the film script into an adventure novel 'for secondary-school pupils', adding extensive fictional scenes on Blinda's childhood.[122] In the novel, Blinda's personal revenge story successfully merged into the narratives of the 1863 rebellion and his hatred for all Samogitian landlords. In both the novel and the film, a substantial use of landscape mixed with the notions of 'rootedness', folklore and social justice produced a powerful narrative that seemed to appeal to audiences of all ages. Thus its popularity was determined by the fact that it presented an engaging fusion of peasant-based Lithuanian nationalism and a social conflict articulated along the lines of the popular legend. By this time the legend had clearly overtaken the image of the historical Blinda. As one Lithuanian historian bitterly

[119] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 138, 150–2.
[120] Hobsbawm suggested that the popularity of the bandit myth in modern societies is explained by the fact that it offers 'a concrete *locus* for nostalgia, a symbol of ancient and lost virtue': see, in particular, *Bandits*, 112.
[121] J. F. Nagy, 'The Paradoxes of Robin Hood', *Folklore*, xci (1980), 199.
[122] Rimantas Šavelis, *Tadas Blinda* (Vilnius, 1987).

complained: 'several generations already take the plots of the adventure film and the drama play for granted'.[123]

VI

BLINDA AS POP HERO

In 1990 Lithuania's break with the Soviet Union promised to put an end to the Sovietized Lithuanian myth of Blinda. Some academic work by local historians and then the discovery of his abovementioned police death record in 1993 came as a serious challenge to its credibility.[124] In one of the most critical evaluations of the myth, a contemporary described Blinda as a forerunner of 'today's owners of fictitious banks, crooks and *mafiosi* who pretend to be saviours, patrons and defenders of society'.[125] Blinda's controversial image as a horse thief seemed to resurface, stripped of nationalist and socialist ideological trappings. In the context of a rapidly emerging free market economy, bankrupt banks and 'wild capitalism', Blinda hardly seemed a heroic figure in the early 1990s.

However, the popular interest in the life story of the robber did not abate but continued in new cultural forms. With Lithuania's political and cultural awakening, the 1990s also saw a new upsurge in interest in its ethnic heritage. An important part in the myth's revival was played by a number of interviews conducted with his remaining descendants by journalists who streamed to Luokė and Kinčiuliai to rediscover 'the true historical face' of Blinda.[126] Each of the descendants told his or her own version of Blinda's life story. According to the oral testimony left by one of Blinda's daughters and retold by her children, 'the father . . . sought justice and freedom. He wanted equality so that all could live well. That is why he was slain'.[127] His grandson Kazimieras Dauginis (1907–79) produced a voluminous manuscript of several hundred pages which merged Blinda's personal story and the myth with the lives of his descendants, speculations on 'the Samogitian national character',

[123] Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis', 8.

[124] Bulota, 'Tadas Blinda — herojus ar vagis?'; Andriusevičius, 'Nebaigtas lyginti pasaulis'; Praspaliauskienė, *Nereikalingi ir pavojingi*.

[125] Bulota, 'Tadas Blinda — herojus ar vagis?', 27.

[126] Bartuškienė, 'Tado Blindos anūkas didžiuojasi savo seneliu'; Marija Gricuk, 'Tadas Blinda: mitas ir tikrovė; Apie Tadą Blindą — jo proanūkės ir anūkas' [Tadas Blinda — Myth and Reality; his Grandson and Great-Grandchild Speak about Him], *Telšių žinios*, 1 and 15 Feb. 2002.

[127] Bartuškienė, 'Geras žmogus špyga taukuota'.

and detailed accounts of local peasant cultural traditions.[128] These highly personalized and ethnographic narratives attempted to rescue Blinda from the Soviet myth by transforming him into a half-mythical, yet tragic, figure with a fallible human face, a sort of robber with a tormented soul.

This new post-Soviet representation was greatly reinforced by the fact that Blinda also became a popular stereotype of regional culture. Today his name is taken by a local hunt club, at least one inn and a conservationist society in Luokė. Having visited the cemetery in Luokė in search of the robber's grave, I was confronted with the fact that most of the locals indicated different places for his burial, relating their personal versions of his myth. The myth is also reinforced by annual regional events such as 'Blinda's Polka festival' that takes place every summer: it merges cultural practices, such as pagan fire rituals on a local castle hill, with a theatrical appearance of 'Blinda' himself.

Blinda's image is also made use of in the development of the nascent Lithuanian tourist industry. In Upper Lithuania, local and foreign tourists were recently offered a trip on an old narrow-gauge train: for an additional fee the tourists could be entertained by an improvised attack on the train by a theatrical 'Blinda's gang': 'Having emptied your pockets and flogged you with sticks, "the robbers" will treat you with food, take you around on horseback, teach you to dance and offer you a chance to play some traditional games'.[129] Meanwhile, Blinda's myth entered another unexplored terrain when the rock star Andrius Mamontovas, one of the most popular singers in Lithuania, whose career is associated with the popular national movement of the 1990s, staged a rock musical *Tadas Blinda* in 2004. Performed in front of a crowd of several thousand students in Vilnius, the musical featured an impressive cast of singers and actors as well as an explosive light show. The musical successfully merged several scenes from both the Landsbergis play and the Soviet film. The character of Blinda, played by the songwriter himself, was depicted as a fighter for freedom and justice against the yoke of landlords. The musical was simultaneously released as a CD.[130]

[128] The manuscript, finished in 1977, was kindly presented to the author by Dauginis's daughter Dalia Pilypavičienė in July 2005.

[129] http://www.siaurukas.lt/index.php?lang=lt&op=blinda. Accessed 20 Oct. 2005.

[130] *Tadas Blinda*, CD, ISBN 86615 (Vilnius, 2004).

Recently the success of the Soviet film was repeated when Lithuanian television aired a commercial for the new 'Blinda's beer' in 2006. The commercial played out some of the film scenes in the picturesque Lithuanian countryside, adding to the image of Blinda one of a commercial icon. Its exceptionally masculine imagery preyed on the notions of 'freedom' and 'rootedness' and alluded to the world of 'traditional values'.

The early years of the twenty-first century also saw the myth merging into the world of Lithuanian politics. It seems that this new revival was, to a certain extent, an expression of social tensions that emerged due to the rapid transformation of the local economy in the post-communist years. During the so-called presidential crisis in Lithuania in 2004, the president at the time, Rolandas Paksas, after he had won the popular vote, was implicated in corruption and secret ties with Russia. Surprisingly Blinda's name re-emerged again when Paksas, whose major electoral support came from the countryside, was described by the media as a 'social leveller' and compared to Blinda himself. Paksas never refuted this comparison and presented himself as an anti-establishment figure. One popular television talk show introduced him as follows: 'Who is Rolandas Paksas? Tadas Blinda, who is rejected by the [political] elite, or a president who is dependent on dirty Russian money and a Georgian sorceress, and who became a hero of comedy shows?'[131]

One of the recent Lithuanian MPs, Vytautas Šustauskas, was compared with Blinda by the media for his efforts to stage the so-called annual 'Beggars' Balls' in Vilnius.[132] These projects served both as a protest against the ruling establishment and as political rallies of his supporters, who came largely from the rural communities. In fact, Šustauskas made his career as a politician as a result of his relentless populist attacks on the traditional political parties of Lithuania.

Another Lithuanian populist former MP, Viktoras Uspaskich, despite his non-Lithuanian ethnic background, was also ironically described by the media as a Blinda-like figure: someone quick to

[131] '"Prašau žodžio": Rolando Pakso triumfas ir tragedija' ['Let Me Speak': The Triumph and Tragedy of Rolandas Paksas], *LTV anonsai*, 4 Dec. 2003.

[132] Virgius Savukynas, 'Kaip Tadas Blinda padeda suprasti dabartinę politiką' [How Tadas Blinda Helps to Understand Contemporary Politics], *Lithuanian Radio and Television*, <http://www.lrt.lt/sites/news.php?strid=15815&id=207899>. Accessed 2 Aug. 2006. The 'Beggars' Balls' were organized by Šustauskas for his supporters. The main features of these events were their anti-establishment stance and the distribution of free food.

promise to deliver popular justice against the ruling establishment.[133] Today both Paksas and Uspaskich represent the populist wing of the Lithuanian party system, predominantly supported by the rural electorate, often criticized for their anti-establishment views and contempt for traditional political parties. No wonder that the name of Blinda has become an appropriate label for both of these populist leaders, eager to indulge in anti-constitutional politics.[134]

Blinda thus remains a symbol of freedom and of an unfocused, popular justice which is often understood as social revenge as well. He seems to appeal successfully both to those who continue to see him as an icon of 'national culture', a local commercial commodity, and to those who use him as an instrument to express their alienation from the political establishment.

VII

THE BANDIT MYTH AND COLLECTIVE SELF-PERCEPTION

The myth of Blinda has proved itself as one of the most flexible and enduring facets of modern Lithuanian culture and identity. Perhaps there is no reason to believe that he would be forgotten as long as Lithuanian society continues to experience abrupt changes in its political or social structure. Blinda, a historical horse thief, lynched by an angry mob in the late nineteenth century, successfully passed on his legacy of a heroic bandit to both nationalist and socialist state agencies, despite historians' efforts to show the fallacies of the myth.[135] Through the myth both nationalist and socialist elites attempted to communicate with society and transmit their ideological messages. The elements of social and ethnic conflict found in Blinda's story were accordingly reinforced to suit the ideological needs of the political elites. The latter tried to create an ideologically fixed image of Blinda, based on the notions of either 'rootedness', ethnicity or 'class struggle'. In the

[133] Krescencija Šurkutė, 'Pirmoji lietuviška melo drama tik suaugusiems "Baronas Miunchauzenas" arba "Tadas Blinda"' [The First Lithuanian Soap Opera for Adults: 'Baron Münchhausen' or 'Tadas Blinda'], *Kultūros barai*, no. 8 (2004), 110.

[134] This is quite evident in recent developments in Lithuania. In May 2006 Uspaskich and his Labour party came under official investigation due to their alleged corruption and financial links with the Russian Secret Service. This led to the collapse of the ruling Labour/Social Democrat coalition and a political crisis. The leader of the party escaped to Russia to avoid the legal investigation, where he remains to this day.

[135] Here I mean the work of Andriusevičius, Praspaliauskienė and Bulota.

end, Blinda's life story and the myth complemented, and blended into, each other as his image as a popular hero came to be reinforced by folklore. Despite recent political changes, his reputation continues as a popular folk figure or a commercial commodity devoid of any consistent ideological message but easily recognizable as a native cultural icon.

And there is no reason to think that Blinda will soon be forgotten. His myth today performs an essential aspect of community maintenance and self-definition. Its uses in the political realm suggest that the myth continues to function as a means of allegiance for purposes of social identification, including ethnicity and class. Thus the fact that post-Soviet politics in Lithuania were plagued by party populism is also partly a reflection of the cultural heritage left by the egalitarian myth of Blinda.[136] Here the issue of what institutional agency controls and appropriates the myth is as important as the understanding that myth-making is successful when it relies on a grass-roots oral tradition. However, the flexibility of the heroic bandit myth also seems to suggest that, seen as a set of beliefs held by a community about itself, the myth can be a more powerful and fluid form of cultural representation than the various efforts of myth-making agencies to preserve and rewrite it. Although this article was more concerned with the ideological transmission of the myth than with its popular reception, it seems that both processes had distinct dynamics.[137] This raises the question as to whether the myth's reception altered the image that the different myth-makers attempted to put across.

In conclusion, we can try to identify some key strategies that elites use in the process of reworking popular bandit stories into national myths. First of all, in the bandit myths, the elements of ethnic and social conflict are given a special meaning (or are even invented where they are lacking) so as to endow them with a consistent ideological message. As a rule, the bandits are presented as victims of the oppressive political establishment and as avengers against it, but rarely as part of it. Most of these myths also make

[136] By party populism I mean the dominance of populist parties such as Paksas's Liberal Democrats and Uspaskich's Labour party in the early 2000s. I am not trying to suggest here that Blinda's myth is a critical factor that explains their emergence. Rather the myth is an illustration of the historical context in which egalitarian politics became a recurring feature. The key trait of modern Lithuanian society is its susceptibility to different populist political programmes.

[137] On the problem of the transmission of ideology and its reception, see, especially, S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction* (Manchester, 1987), 283.

clear who the real enemies of the bandits are — foreign landlords, colonial bureaucracies, police apparatus, and so on — and in this way help to articulate the national (and class) boundaries of modern societies. The element of heroic struggle is of key importance here: as bandits *fight* for their revenge and justice, so the nation (or class) *struggles* for its freedom and self-determination.

Secondly, in the bandit myths, the links between the bandits and local communities are often unduly strengthened, because bandits are usually portrayed as sharing the same social status and culture as the members of the community. As a rule, bandits are seen as the community's social representatives ('a voice of the people') and, therefore, deserve their protection. In their everyday lives, the local community and bandits share the same cultural traditions and material artefacts which, after the bandit's death, may be converted into national icons. In other words, the bandit myths are seen as the part of peasant culture that nationalists regard as an object of veneration and celebration.

Thirdly, bandits are mythologized through their immersion in romanticized landscapes, which are presented as the loci for collective nostalgia for the nation's heroic, historical past. These landscapes are portrayed as repositories of either the 'nation's spirit' or 'pre-modern freedom'. They are also used in other national myths such as those of a 'Golden Age', military valour, native territory, national renewal and others. For the myth-makers, it is natural to assume that the heroic bandits are a product of these national landscapes: they function more as figures of *nature* than of *culture*.

Finally, bandits are transformed into national heroes using the same narrative strategies used to create other romantic heroes. In this sense they are, of course, literary and intellectual constructs. The most significant of these strategies are the narratives of personal freedom, rebellion, social justice and 'rootedness'. In many cases their lives are viewed as individual incarnations of the nation's struggle for freedom and self-determination. This makes them a sort of proto-nationalist harbinger of the nation's 'revival' or a new social order. Since nationalists usually claim that their nations are primordial and originate from the former 'Golden Age', bandits are also often presented as pre-modern (or anti-modern) and as representing 'old values'.

It would be useful to look into other cases of banditry myths which were integrated into the discourse of nation-making so as to establish their significance in the constitution and maintenance

of new social identities. Their flexibility may be fascinating but it also poses serious questions about what elements of these myths are appropriated or rejected in contemporary cultures, how we draw on them to imagine our past, and what type of societies are more susceptible to this myth-making. At the same time this perspective suggests that these myths, as both Hobsbawm and his critics pointed out, present a very different reality from the worlds in which most of the historical social bandits operated.

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