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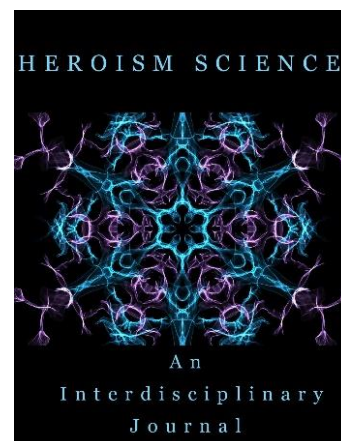
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For Whose Greater Good? The Case of Hero-Making: Girch and Darius



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ABSTRACT: This article reviews an investigation into the case of Stanley Girch (aka Girėnas) and Stephen William Darius as (multi)transfigured and transforming heroes and seeks to examine a two-fold assumption that has emerged in heroism science, namely that people create heroes mostly for the better and that learning from the past can help assess which heroes are needed. We argue that it may be beneficial to shift the focus of the analysis and follow the reverse course of a hero's journey, tracing the impact, evolution and origin of the heroic status ascribed to the historical figures, whether individual or collective. Presuming that heroic status follows contextualization of actions, the developmental phases, techniques, and authorship of hero-making can be revealed through a reverse analysis of multi-layered contexts. The findings have led to the unsettling conclusion that the making of historical heroes hardly served the greater good and was quite removed from what was thought necessary. The same contradiction, however, may give an impulse for further development of heroism science as it prompts a broad-based, interdisciplinary assessment of the effectiveness of hero-making in the past, its present influence and projections for the future.

KEYWORDS: hero-making, historical hero, hero's journey, heroism science, Lituania.

Article history

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1 INTRODUCTION

Recent works on heroism science (e. g. Franco, Blau, Zimbardo, 2011; Franco et al., 2016; Currey, 2018) have signaled, *inter alia*, a possible emergence of a new liaison between the social sciences and humanities, or at least a demand for historical exploration with specific focus. Indeed, “more research is needed to elucidate how historical heroes can influence the present and the future” and “perhaps, learning from the past, we could assess what heroes are needed” (Kinsella, Ritchie, Igou, 2017). This endeavor resonates and prompts critical understanding of the heroic in history, memory and narrative.

Heroism science has emerged in the era of post-heroism, amidst the monument wars, an interrogation of narratives, the deconstruction of historical heroes and de-crowning campaigns, as well as the introduction of new forms and types of historical heroes – dynasties of reinterpreted and reapplied heroes as well as new cyberspace creatures: e-heroes. In the meantime, the field of research by historians has expanded accordingly. For instance, they have scrutinized effectively remembered or forgotten versions of the past and thereby accumulated a considerable amount of knowledge about hero-making: its principals, techniques and outcomes, conceptual and operational levels, as well as past, recent and current trends. Historians’ expertise, thus, may be inconsiderable or irrelevant in the common occurrences of an everyday or single-day hero who makes headlines and goes viral on social media. But this is never the case concerning historical heroes who made history and were written into textbooks.

Notably, a post-heroism mentality is stunningly productive in making new (post)heroes. Hero-making is booming in popular (mostly commercialized and always heroic) history (Popp, Schumann, Hannig, 2015), almost without regard to the long academic dispute on narrative and scientific, fictional and factual, myth-making and myth-breaking. Thus, while history

scholars may have lost or renounced their monopolar authority as principals or prophets, they have secured their position as critical observers and analysts who narrow the limits of interpretation and filter falsifications fostered by the mercantilization of knowledge and instantaneous communication (Lukacs, 2011) and the inevitable multiplication and mutation of freshly introduced e-heroes (Kansteiner, 2007). The variety and applicability of historians' expertise range from origins of the heroic cult in ancient Greece to current global changes in forms and functions of "the heroic" and the possibilities seem endless, as are the motives for and advantages of the emerging liaison with the rapidly developing transdisciplinary and transnational field of research of heroism science.

As to the general theme of this article – Why hero-making? – the answer is straightforward: because it is about self-shaping. Theoretical and empirical studies as well as practical observations have affirmed the scholarly insight that "heroes shape as much as they in turn are shaped" (Allison & Goethals, 2011). The relevance of the subject arises from a necessity to orient ourselves in the present, walking a bridge between the past and the future.

Post-heroism is as much a dead end of heroism and heroization as scientific deconstruction is destruction: i.e. not at all. Rather, post-heroism is a transitional phase, or a period in heroism history, when the worshiping of traditional heroes is in decline, post-modern ideals of heroism are on the rise, and heroes put on new faces. It also marks a shift in scientific discourse when heroism is not only keenly observed, but also, more than ever, critically construed.

In this post-heroic era we, as a society, not only use and abuse heroism for "history wars" of conservative governments (Booth, Pavez, 2018), for gaining the commercial profits (Al-Hameed, 2018), and for psychological reasons or needs "as a vehicle to thrive and prosper in everyday life and in the face of the most unbearable situations" (Efthimiou, Allison, Franco,

2018). We also encounter an unparalleled hijacking, borrowing and faking of heroes for political purposes. The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, led by fascist and Soviet leaders as self-proclaimed heroes, have already left “a widespread feeling among intellectuals that heroes and ideals of heroism were ultimately elitist, undemocratic, and dangerous atavisms” (Kendrick, 2010). But the information technology and new media of the twenty-first century have opened a whole new world for hero-making. The recent rise of political polarization, populism and contemporary authoritarianism have involved the application of such new instruments of large-scale analysis and manipulation as the monetization of individual attitudinal and behavioral data, intentional distortions and clashes of “personal realities”. But the core principle has remained unchanged: the (anti)heroic narrative is still at the core of any social movement, political agenda or election campaign (among the most influential cases was, for example, the villainization of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential election in the United States, or the steady heroization of Vladimir Putin and even the revival of the cult of Stalin in Russia).

Thus, the contemporary science of history empowers scholars to engage in a timely investigation of the conceptual and operative structure of hero-making, as well as the correlation between the ideals of heroism, heroic myths (stories) and ideologies (belief systems). It lets us better understand how modern mythologies evolve, disseminate through mass communication, and influence us – knowingly or unknowingly – as individuals and as a society. Above all, we believe it fosters media literacy and critical thinking in general, which is of crucial importance at any level of the democratic (and democratization) process.

The case of hero-making presented here stands out for its complexity, diversity and universality. It is more a gallery than a portrait of a hero and spans nearly a century of developments rather than one single heroic deed. Undoubtedly, much has been achieved in this instance of hero-making. Millions of people were affected. However, it is not the magnitude of

reach, but the moral excellence in content and its impact that is in focus. The study can be summarized in a question: How can something great, but debatably good, serve the greater good? Whose good is it? And is it, in fact, good?

2 CASE STUDY: HEROES ON BOTH SIDES

Regardless of this article's focus on the extraordinary, if not extreme case of Stanley Girch (aka Girėnas) and Stephen William Darius, its main interest lies in the broader phenomenon of hero-making. The national identity of the heroes, whose prototypes were American pilots of Lithuanian descent who died in a plane crash in Germany on July 17, 1933 while attempting a non-stop flight from New York to Kaunas, Lithuania, may raise suspicions that this work was inspired by Eastern European nationalism or somehow affected by "something dark lurking in the psyche of unenlightened Easterners", but it in fact confirms the observation that "the heroic both precedes and transcends modern nationalism and all that comes with it" (Eriksonas, 2004). Here, the historical hero is considered as an ideal, an icon, a super(human)-being who emerges in a sociocultural dimension, not necessarily rooted in the past or present social or physical reality *per se*, but rather floating adrift of the mass daydreaming and its amnesic effect of forgetting. It is presumed and affirmed that the hero's journey may have little in common with the prototype's life history and must be accordingly approached and explored.

In the beginning, before the professionalization of history science and during the process of nation and state-building in Lithuania, as well as in neighboring Latvia and Estonia, "the original authors had little to work with when they first introduced the heroic historical narratives into the national discourse" (Šmidchens, 2007). Until the 1990s, the typical historical hero was an abstract synergetic collective idea who embodied Lithuanian statehood, united and represented the nation (or its people), and was perceived as a beacon for (or reflection of) the

Lithuanian psyche. During the 1990s, after a well-known manifesto on the quest for the “always relevant hero” (Bumblauskas, 1987), a particular trend emerged in Lithuanian historiography. As if following a chronological pattern, scholars tediously explored such cases as Saint Bruno Boniface of Querfurt and the first mention of Lithuania’s name in historical sources in the early eleventh century (Leonavičiūtė, 2016), King Mindaugas in the thirteenth century (Gudavičius, 1998), then analyzed Duke Margiris of the fourteenth century (Baronas, Mačiulis, 2010), followed by Vytautas Magnus of the fifteenth century (Eriksonas, 2004; Mickūnaitė, 2006; Mačiulis, Petrauskas, Staliūnas, 2012) and a collective portrait of the participants of the uprising of 1863 (Staliūnas, 2007). The more recent was the case of hero-making, the less it was critically investigated. Non-academic biographers followed a descriptive chronological pattern – from birth to deed to death – and excluded the importance of a given hero’s journey to the heroic narrative, to memory culture, and to tradition. It was “one face of a thousand heroes” instead of “one hero with a thousand faces”.

Fundamental works by historians on the professionalization of Lithuanian history science (Gieda, 2017), the Sovietization of scientific historiography (Švedas, 2014), and the formation of the politics of culture (Mačiulis, 2005), as well as insights by sociologists on national heroic imagination (Šutinienė, 2009) helped bolster the assumption that modern hero-making and reshaping was instigated during (and complicated by) at least two major shifts that occurred in the 1920s-1930s and 1950s-1960s. Historical heroes were actively (re)created and pressed upon, passively accepted, rarely examined and, as a consequence, became more disfigured than transfigured. Was this transformation chaotic and incidental or did it involve specific authorship and “copyrights”? In order to clarify the pattern of hero-making and perhaps identify the hero makers, I have focused on the case of Girch and Darius, who were arguably the most popular and certainly most widely and ardently commemorated heroes of the twentieth century in Lithuania and throughout the global Lithuanian diaspora.

Girch and Darius' heroes' journey would remain irreproachable if not for recent historical research (Sviderskytė, 2019). My previous work spanned a relatively broad geographical and chronological framework, encompassing Germany, Lithuania and the United States from 1927 to 2013. The analysis included developments in countries of different national and social systems, occurring in constantly shifting and interrelated contexts of politics, diplomacy, and law, and subjected to conflicting ideologies and propaganda wars. Of the numerous documents consulted from over twenty official and private archives, the sources of the most valuable information can be grouped as follows: official and confidential correspondence by the pilot S. W. Darius (Chicago, Washington, New York, Kaunas); a U.S. State Department special file entitled *Darius & Girch*; initial communication between local German institutions about the plane crash (Rosenthal, Soldin [now – Róžańsko, Myślibórz], Frankfurt an der Oder) and correspondence from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the files of the Interdepartmental Committee in Kaunas containing, *inter alia*, the appendixes of a German air police report and the findings of the Aviation Subcommittee's investigation into the crash; and also the protocols and materials from meetings of the Central Committee Bureau of the Lithuanian Communist Party.

Seemingly familiar, well-renowned national heroes have emerged into the spotlight as vivid and stunningly dynamic characters. Their journey could easily be viewed as a political thriller or space opera, echoing the phrase from the opening crawl of *Star Wars* Episode III: "There are heroes on both sides" (which, I think, encodes a principle that the ideals of heroism are essential in any political, civilian or military fight). In the actual evolution of the heroic narrative, however, Girch and Darius even surpassed fictional heroes and managed to simultaneously appear on both sides of conflicting or opposing ideologies.

From a typological standpoint, in terms of heroism science (Allison, Goethals, Kramer, 2017), Girch and Darius' heroic status changed from everyday heroes to transfigured, and

transforming, civil heroes. Prior to World War II, they were seen as pioneers of the Golden Age of Aviation and “geniuses of the Lithuanian soul”, and later became ideals for athletic youth of Lithuania during the Nazi occupation, patriotic freedom fighters for Lithuanian-Americans and sons of the Soviet Lithuanian people during the Cold War.

On an operative level of their multifaceted heroization, Girch and Darius can be viewed as media-created and politically hijacked heroes. Immediately after their departure from Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, New York, these Chicago natives made headlines as (a) admirable underdogs, setting out over the Atlantic Ocean in pursuit of their superior rival – the more experienced and better equipped American ace Wiley Post; (b) outlaws, the first violators of a freshly enacted amendment to the Commercial Air Regulations (in fact, the Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce had launched and, upon receiving the news about the plane crash, aborted an investigation of the allegedly illegal take-off); and (c) romantic heroes, after reporters had uncovered that, to the shock of an ex-beauty queen and his “close friend” in Philadelphia, Captain Darius was flying to be reunited with his wife and daughter in Kaunas (as a matter of fact, Darius was married while conducting voluntary military service in Lithuania and left his family after returning to the United States). Girch and Darius were naturalized American citizens and certified American pilots owning and flying a duly registered and inspected aircraft, whose proposed flight plan was filed and coordinated with relevant American institutions. However, when the two men died in the subsequent plane crash in Germany and Lithuanian government officials called for a state funeral in Kaunas (any formalities for which were waived by the U.S. State Department), the memory center shifted to Kaunas and the dead and their deed were imbued with a Lithuanian identity. Beyond that, as if having reached the point of no return, the hero-making soared from patriotic propaganda to ecstatic worship and profitable sales (relatives of the pilots had to repeatedly speak out against the commercial exploitation of their names in Lithuania and the United States). The

image of the two pilots was gradually stripped of individual realistic features and turned into an iconic *duo*, a symbol of “Young Lithuania”.

The ascribed patriotic-propagandistic image and disconnection (at certain times even ideological rivalry) between memory centers in Kaunas and Chicago expanded the premises for further remakes, distortion and hijacking of the heroes. From a moral and legal point of view, such a unanimous fate must have gone against Girch and Darius’ own will: The men were anything but soul twins – only business partners acting upon a mutual agreement meant to protect their investments and projected profits for a maximum of six months after the completion of the flight to Lithuania *and* back to the United States (notably, both men neither planned nor promised to donate their airplane or other property to Lithuania). From an ideological point of view, depersonalization led to boundless manipulation: After the war, Girch and Darius even came to embody a “Winged Lithuania”, after the elite officers of the Lithuanian Air Force were erased from collective memory and the Lithuanian memory culture. Unhindered by any constraints, Soviet ideologists exploited the heroes’ *duo* as perfect strangers (notably, both pilots, especially Girch, remain a biographical enigma to this day) and true sons of the working class who allegedly fell victim to the nationalistic Lithuanian bourgeoisie and German fascists.

Thus, the making of “heroes on both sides” cost the prototypes their lives, property, dignity and identity. On a broader scale, the collectively paid price included a sort of mass amnesia – a falsification of history and the loss of historical memory that, deliberately or not, received full official and social approval for more than eighty years. The case of Girch and Darius contradicted the common generalization that nations choose what is worth remembering, and instead showed that people were allowed, urged, or forced to forget. In the mid-summer of 1933, a latent forgetting was convenient for the isolationist United States and was also embraced first by German decision makers, then by investigators and the authoritarian

government officials of independent Lithuania. In 1957-1969, forgetting was most brutally revisited by Soviet ideologists who used it for propagandistic historical discourse and undercover KGB operations against dissidents inside the Soviet Union and against “reactionary” émigrés abroad.

This article now turns to a description of the hero-making of Girch and Darius as an exploration of the hero’s journey in reverse, and to a discussion of the potential and applicability of similar historical explorations.

3 FORWARD TO THE PAST: THE HEROES’ JOURNEY IN REVERSE

Referring to Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1949), there were three basic components of a classical narrative – initiation, departure, and return of the heroes – of which only the latter was more or less clear in the case of Girch and Darius. The definitive end of the narrative (the greatness of self-sacrifice for and *post mortem* return to the *patria*) contrasted with the vagueness of the rest of the plot, its developing stage and starting point. To put all parts together (fame, death, flight, and flight plan, and the initial idea), the pattern of the heroes’ journey was followed in reverse.

A form of criminological approach in this research was also dictated by historical circumstances. The heroic status was ascribed to the pilots after their tragic death that was at the core of the heroic narrative. The cause of their plane crash was officially investigated twice in Lithuania, not including the initial air police investigation conducted in Germany (the United States withheld from conducting any investigation whatsoever). But these investigations were not in complete agreement and left gaps in their reasoning, particularly due to the lack or absence of communication about this matter between the United States, where the flight originated, and Lithuania, where the pilots’ bodies, airplane, and belongings were brought and where the principal investigation took place. Investigations by Lithuanian Air Force officers

(Aviation Subcommittee, 1933) and forensic medical experts (1933, 1964) were launched under considerable public pressure and carried out amid political tensions, primarily for the protection of the *raison d'état* and, thus, only partly conformed to the direct purpose of determining the causes and circumstances of the crash. Haste, limited means and sources left investigators with few options. An insufficiently grounded hypothesis about the tragic accident contributed to the ascription of “heroic” and led to long-term complications. By comparison, when General Władysław Sikorski, the Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile, died in a plane crash at Gibraltar on July 4, 1943, the accident was officially investigated by a British commission, which made investigation files inaccessible and did little to prevent conspiracy theories. When a multidisciplinary investigation in Poland was successfully accomplished in 2009 (e. g., Konopka et al, 2010), the heroic narrative prevailed. Freely interpreting Sikorski’s aim to establish the Soviet Union’s responsibility for the massacre of Polish officers and intelligentsia in Katyn in 1940, the heroic narrative involved a spy drama about an assassination covered up by Soviet secret service and remained known and even revived as “the curse of Katyn” – particularly after another plane crashed en route to a commemoration in Katyn on April 10, 2010, carrying President Lech Kaczyński and the Polish governing elite, killing all on board. The myth’s simplistic logic eased the shock after that great tragedy. Similarly, the heroic tale told about Girch and Darius implied that “Nazis shot down Yankee flyers” (Brown, 1934) and became known as “the mystery of Soldin Forest” (Jurgėla, 1935). The power of “the heroic” distracted public attention away from one of the most obvious and intriguing factual circumstances – the criminalization of the civilian aircraft accident. The Lithuanian government’s campaign to embalm the pilots’ bodies was contradictory: The choice was unorthodox as a commemorative effort and it came one week late in its “precautionary” aim to “preserve” the severely injured and already badly disintegrated bodies for future examination. The move had a poor scientific justification and was politically short-sighted, since it only

served to please the general public in Kaunas and to irritate official Berlin. The instant and constant – partly chaotic, partly intentional – deviation from analysis to narrative on both the political and public levels gave rise to the following questions: How exactly did the heroism of Girch and Darius reach paramount importance? Did it stand for truth and, if so, why?

The three phases of the heroes' journey were examined through close observation of the overall condition, the major transformations and the slight disturbances of the heroic narrative: changes in its content, its forms and effectiveness of application. The causes and authorship of "the heroic" were traced through an analysis of the multilayered and interacting contexts of politics, diplomacy and law.

The Return. The heroism of Girch and Darius is commemorated in countless artifacts, in all genres of literature (in drama, graphic novels, poetry, short stories – nonfiction, fiction, as well as "faction", blending facts and fiction), as well as in various visual arts and numerous film and theatrical productions. In Lithuania, there are some one hundred twenty streets named after Girch and Darius, not to mention other toponyms in Lithuania and elsewhere (in Chicago and New York, for example). The pilots' images were used on Lithuanian currency, on postage stamps, and for state decorations. In 1993 and 2013, respectively, the Day and Month of Darius and Girėnas were celebrated in the State of Illinois and Chicago, and the Year of Darius and Girėnas has been celebrated twice in Lithuania.

Contrary to its mass scope, such a festive commemoration has inadequate historical justification. Since 1933, the attribution of Lithuanian identity to two American pilots and their flight was legitimized through simplistic reasoning: Lithuania was the final destination of their flight – an undertaking that had also been dedicated to Lithuania. Public and, often, scholarly attention was diverted by the literary work of Darius himself and his "propagandist", the Chicago-born publicist Petras Jurgėla, in the form of a symbolic dedication of the flight that

became one of the most popular documents of the twentieth century in Lithuania and has since been known as the Testament of Girch and Darius:

May the conquest of Lituania strengthen the spirit of Thy youthful sons and inspire them to greater deeds! If Lituania shall fail and perish in the depths of the Atlantic, may it strengthen the courage and determination of Young Lithuania so that a Winged Lithuanian will conquer the treacherous Atlantic to the glory and honor of Mother Lithuania! For Thee, Young Lithuania, we dedicate and cherish this flight! (BMLC).

Even the most obvious ambition of the pilots to outrace foreign aviators (of which the closest rivals were Polish pilots, such as the holder of a fresh world record Captain Stanisław Skarżyński or the world famous Polish-American amateur flyer Stanislaus Hausner) was overshadowed by romantic patriotic ideology.

Paraphrasing Campbell, the heroes defeated the archenemies (selfishness, sluggishness, fear, dissent, lack of ambition and integrity, etc.), but had to rely on help from mere mortals and sidekicks to seal the deal. In keeping with the pilots' Testament, Lithuanian-Americans began celebrating World Lithuanian Unity Day on July 17, 1934 and organized the transatlantic flight of *Lituanica II*, the pilot of which became the sixth in history to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean (the U.S. Air Force Reserve Lieutenant Felix Waitkus successfully executed a forced landing in Ireland on September 22, 1935). Since the 1990s, at least four crews have crossed the Atlantic to honor the heroes. But as the process of "sealing the deal" has been delayed (no one has yet clearly explained to what extent the flight of *Lituanica* was an achievement or a technical failure, and no one has yet succeeded in flying non-stop from New York to Kaunas), postmodern artists have attempted to mock the "cult of Girch and Darius" and young historians have sought to systemize it. However, while historical analysis was lacking, artists and scholars failed to recognize "the historical" and "the heroic" and to secure maneuverability beyond the

limits of tradition of narrative and memory culture.

It has only recently been revealed that the identity shift from American to Lithuanian, as well as the dislocation of the memory center from Chicago to Kaunas, was determined by diplomatic interaction between Berlin, Kaunas and Washington immediately after the plane crash, within less than twenty-four hours of the event. The Lithuanian Air Club in Kaunas (the association that organized the pilots' welcome ceremonies at Kaunas airport and enjoyed connections in the highest political, military and diplomatic circles) approached the government of Lithuania with an idea to "bring the heroes home", honoring them with a state funeral. Meanwhile, the Department of State in Washington followed standard procedure: Upon receiving the first telegram from its Consulate General in Berlin, the Department inquired about the will of the pilots' relatives in Chicago and, in absence of any objections from them, waived formalities that could have impeded a state funeral in Kaunas. The German Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Aviation managed the ensuing communication crisis with considerable political insight: the ministers extended condolences and local administrative authorities expressed the highest respect to the deceased and provided Lithuanian diplomats all necessary assistance. It was in Berlin's political interest, among other considerations, to close the case and prevent further escalation and to stifle any rumors. Germany's *raison d'état* required it to steer clear of complications in foreign policy and further destabilization of the situation and even the potential for political riots in the autonomous Memel (Lithuanian: Klaipėda) District. It also sought to avoid disrupting a freshly launched internal propaganda campaign for civil defense and the *Reichluftschutzbund* (Reich Air Raid Protection League) which, according to confidential American diplomatic correspondence, was a part of propagandistic camouflage for military preparations, personnel training and the building of infrastructure for the future German Luftwaffe. What was embraced by many as legitimate or worshiped as romantic, thus, indeed was caused by cold-blooded prioritization and realpolitik.

The uproar in the international media about “the American pilots shot down over Germany” was little more than a false alarm and dissipated as quickly as it had materialized. Rumors were denied by the government-controlled Lithuanian press and official investigators and, more importantly, were indirectly disproven by further developments. Subsequent international flight plans included transits through German air space, including a flight around Europe by four Lithuanian-made ANBO IV airplanes under the command of Lithuanian Air Force Colonel Antanas Gustaitis (head of the Aviation Subcommittee) in 1934 and the interrupted flight of *Lituanica II*, piloted by Felix Waitkus in 1935.

The conspiracy was mostly driven by Lithuanian popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Until the 1940s in Kaunas, the Lithuanian Air Club sought but failed to publish a documentary monograph about the flight of *Lituanica*. Meanwhile, amateur novelists introduced limitless improvisations on the heroic narrative. In Chicago, Jurgėla’s bestselling book introduced “the mystery of Soldin Forest”. The next and most powerful wave of speculations was technically launched in 1958 by Vytautas Zenkevičius, a deputy chairman of the Lithuanian Communist Party’s Department of Propaganda and Agitation. During the brief political “thaw” that followed Joseph Stalin’s death and the condemnation of his cult of personality, the program suggested in Zenkevičius’ secret referral to the Central Committee Bureau of the Lithuanian Communist Party was thoroughly implemented. The Lithuanian heroes were “rehabilitated”, losing their identity for the second time in the process. Their image was made more primitive, as if transformed into a propagandistic poster featuring proletarian representatives who were purportedly born as peasants under the Tsarist regime, struggled through life as immigrants under Western imperialism, and were subsequently rejected by the Lithuanian nationalist bourgeoisie and later killed by German fascists – the eternal enemies of the working class. The most effective operation, instigated and controlled by the Lithuanian Communist Party Central Committee and the Soviet Lithuanian KGB, was the “discovery” and

burial of the pilots' embalmed bodies, hidden at the Vytautas Magnus University Medical School in 1944 because of well-justified fears of their possible destruction under the Stalinist regime. This farce of rehabilitation was recognized and rejected by Lithuanian émigrés in the United States. However, in the absence of a similarly organized ideological counterattack, this narrative established deep roots in the Lithuanian collective memory and memory culture. From a historical perspective, the heroes' return was no less complicated than their initiation and departure – all had been repeatedly transfigured and intentionally contaminated by native and even hostile propaganda.

Initiation. According to Campbell, “this is a favorite phase of the myth-adventure” – a series of tests and challenges which the hero must overcome to succeed (Campbell, 1949). Indeed, the heroic narrative of Girch and Darius was full of archetypical notions of fatal obstacles and divine fortune. They purportedly lacked one hundred dollars to expedite and finalize the authorization of their flight at the U.S. Departments of Commerce and State yet, at the same time, they were able to “completely” provide for their modified Bellanca Pacemaker CH-300 airplane and trained sufficiently to become “fully prepared” for the long-distance, potentially record-breaking flight. Captain Darius was “a master of all”: the sole organizer of and spokesman for the flight, a crew leader, chief negotiator and navigator – yet he never failed. Moreover, he was portrayed as an ace flyer, purportedly piloting his faithful Bellanca (the future *Lituanica*) for three years, accumulating more than one thousand hours of flight time with that one aircraft alone. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles described how the pilots overcame a lack of funds, endured apparent neglect on the part of the Lithuanian government, fought public mistrust and slander, and prevailed over difficulties encountered during technical preparations for the flight.

Research confirms that the pilots did manage to launch a fundraising campaign during an economic depression. However, it also reveals that Darius restrained from finalizing

authorization of the flight and was in continuous disagreement with Girch in this regard. A flight plan was prepared in the hopes of obtaining radio equipment, but had to be revised shortly before the scheduled departure after commercial sponsors withdrew their support. Darius' aviator logbook showed insufficient and diminishing hours of crew flight training, not only due to the withdrawal of commercial backing, but also because of the captain's assumption of multiple tasks, a lack of know-how, and the general ineffectiveness of the foundation and committee organized to support the flight. The pilots' "excellence" in training and technical preparations was affirmed by the Lithuanian Aviation Subcommittee, which only managed to obtain and analyze a limited set of data, relying mostly on a few basic facts (regarding fuel, oil reserves and, in part, weather conditions) provided by diplomats in the United States, an initial investigation report by the German air police, and the limited qualifications and experience of local officer staff. The Lithuanian-American community and the pilots' relatives in the United States pressed for more detailed explanations, but the Interdepartmental Committee in Kaunas rejected their claims as insufficiently justified in 1934. The complex investigation into the cause of the *Lituanica* crash was never revisited in Lithuania or elsewhere – only a medical examination was conducted in 1964, before the final burial of the pilots' embalmed bodies in Kaunas.

Departure. How did Girch and Darius decide to undertake something great? What were their initial steps into the unknown, away from the safety and comfort of a familiar world? Contrary to traditional belief, the heroes had much more on their hands and minds than a desire to sacrifice their lives and well-being for their *patria* overseas. Darius' idea of a non-stop flight from New York to Kaunas developed over consequential phases from "I shall fly back to Lithuania" to "We (Lithuanian-Americans) will fly to Lithuania": The first concept reflected the Lithuanian Air Force reserve officer's own passion, whereas the second took on the collective ambition of Lithuanian-Americans. The shift was triggered by macro and micro

factors that defined fund-raising options: the post-Lindbergh boom and surge in American aviation, the Great Depression, changes in U.S. federal aviation law that raised qualification standards and strengthened authorization procedures for international flights, tensions in the relationship between the Lithuanian government and politically polarized Lithuanian-Americans, as well as Girch and Darius' own professional and personal (mis)fortunes.

According to Campbell, “often a guide or helper appears to assist the hero with this transition.” Indeed, Darius' acquaintance with Girch, who, just like him, was also a veteran of the U.S. Army, an American commercial pilot and a Chicagoan of Lithuanian descent, was fateful. However, their true relationship contradicted its idealized portrayal. The two pilots' business partnership was prescribed and determined by mutual agreement and a memorandum of trustees. Both documents were not strictly confidential, but after the pilots' death the papers were kept private by Lithuanian diplomats in the United States and at the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as potentially inconvenient.

In summary, the heroic status, image and narrative firstly emerged in the United States and was disseminated by the American print media as well as the Lithuanian émigré press. Secondly, almost instantly after Girch and Darius' deaths in the *Lituanica* crash, the heroic narrative was adapted for the purposes of national patriotic propaganda and simplified for limited circulation within the Lithuanian diaspora. Thirdly, it was ideologically recharged for Soviet propaganda purposes and even used for camouflaging the KGB operations against dissidents and “reactionary” émigré. The use and abuse of the heroes was possible mostly due to the inaccessibility of primary sources in Germany and the United States but also in Lithuania, and was partly instigated by the pilots' own shortcomings in experience and know-how, the insufficient preparation of the flight plan and often reckless communication during a fund-raising campaign. The bias in hero-making was manifested mostly without regard for political circumstances and the sociocultural environment, resulting in a similar archetypical structure

and content and in only slightly different forms of the heroic narrative. The hero-making had provided little more than a fragile idealistic vision and resulted in an almost century-long disoriented drift, downstream of collective (dis)beliefs. People comforted themselves considerably with the socially and/or politically sanctioned narrative and jointly shaped and performed national and/or official memory. At the same time, however, they failed – and many still refuse – to recognize, admit and prevent the disorientation and disconnection from the reality of the past, which caused consistent damage to historical consciousness and even the loss of historical heritage.

4 DISCUSSION

As Campbell has pointed out, a classical narrative evolves and dissolves between waking, dream and deep sleep. We are mostly in agreement that “myths are public dreams” (Allison, 2011) and have concluded that the case of Girch and Darius involved both active hero-making and passive hero-dreaming. A heroic narrative with a knowingly installed myth (and metamyth, as suggested in Campbell, 1949) at its core was not only flexible and useful, but also illusive and misleading – as much as the passive mind is unreliable and forgetful. Much remains to be investigated regarding the consciousness, free will and rationality involved (if any) in decision-making: To what exact extent do nations and communities *choose* whom and how to remember and what their histories are for?

As to the “historical” in popular historical narratives – their heroes may and must lack historical dimension. The only issue here is that restoring it may be as complicated as chasing a dream. While it is clear that no scientific institution ever issued heroes’ birth certificates, it is never easy to detect a hero’s *lieu de naissance* which lurks in an ever-dynamic cumulus of political interests and ideological needs, sociocultural tendencies and collective fantasies.

We argue that it was not history (or what is generally perceived as history) or a historical

narrative *per se*, but rather the development phase or multiple phases of the narrative that was the birth place of a historical hero. In order to critically analyze cases of hero-making, to acclaim or disclaim the fame of popular stories and images (transfigured and transforming – fictionally upgraded, historically degraded, and collectively applied) of historical figures, it is necessary to shift the center of attention from the easy-to-follow-and-swallow linear progressive story (the future hero was born, grew up, and then achieved this or that) that usually extends only to the proclaimed heroic deed, to the exact opposite side of the chronology – that is, to follow the complex interactions of multilayered contexts of the sociocultural environment, politics and law after the proclaimed heroic deed.

The case study confirms the importance of “the always relevant hero” and, thus, the phenomena of hero-making, and at the same time raises questions about the ethics, truthfulness and justice in the process of the latter. Can moral heroes emerge from negligence or falsification of historical evidence, the distortion or destruction of the historical heritage and the manipulation of collective memory? From this perspective, the heroes’ journey of Girch and Darius served more specific priorities than greater good. Indeed, “heroism humanities” (Curry, 2019) changes the light balance of the big picture of heroism science, adding brightness, diminishing contrast, and vice versa. As Campbell has asserted, where there was darkness, now there is light; but also, where there was light, there now is darkness. We believe in the purposefulness of light balance, however, as well as in the possibility of its correct and beneficial adjustability. After all, when it comes to the perception and interpretation of images, shapes and forms, the shadow is but the counterpart of light. It is becoming more obvious than ever (thus expanding the applicability of the discussed research approach) in our digital age, or the age of simulacrum, when, they say, nothing *is* what it *seems* – from social networking to media coverage, to commercial and political advertising.

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7 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.