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The Death of Fighter Pilot Lidiia Litviak: Rumor and Hearsay as Historical Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Soviet pilot Lidiia Litviak was the first woman in the world to shoot down an enemy aircraft in combat and has the highest documented score of any female pilot. She achieved this in fifteen and a half months of active service before she disappeared on 1 August 1943 during a dogfight over eastern Ukraine. Her remains were identified in 1979 and in 1990 Mikhail Gorbachev named her a Hero of the Soviet Union. Yet a rumor that Litviak was not killed in the war but survived and defected to the Germans, has gained widespread acceptance. The author argues that based on accepted standards of plausibility, credibility and reliability, the preponderance of evidence shows that Lidiia Litviak died on 1 August 1943.

KEYWORDS

Second World War; Red Army; Air Forces; women; aviation; historiography

Introduction

*The past has never been more contentious, its interpreters never more publicly at war.*¹

The world loves a good disappearance, and will sometimes manufacture one, turning an inconvenient death into an improbable survival. Famous people who die in mysterious circumstances become the focus of rumors, alleged sightings, and conspiracy theories.² Such rumors are the bane of historians and the darlings of the internet.³

Aviation offers an array of mysterious disappearances.⁴ Pilots might get far off course, crash in remote areas or at sea, and never be found.⁵ In most such cases, the pilot was killed, but rumors of false sightings abound. For example, Amelia Earhart disappeared in 1937 over the South Pacific. She almost certainly got lost, ran out of fuel, and crashed and died at sea. But rumors proliferated that Earhart had been captured by the Japanese and forced to play Tokyo Rose, or staged her disappearance so she could secretly run off with her navigator, or that she survived, secretly returned to the United States, and took on a new identity.⁶

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This article focuses on the disappearance of another pilot who was rumored, like Earhart, to have survived and assumed a new identity with the help of an enemy. Soviet pilot Lidiia Litviak – who referred to herself by the nickname ‘Liliia’ — was a teenage flying instructor in the late 1930s.⁷ She volunteered for military service when war broke out in 1941 and was assigned to the newly formed women’s fighter aviation regiment, the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment. Within a few months, she was transferred to front-line combat duties in mostly male units. She was described as ‘fearless in the air’ by those who knew her and is credited with 12 personal and 3 shared kills, the world’s record for a female pilot.⁸

Litviak was shot down in an air battle on 1 August 1943, three weeks before her twenty-second birthday. Because her crash site and body could not be found during the war, she was listed as missing in action. In the Soviet Union, to be ‘missing in action’ was tantamount to desertion and treason. The charge was all the more onerous because Litviak’s father had been arrested as an ‘enemy of the people’ during the 1937 purges, casting suspicion on the whole family.

In 1969, the body of an unidentified female pilot who had been hastily buried during the war at the crash site of a Yak-1 aircraft in Ukraine was exhumed, examined by a medical commission, and then reburied in a mass grave with other war casualties. Ten years later, the Ministry of Defense identified those remains as Litviak’s based on physical attributes and a process of elimination of any other possible candidates. In 1988, her official records were changed from ‘missing’ to ‘killed in action’, and in 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev awarded her the honor of Hero of the Soviet Union.⁹

Litviak has attracted a great deal of attention, partly because of her achievement as the world’s first female ace, and partly because of her movie-star good looks. Books, articles, and websites about Liliia Litviak are riddled with errors, exaggerations, and romanticizations. One rumor that has recently gained widespread traction is that Litviak was not killed in 1943, but defected to the Germans and ended up living in Switzerland. Recent books and websites in Russian, Italian, and English, including the English-language Wikipedia entry, have perpetuated this rumor. This article examines each item of evidence about Litviak’s death in detail. First, however, a brief review of methodology and sources is in order.

Sources and Evidence

‘What is a rumor evidence of, apart from its own existence?’¹⁰

The sources for Litviak’s supposed survival are based on rumors which can be traced to a few items of hearsay that have been widely repeated and embellished. Hearsay is information not based on direct observation, but a report of something someone has heard from others.¹¹ A rumor is unverified

information, usually transmitted by word of mouth.¹² Hearsay is often the source of rumor.

Hearsay and rumor are generally inadmissible as legal evidence and are considered weak historical sources. Scholars apply a series of tests to such sources. Who is the person reporting the rumor? Were they an eyewitness, and is there confirmation of that fact? How well could the author have observed the things they report? Was there any reason for the author to misrepresent the event? Historians privilege sources with the greatest authority.¹³

Additional standards of evidence include tests of context, reliability, and plausibility. Questions of context include: When was the account produced, and for whom? Was it a spontaneously generated account, or coerced? In the case of a rumor, why was the record of the rumor produced? Where is it recorded, when, and by whom? What reasons would someone have to pass on the rumor? Reliability is considered to be greater if the source of the information is not pressured and has no obvious bias in how an account is reported; when a source is close to the event it describes; and when corroborating sources exist. Firsthand accounts are usually more reliable than hearsay. Finally, there are questions of plausibility: Does the statement seem probable? Is it consistent with what is known about the person involved?

If many sources agree, scholars may consider that to be strong evidence, but it is not a matter of 'majority rule'. Sometimes many sources can be wrong, especially when questionable sources are contradicted by more reliable and plausible ones. Some journalists and popular writers do not subject their sources to scholarly standards of evidence. Almost all the allegations that Litviak survived the war come back to two non-academic writers whose claims are based on rumor and hearsay, accepted uncritically. Documentary evidence contradicts these rumors but is ignored by these writers.

The principal work perpetuating the rumor of Litviak's alleged survival and defection is Ekaterina Polunina's brief 2004 book *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*.¹⁴ Polunina served as a mechanic in the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment during the war and later as the regiment's self-appointed historian. In a brief chapter on Litviak, Polunina states as though it were a fact, 'Our comrade-in-arms is not dead, but alive. Now, of course, this woman has a different last name'.¹⁵ *Devchonki* is cited by a variety of writers as evidence, although it is doubtful that many have consulted the source themselves. The book has not been translated, appeared in a very small print run, and is extremely hard to find, but is frequently quoted by others.¹⁶

Italian writer Gian Piero Milanetti bases his views on Polunina's work. In his 2011 book *Le streghe della notte* (*The Night Witches*) and his 2013 English-language photographic history, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War* (a 'pictorial history' with no text except lengthy captions describing photos), Milanetti repeats Polunina's claims about Litviak's alleged survival and adds his own allegations.

Scholars may use rumors and hearsay as evidence, but good historians use them judiciously, after applying tests of bias, verifiability, credibility, and plausibility.¹⁷ Rumor and hearsay are never used in isolation, but only as they contribute to an interpretation that provides the most plausible explanation, based on systematic research and a preponderance of evidence. Let us examine the evidence regarding whether Liliia Litviak lived or died on 1 August 1943 and assess how it meets these tests.

Litviak's last flight

Litviak flew her last flight on 1 August 1943 over occupied Ukrainian territory. At that time, she served in the 73rd Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment.¹⁸ Despite her skill, Litviak was shot down, as had been so many others: her best friend Katiia Budanova, and two previous regimental commanders in the 73rd, all in just the previous three months.

The 73rd was operating from a field at the Kalinin state farm on 1 August 1943. According to archival documents, Litviak flew four sorties that day. She shared a kill against an Me-109 on her third sortie, and personally shot down another on her fourth sortie.¹⁹ On that last sortie, Litviak flew in a group of Yak-1s with her wingman Viktor Tabunov; Ivan Borisenko and Aleksandr Evdokimov were also in the formation.²⁰ A 1943 document states the fighters were flying cover for ground troops in the region of Marinovka.²¹ The pilots engaged a German formation of 12 Ju-88 bombers escorted by Me-109 fighters. Tabunov and Litviak were attacked by four Messerschmitts and Litviak's aircraft was damaged.²² The Soviet fighters had been flying above the cloud ceiling, and Borisenko stated that Litviak tried to escape by diving into the clouds.²³ Litviak then disappeared. Evdokimov reported that he saw Litviak shot down, but he did not observe a parachute.²⁴ Tabunov became separated from Litviak and formed Borisenko. The battle was intense because Tabunov ran out of gas and had to land for more fuel before returning to his unit. Evdokimov also had to make a forced landing and did not return to the 73rd until the next day.²⁵

A divisional operation report dated 1 August 1943 states that Litviak 'fell in the area 2 km northeast of Marinovka', and that she was shot down and killed.²⁶ Other documents from August 1943 also state that she was presumed dead.²⁷ In 1964, Ivan Borisenko described what he remembered of that day:

'Now about Lilia Litviak. I took part in the flight when she was shot down. This was in August, at the end of the month (I don't remember the exact date). It was like this. We were in a group of eight Yak-1s flying cover for our forces. Lilia was in the covering group. Above enemy territory at 15-20 km behind the front lines, we saw a group of enemy bombers approaching the front line. We decided to attack straight away.

During the attack, Lilia did not see a group of Messerschmitts, which was covering the bombers. A pair of Me-109s attacked her. Her wingman Viktor Tabunov (you might remember him, 'Blondie') rushed to intercept them but did not succeed. Lilia Litviak's aircraft was hit. The battle was behind the clouds. I saw how one Yak-1, sharply descending with smoke, entered the clouds. I followed after it, but, coming out of the cloud layer, could not spot it any longer. Whose aircraft it was, I still didn't know. After the end of the engagement, arriving back at the airfield, we learned that Lilia had not returned from the mission. You can imagine our grief. Everyone without exception loved her. Lilia's name was recorded in the permanent roll of the regiment.

As of the day of her death she had personally killed 8 enemy aircraft. As a person and as a pilot she was wonderful.

After recapturing that place (the same area where Katia Budanova was shot down) we tried to find the place where she perished and was buried, but could not find it. That is what I know about the last days of Lilia'.²⁸

Borisenko provides a firsthand account from a participant in the event in question. As with most eyewitness accounts, there are some errors in his letter – the date of the last flight, and the number of Litviak's kills at that time – but his description of the basic events is consistent with archival documents. Borisenko was in a good position to observe events, as part of the same formation of aircraft. The report is corroborated by a similar firsthand account by mechanic Nikolai Men'kov, 1943 documents from the 73rd regiment and its divisional headquarters, and hearsay reports from Evdokimov, who died in late August 1943.²⁹ Borisenko's account has authority and reliability, is well corroborated, and is plausible. Virtually all Russian-language sources are consistent with this version of events.³⁰ There are some disputes about the details of the engagement (mainly in popular histories and websites) that are not relevant to the question of Litviak's fate.

All sources agree that Litviak was in a serious battle on her last flight, sustained heavy aircraft damage and probably serious injuries, and was last seen flying into some clouds, trying to evade the enemy fighters that were attacking her aircraft. They disagree about what happened to Litviak next.

Did Litviak bail out?

Some sources have suggested that Litviak must have parachuted from her damaged aircraft. The bail-out rumor is treated as a fact on several websites: 'We know now that Litvyak had bailed out to safety'.³¹ These claims are not only unverified; they also ignore the context of the time and Litviak's own history. Most Soviet pilots in the Great Patriotic War went to great lengths to salvage a damaged aircraft rather than bailing out, especially in the first three years. Bailing out meant that the aircraft would crash and be destroyed. Aircraft were valuable assets and every plane counted; even damaged aircraft

could be used for parts. Bailing out could even be construed as an act of sabotage. Flying home also meant a better chance of making it back to friendly territory, if the battle occurred over enemy lines, with less chance of being captured by the enemy and a better chance of salvaging the aircraft.

Litviak had never resorted to bailing out. She crash-landed on 22 March 1943 after being so seriously wounded in the leg that 'she managed to land the aircraft but she couldn't taxi or get out of the cockpit because of her wound'.³² Her injuries were so severe that she was sent to Moscow for medical attention.³³ After returning to flying duty, Litviak crash-landed again on 16 July 1943.³⁴ On 21 July 1943, Litviak once more successfully landed a badly damaged aircraft.³⁵ She always attempted to get her aircraft back home, even when she was badly injured.

No eyewitness observed Litviak parachuting from her aircraft on 1 August 1943. One source for the idea that Litviak parachuted to safety may be a very brief item published in 1963 by Guards General-Major of Aviation Pavel Golovachev, who flew in the 9th Guards with Litviak.³⁶ He wrote that 'Once, the pair Golyshev-Litviak conducted an air battle against nine enemy fighters. The colonel was killed in the air, and his partner bailed out of her damaged aircraft by parachute. Since then I haven't had any sort of news about Lilya'. This could be misread as describing Litviak's last flight, but Golyshev was killed on 21 July 1943, and Golovachev was not in the 73rd regiment where this incident occurred and is wrong in several details regarding that incident.³⁷ Military records and veteran interviews indicate that Litviak crash-landed after the engagement in which Golyshev was lost, and Golyshev himself crash-landed before dying. This source is in error that Litviak bailed out on 21 July 1943, and is not evidence that she bailed out on 1 August 1943.

The bail-out rumor has been further embellished in English-language sources. James Greenwood wrote in a 1967 article in *Popular Aviation* that 'Two surviving Red pilots swore they saw Lidia bail out, but no trace of her body was ever found. For months many believed she was still alive'.³⁸ Greenwood provides no names, dates, or any source for this hearsay statement.³⁹ If another pilot saw Litviak bail out, there would have been reports to that effect and a search of the location of the bailout would have commenced, if possible. But no such reports have been found. It is possible that Litviak jumped from her aircraft after disappearing in the clouds, but in that case, it is extremely unlikely that two other pilots saw her but did not report that fact at the time, and it is unlikely that they would have been able to identify who was jumping out if they weren't part of her unit.

Milanetti recently claimed to have found new evidence that Litviak bailed out. His book includes a photo of an anonymous resident of Dmitrievka who 'remembers how a friend of his used to repeat how during the war a pilot girl parachuted from 7000-10,000 feet over Kozhevnia. The only female pilot that

could ever bail out on that area, from that height, is Lidia Litviak'.⁴⁰ That is, Milanetti says he was told by an unidentified source that 68 years earlier someone else said he had seen a girl parachute down in that area. This anonymous hearsay raises several questions. How would someone know that a pilot, wearing overalls and a flying helmet, drifting down from great altitude, was a woman? Was the pilot seen on the ground? Wouldn't local villagers have attempted to assist such a pilot? This statement scores poorly for authority and reliability, is implausible, and in any event, doesn't positively identify the pilot as Litviak.⁴¹

There is no documented instance in which Litviak bailed out. This does not mean she might not have bailed out on 1 August 1943, but it does establish a pattern of successful emergency landings in damaged aircraft. The allegations that Litviak bailed out on 1 August 1943 are based on anonymous hearsay sources, reported decades later. They contradict eyewitness accounts of pilots who saw no parachute. When Litviak disappeared on 1 August 1943, she was flying far beyond friendly lines. She was probably wounded, but still in control of the aircraft when she was last seen. Based on Litviak's previous experience, standards of plausibility indicate that it is most likely that if her aircraft was still flyable, as it seemed to be, she attempted to return to friendly territory and land her aircraft, and did not bail out.

Did Litviak survive?

'When the same person is in four places at once, it means that he has become a legend'.⁴²

It was natural for Litviak's wartime comrades to hope for her survival.⁴³ No one saw her crash. It was not uncommon for pilots to survive a rough landing and make their way back to their unit, sometimes after days or even months. Many of her friends held on to the hope that Litviak had survived, even though the regiment and division concluded in their official reports at the time that she was dead. Seventy years later, that hope has transformed into hearsay and implausible rumors.

Four rumors contribute to the belief that Litviak survived.

1: In 1943 a pilot informed a political officer that he was told by villagers that they had seen a female pilot land and drive away with Germans

Soon after Litviak's last flight, a rumor began to circulate that she landed the aircraft, survived without serious injury, and then either defected to the Germans or was captured by them. In late August or early September 1943, the chief of the political section of the 6th IAD, LtCol Doronenkov, submitted

the following report from a pilot from the 85th Fighter Aviation Regiment who had been shot down behind enemy lines on 24 July and eventually returned to the division.⁴⁴

On the 28th of August pilot, SrSgt Balamut returned from the area of Zalessky; he was shot down in an air battle on 24 July and made a forced landing on enemy territory in the region of Saur-Mogil'sk [Saur Mogila]. Balamut said: '...after two or three days the locals told me that in the region of Chitiakovo, a Soviet fighter landed, the pilot of which was a thin, fair-haired, straight-nosed girl. As soon as she landed, Germans came up in a passenger car and took her away with them.'

It is possible to assume that this pilot was of the Zapriagaev regiment – Liliia Litviak, who did not return from a mission on 1 August.⁴⁵

To sum up: a political officer reported that a pilot from a different regiment who did not know Litviak personally said that some locals said that other villagers said they saw a female pilot land an aircraft and right away some Germans in a car met her and took her away. The political officer suggests the pilot might have been Litviak, although there was no confirmation of this. The report is pure hearsay.

How reliable is this report? First, the dates don't quite line up. Balamut returned on 28 July, but Litviak did not disappear until 1 August. Second, although Litviak disappeared near Marinovka, the remains of her aircraft have been identified far from that location. No Yak fighter was reported to have been discovered in the village in question, which also renders this rumor implausible. Third, there is good evidence that Litviak had been wounded, but this rumor does not indicate that.

Finally, this report fails the plausibility test. How would Litviak have been able to arrange to meet a German passenger car at a particular time and place, assuming she had decided to defect in the first place? If it was a planned defection, why didn't she simply arrange to fly to a German airfield? If this was not a defection, and Litviak was captured by the Germans, how likely is it that Germans were in the area in a passenger car so they could drive up as soon as an unexpected aircraft landed and take the pilot away? To believe this report, you would have to conclude that either Litviak arranged to defect or that she was captured in an unlikely scenario. Whether by rendezvous or coincidence, this rumor is implausible.

Assuming that Balamut reported what he heard correctly, why would villagers start such a rumor? There are at least two reasons. One, as historians have noted, is that 'In times of emergency – for instance, during natural disasters or warfare—people lose all objectivity. Every rumor, every absurd story, is taken seriously. An eyewitness observer in these circumstances is, obviously, not 'reliable' in the usual sense'.⁴⁶ Second, if a counterintelligence officer came asking questions, prodding them to 'remember' something about

a short blond female pilot who might have defected to the Germans, Balamut and/or the villagers might have started repeating this story.

Balamut's account was implausible but so damning that it was widely repeated. LtCol Anatolii Kanevskii in his 1990 article addressed this rumor, claiming that: 'The majority of the aviators who heard this didn't believe it'.⁴⁷ Others did, however, and still do. Ekaterina Polunina accepts the rumor as fact, and many who cite her work do the same.

2: Rumor that Litviak was seen in a German POW camp

Other rumors added fuel to the fire. Litviak was rumored to have been seen in a German POW camp. Supposedly, the famous fighter pilot Vladimir Lavrinenkov, who escaped from captivity after being shot down, told people he had seen Litviak in the camp—a rumor that was well-known among Litviak's colleagues.⁴⁸ The rumor was particularly damaging because of Lavrinenkov's spotless reputation as a Hero of the Soviet Union, and the fact that he had served with Litviak for a few weeks in the 9th Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment from late 1942 to early 1943.

The source of the rumor is difficult to ascertain. Some claim that Lavrinenkov made a statement while he was under investigation after returning from captivity, but researchers have failed to locate a record of his interrogation.⁴⁹ Polunina wrote that Lavrinenkov 'confided this in conversations with Klavdiia Pankratova-Tubalova, a member of the same regiment'.⁵⁰ Milanetti gives a slightly different version of this rumor, writing that Lavreninkov 'later revealed to 586 IAP's pilot Klava Pankratova Tubalova that he had read the name of Litviak on the prisoner list affixed in the Kamp where he had been first taken'.⁵¹ Milanetti takes this contradictory bit of hearsay even further: 'Someone think [sic] that she managed to escape from the POW camp, where her presence was observed by Vladimir Lavrinenkov, a fellow prisoner, and there is speculation that she availed herself of that opportunity to leave the Soviet Union'.⁵²

If Lavrinenkov made some sort of statement to Pankratova, did he tell her that he actually saw Litviak in a camp, as Polunina writes, or that he only saw the name Litviak on a list, as Milanetti claims? There's a vast difference between the two; Lavrinenkov knew Litviak well and would easily have been able to identify her in a camp. However, the name 'Litviak' is not gender-specific and could have applied to a male prisoner.

There are several inconsistencies in these hearsay accounts. There is no available firsthand account by Pankratova.⁵³ She never served in the same regiment with Lavrinenkov, or with Litviak after September 1942. Similarly, no one has produced a firsthand account from Lavrinenkov that he saw Litviak in a German camp.⁵⁴

If Lavrinenkov saw Litviak in the camps, he did not write about it in his 1983 memoir, in which he described his experiences as a prisoner. He did, however, write a lot about his time serving in the 9th Guards with Litviak, summing up by saying, ‘Katia Budanova and Lilia Litviak were, for us, dependable comrades-in-arms in the skies of the front’.⁵⁵ It seems unlikely that a Hero of the Soviet Union would write that about a fellow pilot if he thought she had defected.⁵⁶ We may never know whether Lavrinenkov claimed, under duress or otherwise, that he saw Litviak in a prisoner-of-war camp. Unfortunately, we have no documented firsthand account from Lavrinenkov or Pankratova, only hearsay: Polunina states that Pankratova said that Lavrinenkov said that he saw Litviak in a German camp.⁵⁷

If Lavrinenkov had made such statements, he may have been pressured by political officers. Lyuba Vinogradova relays a statement from armorer Krasnochekova, who told her that a pilot in the 85th Regiment, Andrei Goliuk, admitted that he had been coerced by interrogators to say that he too had seen Litviak in a POW camp.⁵⁸

The hearsay accounts that Lavrinenkov saw Litviak (or her name) in a POW camp fail tests of reliability. Polunina’s version is hearsay that is not corroborated in other interviews and works by Lavrinenkov and Pankratova. Every other account seems to be based on Polunina. For example, Milanetti’s citation is a popular history book written by a librarian who cites a journalist who cites Polunina.⁵⁹

Rumors and hearsay are the only ‘evidence’ that Liliia Litviak was captured. No documentary evidence has been produced. Yet the ‘fact’ that Litviak was ‘seen alive’ in a POW camp is now posted on various websites as proof of Litviak’s supposed survival.⁶⁰

3: Rumor that Litviak’s voice was heard on German radio in 1943

Polunina also claimed that Litviak was heard speaking in German on the radio during the war: ‘The unpublished writings of 586th commander Aleksandr Gridnev appear even more reliable. It was transmitted to him from the command post: “Listen: Liliia Litviak is speaking in German on the radio”. Gridnev’s manuscript was given to the Monino archive’.⁶¹

But Gridnev’s manuscript says no such thing. Gridnev gave me a copy of his manuscript in 1993; it is almost certainly the same work that is purportedly at Monino. There is a brief chapter about the only time that Gridnev met Litviak, in April 1943 (she had transferred out of the 586th before he took command).⁶² Gridnev wrote that on that occasion, Litviak told him she spoke German and had been able to speak once to a captured German pilot she had shot down.⁶³ He does not say she was heard speaking German on the radio after her disappearance.

It is possible that Gridnev gave Monino a different document than the 300-page memoir he gave to me. But when a Russian historian went to Monino in 2011 to check on this, she was told they couldn't find any papers at all from Gridnev.⁶⁴

Even if Gridnev did write somewhere that Litviak was heard on the radio, there would be many questions. How did they know it was Litviak? Did she identify herself? If she had, and the broadcast had been heard in a regimental command post, there would have been political reports to that effect and Litviak would never have been awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union. If Litviak did not use her name, how was she identified? Gridnev had only met her once. If a German-language broadcast of an unidentified Russian female pilot was intercepted, it would be difficult to conclusively identify the speaker as Litviak. One might expect Gridnev to have written something more than just the shocking statement that 'Liliia Litviak is speaking in German on the radio'. If he wrote about hearing Litviak on the radio, he could be expected to have said something about his reaction. And why would Litviak be speaking in *German* on the radio? If she was being used for propaganda purposes, she would probably be speaking in Russian to the Red Army. Gridnev writes about others, including himself, who were accused and interrogated by the NKVD. Why would he not say more about Litviak's capture or defection?

The 'evidence' that Litviak made a radio statement in German during the war is hearsay that fails tests of reliability and plausibility. The likelihood of the event occurring is quite low; a positive identification of the speaker would have been extremely difficult; and there is no documentary source for this information. On the contrary, the supposed author, Aleksandr Gridnev, left a complete unpublished memoir and numerous interviews, none of which mentioned this episode. I interviewed Gridnev several times in 1993 and we talked about Litviak. He never mentioned hearing her on the radio or voiced any suspicion that she had survived. Polunina's statement appears to be a simple mix-up, perhaps distorted in a 'telephone game' kind of retelling.⁶⁵ But in other publications, the error in Polunina's book has become a 'fact'.

4: Rumor that Litviak appeared on a Swiss television program in 1990

One more bit of hearsay has contributed to the rumor that Litviak survived the war. Polunina writes that she was told by Nina Raspopova of the 46th Guards Night Bomber regiment that she saw a Swiss television program in 1990 on Russian television that featured an interview with a female Russian pilot from the Second World War who was living in Switzerland. The pilot appeared anonymously or under a different name, and said she had been wounded twice during the war and had three children. Polunina doesn't say that Raspopova positively recognized Litviak, but 'assumed' it was her and shared that 'conjecture' with Polunina.⁶⁶ Raspopova knew Litviak during training, but not on

active service; would she be able to identify her 47 years later? No date or title is given, so the broadcast cannot be verified.

How might Litviak have ended up alive and well in Switzerland in 1990? If Litviak had been captured by the Germans, why was she not repatriated along with other former POWs? Why would the Germans, or the Swiss, give her a new identity and allow her to avoid repatriation? There were very few female Soviet pilots who were taken prisoner or disappeared in the war. It is extremely unlikely that one of these women (Litviak or someone else) survived the war, avoided repatriation, found a home in the West, and yet never contacted her family in the Soviet Union, even in the days of *glasnost* in the late 1980s or after the fall of the Soviet system in 1991. It is even less likely that such a woman would agree to appear on television.⁶⁷ This rumor, too, fails reasonable tests of authority, reliability, and plausibility.

And yet this rumor is repeated in other sources as fact. Milanetti writes that 'Nina Raspopova, a veteran of the 46th GvNBAP, declared to be sure that she was Lidia Litviak' [sic] but even according to Polunina, Raspopova only *speculated* that the pilot was Litviak.⁶⁸ Milanetti goes on to state that 'Galina Brok-Beltsova, a veteran of the 125 GvBAP and former NKVD's agent, revealed to the Author in May 2010, "Litviak survived and went to Switzerland, where she got married and had sons" (the 'three children' of Polunina's account have now become 'sons').⁶⁹ It's not clear, however, that Brok-Beltsova had any direct knowledge, such as having seen the broadcast herself, or if she was simply repeating what was in Polunina's book, or the rumors that she had heard. To say that Brok-Beltsova 'revealed' this information implies there is firm evidence, but none is cited or presented.⁷⁰

It seems extremely unlikely that if Litviak was alive, and in communication with former friends by phone, letter, and in person, she would not simply give an interview and tell her story. If she wished to protect her identity, it is unlikely that she would make such contacts. This rumor fails tests of authority, reliability, and plausibility. Yet the rumor of Litviak's survival continues to spread.⁷¹

Litviak is not the only pilot who was allegedly seen by others after her death. Rumors surround another female fighter pilot, Antonina Lebedeva, who went missing in July 1943. In 1982, parts of her aircraft were found along with remains that were identified as hers, based on similar criteria to those used to establish Litviak's identity.⁷² In Lebedeva's case, documents were also found on the body that confirmed the identification. Lebedeva's remains were reinterred on 17 August 1983 at Vyazovaya of Bolkhovskiy District, Orel Region.⁷³ Yet rumors still circulate that Lebedeva did not die, but was captured by the Germans. During the war, a colleague of Lebedeva's wrote to her father, relaying a rumor that she had been captured and interrogated by the Germans.⁷⁴ Milanetti offers both versions of Lebedeva's story; he states her father was told she had been captured, but he also notes that Polunina says

Lebedeva was killed in action on 17 July 1943. He does not resolve the contradiction.⁷⁵

There is no documentary evidence that Litviak was captured or defected.⁷⁶ Why would people spread these rumors if they were not true? Perhaps they simply came to believe them, as rumors circulated and it became ‘common knowledge’ that Litviak was still alive. Historians know that ‘eyewitnesses regularly shape their recollections to accord with reports from more “authoritative” sources’, sometimes from a conscious response to pressure, but also from ‘an unconscious need to conform to the dominant narrative’.⁷⁷ The rumors of Litviak’s survival and secret life in Switzerland have become the dominant narrative. Pressure to conform to the dominant narrative may have been exerted by political officers and SMERSH, as we shall see below.

The search for Lidiia Litviak and the identification of her remains

Litviak was one of thousands of soldiers and pilots who went missing in action in the Great Patriotic War. Members of the 73rd regiment searched for her crash site for at least three weeks after her disappearance. Those searchers looked for a crash landing and a corpse, not for a bailed-out pilot. Though some continued to hope Litviak might have survived, it was generally assumed that she was dead. But her body had to be located before she would officially be designated as ‘killed in action’ rather than missing.

N. I. Men’kov stated that he and Aleksandr Evdokimov searched near Dmitrievka on 2 August 1943 and that a group from the 73rd drove around after that date, but did not find the crash site.⁷⁸ A week after she went missing in combat, Litviak’s regimental commander, Guards Major Zapriagaev, submitted an Award Certificate detailing her combat record and recommending that Litviak be *posthumously* awarded the title of ‘Hero of the Soviet Union’.⁷⁹ The recommendation was rejected until Litviak’s body could be found but is an indication that the regiment assumed she was dead. Nevertheless, the search continued in August until the front lines shifted, the regiment was rebased, and the 73rd had to give up its attempts to locate Litviak’s body.⁸⁰

There were hundreds of wartime crash sites and many thousands of hasty burials during the war. In the 1960s it became a common summer activity for Soviet schoolchildren to help in the search for unidentified remains. Inna Pasportnikova and members of her family participated in some of the summer searches. Pasportnikova told me in an interview:

‘Our work of searching was mainly done by school children. I established contact with several groups who were searching for the territory of the Donbas [...] Fate brought me together with Valentina Ivanovna Vashchenko, the leader of the search group from the city of Krasnyi Luch. This group had been going out on excavations quite seriously for several years during each summer vacation. They established the names of many pilots

who had been killed, found the place where they fell, and dug up their aircraft, some of which were found the pilot's remains. The local inhabitants helped them well and actively. And finally my husband and I went on an outing with them by car. And the following year we went again, taking along with us a group of children from a Moscow school. Our operation was called 'White Lilia' [...] Having in our hands data from the archives, we searched for Lilia.⁸¹

The Young Pioneers from Middle School Number One in Krasnyi Luch, Ukraine, led by teacher Valentina Vashchenko, were the main participants in the search for Litviak.⁸² The journalist Valerii Agranovskii documented this effort.⁸³

In 1979, Vashchenko's team investigated a crash site on the Kozhevnia farm near Dmitrievka (Shakhterskii district, Donetsk oblast).⁸⁴ A pilot had been buried at the site in 1943, which was some miles from where Litviak was thought to have crashed. According to Vashchenko, a female pilot had 'died in the cockpit of her plane. Some infantrymen found her body and buried her in a trench'.⁸⁵ Pasportnikova told an interviewer, 'We don't know who buried her, the fascists or the Soviet soldiers who liberated the village the next day. And we also don't know whether she was mortally wounded or killed by the Germans on the spot'.⁸⁶ The aircraft was partially dismantled, probably for scrap metal, and the locals forgot about the crash site until the 1960s, when two little boys accidentally came across the site again, supposedly while chasing a snake.⁸⁷

In July 1969, the pilot's body was disinterred by residents and reburied in common grave Number 19 in the village of Dmitrievka along with the remains of some other soldiers.⁸⁸ Local doctors examined the body before it was reinterred and concluded that the pilot had been a short woman who had sustained a head injury.⁸⁹ There were no documents on the body, so the commission simply listed the body as an 'unknown pilot'. According to Pasportnikova, 'This [medical] commission wrote a paper that said this is the body of a woman pilot, very small and they found hair, her flying suit, and a gold tooth'.⁹⁰ In 1969, no one connected this crash with Litviak; it was just part of the general postwar cleanup.

Ten years later, Vashchenko's team tried to identify the aircraft and/or the pilot. They collected pieces of the plane from the crash site and sent them to Moscow, where 'a special military expert commission stated that it was a Yak-1 plane'.⁹¹ They reviewed personnel rosters of units operating in the area at the time. The crash occurred in the Eighth Air Army's area and there was only one female fighter pilot from the Eighth who was missing at that time – Liliia Litviak.

Pasportnikova summed up how she believed Litviak came to crash: 'As it later became clear, Lilia, having been wounded, was trying, by hiding in the clouds, to reach her airfield. But she did not succeed: she set down her aircraft in a belly landing, with the landing gear retracted, on a fascist trench near the

“Kozhevnia” farm in the Shakhterskaia region, not being able to hold out for our own territory only 20-25 km away. But we had been searching for her in the Marinovka region where her aircraft had been hit’.⁹² Litviak had flown 8-9 km beyond Marinovka before crashing.

By 1980, Pasportnikova and Vashchenko were confident that Litviak had crash-landed, died, and been buried on the Kozhevnia farm.⁹³ VVS headquarters spent several more years investigating and compiling data. Lt Col Anatolii Kanevskii, then an active-duty VVS officer, and HSU Lieutenant-General Boris Eremin wrote letters and helped to shepherd the necessary paperwork for the VVS to decide. Kanevskii writes that ‘Information was received from the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR from March 31, 1986, that confirmed this conclusion [that the body was that of Lidiia Litviak]’.⁹⁴

So far the evidence seems straightforward. Inna Pasportnikova, one of Litviak’s wartime colleagues, was involved in the search for the body and has related the story in writing and to several interviewers. Valentina Vashchenko, who led the Pioneers’ search team, has also been interviewed, confirming the details of the search and the identification. An active-duty VVS officer and a highly decorated wartime pilot who knew Litviak found the evidence persuasive enough to put their names on the paperwork.

DNA evidence could conclusively prove that it was Litviak’s body that was buried in common grave #19. But DNA confirmation at this point would be inordinately difficult to arrange. The remains would have to be exhumed from the common grave, and a DNA sample from Litviak’s belongings or a close family member would have to be obtained⁹⁵ and compared to the DNA of the remains, if usable DNA could be extracted. However, it is reasonable to assume that the body was indeed Litviak’s if it is true that local doctors examined and correctly described the remains as reported. It is not difficult to determine the height and gender of intact human remains, as well as obvious skeletal wounds (in this case, a cranial wound) even after twenty-six years.⁹⁶ There were no other female Yak-1 pilots who crashed in that general region in early August 1943. If the body was indeed that of a woman, by the process of elimination, it is almost certainly the body of Liliia Litviak.

Other pilots have been identified similarly. It was common for pilots and soldiers to be buried where they fell. In the case of pilots, this was often at the place where their aircraft crashed or landed. For example, Katia Budanova was buried in the field where she crash-landed in July 1943.⁹⁷ It was also common for those bodies to be moved after the war, as also happened with Budanova’s remains.⁹⁸

In 1986, the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense confirmed that the woman pilot who crashed near Dmitrievka had to be Litviak. Given the evidence of the Yak-1 crash site on the Kozhevnia farm where a pilot’s body

had been buried on 1 August 1943, and the exhumation of the body in 1969 and verification by medical authorities that the body was that of a small woman, it required only a records search to identify the body as that of Litviak. It could not be anyone else.⁹⁹

In 1988, Litviak's name was placed on the common grave, and the Ministry of Defense approved changing her military records to read 'killed in action'. The order was signed by General of the Army D. Sukhorukov, Deputy Minister of Defense of the USSR for Personnel.¹⁰⁰

To item 22 of the order of the Main Directorate of Personnel No. 01255 dated 16 September 1943 concerning the fate of LITVIK L. V.

IT IS WRITTEN: She went missing with a trace on 1 August 1943.

IT SHOULD READ: Jr. Lieutenant Litviak Lidiia Vladimirovna - flight commander of the 3rd Air Squadron 73 Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment.

Born in 1921, a native of Moscow.

She was killed on a combat mission Aug. 1, 1943.

Buried in mass grave No. 19 in the center of the village of Dmitrovka, Shakhterskii raion, Donetsk oblast.

Some skeptics reject the evidence that Litviak crash-landed and died. Milanetti questions everything about the discovery of Litviak's body. He states that he recently interviewed one of the brothers who claimed to have discovered the crash site. He says the brothers did not find the body by chance while chasing a snake, as some reports said, but that everybody knew there had been an aircraft there. They lied about how they found the body 'because they were afraid that the Soviet authorities could punish them, as they were unearthing a relic without permission'. The brother also denied having found blonde hair or a gold tooth and said he was never told later that the bones were female.¹⁰¹ This information is irrelevant. It doesn't matter whether the boys were chasing a snake or trying to find parts of an old aircraft to sell; they knew of the crash site and they found a body. No one said the boys found blonde hair or a gold tooth; that was reported by the medical examiners. Would the boys have been told later about the details of the local doctor's examination of the body? Possibly, but not necessarily.

Milanetti points out that there are two thousand bodies in the common grave, and asks, 'How was it possible to find them to examine [Litviak's remains] and why, after they discovered that they were Litviak's, they did not bury them in an individual grave?'¹⁰² The answer is that the body was examined and categorized as an unidentified female pilot in 1969 when it was dug up from the crash site before reburial in the common grave. The identification of the body as Litviak's occurred ten years later, based on unit records, not due to another exhumation. There is also confusion about the dates; Milanetti says the body was discovered by the brothers in 1979, rather than 1969.¹⁰³ The erroneous

date might be a typo or a memory error. Or someone might have confused the date because the search party found out about the crash site and the reburial in 1979, and at that time began the process of identification. The confusion about these dates is repeated on some internet sites.¹⁰⁴

Polunina questions whether there was a body at all. She says that she had to ask the manager of the Krasnodonskoye cemetery to add the name of Litviak to common grave No. 19.¹⁰⁵ This is not evidence that there was no body. It is only evidence, if Polunina's statement is true, that Litviak's name was added to the plate at her insistence. One might ask why she insisted on the name being added if she did not believe that Litviak was buried there? The identification of Litviak's body had already been accomplished, official recognition was already in process, and a monument to Litviak was constructed, through the efforts of others, not Polunina. The name on the grave plate was never taken as evidence of Litviak's death, regardless of who was responsible for the name being added.

Rumors that Litviak had somehow survived provided the fuel for the skepticism about whether the body was truly Litviak's, despite evidence to the contrary.

Rumor, suspicion, and SMERSH

Historians note that 'all rumors work best when they build upon already existing suspicions or fears'.¹⁰⁶ The political atmosphere of the wartime Soviet Union was rife with suspicion and fear. Red Army political officers provided training in Party values and ideals and monitored deviations from those ideals. In addition to the army's political staff, several branches of counter-intelligence collectively known as SMERSH (from the Russian acronym 'Death to spies') were responsible for monitoring 'anti-Soviet activity' in the Soviet military. Traitors, deserters, and Soviet soldiers who had been captured by the enemy were their particular province. Political officers and SMERSH investigators took a special interest in soldiers who went missing. They scrutinized past actions and comments by the missing to determine whether there was any chance the soldiers might have been deserters rather than victims of war. Soviet-era political reports are largely based in hearsay and rumor, as is clear in the 6th Division report about SSgt Balamut.

Like all who went missing, Litviak became the target of investigation and suspicion. As a daughter of an 'enemy of the people', her loyalty was doubly suspect. Litviak had told her friends of her fear of going missing in action and vowed to do anything to avoid that fate by landing with her last breath, if necessary. Pasportnikova said, 'Lilia was afraid to be lost without a trace. She told me and Valia about this. She spoke very highly of her father. She believed in his honesty and decency. By her victories, she wanted to prove her devotion to the Motherland'.¹⁰⁷ Litviak's sister-in-law confirmed that 'Lilia was truly

very afraid to be lost without a trace or to be taken prisoner because they would make her out to be an enemy of the people'.¹⁰⁸

It is important to note that despite her father's arrest in 1937 and the resulting suspicion of all members of his family, Litviak was allowed to become not just a pilot, but a flying instructor; she was recognized publicly for her prewar achievements; she was allowed to become a combat pilot; and she continued to receive public recognition and awards. If her actions served the Soviet state, even the child of an 'enemy of the people' could function as a respected member of society. But any action that could be regarded as suspicious— even a careless statement or rumored disloyalty—could bring down the heavy hand of SMERSH. Going 'missing without a trace' was enough to cause political officers to seek out any indication that Litviak might have defected.

Political officers pressured Litviak's colleagues to say she had planned to defect, and that was why she was missing. Dr. Lyuba Vinogradova, best known as translator and co-editor of *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, recently interviewed Litviak's mechanic from 73rd regiment Nikolai Men'kov and her armorer Valia Krasnoshchekova, who told her 'they were under great pressure from the SMERSH officers to admit that Litviak was politically unreliable and had had thoughts about defecting'. Krasnoshchekova stated that others in the regiment were also pressured during the investigations.¹⁰⁹ Krasnoshchekova told Vinogradova that she was questioned in September 1943, just a few weeks after Litviak went missing. They asked her specifically whether Litviak might have defected; Krasnoshchekova says she told them the idea was ridiculous.¹¹⁰

This is hearsay – the actual interviews with Men'kov and Krasnoshchekova have not been made available – but are consistent with SMERSH practices. Anyone connected to a missing soldier (a potential defector) was under suspicion that they might have colluded with that soldier, and one way to avert suspicion was to incriminate others. A classic text on historical method notes, 'A witness under the eye of secret policemen [...] may find himself under severe pressure to conform [...] observation often is affected by prejudice, so that the eye apparently beholds and the ear apprehends what the mind wishes them to report'.¹¹¹

In other words, people may tell investigators what they think they want to hear, to appease powerful authorities and deflect suspicion from themselves, even to the point of self-delusion. Balamut might have succumbed to such pressure. None of Litviak's regimental colleagues apparently did so; the sole document that has surfaced is the report of a divisional political officer relaying Balamut's hearsay tale of a female pilot driving away with the Germans.

The investigation itself became the source of rumor.¹¹² LtCol Anatolii Kanevskii in his 1990 article addressed the rumor of Litviak's defection, noting

that Balamut's report caused 'a shadow of suspicion [that] went out beyond the bounds of the regiment and reached the higher staff. The command, displaying "caution", would not confirm the presentation to Litviak of the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, but limited itself to the Order of the Patriotic War, 1st degree'.¹¹³

The atmosphere of fear and suspicion contributed to the spread and persistence of rumors about Litviak. In 1951, her brother changed his last name when he got married, partly because he felt his father's arrest during the Purges prevented him from getting a good job, and partly because of the rumors about his sister.¹¹⁴ When Pasportnikova, a member of the 8th Air Army veterans committee, tried to have Litviak's Hero of the Soviet Union recommendation revived, few were willing to help. She says that Tikhomirova (the 586th regimental political officer) refused because she considered Lilia to be a traitor.¹¹⁵

Would Litviak have had the motivation to defect? She had cause to hate the Soviet system that had arrested her father, but she probably had more cause to hate the Germans who had invaded her country and caused countless deaths and immense suffering. Defection was a rare occurrence. The vast majority of Soviet pilots who were captured did not 'go over' to the Germans. Why would Litviak, who was fiercely patriotic and painfully aware of the dangers of treason, choose to defect?

It is far more plausible that false rumors about Litviak originated in the atmosphere of hypervigilance against treason than it is that Litviak somehow survived, defected, or was captured, and chose to stay in the West. Surely, it would have damaged her family more, if it were ever discovered that she had defected or collaborated in any way than it would have done if she waited for repatriation.

The actions of the SMERSH investigators contributed to the rumors of Litviak's supposed survival and defection. Those rumors persisted even after the Ministry of Defense officially declared her dead.

Litviak's death becomes official and she is made Hero of the Soviet Union

Litviak was first recommended for the Hero of the Soviet Union award a week after her disappearance. On 8 August 1943, the commander of the 73rd, Major I. I. Zapriagaev, petitioned that 'For heroism and courage displayed in the struggle against German invaders, for excellent fulfillment of military orders at the front of the Patriotic war comrade LITVIAK deserves posthumously the title of "Hero of the Soviet Union".'¹¹⁶ However, the standards for awarding the Hero of the Soviet Union were strict. The Ministry of Defense refused to grant the award until Litviak's body could be located and positively identified. The HSU would never be awarded to a potential traitor, and 'missing in action' equated to 'possible

defector' in the Soviet view. No body, no award. The Soviet government was not known for granting the benefit of a doubt.

In 1968, the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* revived the appeal to award Litviak the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, but Soviet Air Force headquarters reiterated its position that the award would not be made unless Litviak's body could be identified.¹¹⁷ Thus, people like Paspornnikova increased their efforts to encourage searchers to look specifically for Litviak's crash site. With the information gained in 1979 that Litviak's body had been identified, they were able to proceed with official confirmation of death and to pursue the HSU.¹¹⁸

LtCol Anatolii Kanevskii, Boris Eremin, and Inna Paspornnikova were the main advocates who worked to see that Litviak finally received the Hero of the Soviet Union. Eremin, himself a Hero of the Soviet Union, retired as a Lieutenant General of Aviation; I interviewed him in 1993 when he was Chairman of the Presidium of the Council of War Veterans of the 8th Air Army.¹¹⁹ His signature is on many of the documents supporting the conclusion that Litviak died in 1943 and thus was eligible for the Hero of the Soviet Union.

It seems unlikely that active-duty officers and Soviet-era heroes like Eremin would support elevating Litviak to the rank of Hero of the Soviet Union if there was any substance to the rumor that she had survived and defected. But if the authorities were convinced that her body had indeed been identified, then the doubts could be put to rest and Litviak would at last be eligible for the award.

On 31 March 1989, Kanevskii and Eremin signed a 'Chronicle of Combat Victories of Guards Junior Lieutenant Litviak Lydiia Vladimirovna'.¹²⁰ This chart lists the dates and types of kills credited to Litviak, 'compiled based on materials of the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR [TsAMO] and attested to by colleagues of L. V. LITVIK'. It details 12 personal and 3 shared kills and provides archival citations for her combat actions.

On 25 May 1989, an Award Certificate (*Nagradoi list*) was submitted, signed by the Chairman of the Presidium of the Council of War Veterans of the 8th Air Army, LtGen of Aviation B. N. Eremin.¹²¹ This certificate is based on the 1943 *Nagradoi list*, gives details of Litviak's career and kills, and is signed by archives officials as verified by archival records and confirmation by veterans. Finally, on 5 May 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev signed Order No. 460056 awarding Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak Hero of the Soviet Union, gold star No. 11616.¹²² Various plaques and monuments have since been erected to commemorate Liliia Litviak, and several streets have been named for her.¹²³ In 1992, I received the following letter from the Directorate of Troop Information:

‘According to the instructions of General-major of Aviation N. S. Stoliarov, your letter is being taken up by the Directorate of Troop Information and Public Liaison.

Regarding the award to military pilot Lidiia Litviak, we have the following information. Conferring on her the high award of Hero of the Soviet Union posthumously is evidence of the high regard for the courage and heroism of this woman-pilot. Why was it not given earlier? The point is that Lidiia Litviak for many years was considered to be lost without a trace, and according to the regulations, members of the service are given awards personally; in the event of their death awards and medals are passed on to their relatives. The fact of death in combat of the military pilot was confirmed comparatively recently.

P. Korchemnyi

Chief of the Directorate of Information and Public Liaison

25 September 1992’

Archival materials from 1943 are strong sources regarding Litviak’s career, but provide no proof of her death. The medical commission’s report from 1969 does not seem to be available, but other existing documents were based on that report and concluded that her body was identified beyond a reasonable doubt. The Ministry of Defense documents and Gorbachev’s order are not conclusive evidence that Litviak’s body was indeed found, but they indicate a credible level of investigation.

If anyone in the Soviet Ministry of Defense in the late 1980s still believed Litviak had defected, there would have been no change in Litviak’s status to killed in action and no agreement to award her its highest military honor. Government officials reviewed, and dismissed, the rumors of Litviak’s survival, including the 6th Guards Division political report. It would have been easier to do nothing. There was no particular advantage to the Soviet bureaucracy in making the change. Indeed, the greater risk was to declare Litviak dead and grant the HSU if there was any chance she had defected. It would have been an extreme embarrassment if Litviak had been confirmed to be alive and well and giving interviews on Swiss television.

Some might question the reliability of official Soviet documents. Soviet sources do not have a reputation for accuracy, but the problems are more in the realm of omission than commission. Moreover, the final reports, confirmation of death, and award of the Hero of the Soviet Union were done in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the Gorbachev administration in the period of glasnost’. The process of giving the Hero of the Soviet Union to Litviak involved a great deal of authentication.¹²⁴ Taken in context, the authority and reliability of these archival and governmental documents is high.

In 2018, a memorial plaque to Litviak was authorized by the President of the Russian Federation and the Mayor of Moscow and installed on the building where she lived on Novoslobodskaya Street. The accompanying speech and article affirm her death on August 1, 1943.¹²⁵

Conclusions

In 1990, Anatolii Kanevskii concluded that Litviak's Hero of the Soviet Union award meant that 'it is possible to say, that after 45 years, the honor of the name of the brave pilot is completely restored'.¹²⁶ Sadly, that is not the case. Rumors and hearsay have cast doubt on Litviak's death. If she survived and led a new, secret life abroad, then she was a traitor.

Let us summarize the evidence, identifying each item as hearsay (information not based on direct observation, but a report of something someone has heard from others), eyewitness (information based on direct observation), and documentary (written official documents such as unit reports and military records). Statements made to an interviewer where the transcript or videotape of the interview is not available must be classified as hearsay. Letters and memoirs are generally eyewitness accounts but may contain hearsay. 'Anonymous hearsay' indicates items that are reported without attribution (the witness is not identified).

Evidence that Litviak survived after 1 August 1943, either as a prisoner or defector

- Anonymous hearsay: Two authors claim that a female pilot was seen parachuting in the vicinity of the crash;
- Hearsay: (recorded in 6th IAD political officer's report): a Soviet fighter aircraft landed near Chitiakovo in late July or early August 1943, flown by a slim blonde girl who was seen getting in a car with Germans who happened to drive up;
- Hearsay: Litviak was seen in a POW camp, or maybe just the name 'Litviak' was seen on a list at a POW camp;
- Hearsay: Litviak was heard speaking German on the radio during the war (not corroborated in the supposed source, Gridnev's memoir);
- Hearsay: One, possibly two, accounts of a Swiss television program in 1990 in which a Russian woman pilot was interviewed; the observers speculated that it might have been Litviak;
- Anonymous hearsay: rumors that someone has had phone, mail, and/or personal contact with Litviak (no names, dates, or copies of the supposed letters have been produced).

The reports that Litviak survived are all hearsay and rumor. All are moderately to highly implausible, and none is supported by corroborating evidence such as eyewitness accounts or documents. For example, no German record has been produced to prove that Litviak was a prisoner of war. Some of these accounts are in contradiction: if Litviak bailed out, she didn't land the airplane, and vice versa.

The hearsay evidence is also inconsistent with context and character. No motivation for a supposed defection is given; such an action was not in character, based on what is known of Litviak's previous actions. If the Germans had captured Litviak, there would have been no reason to keep her identity secret. If she somehow survived, somehow found a way to secretly make a new life abroad, why would she never reveal her true identity, decades after the war, yet agree to appear in radio or television broadcasts? If Litviak did finally contact a few friends, there should be some sort of documentary evidence such as letters or photographs.

Evidence that Litviak crash-landed and died

- Military records, eyewitness reports: Litviak was still in control of the aircraft when it was last seen flying, but eyewitnesses reported that her aircraft was badly damaged and she was probably wounded;
- Military records, eyewitness reports: Pilots in the air at the time of her disappearance did not see an explosion or bailout;
- Eyewitness reports, hearsay: Members of Litviak's regiment, and family members, offered character references as to the consistency of her actions and motivations and their belief that she would not defect;
- Military records: A Yak-1 crash-landed on the same day, within the range of Litviak's disappearance, at Kozhevnia farm. The dead pilot was buried on the site;
- Military records: This same crash site was rediscovered in 1969 when the body of the pilot was exhumed. The dead pilot was examined by local medical personnel who noted that the unidentified pilot was a short female with blonde hair and a gold tooth;
- Military records, eyewitness reports: In 1979, searchers learned of this information, and sent aircraft fragments to a commission in Moscow to confirm that the aircraft was a Yak-1;
- Military records, eyewitness reports: In 1979, the body was identified as that of Lidia Litviak, based on a process of elimination; no other missing female Yak-1 pilots, or short male pilots, could have been flying this aircraft;
- Military records: In 1986, the Ministry of Defense confirmed the identification of the body as that of Litviak;
- Military records: In 1988, Litviak was declared officially killed in action by the Ministry of Defense;
- Military records: In 1989, documents were prepared in support of the Hero of the Soviet Union petition listing Litviak's skills and accomplishments, and her death, based on unit records and certified by archival officials;

- Military document: In 1990, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Hero of the Soviet Union for Lidiia Litviak;
- Military document: In 1992, the Directorate of Troop Information confirmed that the Soviet government had verified Litviak's death;

None of the sources provides incontrovertible proof that Litviak died. But the evidence for Litviak's death is more authoritative, reliable, and plausible than the evidence of her survival. The evidence for Litviak's death is better than the evidence against it, and the interpretation that she died is much easier to support than the belief that she parachuted/defected/was captured, did not repatriate, found her way to Switzerland, and then gave interviews and starting calling her friends and writing letters but never publicly revealed her existence.

The principle of Occam's Razor proves useful in this examination: among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected. The hypothesis that Lidiia Litviak crash-landed and died on 1 August 1943 requires the fewest assumptions and is supported by a preponderance of evidence. The truth about Litviak is tragic but simple and ordinary. Like Amelia Earhart, like the Grand Duchess Anastasia, like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Lidiia Litviak died, too suddenly, too young, and in a lonely and long-undiscovered place.

Notes

1. From the publisher's description of Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, and Fraud in the Writing of American History* (New York: PublicAffairs 2007), <http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/publicaffairsbooks-cgi-bin/display?book=9781586482442> [accessed 22 September 2013]. See also <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Past-Imperfect%3A-Facts%2C-Fictions%2C-Fraud-American-and-Hoffer/d6aaca6eaf2e273ed9ee0c54f1ce8b69c0764c1e> (accessed 22 January 2024).
2. The deaths of Adolph Hitler and Elvis Presley are well documented, yet eyewitnesses insisted that Hitler had survived the war, and 'sightings' of Elvis Presley continued for decades after his death. Sarah Douglas, 'The Search for Hitler: Hugh Trevor-Roper, Humphrey Searle, and the Last Days of Adolf Hitler,' *Journal of Military History* 78(1) (January 2014): p. 191; Patrick Lacy, 'There's No Debate: Elvis Is Not Alive,' *Skeptical Briefs* 19.4 (2009, http://www.csicop.org/sb/show/theres_no_debate_elvis_is_not_alive/) (accessed 22 January 2024).
3. One such case was that of Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna, daughter of Tsar Nicholas II, who was executed on 17 July 1918 along with her entire family: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Duchess_Anastasia_Nikolaevna_of_Russia#False_reports_of_survival (accessed 22 January 2024). Questions persisted for years because the Bolsheviks denied the murders and the gravesite was unknown. Rumors continued for decades that Anastasia had survived and eyewitnesses claimed to have seen her. Ten or more women claimed to be Anastasia, offering various tales of miraculous survival and escape that were widely believed. When the burial sites of the family members were finally located in 1991 and 2007, DNA evidence verified that the entire family had indeed

- died in 1918: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/dna-analysis-confirms-authenticity-remains-attributed-romanovs-180969674/> (accessed 22 January 2024)
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_missing_aircraft (accessed 22 January 2024).
 5. French pilot and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry disappeared in 1944 during a reconnaissance mission over German-occupied territory; part of his aircraft was identified in 2000 and confirmed in 2004, but his body was never found: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_de_Saint-Exupéry#Disappearance (accessed 22 January 2024).
 6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amelia_Earhart (accessed 22 January 2024).
 7. A note on spelling: There are two common transliteration systems for Cyrillic. Scholars generally use the Library of Congress system, which provides for a more specific and accurate transliteration of Cyrillic characters. Government and some popular publications favor the United States Board of Geographic Names transliteration system, which is more readable but less precise. Many writers are unaware that there are transliteration rules, and use a hodge-podge of spellings, including Lily, Litvak or even Litvjak. In Russian, her name is Лидия Литвяк. Her transliterated name in the Library of Congress system is Lidiia Litviak (i for the Russian letter и and ia for the Russian letter я). Litviak preferred to call herself Liliia (Лилия), which was sometimes shortened to Lilia (Лилия). The nickname for her given name of Lidiia was Lida, used by some Russian writers. The United States Board of Geographic Names would transliterate her name as Lidiya/Liliya Litvyak. In this article, the Library of Congress system is used, except in exact quotations where there are alternate spellings.
 8. Paspornikova, 'Moi komandir.' The memoir is available in Russian and in English translation online: <http://lilylitviak.org/styled-21/styled-2/styled-12/> (accessed 22 January 2024). Paspornikova quotes a letter from Twice-Hero of the Soviet Union shturmovik pilot Leonid Ignat'evich Beda, who knew Litviak at Stalingrad.
 9. Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, 'Order No. 460056 awarding Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak Hero of the Soviet Union, gold star No. 11616,' 5 May 1990. Order of the President of the USSR. The order is available in Russian and in English translation online: <http://lilylitviak.org/styled-4/page20/> (accessed 22 January 2024).
 10. Donald Watt, 'Rumours as Evidence,' in *Russia: War, Peace and Diplomacy - Essays in Honour of John Erickson*, ed. Mark Erickson and Ljubica Erickson (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 276.
 11. Hearsay can become double or multiple when a hearsay statement contains further hearsay: 'My friend told me that they heard ...'
 12. Some useful references on rumor include Gary Alan Fine, 'Rumor, trust and civil society: Collective memory and cultures of judgment,' *Diogenes* 54(1) (2007): pp. 5–18.
Jean-Noel Kapferer, 'How Rumors Are Born,' *Society* 29(5) (1992): pp. 53–53.
 13. Martha C. Prevenier and Walter Howell, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2001), p. 70.
 14. Ekaterina Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy* (Moskva: Vestnik Vozdushnogo Flota, 2004). The title doesn't translate well into English, but roughly is 'Girls, Girlfriends, and Female Pilots.' Polunina took the title from a line in a poem by a veteran of the 586th; see page 197.
 15. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 146.
 16. Worldcat, searched on 22 January 2024, listed only two copies, one at the Library of Congress and one in Berlin. I bought a copy in 2008 through Eastview Press, but I had to pay a special search fee and it took many months before they could locate a copy for me. There are seven pages about Litviak in Polunina's book, of which almost three pages consist of some of Litviak's letters from 1942 (all previously published). Polunina

includes excerpts from two letters and an archival document, leaving about three pages of actual text about Litviak.

17. David Bennett, Harry Shafer, and Robert Jones, *A Guide to Historical Method* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey 1974), p. 158.
18. Vladimir Anokhin and Mikhail Bykov, *Vse istrebitel'nye Aviapolki Stalina: Pervaia Polnaia Entsiklopediia (All of Stalin's Fighter Aviation Regiments: The First Complete Encyclopedia)*. Moskva: IĀûza Press 2014), p.153. The 73rd Guards (the 296th Regiment until May 1943, when it received its Guards designation) was subordinate to the 268th Fighter Aviation Division (redesignated 6th Guards Fighter Aviation Division) of the 8th Air Army, then serving on the Southern Front. Russian-language websites give the unit structure, subordination, aircraft flown, and commanders, and include a list of sources: <http://www.allaces.ru/cgi-bin/s2.cgi/sss/struct/h/va8.dat>, <http://www.allaces.ru/cgi-bin/s2.cgi/sss/struct/d/iad268.dat>, and <http://www.allaces.ru/cgi-bin/s2.cgi/sss/struct/p/iap296.dat> (accessed 22 January 2024).
19. B. N. Eremin, 'Award Certificate (Nagradnoi list, Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak),' 25 May 1989. TsAMO f. 33, op. 686044, d. 4, l. 279. Online at <http://lilylitviak.org/styled-4/styled-18/> (accessed 22 January 2024); and A. Kanevskii and B. N. Eremin, 'Khronika boevykh pobed Gv. Mladshchego Leitenanta Litviak Lidii Vladimirovny, komandira zvena 3 ae 73 Gvardeiskogo IAP,' 31 March 1989, Podolsk, Russia: TsAMO, online at <http://lilylitviak.org/styled-4/styled-17/> (accessed 22 January 2024).
20. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 144, citing the 1 August 1943 operation report of the 6th Gv. IAD, TSAMO Fond 6 GvIAD, op. 1, d. 21, l. 293. Vinogradova says that Litviak's wingman was Evdomikov; see Lyuba Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland: The Soviet Women Who Fought Hitler's Aces*, trans. Arch Tait (London: MacLehose Press 2015), p. 306. However, the division operation report and a letter from Borisenko state that Tabunov was Litviak's wingman. Litviak was a flight commander and probably led the flight of four aircraft. Inna Vladimirovna Pasportnikova, letter to author, 3 September 1992, included copies of several documents, including a copy of Borisenko's letter.
21. I. I. Zapriagaev, 'Nagradnoi list (Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak),' 25 May 1943. TsAMO f.33, op. 686044, d. 420, l. 279, 279ob, 280, 280ob.
22. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 144, citing 6th Gv. IAD operation report of 1 August 1943.
23. Anne Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press 1994), pp. 198–199.
24. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, Ibid.
25. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, Ibid.
26. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, Ibid.
27. 8th Air Army Order #246 of 4 August 1943 and undated letter from 73rd Acting commander Major Blokhin, from copies given to me by Inna Pasportnikova.
28. Inna Vladimirovna Pasportnikova, letter to author, 3 September 1992. Pasportnikova's letter included copies of several documents, including a copy of Borisenko's letter.
29. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 144. See Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, 304–306, and other pages that cite the author's interviews in 2009–2011 with Men'kov.
30. Chugaev, *Geroi i Podvigi: Sovetskie listovki Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941-1945 gg.* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958), S. Gribanov, 'Ognennaia Liliia,' in *Geroi i podvigi*, ed. M. F. Loshchits (Moscow: Voenizdat 1966), S. Gribanov, 'Vyletala Liliia v boi,' *Aviatsiia i kosmonavtika*, (3) (1968), S. Gribanov, 'Liliia,' in *V nebe frontovom: sbornik vospominaniy sovetskikh letchits-uchastnits Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, ed.

- M. A. Kazarinova, N. F. Kravtsova, and A. A. Poliantseva (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia 1971), Anatolii Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia ...' *Aviatsiia i kosmonavtika*, March 1990, Anatolii Kanevskii, 'Piatnadsat' Pobed Lidii Litviak,' *Kryl'ia Rodiny*, March 1997, Iu. Shtein, 'Belaia lilia,' in *V nebe frontovom: sbornik vospominanii Sovetskikh letchits-uchastnits Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, ed. M. A. Kazarinova, N. F. Kravtsova, and A. A. Poliantseva (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1962), N. Shtuchkin, 'Ee zvali Lilia,' *Kryl'ia Rodiny* (3) (1973), N. Shtuchkin, 'Ee zvali Lilia,' *Vestnik protivovozdushnoi oborony*, (2) (1991).
31. www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Lydia-Litvyak (accessed 1 September 2013). See the numerous comments of Kazimiera Jean Cottam, PhD to Mathew Crisci, in the comments section of this video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFtMwz5b1j8> (accessed 22 January 2024): 'Unless Lidya Litvyak was so badly wounded she was unconscious, she was bound to attempt to bail out with a parachute.' Cottam repeats this assertion on several websites, including <http://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,5753,-18520,00.html> (accessed 22 January 2024) and <https://forum.warhunder.com/index.php?/topic/65200-september-ace-of-the-month-lydia-litvyak/page-2> (accessed 1 February 2016). However, Wikipedia cites her as saying 'Cottam, an author and researcher focusing on Soviet women in the military, concludes that Litvyak made a belly-landing in her stricken aircraft, was captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp.' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lydia_Litvyak (accessed 22 January 2024).
 32. Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, 197.
 33. Eremin, 'Award Certificate (Nagradnoi list, Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak).'
 34. Eremin, 'Award Certificate (Nagradnoi list, Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak).' Zapriagaev, 'Nagradnoi list (Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak).' See also Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, 197.
 35. Eremin, 'Award Certificate (Nagradnoi list, Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak).' See also the account of mechanic Nikolai Men'kov in Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, 297.
 36. P. Golovachev, 'My ikh lyubili,' in *Geroi i Podvigi*, ed. M. F. Loshchits (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1963).
 37. <http://www.allaces.ru/cgi-bin/s2.cgi/sss/struct/p/iap296.dat> (accessed 11 January 2021). Col Ivan Vasil'evich Golyshev replaced Major Nikolai Baranov as commander of the 73rd Fighter Aviation Regiment on 7 May 1943 but was killed in combat himself on 21 July 1943. Major Ivan Ivanovich Zapriagaev took over on 31 July and was the 73rd commander at the time of Litviak's death.
 38. James R. Greenwood, 'Russia's Female Fighter Pilots,' *Popular Aviation*, November/December 1967, p. 12.
 39. There are other errors in the Greenwood article that weaken its overall credibility. The article is about the 586th, but Litviak had been transferred to three other regiments before her death. The author repeats the legend that Litviak had a 'big white lily flower' painted on her aircraft. Misspellings of several names and places (not just problems in transliteration) indicate that the author didn't read Russian and wasn't familiar with the units and geography, information that could be easily found in Russian-language unit histories and archival documents. All this weakens the credibility of the source.
 40. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, 236.
 41. Coincidentally, this report places Litviak's alleged bailout near the actual crash-landing site; if she had bailed out, she might have done so anywhere in the many miles between the air battle and the landing site.
 42. Valerii Agranovskii, *Belaia Liliia (White Liliia)* (Moskva: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1979), 42.

43. Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia . . . ', 37. Litviak's 'Yak seemed to disappear, but near the ground, the pilot, apparently, tried to level it out . . . In any event, so said the comrade wingman of Litviak, Aleksandr Evdokimov. So was born the hope that Lida was alive.'
44. This report is quoted in Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, 145, citing 'Iz politidoneseniia o boevoi i partiino-politicheskoi rabote chastei 6-i IAD za 28-29 avgusta 1943 goda,' TSAMO Fond 6 GvIAD, op. 273116c, d. 3, str. 316. I have not had access to this document to verify the accuracy of Polunina's quotation. Agranovskii offers a hearsay account in which a pilot, 'Vasily B,' was said to have seen Litviak in a POW camp, and left it in a German car. He rejects the account and suggests that this pilot was coerced by the interrogator, possibly in exchange for a military award: Agranovskii, *Belaia Liliia*, p. 27.
45. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 145.
46. Howell, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, p. 67.
47. Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia . . . ', 37.
48. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, pp. 309–310, citing the author's interview with Krasnoshchekova.
49. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, p. 310.
50. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 146.
51. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 231. Even if true, seeing the surname 'Litviak' (which could be male or female) on a list is quite a different thing than seeing Litviak herself. No source is given, so it is unclear whether Milanetti misread the story in Polunina's book or got this information from some other source.
52. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 233.
53. Noggle *A Dance with Death*, 181–184, interview with Pankratova. A short memoir by Pankratova is online at <http://airfighters.ru/pankrtva.php> (accessed 25 January 2016). There is no mention of Litviak in either interview.
54. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, pp. 309–310. Citing the author's interview with Krasnoshchekova.
55. Vladimir Dmitrievich Lavrinenkov, *Vozvrashchenie v nebo*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Voenizdat 1983), p. 57.
56. According to one Russian veteran, 'in his last days' Lavrinenkov reportedly admitted that he had lied about it. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, p. 312, citing the author's interview with Krasnoshchekova.
57. Pankratova was a friend of Litviak; Litviak said so in a letter dated 29 March 1942; see Griбанov, 'Liliia.' Oddly, Polunina quotes the same letter but leaves out the line about Pankratova. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 141.
58. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, pp. 309–310, citing the author's interview with Krasnoshchekova.
59. Lois K. Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II: A History with Biographies of American, British, Russian and German Aviators* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 2011), p. 169, citing Amy Goodpaster Strebe, *Flying for Her Country: The American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of World War II* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International 2007), p. 27. Milanetti cites Merry; Merry cites Strebe; Strebe's source is Polunina.
60. http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/discussionpost/Lydia_Litvyak_one_of_two_Soviet_female_ace_fighter_pilots_of_WWII_3439 (accessed 22 January 2024).
61. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 146. The Russian Federation Air Force Museum at Monino maintains an archive separate from the official military archives at Podolsk. The museum's website is <http://www.moninoaviation.com> (accessed 21 September 2013). Polunina does not give a date for this supposed event or any comment from Gridnev.

62. Alexander Vasilevich Gridnev, 'Memuary' (ts., n.d.), p. 94. The chapter of Gridnev's memoir that describes his meeting with Litviak can be found on the website: <http://lilylitviak.org/styled-21/styled-19/styled-25/> (accessed 22 January 2024). This chapter is available in Russian and English translation on the website.
63. Gridnev, 'Memuary,' p. 94.
64. Lyuba Vinogradova, emails to author, 26 January 2011 and 8 November 2011. Vinogradova was told that the museum does not have Gridnev's manuscript. Monino also appears to have lost, or never received, papers from Polunina. Vinogradova emailed the author, 'I am afraid that whatever Polunina had given to the Monino museum is not accessible to the researchers. The staff there claim that they are unaware of Polunina giving them anything at all.' Lyuba Vinogradova, email to author, 7 August 2011. The museum does appear to have papers donated by Pasportnikova's family; Pasportnikova's daughter said that the family had given her mother's archive to Monino, but the museum told Vinogradova that 'they need two or three years to sort the archive out and to decide which papers can be accessible to the public.' Lyuba Vinogradova, email to author, 26 January 2011.
65. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 236.
66. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhenki, letchitsy*, 146. 'Своей догадкой Нина Максимовна поделилась со мной, хранителем архива 586 ИАП.' А догадка is a guess, conjecture, or speculation.
67. Even Milanetti admits that 'So far, there has been no evidence to show that the Soviet lady seen on a TV broadcast from Switzerland was Litviak.' Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, 237.
68. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 236.
69. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 236.
70. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 237.
71. A friend of mine in Moscow who knows some of the veterans told me recently that 'some 'girls' allegedly talked to her on the phone and even met her and corresponded with her. And I do believe them! At that time they were not yet insane.' Although Rita wrote 'insane' in English, I believe she meant 'demented' or suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Rita Ponomareva, email to author, 13 Sep 2013. Ponomareva can't recall who made these statements or when; there's no documentation. If people had in fact spoken to Litviak or had letters from her, they might have reported this to someone more formally, to historians, or journalists, or even the Air Force. Even Polunina doesn't say that anyone told her they had direct contact with Litviak after her disappearance.
72. L. P. Ovchinnikova, *Zhenshchiny V Soldatskikh Shineliakh* (Volgograd: Nizhne-Volzhskoe, 1987), p. 21.
73. Kazimiera J. Cottam, ed. *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*, Revised ed. (Nepean, Ontario: New Military Publishing 1997), p. 302 fn309.
74. M. A. Kazarinova, N. F. Kravtsova, and A. A. Poliantseva, *V nebe frontovom: sbornik vospominanii sovetskikh letchits-uchastnits Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia 1971).
75. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 149, citing Cottam *Women in Air War*, pp. 217–219.
76. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 237: 'unfortunately the research of the Author in the German Bundes Archives and by the association Deutsche Dienststelle in Berlin did not lead to the discovery of any proof of Litviak imprisonment in German Kamps.' He attributes this to the possibility that the Soviets stole those records to identify traitors.
77. Howell, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*.

78. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 144.
79. Zapriagaev, 'Nagradnoi list (Lidiia Vladimirovna Litviak).'
80. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, 144. Men'kov said that the regiment stopped searching before Evdokimov was killed. Shtuchkin, 'Ee zvali Lilia,' 78 says the search continued until Evdokimov was killed.
81. Paspornnikova, letter to author, 3 September 1992.
82. In all, they found more than 90 aircraft, as well as the remains of many unidentified pilots.
83. Agranovskii, *Belaia Liliia*.
84. Paspornnikova, letter to author, 3 September 1992.
85. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEwzeUMwAi4> (accessed 22 January 2024).
86. Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, pp. 198–199.
87. Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, p. 200.
88. Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia ...', p. 38.
89. Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia ...', 38. Vashchenko also repeated this description of events to Lyuba Vinogradova; Vinogradova email to author, 7 August 2011.
90. Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, 200.
91. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEwzeUMwAi4> (accessed 22 January 2024).
92. Paspornnikova, letter to author, 3 September 1992.
93. Paspornnikova, 'Moi komandir.'
94. A. Kanevskii, 'Ia Samaia Schastlivaia ...' *Aviatsiia i kosmonavtika*, March 1990, p. 38.
95. The remains would have to be exhumed from the common grave, and a DNA sample from Litviak's belongings or a close family member would have to be obtained and compared to DNA of the remains if usable DNA could be extracted.
96. The body was not exhumed from the common grave in 1979, but had been exhumed from its original burial site and examined by doctors in 1969 before being reburied. I mistakenly wrote that it had been exhumed in 1979 in a previous article, Reina Pennington, 'Wings, Women and War,' *Air & Space/Smithsonian*, December/January 1993–1994.
97. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 139.
98. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, p. 139.
99. 31 Mar 1986 letter from TsAMO, No. 4 P-44156, signed by Chief of the Archive Repository Shatalov, stating that Litviak was killed on 1 August 1943.
100. General of the Army D. Sukhorukov, 'Order of the Deputy Minister of Defense of the USSR for Personnel No. 251,' 26 November 1988.
101. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 232.
102. Milanetti, *Soviet Airwomen of the Great Patriotic War*, p. 234.
103. Paspornnikova, 'Moi komandir;' Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia ...', p. 38. Paspornnikova wrote this occurred in 1966; Kanevskii wrote that it was found on 26 July 1969.
104. <http://www.acestory.elknet.pl/litvak/litvak.htm> (accessed 1 February 2016)
105. Polunina, *Devchonki, podruzhki, letchitsy*, 146.
106. Howell, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, p. 140. See also Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).
107. Paspornnikova, letter to author, 3 September 1992.
108. Liubov Ilinichna Oriefieva, 20 August 1992 telephone Interview with author's assistant,' (Moscow, Russia).
109. Lyuba Vinogradova, e-mail message to author, 7 August 2011.

110. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, 309, citing author's interview with Krasnoshchekova.
111. Bennett, Shafer, and Jones, *A Guide to Historical Method*, p. 146.
112. Lyuba Vinogradova notes other rumors: that Litviak had died, but given a full military funeral by the Germans; that the Germans had printed a flier with Litviak's photograph, claiming she was alive and well in German care. Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland*, pp. 309–310. No source is given, but the information comes from the author's interview with Krasnoshchekova.
113. Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia ...', p. 37.
114. Oriefieva, 20 August 1992. See also Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, 199.
115. Inna Vladimirovna Paspornikova, interview with author 12 May 1993, in tape recording, (Zhukovsky, Russia).
116. Zapriagaev, 'Nagradnoi list (Lidii Vladimirovna Litviak).'
117. Kanevskii, 'Ia samaia schastlivaia ...', p. 37.
118. Paspornikova, interview with author 12 May 1993.
119. He wrote about Litviak in his 1987 memoir: Boris Nikolaevich Eremin, *Vozdushnye boitsy* (Moscow: Voenizdat 1987), pp. 182–185. Eremin wrote only about his initial encounter with Litviak when she arrived at his division before being assigned to the 73rd; he served in a different regiment in the same division.
120. Kanevskii and Eremin, 'Khronika boevykh pobed Gv. Mladshchego Leitenanta Litviak Lidii Vladimirovny, komandira zvena 3 ae 73 Gvardeiskogo IAP,' online at <http://lilylitviak.org/styled-4/styled-17/> (accessed 22 January 2024).
121. Eremin, 'Award Certificate (Nagradnoi list, Lidii Vladimirovna Litviak).'
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