

# ANSIS KAUPĒNS' GANG (1920–1926): TESTIMONY OF THE “ZEMGALE CRIMINAL” IN THE PROTOCOLS OF THE PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

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The aim of the article is to analyse the testimonies given by A. Kaupēns with a view to explore his social portrait, committed crimes etc. on the basis of the documents available in fund 3404 (“Latvijas Armijas tiesa”) of the Latvian State Historical Archive. The analysed protocols provide material for the social portrait of A. Kaupēns, as well as the crimes committed by the gang. Separate interrogations conducted by Jelgava city investigative judges and Criminal Administration investigators allow to reconstruct the crimes committed by the gang.

**Keywords:** Ansis Kaupēns, crimes, gang, protocols, Zemgale, interwar Latvia.

## INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the 1920s, the number of various crimes increased in Latvia. Illegal activities were carried out by individual criminals and also by criminal groups. This is confirmed by statistical data. For example, in 1920 there were 238 murders and more than 620 robberies (Policijas Vēstnesis, 22.02.1924., 1). The most notorious of these was the so-called Ansis Kaupēns' (1895–1927) gang, which from 1920 to 1926 committed dozens of different types of crimes (robberies, thefts etc.) and 19 murders (Zauers 2023). The leader of the gang was A. Kaupēns, but in time several individuals joined the gang's activities and played different roles

in committing a number of crimes. Its core was formed by the resident of Bauska district, Budbergas parish Voldemārs Piebalgs (born in 1897), the resident of Rīga district Katlakalns parish Jānis Vālodze (born in 1864), A. Kaupēns' sister, the resident of Jelgava district Bukaiši parish Anete Bubelte (born in 1894), the resident of Rīga Jānis Rubenis (born in 1891), the resident of Rīga district Mangaļi parish Jēkabs Butte (born in 1895) (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3771, 28, 448, 452, 456, 460).

After the arrest of A. Kaupēns on 8 June 1926, he was questioned several times by representatives of the Criminal Department of the Jelgava and investigative judges of Jelgava and Jaunjelgava. The testimonies obtained during the interrogations were later used as the evidence in the trial.

Until now, the activities of A. Kaupēns and other gang members have not come to the attention of academic researchers in Latvian historiography. Hence, there is a lack of detailed studies on this issue that is essential for the history of Latvia. Ultimately, there are just a few sentences without any specific details (Zemītis 2023; Andersons 1983; Strods 2020). An exception is the book by the lawyer Andris Grūtups “Tiesāšanās kā māksla” (“Litigation as an Art”) (Grūtups 2002), as well as the publication about the Kaupēns' gang prepared by historian Alvis Zauers (Zauers 2023), and the study dedicated to the representation of Kaupēns' crimes in the press and popular culture by researcher Liene Pommere (Pommere 2013).

According to available archival materials, during the preliminary investigation A. Kaupēns was interrogated at least 38 times – the first time on 8 June 1926, and the last time – on 29 November of the same year (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3771, 38; LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3856, 302). The interrogations were conducted by the head of the Jelgava Criminal Police Department Vilis Virziņš (1898–1969) (14 times), investigative judges of the Jelgava city and county (20 times), and also Jaunjelgava district (4 times). Usually interrogations were carried out once a day, but in some cases several times in one day. For example, on 2, 20, 26 and 30 July 1926 – twice, whereas on 5 August – three times, and on 30 August – even four times. Often these were additional protocols of a specific criminal episode.

This publication does not claim to be an exhaustive coverage of A. Kaupēns' personality and criminal activity, but it features the key aspects of his biography as the leader of gang, as well as the activities of the gang, which are essential in the context of understanding civil security of the relevant period.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS AND (FALSE) TRUTH**

Ansis-Alberts Kaupēns was born on 2 November 1895 in the “Baltcera-Strunges” homestead, Jelgava district, Vecplatone parish<sup>1</sup> in family

of Lutheran servants Jānis and Anlize (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3856, 56; LNA-LVVA, 235–15–1164, 68). He had one sibling – a sister Anete Lizete<sup>2</sup> who was one year older than himself (Grūtups 2002, 218; LNA-LVVA, 235–15–1164, 46). A. Kaupēns received his education in Svēte parish school. During the World War I (in the spring of 1916) he was enlisted into Tsarist Russia Army, where he served in the Caucasus, but in 1917 was transferred to the so-called “Kerensky Army” (Russian Provisional Government Armed Forces). He remained in its ranks until the spring of 1918, but after demobilization moved to Luga, later – Petrograd (today – St. Petersburg). Four months later, he went to Moscow, where he served as a sergeant in the 9<sup>th</sup> Latvian Riflemen Regiment. Later, he moved to Caricina, and in 1919 returned to Latvia (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3771, 38, 41, 110).

During the following interrogations, A. Kaupēns testified that on December 17, 1919, he was enlisted into the 1st machine gun company of the 11<sup>th</sup> Dobele Infantry Regiment of the Latvian Army, where he served at the rank of sergeant. In January of the following year Kaupēns had a vacation, but at the end of it he did not return to the regiment and left it (deserted) (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3771, 2, 38, 110).

This information is confirmed by Kaupēns’ testimonies and documents from the 11<sup>th</sup> Dobele (at that time – Grobiņa) Infantry Regiment (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3711, 60–61, 111). Consequently, in 1919 he had already entered the territory of Latvia. It should be noted that A. Kaupēns told to the head of the Jelgava Criminal Police Department V. Virziņš that the reason for his desertion was “a misunderstanding with the officers” and that they wanted to “demote Kaupēns from a sergeant to a soldier”. On the other hand, on 11 August 1926, he stated to the investigating judge of the city of Jelgava: “In order to avoid punishment, I decided to leave the army and desert, especially taking into account my lust for revelry” (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3771, 82, 86).

In 1921, he illegally crossed the Latvian-Soviet Russia border, but in the next year returned and, under the guise of a refugee changed his name to “Alberts-Ansis Jāņa d. Kaupēns” (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3771, 49).

In his first testimony to the investigator V. Virziņš, Kaupēns claimed that he escaped from Moscow in the autumn of 1922 and by train (through Zilupe) went to the Rēzekne quarantine<sup>3</sup>, but later – Jelgava, where on 15 January he arrived at the Jelgava-Bauska War District Commission. In January, he obtained a permit of permanent residence from the board of Svēte parish. During interrogation, Kaupēns claimed that he had never served in Latvian Army units (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3771, 38–39). Such a discrepancy can be observed by the information provided in the first testimony, therefore, they should be treated with some caution.

Until his arrest on 8 June 1926<sup>4</sup>, A. Kaupēns lived in Jelgava, where he worked as a craftsman and a saddle maker (repairer) (LNA-LVVA,

3404–1–3771, 39, 82). For the crimes committed (more than 35 murders, robberies etc.) on 3 April 1927 the Latvian Military Court sentenced him to the highest punishment – death by hanging, which was carried out on 6 May 1927 (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3891, 361, 446; Pēdējā Brīdī, 06.05.1927., 5).

Comparison of this testimony to other sources reveals several contradictions, especially regarding his life during the War of Independence (1918–1920) and the Russian Civil War (1918–1921). In this testimony, he claimed that after serving in the 9<sup>th</sup> Latvian Riflemen Regiment, he moved to Moscow, where he worked in army warehouses until August – autumn of 1922, while he failed to mention the service in the Latvian Army and civil life. Likewise, in the next testimonies A. Kaupēns omits the previously given information. Thus, on 25 June 1926, he told to investigator V. Virziņš that in 1919 he had “voluntarily” joined to the 11<sup>th</sup> Dobeles Infantry Regiment, from which he had deserted in January 1920. He also confirmed that he returned to Latvia in 1922 and after receiving the necessary documents in Rēzekne quarantine he went to Jelgava (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3771, 41). It is possible that with such testimonies he tried to mislead the investigators and hide his crimes, but later he changed his mind. Probably, that could be related to Kaupēns’ expectation of a possible reduction of the sentence (Grūtups 2002, 350).

Involvement in the military activities of World War I had a traumatic impact on the involved population, – the frequently experienced murders (killings) which were carried out on an industrial scale, turned the ex-soldiers into enraged men whose anger was irrational and at the same time contributed to “regression from a mature civilized society” (Emsley 2007, 236). Therefore, it is possible that the military experience of A. Kaupēns exerted a traumatic effect on his future life, especially upon his relations with civilians, which was also reflected in his crimes.

## DESCRIPTION OF COMMITTED CRIMES

The first crime A. Kaupēns committed on 29 January 1920, when he robbed Frīcis Osis on the Jelgava-Tukums road, while his last crime took place on 29 May 1926, on the Jelgava-Rīga road when he robbed Paulīne Turķe, Miervaldis Jūdrupis, Eduards Pauls and other persons (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3891, 3, 19). Based on the analysed documents, during the interrogation A. Kaupēns gave quite detailed descriptions of the crimes committed.

On 23 June 1921, A. Kaupēns with a shot of a revolver killed Anna Lediņa who lived near his parents’ house in “Pogas” homestead, Svēte parish. On 13 October of the same year, he committed another crime. In Jelgava, on Žagares iela near the children’s shelter, with several shots of a revolver he

killed the supervisor of the Criminal Police Department of Jelgava Arveds Preise. According to the criminal, that evening he was walking from his father's house and on the way met a police officer. When a policeman asked Kaupēns to show his personal identification documents, he fired several shots at the victim and subsequently dragged the body into a nearby ditch. In his testimonies, Kaupēns justified the crime with his "illegal life" and desertion from the Latvian Army (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3889, 149, 158; LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3881, 192).

One of the cruellest crimes by the so-called "Zemgale Criminal" was committed on 5 May 1922. During a robbery in "Klabiņi" homestead (Vecsaule parish) he killed five people (two women, one man and two children) and, with a purpose to hide the crime, set fire to a residential building. This crime he committed pursuant to the "suggestion" of Voldemārs Piebalgs. The robber's gain was an "old Russian rifle", white and dark bread, and a piece of smoked pork (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3851, 38–39). Even on this occasion, Kaupēns changed his earlier testimony. In the testimony of 4 August 1926, the accused claimed that V. Piebalgs not only incited him to commit this crime, but also actively participated in it. Respectively, it was Piebalgs who shot all the house residents, while Kaupēns was only looking for money (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3851, 69). However, during the investigation this version was not confirmed.

However, the majority of Kaupēns' crimes were committed on roads, mostly near forest areas. On 22 September 1924, armed with a rifle and two revolvers, on the Skaistkalne-Bauska road A. Kaupēns robbed several (including Jewish) horse carriages. As a result of his illegal activities, Kaupēns acquired approximately 360 lats and various belongings (coat, watch, etc.). Although the suspect claimed that he committed the robbery alone, during the interrogations, on 12 August 1926, he admitted that this crime also involved V. Piebalgs and Augusts Valiunas. However, on 25 August of the same year, he returned to his original version (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3890, 226, 240, 251). Presumably, he told the Jelgava city investigative judge the true sequence of events. Respectively, that particular crime was committed single-handedly. In other testimonies, Kaupēns stated that Piebalgs supplied him with weapons and ammunition to commit the crime. For example, a rifle, a hand grenade and a box of German cartridges with 250 rounds, which were kept at the house of Kaupēns' father (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3851, 49). It should be added that already in one of the first robberies on the Jelgava-Joniški highway on 14 May 1920, the "Zemgale Criminal" might have encountered an obstacle. Namely, before the crime was committed, in the forest he met the supervisor of the Jelgava Criminal Police Administration Jēkabs Franks (1891–?), who Kaupēns thought was a criminal. Unsuspecting of Franks' service in the Criminal Police, he took

from him the “Parabellum” system pistol and after the robberies gave him liquor, 100 roubles for the road to Liepāja and let him go.<sup>5</sup> During the robberies, in one of the detained carts Kaupēns found a box of liquor, which he forced the robbed persons to drink. As a result, several of the victims were inebriated (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3856, 260, 275). J. Franks gave a similar testimony (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3856, 137-138).

In written testimonies, A. Kaupēns gave a detailed description of his visual appearance. For example, during the previously mentioned robberies, he was dressed in grey clothing with a knitted sock-like rag on his head and ferns around his body. During other crimes he wore an English soldier’s attire or greenish coat with a jockey’s hat (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3851, 78; LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3890, 251).

The reports of the investigating judges often contain a list of the stolen property and amounts of money. For example, during the robbery of horse carriages which took place on Jaunjelgava-Taurkalne and Jaunjelgava-Birzgale roads on 25 September 1923 the “Zemgale criminal” from fifteen victims took several dozen lats, a bicycle, earrings, rings, a bottle of vodka, two smoked sausages, candies, “papyrus”<sup>6</sup> etc. On the other hand, in his testimony of 30 August 1926 given to the investigating judge of the Jaunjelgava district R. Jaunroze, Kaupēns pointed out other guns used in the attack – a German carabine (received from Jānis Valodze) and a “Bulldog” system pistol (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3888, 209).

Kaupēns received information about potential robbery locations from V. Piebalgs. In the spring of 1925, during a meeting, Piebalgs mentioned a rich man from Taurkalne. Received this news, on the night of 9 May of the same year, A. Kaupēns robbed residents of the “Melnbārži” homestead of Bauska district – Kārlis Kolis and Ingars Daņilovs. During the attack, the criminal gravely wounded K. Kolis with several shots from a revolver, and stole a suitcase with different things and cash – 38 lats. In the context of this crime, the accused mentioned Jānis Rubenis, who lived in Rīga, from whom he received one of his weapons – a “Colt” revolver (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3887, 172, 193).

During the preliminary investigation, several times Kaupēns was taken to the crime scenes, where he testified about the relevant criminal episodes. For example, on 24 June 1926, the investigators restored the circumstances of the robbery of “Sveķi” homestead, Taurkalne parish. During the robbery which took place in the early morning of 9 May 1925, Fricis Virsis, Jāzeps Kalmukis and forester Jānis Rozentāls were shot, but the robbers got 1512 lats (LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3887, 174; LNA-LVVA, 3404-1-3892, 309-310).

## CONCLUSIONS

The biographical aspects of A. Kaupēns enable outlining of his social portrait, and also contribute to identification and understanding of the possible problematic issues concerning the formation of his personality. For example, the cruelty of the committed crimes could be explained by the violence experienced by A. Kaupēns during the war. This might have resulted in the dehumanization of the victims and the inability to fully participate in the everyday life of civil society. Also, in some cases, these materials allow reconstruction of the crimes committed by the gang.

In the initial testimony, A. Kaupēns often claimed that he had committed several criminal episodes alone, however, further investigation proved that in many of them participated other gang members. Despite this, he periodically noted the involvement of other people (in robberies and murders on the Skaistkalne-Bauska road, “Klabinu” homestead, etc.). However, the other accomplices are mainly mentioned as suppliers of weapons, “indicators” of potential crime victims, storers of various belongings, etc. The change of testimony could be related to the reduction of the sentence, as well as other circumstances.

Comparing the various contents of the interrogation protocols, it can be concluded that A. Kaupēns gave extensive and detailed testimonies to the Criminal Police supervisor V. Virziņš (about the committed crimes, the involved persons, victims, and other aspects). A similar situation can be observed with regard to the documents compiled by the investigators, however, in some cases (mainly the documents compiled in October–November 1926) they contain very superficial information, with a more formal approach. This could be attributed to the lack of time, as well as the subjective approach of investigator to the accused person and his statements.

Finally, considering the volume of the case (the number of crimes committed), the significant interrogation of A. Kaupēns during the investigation (June 1926–November 1926) indicates the serious approach of law enforcement agencies, and, at the same time, a high cooperation level on A. Kaupēns' behalf.

## ABBREVIATIONS

LNA-LVVA – Nacional Archive of Latvia, Latvian State Historical Archive

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- <sup>1</sup> Although in most interrogation protocols, passport copies and literature, his place of birth is indicated in the parishes of Zaļenieki and Bukaiši, but in the records of the church book of Zaļenieki parish indicate Vecplatone parish (LNA-LVVA, 235–15–1164, 133. lp.).



- <sup>2</sup> On 3 April 1927, a military court sentenced her to three years in a correctional facility for participation in A. Kaupēns' gang, but she was released a year later (LNA-LVVA, 3404–1–3891, 718).
- <sup>3</sup> In quarantine, he received new identity documents as a refugee in the name of Alberts Kaupēns.
- <sup>4</sup> The arrest was made by officer of the Jelgava City Police Jānis Stirna in the house of A. Kaupēns at Pētera iela 3.
- <sup>5</sup> According to Kaupēns himself, Jēkabs Franks invited him next evening to meet some “girls” in Jelgava, but he did not go there, fearing the possible arrest.
- <sup>6</sup> Cigarettes.

# ANŠA KAUPĒNA BANDA (1920–1926): “ZEMGALES NOZIEDZNIEKA” LIECĪBAS IEPRIEKŠĒJĀS IZMEKLĒŠANAS PROTOKOLOS

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### ANOTĀCIJA

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Publikācijas mērķis ir, izmantojot Latvijas Nacionālā arhīva Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīva 3404. fondā “Latvijas Armijas tiesa” pieejamos dokumentus, analizēt A. Kaupēna sniegtās liecības (biogrāfiskos aspektus, pastrādātos noziegumus u. c.). Analizētie protokoli rada priekšstatu par A. Kaupēna sociālo portretu, kā arī bandas pastrādātajiem noziegumiem. Atsevišķos Jelgavas pilsētas izmeklēšanas tiesnešu un Kriminālās pārvaldes izmeklētāju veiktās nopratināšanas ļauj rekonstruēt bandas paveiktos noziegumus.

**Atslēgvārdi:** Ansis Kaupēns, banda, noziegumi, izmeklēšanas protokoli, Zemgale, starpkaru Latvija.

### Kopsavilkums

Pagājušā gadsimta 20. gadu pirmajā pusē Latvijā pieauga dažādu noziegumu skaits. Pretlikumīgās darbības īstenoja gan individuāli noziedznieki, gan arī organizētas noziedznieku grupas. Zināmākā no tām bija t. s. Anša Kaupēna (1895–1927) banda, kura no 1920. līdz 1926. gadam veica vairākus desmitus dažāda veida likumpārkāpumu (laupīšanas, slepkavības, zādzības u. c.). Lai gan bandas līderis bija A. Kaupēns, tomēr laika gaitā tās darbībā iesaistījās arī citas personas. Tās kodolu veidoja Bauskas apriņķa Budbergas pagastam piederīgais Voldemārs Piebalgs (dzim. 1897), Rīgas apriņķa Katlakalna pagastam piederīgais Jānis Vālodze (dzim. 1864). Tāpat bandā darbojās A. Kaupēna māsa – Jelgavas apriņķa Bukaišu pagastam piederīgā Anete Bubelte (dzim. 1894), kā arī Rīgas pilsētai piederīgais Jānis Rubenis (dzim. 1891). Pēc A. Kaupēna aizturēšanas 1926. gada 8. jūnijā viņu vairākkārtīgi nopratināja Kriminālās pārvaldes, Jelgavas pilsētas un apriņķa, kā arī Jaunjelgavas apriņķa iecirkņu izmeklēšanas darbinieki.

Sākotnējās liecībās A. Kaupēns nereti apgalvoja, ka vairākas noziedzīgās epizodes paveicis vienatnē, tomēr turpmākā izmeklēšana pierādīja, ka daudzās no tām piedalījās arī citi bandas locekļi. Neskatoties uz to, viņš periodiski atzīmēja līdzzinātāju iesaisti (laupīšanās un slepkavībās uz

Skaistkalnes-Bauskas ceļa, “Klabiņu” mājās u. c.). Galvenokārt pārējie līdzzinātāji minēti kā ieroču piegādātāji, potenciālo nozieguma upuru “uzrādītāji”, dažādu zagto mantu glabātāji u. c. Liecību maiņa varētu būt saistīta gan ar vēlamā soda samazināšanu, gan ar dažādiem blakus apstākļiem.

Salīdzinot dažādos nopratināšanas protokolu saturus, jāsecina, ka krimināluzraugam V. Virziņam sniegtas plašas un detalizētākas liecības par paveiktajiem noziegumiem, tajā iesaistītajām personām, cietušajiem u. c. aspektiem. Līdzīga situācija vērojama arī attiecībā uz izmeklēšanas tiesnešu sastādītajiem dokumentiem, tomēr atsevišķos gadījumos (galvenokārt 1926. gada oktobra–novembra sastādītajos dokumentos) ietverta visai virspusēja informācija ar vairāk formālu pieeju, kas, iespējams, saistāma ar laika trūkumu, kā arī izmeklētāja subjektīvo pieeju apsūdzētā izteiktajām liecībām.