

Lithuanian Catholicism and the KGB
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In 1983, one writer said of Lithuania: “The Soviet take-over was not class war, as Soviet propaganda has it, but the stealing of a nation from its people.”¹ Yet while the nation of Lithuania may have been “stolen,” its foremost symbol—the Lithuanian Catholic Church—remained. For the Soviet regime, the continuing presence of this nationalist symbol in its international socialist order posed a serious challenge. In one 1970 internal report, a KGB official described the Lithuanian KGB officials working against the Catholic Church as a militant force, with the KGB, “daily in contact with holders of an ideology alien to us, engaging in battle with [the Catholic Church’s] hostile activities.”² Tasked with defending the republic from threats to its social order, the KGB saw the Catholic Church as a force at war with the Soviet regime. During the Soviet period, the once-powerful Lithuanian Catholic Church was therefore weakened, flooded with KGB informants, and largely controlled by Soviet loyalists. Yet because the KGB did not succeed in extinguishing individual and extra-institutional forms of Catholic belief, the Lithuanian Catholic Church not only survived, but also gave birth to a powerful dissent movement that played a vital role in bringing about the public restoration of Lithuania’s national identity.

Like its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Estonia, Lithuania had long endured a contentious relationship with Russia and the Soviet Union. It had been part of the Russian Empire until 1918, when the effects of World War I and the Russian Revolution led to a brief period of national independence. During this time, the Lithuanian Catholic Church received the support of the

¹ Irene Welch, "Nationalism and Lithuanian Dissent," *Lituanus* 29 No. 1 (Spring 1983), lituanus.org, accessed on 08/05/2014.

² “Report of P. Kolgov, the subdivision chief of LSSR KGB Division No. 5, at the operational staff meeting on the work against priests, held on 19 February 1970,” *KGB Documents*, kgbddocuments.eu, 02/19/1970, accessed 08/06/2014, 112.

independent Lithuanian government and helped to foster a stronger national culture.³ In 1940, however, Lithuania was annexed by the Soviet Union, and a year later, invaded by Germany. In 1944, Lithuania was forcibly re-annexed by the Soviet Union. For several years following World War II, the Soviet regime fought to control anti-Soviet guerrilla movements in the republic, finally putting them at bay in the early 1950s.⁴ Positioned on the Western edge of the Soviet Union, Lithuania straddled the border between Eastern and Western Europe both geographically and culturally. Lithuanians, like Latvians and Estonians, spoke a non-Slavic language and were more strongly influenced by the cultures of their Polish and Scandinavian neighbors than by that of their Russian occupiers.⁵ Lithuania's peripheral location in the Soviet Union was made even starker in the context of the country's majority Catholic population, which did not exist in any other republic of the Soviet Union.⁶ As such, the Lithuanian Catholic Church's ties to the Vatican only served to emphasize Lithuania's Western orientation, distancing it from Russia and its Orthodox religious culture.

As a focal point of non-Soviet national feeling as well as a clear divergence from the Soviet policy of scientific atheism, the Lithuanian Catholic Church threatened the Soviet regime's ability to foster a Soviet consciousness among the Lithuanian population. The Catholic Church is Lithuania's oldest national institution, and by the nineteenth century, following years of tsarist persecution, the Catholic faith had become a primary factor of Lithuanian nationalism.⁷ Around 85% of Lithuanians considered themselves Catholic in 1940, and the chaotic atmosphere

³ V. Stanley Vardys and Judith B. Sedaitis, *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 33.

⁴ Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1990* (Berkeley: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 93.

⁵ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 1.

⁶ Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 152.

⁷ *Ibid*, 17

of World War II only strengthened the influence of the Church upon the population.⁸ In fact, Lithuania's Catholic-identifying population, although diminished, remained remarkably robust throughout Lithuania's decades of Soviet control, especially in comparison to the national Lutheran churches in neighboring Estonia and Latvia.⁹

The continuing influence of the Lithuanian Catholic Church was especially critical in light of the Soviet understanding of religion, which held that belief in the Soviet cause could not exist alongside belief in any sort of supernatural action. Especially during the Khrushchev period, when ideology remained a crucial part of the Soviet vision, anti-religious policies served as a manifestation of the regime's desire to re-engage the ideals of Communism.¹⁰ The Soviet Union's attempts to stem religious belief often hinged on the framing of believers as alien and incompatible with the vision of the ideal Soviet person. Believers were assumed to be, and were portrayed in Soviet media, as rural, backwards, and old—dying remnants of a soon-to-be-discarded worldview. Superstition was the past; science was the future.¹¹ But in the still-tense atmosphere of the Soviet borderlands, particularly in Lithuania, and in the face of a surprisingly vigorous and resilient Catholic religious community, the official Soviet message was difficult to square with the reality of a widely valued religious culture and style of life.

⁸ V. Stanley Vardys, *The Catholic Church, Dissent, and Nationality in Soviet Lithuania* (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Quarterly, 1978), 213

⁹ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 125. Two factors contributed to the lesser importance of religion in Latvia and Estonia in the Soviet period: more heterogeneous religious cultures, and the presence of national Lutheran churches in Latvia and Estonia which, after WWII, were negatively associated with German occupiers.

¹⁰ Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "'A Sacred Space Is Never Empty': Soviet Atheism, 1954-1971" (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 2010), 8.

¹¹ For discussions of these practices in a Soviet-wide context, see Andrew B. Stone, "Overcoming Peasant Backwardness": The Khrushchev Antireligious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union," *Russian Review*, 67.2 (April 2008), 296-320, and Miriam Dobson, "Child Sacrifice in the Soviet Press: Sensationalist and the 'Sectarian' in the Post-Stalin Era," *Russian Review*, 73.2 (April 2014), 237-259.

The incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union meant that the government was challenged to bring reluctantly Sovietized Lithuanians into full adherence to the Soviet social order just as the postwar government developed an ever-more ambitious and idealistic vision of what that social order should be.¹² The implementation of this vision occurred through systems described by Peter Holquist (drawing on Zygmunt Bauman) as “sculpting and ‘gardening’...a better, purer society while simultaneously molding society's human material into more emancipated, conscious, and superior individuals.”¹³ For the Soviet regime, this desire to shape its citizens could often be best implemented by its surveillance apparatus, the KGB. As such, the KGB was entrusted with both protecting the regime from threats internal and external as well as molding the population into the Soviet ideal. Within rebellious Lithuania especially, the KGB was a crucial means through which the Soviet regime could protect and strengthen its legitimacy.

This project seeks to contextualize the relationship between the KGB and the Lithuanian Catholic Church by examining the ways in which both organizations sought to influence and were influenced by Catholic believers in the realms of institutional practice, everyday life, ideology, and religious belief. In order to examine the KGB, this project utilizes materials from two online databases of Russian-language KGB documents: kgbveikla.lt and kgbdocuments.eu. Both databases feature a representative set of KGB reports put online by the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania that cover the entirety of the Soviet Lithuanian era and shed light on the day-to-day operations KGB officials undertook in order to monitor and restrain the Catholic Church, revealing the KGB attitude towards Church members and officials. As for the Catholic Church, this project makes extensive use of the *samizdat* publication, the *Chronicle*

¹² Amir Weiner, "Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism," *The American Historical Review* 104 No. 4 (October 1999), 1116.

¹³ Peter Holquist, "Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work": Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context," *The Journal of Modern History*, 69 No. 3 (September 1997), 417.

of the Catholic Church in Lithuania, which operated from 1972-1988. During its operation, the publication compiled reports of arrests of priests, petitions to the Soviet regime, and various complaints of Soviet oppression of the Church. By examining the dual narratives of the KGB and the Lithuanian Catholic Church in regards to one another, this project demonstrates the shifting continuums of opposition, manipulation, and accommodation both utilized while each attempted to gain primacy of self-identity among the Lithuanian population. As thus far little work has been done by English-language scholars to understand the relationship between the Lithuanian Catholic Church and the KGB, this project fills a gap in the literature, providing further insight into the extension of KGB surveillance efforts in Western border regions of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

For the KGB, fighting on the frontlines of the regime's battle for the support of a population wary of their presence, manifestations of religious belief were more than simply symbols of individual superstition: they were signs of the regime's inability to extend its influence into the hearts of Lithuanian citizens.¹⁵ In order to explain the ongoing struggle between the KGB and the Lithuanian Catholic Church, this first section of this project will discuss the Khrushchev-era attempts of the regime to suppress the Church as an institution, illustrating the regime's successes in distancing the official personnel and resources of the Church from the Lithuanian people. In the second section, focus will then shift to the regime's failures in responding to non-official manifestations of Catholic belief. Finally, the last section will demonstrate how the KGB's failures to suppress extra-institutional religious sentiment allowed for the growth of a powerful, nationalist Catholic dissent movement in the 1970s and

¹⁴ For academic studies of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, see V. Stanley Vardys, *The Catholic Church, Dissent, and Nationality in Soviet Lithuania* (Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1978), and Aronas Streikus, "Lithuanian Catholic Clergy and the KGB," *Religion, State & Society*, 34, 1 (March 2006), 63-70. Memoirs of Lithuanian Catholic leaders and the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* are available at lkbkronika.lt.

¹⁵ Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tam, "Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance State, 1939-1957," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 13 No. 1 (Winter 2012), 7.

1980s. For the Catholic Church, its success at retaining strength and influence in Lithuania despite years of Soviet repression hinged crucially on its ability to maintain priority of self-identity among Lithuanians. This occurred because of the Church's continued identification as a center of Lithuanian national sentiment—an identification maintained largely through unofficial and underground manifestations of Catholic belief. While the KGB succeeded in dismantling the institutional power of the Lithuanian Catholic Church in the first two decades after World War II, it was unable to prevent everyday Lithuanians from developing ties with the Church through unofficial manifestations of belief. As such, these extra-institutional religious actions, which preserved feelings of community among Lithuanian Catholics, combined with frustration about the KGB's treatment of the institutional Church paved the way for the development of an influential Catholic dissent movement in the late Soviet period.

The KGB and the Institution of the Lithuanian Catholic Church

In 1963, a loyal Soviet Lithuanian writer summed up the relationship between the Soviet government and the Lithuanian Catholic Church, stating, “The church in our land is the only legally functioning organization with an ideology that is inimical to us.”¹⁶ As a competing organization, the Catholic Church challenged the Soviet regime's role as the sole source of institutional influence and national self-identification within Soviet Lithuania. In order to address this threat, the regime worked to infiltrate, debilitate, and ultimately dismantle the institutional resources of the Church. The KGB hoped to manipulate the Catholic Church into an extension of regime power in the short term, while ultimately seeking to eliminate it. As such, in the two

¹⁶ E. Juskus. in *Religijos ir ateizmo klausimai* (Vilnius: Valstubine politines ir mokslines literaturos leidukla, 1963), 333, qtd, in V. Stanley Vardys, *The Catholic Church Dissent, and Nationality in Soviet Lithuania* (Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1978), 92.

decades following World War II, the KGB largely succeeded in both halting the institutional influence of the Church and in controlling its hierarchy.

During World War II, religious activity in Lithuania flourished and the Lithuanian Catholic Church gained resources and influence accordingly. Upon Lithuania's return to Soviet control, however, the government enacted harsh controls on the Church. By 1946, most Church leaders were exiled, monasteries and convents were abolished, all but one seminary was closed, and heavy taxes were levied against churches and priests alike. After Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet leaders allowed a brief period of relative permissiveness towards religion throughout the USSR, but that quickly came to an end when Khrushchev came to power and initiated a renewed anti-religion campaign. The campaign, initiated in 1958, occurred as part of Khrushchev's push to revitalize the ideology of the Communist Party and return to the "authentic" ideals of Lenin, which could not be reconciled with religious belief.¹⁷ Throughout the Soviet Union, churches and holy sites were aggressively closed, and a stridently anti-religious propaganda campaign was initiated.¹⁸ In Lithuania in particular, the KGB inflicted significant damage to the Church power base in both personnel and material resources. From 1940 to 1970, the number of Catholic priests in Lithuania was reduced by more than half, hundreds of churches were closed, and believers were portrayed as backwards relics of a former era.¹⁹ For the KGB, the primary venues of combat with the Church occurred in the closing of churches and the withholding of physical resources, harsh limits on youth activity in the Church, particularly through stringent controls on

¹⁷ Smolkin-Rothrock, "'A Sacred Space is Never Empty,'" 8.

¹⁸ Andrew Stone, "Overcoming Peasant Backwardness": The Khrushchev Anti-Religious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union," *Russian Review*, 67.2 (2008), 297.

¹⁹ "Introduction," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, #53, May 31, 1982, 1-2. Due to the underground nature of the *Chronicle*, some editions were published with both date and month noted, while other editions (often earlier) only noted the month the edition was published.

the country's single seminary, and the introduction of informers throughout the Catholic hierarchy.²⁰

The most obvious way to weaken the power of the Catholic Church was to seize its physical assets, particularly its churches. Numerous churches and cathedrals were turned to other uses, particularly if the buildings were of aesthetic or historical note or were located in a highly visible location. Chapels connected to hospitals, prisons, and cemeteries were unilaterally closed.²¹ While closings often elicited scattered complaints from the populace, organized expressions of discontent did not yet occur. In 1940, according to the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, there were 708 churches in the country.²² By the time the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign had died down in 1965, that number had dropped to 630, a number which believers thought to be far too few for their needs.²³ Many churches were supported largely through the help of local believers, and sometimes through emigrant contributions, since taxes on the churches were extremely high and the Soviet government often refused to make necessary repairs to old and damaged buildings.²⁴

The Igulos Church in the center of Kaunas provides a typical example of a church closing. Large, ornate, and located in a highly visible area of the city, few citizens were surprised when the government ordered the closing of the church in 1960.²⁵ A KGB report highlights several of the methods used by the KGB in order to dissuade locals from attending services at Igulos Church, including the publishing of articles in the local newspaper by an ex-priest who

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Vardys, 197.

²² "Introduction," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, #53, May 31, 1982, 1-2.

²³ "The Origin and Aims of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*," lkbkronika.lt, accessed 8/5/2014.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ LYA f. K-18, ap.3, b. 134, l. 34-35. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

condemned the Catholic Church, as well as articles containing “proof that churches are places where believers catch infectious diseases and are dangerous for human health.”²⁶ No rumor could be as effective as the actuality of church closing, however, and while the report emphasized that “the majority approves of the closing of the church” it also mentions the complaints of several local citizens less pleased with the decision. One man was quoted as saying, “I myself have no need for the Church, but the method of administrative fight with religion is not nicely done. This closing of the church, for example, shows clearly that freedom of religion in the Soviet Union exists only on paper.” Others complained that the government closed the church only because its central location demonstrated that many people remained believers.²⁷ These complaints, which mirrored widespread dissatisfaction with church closings among believers, did little to alter the regime’s actions in systematically draining the Church’s material base.

Despite the KGB’s success in dismantling churches and other Church resources during the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign, missteps were still made, most notably in the building of a church in Klaipeda in 1960. In December of that year, the KGB was made aware that the construction for a new church at the edge of Klaipeda had been completed. Permission for the church had been given in 1956, during the brief respite in the regime’s fight to weaken the Church.²⁸ In a period of closing churches and tightly controlled clergy, the opening of a new church in one of the republic’s biggest cities did not support the Soviet vision of dying churches, and the imminent opening sent the KGB into crisis. Local Klaipeda KGB officials were called to the central office in Vilnius and interrogated.²⁹ The republic-wide KGB was full of questions—

²⁶ LYA f. K-18, ap.3, b. 134, l. 33. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

²⁷ LYA f. K-18, ap.3, b. 134, l. 36. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

²⁸ "The Struggle for the Klaipeda Church," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #41, January 31, 1980, 120.

²⁹ LYA f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 110. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

who had allowed the church to be built? Was it built with state resources? If not, how did the Church raise enough money to build it? One KGB official complained, “We gave permission to build the church. Gave permission and forgot about it. And the priests used this chance and built in three years this big church. We in Vilnius have already been building a library for 10 years and will still be building it for a few years.”³⁰ Ultimately, after delaying the opening of the church for some time, the KGB decided to seize it and turn it into a philharmonic hall.³¹ According to the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, the church gates were locked and 200 policemen were sent in to prevent a riot. Later, in 1961, two Klaipeda priests were arrested in connection with the building of the church and sentenced to prison, while another priest was exiled.³²

In both Klaipeda and Kaunas, the KGB worked not only to physically close the churches, but also to monitor and control the local population’s reaction to the closings, demonstrating the fundamental goal of the church closings: to turn the population away from the Catholic Church. By controlling the physical resources of the Catholic Church, the KGB sought to pave the way for the eventual extinction of the Church as a whole. While the rate of church closures slowed after Khrushchev’s anti-religion campaign came to an end, the KGB continued to control tightly the allocation of resources to the Church, preventing it from building new churches and tightly limiting maintenance of older churches, and the lack of material support to the Church would continue to remain a key source of dissatisfaction among Catholic believers throughout the Soviet period.³³

³⁰ LYA f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 116. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

³¹ "The Struggle for the Klaipeda Church," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #41, January 31, 1980, 120.

³² "Events in Klaipeda," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #2, May 1972, 62.

³³ Ibid.

Besides depriving the Church of physical resources, the KGB also worked to deprive the Catholic Church of access to the youth of the republic by preventing priests and other church officials from teaching children about religion. One 1963 KGB report epitomized the fears of the Soviet regime in regards to the Church when a Catholic priest was quoted as saying, “All our attention needs to be turned to children and youth, because Soviet power more than ever seeks to divert them from church.... The base concern of priests should be children, children, and once again children.”³⁴ These KGB officials understood that as long as the Soviet system had a monopoly on the future, the existing vestiges of religious belief could exist in the older generations, as they would die out in a matter of years.³⁵ Therefore, the KGB focused their efforts on preventing the Catholic Church from connecting with younger generations.

A letter written by the chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs, the Soviet bureau tasked with controlling religion in the Lithuanian republic, emphasizes the broad range of activities tabooed by the regime’s ban on allowing children to participate in Church ritual, stating:

In those cases when the participation of minors in rites of the cult is a concealed form of religious instruction (the systematic singing of psalms and hymns by children during cult rites, the conducting of collective discussions with children on religious topics, the organizing of activities for children in preparing them for their confirmation, etc.), the violators are subject to criminal prosecution.³⁶

Immediately after Soviet power was re-established in Lithuania in 1944, extremely strict laws had been enacted in an attempt to prevent children from being exposed to religious teaching.

After 1946, it was forbidden to teach children religion in churches.³⁷ Priests were arrested and

³⁴ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 627, l. 246. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

³⁵ Ibid, 245.

³⁶ Statement by Kuroyedov, Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, qtd. in "Vilnius," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #3, August 20, 1972, 136.

³⁷ "The Origin and Aims of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*," Ikbkronika.lt, accessed on 8/5/2014.

exiled for teaching children. Church-run youth groups were banned, and children younger than 16 could not be altar servers.³⁸ In one 1954 case, a priest was arrested after helping to organize a religious youth group among members of the Soviet youth group, the Pioneers. The priest outraged KGB officials when he stated, “In relation to young Catholics, schools should support Catholic principles. At the very least, [Soviet schools] violate the constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of religion.”³⁹ This appeal to legality fell on deaf ears. In the eyes of KGB officials, Soviet law was constructed to support *their* actions, and not that of the enemy. But in the eyes of many priests, by prosecuting the teaching of children as a criminal act, the Soviet regime deprived priests of traditional responsibilities, essentially forcing priests to choose between becoming either criminals or collaborators.

Probably most importantly for the KGB in regards to the Church’s involvement with youth and the future of the Church as a whole was its control of the remaining theological seminary, located in Kaunas. The KGB established a loyal priest as rector of the seminary and required that the rector hand over the list of applicants to the seminary each year so that each could be evaluated for suitability.⁴⁰ Candidates were visited by KGB officials in the months before their admission to the seminary and many candidates were forbidden from attending. The KGB issued in-depth reports on measures taken to dissuade these potential candidates or alternatively, to turn them into agents of the regime.⁴¹ By strictly limiting the number of students at the seminary, the KGB ensured that the number of new priests would be less than the number

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 485, l. 95 KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁴⁰ "The Role of the KGB in the Theological Seminary," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #3, August 20, 1972, 98-99.

⁴¹ For example, LYA f. K-18, ap. 2, b. 235, l. 1-13. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

who passed away each year, meaning there was a continuously decreasing pool of potential troublemakers—priests—to worry about.

Yet in order to fully neutralize the threat of the Catholic Church, the KGB needed to control the people running it. So-called “agents” were indispensable for the Soviet regime achieving this goal. In the Soviet context, an “agent” was not an employee of the KGB, but instead an individual convinced to serve as an informant or spy for the KGB. According to a KGB handbook, the agent recruitment process, known as *verbovka*, consisted of two parts: evaluation of a candidate’s acceptability and then attempts to recruit them. The handbook states, “An essential part of the recruitment process is the psychological influence exerted by the operational officer or recruiting agent on the person being recruited in order to prompt him to agree to help the agencies.”⁴² This “psychological influence” often involved finding out compromising material about the potential agent. Other angles used in order to induce participation included bribes, direct approaches, or coercion by requiring acquaintances of the candidate already under KGB control to encourage compliance.⁴³ Once recruited, candidates were then given “operational tasks” which aimed to evaluate the trustworthiness of the potential agent.⁴⁴

For the KGB, priests were a major target of agent recruitment. A 1960 report on the cultivation of two agent-priests begins its explanation of the *verbovka* of the first priest in a rather circumspect manner, explaining only that the agent-priest was “recruited by the method of gradual engagement with...the security organs.” Later in the report, however, a past association with guerillas and an intimate relationship with a woman are mentioned as information used to

⁴² Vasili Mitrokhin, ed. *KGB Lexicon: The Soviet Intelligence Officer's Handbook* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 179

⁴³ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

encourage participation.⁴⁵ The second agent in the report, on the other hand, was recruited “on the basis of compromising material of a domestic nature.” The KGB’s interest in the agent-priest arose because of his connections with underground nationalists and emigrant clergy in Rome, but in order to coerce him into becoming an agent, the KGB staged an elaborate operation in which workers dressed as policemen caught the potential agent at a hotel engaging in intimate relations with a woman.⁴⁶ While dramatic, these examples illustrate the KGB’s frequent use of highly personal information in order to motivate agents to operate in their professional sphere.

Throughout the Soviet period, the KGB managed to maintain a heavy agent network throughout the Catholic hierarchy. In 1956, sixty priests out of the nine hundred in Lithuania worked for the KGB.⁴⁷ By 1970, there were around one hundred recruited priests.⁴⁸ In the same year, the KGB reported that there were 845 priests and six bishops overall in Lithuania, and thirty one students at the Kaunas seminary.⁴⁹ Throughout Lithuania, almost every KGB division seems to have made the maintenance of an agent presence among the clergy a top priority. In regards to the rank-and-file priests of the Catholic Church, agents were a frequently rotating group within any given division, often only serving for a year or two before being released from their duties. The Kaunas division especially included a high number of priest-agents, likely due to the seminary located there. In 1969 there were 14 agents related to the clergy active in the Kaunas region.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ LYA f. k-1, ap. 10, b. 276, l. 66. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁴⁶ LYA f. k-1, ap. 10, b. 276, l. 69. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁴⁷ Donal O’ Sullivan, “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier . . . Priest,” *Hoover Digest*, No. 1 (January 2012) <http://www.hoover.org/research/tinker-tailor-soldier-priest>, accessed 08/07/2014.

⁴⁸ Arunas Streikas, “Lithuanian Catholic Clergy and the KGB,” *Religion, State & Society*, 34 No.1 (Mar. 2006), 66.

⁴⁹ “Report of P. Kolgov, the subdivision chief of LSSR KGB Division No. 5, at the operational staff meeting on the work against priests, held on 19 February 1970,” *KGB Documents*, kgbdocuments.eu, 02/19/1970, accessed 08/06/2014, 112.

⁵⁰ LYA f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 152, l. 4. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

While the KGB viewed their efforts to recruit priests with optimism, some officials within the Church structure took a different view of the process. The *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* explained that KGB officials often succeeded in recruiting agent-priests “due to some priest's unwise advice: ‘Don't be afraid to sign, everyone does so. Afterward you don't have to work for the secret police.’”⁵¹ While the writers of the *Chronicle* may have disapproved, many priests did indeed view agreement to cooperate with the state as their only means of entering the seminary or attaining certain positions within the Church hierarchy. Whether or not KGB officials' recruitment of agent-priests actually led the KGB to substantial sources of information, the known prevalence of agent-priests among the clergy helped to significantly weaken trust within the Lithuanian Catholic community of priests, strengthening the KGB in its goal to undermine the institutional structure of the Church.

Agent-priests provided an excellent pretext for the KGB to monitor threats posed by the Catholic Church's ties to the West, which occurred mainly in two arenas: Vatican church leaders and devout Lithuanian emigrants. In order to address both of these areas, the KGB worked to send priest-agents to Rome on several occasions, hoping both to debilitate the Lithuanian Catholic emigrant community located there and to gain information about the Vatican as a whole. The practice of sending Soviet-approved religious leaders to the West as tools of Soviet foreign policy occurred throughout the Soviet Union. Since Lithuania was the Soviet Union's only majority-Catholic republic, the Lithuanian Catholic Church provided the Soviet Union's best opportunity to monitor the Vatican in particular, an organization whose global reach caused strong anxieties among the Soviet leadership.⁵² The Council of Vatican II, which convened in

⁵¹ "The Role of the KGB in the Theological Seminary," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #3, August 20, 1972, 100.

⁵² Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 200.

1962, proved to be both a challenge and an opportunity for the KGB in this regard. While the four highest-ranking bishops in Lithuania were all invited to attend the first council, which convened in October 1962, the KGB only agreed to send people whose loyalty to the Soviet regime was certain. Archbishops Steponavičius and Sladkevičius were barred from attendance due to their perceived “hostile attitude” towards the regime, while Archbishop Maželis was judged by Soviet officials to be too ill to attend. As such, only the Archbishop of the Vilnius archdiocese, Stankevičius, was allowed to travel to the Vatican. While in Rome, Stankevičius, along with his fellow delegates, was tasked with monitoring the actions of the clergy at the College of St. Casimir. St. Casimir was seen as a threat in Soviet Lithuania, as the seminary worked to educate the Lithuanian emigrant clerical community, upholding Lithuanian Catholicism outside of Lithuania’s borders.⁵³

During the trip, the delegation’s two main objectives were to “compromise the position of Lithuanian clergy-emigrants acting as representatives of the Catholic Church of Lithuania and expose the fallacy of their propaganda about the alleged harassment of the Catholic Church in Lithuania” as well as to “establish contact with Council attendees from other socialist governments and if possible work with them to prevent the adoption of anti-Soviet decisions by the Council.”⁵⁴ The report states that the Soviet delegates were able to establish with the emigrant priests a “less reactionary mood” towards the Soviet government and describes a discussion with a Vatican representative about the possibility of establishing diplomatic contact with the Soviet Union.⁵⁵ Although the report claims that emigrant radio and print media became “more objective” after the work of the Lithuanian delegation, it also discusses many difficulties

⁵³ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 627, l. 142. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁵⁴ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 627, l. 143. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁵⁵ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 627, l. 149. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

that the Lithuanian delegation encountered, such as distrust and lack of communication with the members of the priest-emigrant community, suggesting that the efforts were not as harmonious as the KGB may have hoped.⁵⁶ Despite their relative lack of success in enacting the goals of the Soviet regime while abroad, the fact that the delegation remained loyal to the regime, frequently expressing the Soviet party line to emigrant and Italian clergy, was enough to satisfy the KGB that these clergymen, at least, were firmly under their control.

In addition to organizing trips to the Vatican II conference, in 1959 the KGB also managed to station two agents within the Vatican permanently as students. The first of these agents, “Saulė” (Sun), is the subject of one of the earliest available records of an agent within the Catholic hierarchy. His file dates from 1958 but indicates that the agent in question had been active since 1950, and seems to be a case in which the agent himself initiated contact.⁵⁷ According to the report, the agent worked to provide information on the anti-Soviet actions of instructors within the Kaunas seminary, leading to the arrest of two instructors in 1952. In 1959, “Saulė”, along with another agent, “Pušis” (Pine), was sent to Rome to study at the College of St. Casimir. In 1961, a KGB agent noted:

We have no reason to consider that after finishing his studies Saulė will become an opponent of the Soviet Union and will defend, as a professional attorney, the interests of the Catholic Church. Quite the opposite—he is already ready at any moment to leave the clergy and make a statement against the Vatican, but for the time being this is not advisable, because we foresee for him a role in undermining the church in Lithuania from the inside.⁵⁸

Saulė finished his doctorate in 1963 and returned to Lithuania, continuing to work with the KGB throughout his career. In 1969 he was consecrated as a bishop, and he served as bishop of the Panevėžys diocese from 1973 until 1983, when he was ousted because of suspected involvement

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 615, l. 43. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁵⁸ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 617, l. 83. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

with the KGB.⁵⁹ The other priest sent abroad, Pušis, returned in 1961 after receiving his doctorate in Rome and served as the rector of the Kaunas seminary from 1961 until 1989. Thanks to Soviet control of the upper reaches of the Lithuanian Catholic hierarchy, priests who cooperated with the government's wishes, such as these former agents, had a good chance of being promoted within the church. By imposing harsh controls on priests who did not cooperate with the regime and rewarding those who did with positions of increased power, by the 1960s the KGB was able to manipulate much of the Catholic clergy into a position of weakness and accommodation.

The Soviet regime's persecution of the Church throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s led to a great deal of optimism on the part of the KGB. Documents describe the typical churchgoer as an elderly woman, exactly the demographic group considered least threatening by Soviet ideology, and emphasize the quickly fading power of the Church. One 1962 document quotes a priest, who states, "The Church is dying. After 20 years it won't exist and neither will these elderly who now attend church. They will die. And who will notice? The young? No. The anti-religious propaganda has worked well with them."⁶⁰ For the KGB, statements like these were just the affirmations they sought to confirm the Soviet regime's victory over Catholicism, and for the clergy, there seemed to be few signs to contradict the government's predictions of the Church's imminent demise. Nevertheless, the KGB was aware of Lithuania's strong historical connection to Catholicism and thus continued to respect the Church's ability to carry institutional

⁵⁹ Sullivan, "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier...Priest."

⁶⁰ "Letter of April 1962 to A. Sniečkus, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, by Colonel A. Randakevičius, Chairman of the KGB of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, regarding the effectiveness of anti-religious propaganda," *KGB Documents*, kgbdocuments.eu, 04/01/1962, accessed on 08/06/14, 1.

weight as a nationalist symbol and source of identity. In the eyes of the KGB, the fight against the Catholic Church was not yet over, but was one that they would surely win.

Catholicism and the Everyday Believer

Writing in 1959 to her children in the United States, Konstancija Brazeniene echoed the sentiments of many Catholic believers in Lithuania, explaining, “All my peace I experience in church, but lately the church has been under attack.... Now there is a new method—to create communism by destroying religion, especially the Catholic faith, because religion is considered a superstition that darkens the people’s minds.”⁶¹ Therefore, for Konstancija and Lithuanian believers like her, the Soviet regime’s policies threatened not just the official church, but also their own private religious practices. Actions that occurred outside the structure of the official Catholic Church, performed not by priests but by average Soviet citizens, complicated the KGB’s understanding of Catholic belief and made the Church a much more diffuse, difficult-to-isolate threat. While the KGB was largely successful in constraining the actions of the Church as a centralized institution, they were not able to prevent everyday believers from forming vital emotional and religious connections to the Church through unofficial forms of belief that could eventually be mobilized into public demonstrations of religious and national sentiment.

The Soviet regime had worked to establish, and the KGB worked to enforce, a sharply defined acceptable space for Catholic belief—a space that was private, and largely occupied by a quickly dying, “backwards” few. When these limits were breached through unofficial religious manifestations—expressions of belief originated by non-clergy, occurring outside the typical rituals of the Church—the KGB sought to both repress these actions and to dissuade others from committing them. For the KGB, attempts to prevent these decentralized, populist, and, in their

⁶¹ Konstancija Brazeniene, *Just One Moment More . . . : The Story of One Woman’s Return from Soviet Exile* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2007), 123.

view, inherently anti-Soviet actions proved to be uniquely challenging. These everyday expressions of Catholicism highlighted latent but strong nationalist sentiment, forcing the KGB to confront the degree to which the Soviet regime had been unable to fully integrate Lithuanians into a larger Soviet identity.

The participation of youth in the Catholic Church was seen as a severe threat by the Soviet regime, and the government's strict attempts to curb youth belief extended not just to their participation in the official Church, but also to unofficial youth groups and individual assertions of religious belief. The *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* contains many accounts of children who were bullied in school by teachers and classmates because of religious belief. Students could be expelled from university if they spoke of being Catholic.⁶² Throughout the Soviet era, various political offenders were subjected to *profilaktika*, conversations with the KGB in which political offenders were interrogated, encouraged to confess to their crime, and warned of future punishment. In these *profilaktiki*, youth groups, particularly religious groups, were treated with special concern.⁶³ In one 1954 report, the KGB reports that among 19 detected youth groups in the city of Kaunas, two were of a religious nature. The KGB worked quickly to place the blame for these groups onto the parents and grandparents of the participating children.⁶⁴ *Profilaktiki* remained in wide use throughout the Soviet period, and KGB officials continued to target religious youth. In 1983, one eighteen-year-old girl was brought in for a chat after having been found with a pamphlet titled "On the Religiosity of Youth in Lithuania." Although the girl claimed that she did not know where the pamphlet came from, the KGB

⁶² "Discrimination Against Believing Students," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #41, January 1, 1980, 117-118.

⁶³ For more on *profilaktika*, see Edward Cohn, "Profilaktika and the Roots of Dissent: The KGB's Use of the 'Prophylactic Conversation' in the Republic of Lithuania, 1953-1964" Unpublished paper.

⁶⁴ LYA f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 485, l. 91-93. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

worked to make sure that she denied belief in any of the statements made in the document, and attributed her possession of the document to her father, a “religious fanatic.”⁶⁵ In one account by the *Chronicle*, in 1981 a group of twenty youths went on a religious outing, “to relax and at the same time gain a deeper understanding of religion.” On the second day of the outing, police arrived, forcing the children into trucks and interrogating them about the instigators of the retreat.⁶⁶ For the KGB and other Soviet officials, Catholic religious practice by the young was unacceptable in any form, but when it occurred outside the bounds of the official Church their tactics were constrained, because the source of religious belief (which, according to Soviet ideology, could not come from the youth themselves) was much more difficult to identify.

In the 1950s, the Soviet regime banned monks and nuns from participating in the Catholic Church, but many continued to practice unofficially. Their actions fell outside of the official Church hierarchy, and these men and women operated separately from official priests and bishops, needing to conceal their identity. The KGB frequently expressed concern about the actions of these unofficial clergy, especially nuns. Because they were acting outside of the purview of the Catholic hierarchy, nuns were very difficult for the KGB to track, and because their existence was considered illegal, few nuns acted publicly. According to one 1975 KGB report, “The nun element uses for organization of its actions eucharistic evenings in private apartments with the goal of manipulating believers, especially youth, into a clerical-nationalist attitude.”⁶⁷ In addition to organizing private gatherings, the Soviet regime worried that these underground nuns would be set up as teachers within Soviet schools and thus manage to corrupt

⁶⁵ LYA f. K-11, ap. 2, b. 283, l. 230. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁶⁶ "Persecution of Believing Youth," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #49, September 8, 1981, 551.

⁶⁷ LYA f. K-1, Ap. 46, B.205, L.35. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

the youth from within.⁶⁸ As a whole, the KGB struggled with its handling of nuns. Lacking a central organizing hierarchy like one that the official Church possessed, these nuns could not be part of the Soviet-defined Catholic apparatus, and yet the diffuse, underground, and communal nature of their actions made them fall far outside the expected realm of private Catholic belief and once again showcased a non-Soviet form of community, thus marking them as a threat to the regime.

The most dramatic arena of religious-nationalist confrontation of ordinary Lithuanians with the Soviet regime, however, occurred at Catholic holy sites. These places attracted pilgrims and served as sites of public devotion to Catholic belief. Located throughout the country, these holy places were diverse in character and influence on the religious population. Some were small and only caught the attention of locals, while others were well known, attracting believers throughout the republic and sometimes beyond. The KGB frequently struggled with ways in which to address the displays of religious behavior evinced at such sites. One 1962 KGB report describes the Way of the Cross of Vilnius, known as Vilnius Kalvarijos, which was one place of pilgrimage:

Kalvarijos is a source of religious fanaticism. Believers attending the chapels there consider it their duty to kiss the feet of the saints there and take something to remember as a relic of healing. So they try to take a bite with their teeth holy logs specifically located there for that purpose. In addition, the handicapped, the sick and fanatics are bathed in the brook Kidron, which flows through the territory of Kalvarijos, while others drink from it.⁶⁹

At Vilnius Kalvarijos, as in other holy places throughout Lithuania, the KGB saw these displays of religious fervor as the products of a backwards populace caught in the thrall of superstition.

Yet the KGB report also indicates that it was not solely religious motivations that made the

⁶⁸ LYA f. K-1, Ap. 46, B.205, L.35. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.; LYA f. K-11, ap. 2, b. 1365, l. 28-32. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁶⁹ LYA f. K-1, ap. 3, b. 627, l. 32. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

Kalvarijos a symbol of anti-Soviet sentiment. The Way of the Cross, the report claims, was built in 1662 as a “memorial of the freedom of Lithuania from the ‘yoke’ of Moscow.” Located on the grounds of the site was a statue of the Mother of God with a plaque that read “In memorial of the freeing of the homeland.”⁷⁰ Thus for pilgrims and the KGB alike, the pilgrimages at the Kalvarijos stood as a reminder of Lithuanian nationalist as well as religious sentiment. By entwining nationalism with religion, these holy sites stood as reminders of the past, while the continuing presence of pilgrims at these sites kept that past alive.

For the Vilnius Way of the Cross site, this reminder could not be allowed to stand, and in 1962, the Soviet regime closed the site. According to a 1974 account in the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, “In 1962 the atheists, with military reinforcements, dynamited the Stations of the Cross in Vilnius and trucked away the rubble that very night. Dirt was brought in, and the sites where each station had stood were leveled.”⁷¹ According to that account, believers continued to leave stone crosses and flowers at the site of the former Way of the Cross, despite discouragement from the regime and local police forces. The site would not be rebuilt until 1990.⁷² For believers who valued holy sites such as the Vilnius Way of the Cross, the “atheists” and the Soviet government were one and the same—oppressive agents of an alien ideology.

Other holy places throughout Lithuania received similar treatment at the hands of the Soviet regime, most famously the Hill of Crosses located in the northwestern part of the republic. A revered site of the Lithuanian people, Catholic believers throughout Lithuania and in the surrounding regions had long travelled to the Hill of Crosses in pilgrimage, planting crosses there in memory of deceased loved ones. Such a site was unacceptable to the Soviet regime, and

⁷⁰ Ibid, 31.

⁷¹ "The Freedom To Die," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #9, March 1974, 379.

⁷² "The Way of the Cross of Vilnius Calvary," *Vilnius Calvary*, vilniauskalvarijos.lt, accessed on 8/5/2014.

the Hill of Crosses was first demolished by the Soviet regime in 1961 during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign. A KGB document from April of that year explains that around 2,000 crosses were burned down and that "work was started on the preparation of a memorial to the deceased participants of the 1861 uprising against czarist autocracy and the feudal system" at the same site.⁷³ The report claims that the local population reacted favorably to the burning, with many saying that the destruction of the crosses would "prevent profiteering off of the emotions of believers and give the proper form of historical memorial."⁷⁴ Yet the report also details several negative statements about the regime's destruction of the hill recorded by KGB agents. One man was quoted in response to the burning as writing, "All communists have lost their minds."⁷⁵

Another man issued a prediction to the regime upon hearing the news:

A miracle will appear because of this work. How many wars have there been, and no one bothered that hill. Last summer, a man from Šiauliai came [to the hill] and stole from a little boy a cross and threw the cross in the river. Later, the children of that man went in a car, drove into a lake, and drowned. This was because he threw the cross he had stolen from the little boy in the river. Now there will be another miracle like that.⁷⁶

For Lithuanian believers, the destruction of one of their most treasured holy sites seemed a huge blow to both nationalist and religious Lithuanian identity.

In the following three decades, the hill was replanted with crosses and torn down several more times. Often, crosses would appear in the night right after others had been torn down, planted seemingly spontaneously by believers determined to maintain their holy site. In April 1973, after several years of restoration, the crosses were once again taken down. In response, believers, many of whom were local youth, organized a march to the hill on May 19, carrying

⁷³ LYA f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 482, l. 85. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 87.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 87.

with them a large cross that they planted at the hill. Participants were interrogated. For the KGB, the participation of youth in the march was particularly problematic, and, according to the account in the *Chronicle*, they worked to assign blame to the teachers of the participating youth, seemingly seeking to avoid the implication that the youth themselves could be responsible for such a demonstration. The *Chronicle*, reacting to the KGB's investigation of the march, encouraged its readers, "The persecution by the security police not only failed to frighten people, but even inspired them with greater courage."⁷⁷ Throughout the 1970s, the regime continued to struggle to prevent believers from planting crosses on the hill, frequently tearing down crosses put up in the night.

In the early 1980s, the KGB also became interested in a site known as "Maiden's Mountain." According to the *Chronicle*, the site was the location of a 1626 fight between Lithuanians and the Swedish army, where the Swedes murdered two thousand girls.⁷⁸ A 1981 KGB report explains that the location had long been the site of wooden crosses and a wooden chapel, and that in 1980 a number of believers worked to renovate the old chapel and to place several new crosses decorated with "ideologically flawed inscriptions."⁷⁹ The report expressed concern that the location would be turned into a second Hill of Crosses. In 1982, the crosses and chapel on the hill were torn down.⁸⁰ Once again, the religious associations of the site combined with nationalist sentiment to make the site a significant threat to the Soviet regime.

Towards the end of the 1970s, participation greatly increased in an annual procession to the holy site of Šiluva, where the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared. A marcher in the 1979

⁷⁷ "Interrogations Concerning the Carrying of the Cross to the Hill of Crosses in May, 1973," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #8, December 1973, 345.

⁷⁸ "Soviet Vandalism," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #53, May 31, 1982, 5.

⁷⁹ LYA f. K-18, ap. 2, b. 103, l. 36. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁸⁰ LYA f. K-11, ap. 1, b. 2424, l. 3. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

procession triumphantly explained, “A wave of spiritual rebirth is passing over Lithuania. More and more young people are joining the battle for spiritual salvation.”⁸¹ Several arrests were made of would-be pilgrims in 1979 and 1980, and in 1981, right before the annual August procession was to occur, the entirety of the region was quarantined off, supposedly because of an outbreak of swine flu. Warnings were sent to suspected leaders of the pilgrimage, and Church leaders were kept under heavy surveillance. Busses and trains were prevented from stopping at Šiluva or nearby towns in the days leading up to the procession, and roadblocks were stationed to turn back any non-local passerby. Houses of locals were searched in case they harbored pilgrims. The *Chronicle* wrote of the incident, “Why did the Soviet government take such measures to stop a purely religious procession? A statement uttered by one Checkist [sic] could be a probable answer: ‘In Poland everything also started with the rosary!’”⁸² Just as in Poland, where the Catholic Church spurred on greater forms of dissent, the KGB in Lithuania saw participation in religious rites as a locus of potential nationalist eruption. For the KGB, the actions of believers in attending pilgrimages to holy sites spoke to a nationalist sentiment that went far beyond the boundaries of superstition, standing instead as proof that nationalism and religion could not be separated.

Unofficial manifestations of Catholic belief were not simply backwards expressions of a fading religion. For Lithuanian believers, they were a crucial way of maintaining the vitality of a belief system that could only be expressed in limited ways. By teaching children religion, displaying crosses in their yards, living as an underground nun, or engaging in pilgrimages to religious areas, believers helped to maintain their own beliefs and maintained a community of

⁸¹ "One Marcher's Description of Her Impressions," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #40, October 19, 1979, 62.

⁸² "'Swine Fever' or How the KGB Hampered the Procession to Šiluva," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #49, September 8, 1981, 549.

believers. The community-building nature of these activities, however, was precisely what made these actions a threat to the KGB. The decidedly non-Soviet actions of Catholic believers, even if they were not undertaken with the intention of expressing discontent with the Soviet regime, helped to reinforce alternative methods of self-identification, showing the inadequacies of the Soviet regime's ability to win the whole-hearted loyalty of its Lithuanian citizens and highlighting the repressed but still-present nationalist sentiments of the Lithuanian people.

The Lithuanian Catholic Dissident Movement and the KGB

In 1969, a KGB agent recorded a conversation with a “reactionary” priest, who declared, “I wholly and decisively inform the masses of people about the actual position of the Church. The people will not tolerate the destruction of the Church. The Soviet Union leads to the degeneration of society and only the Church can save society from moral degradation.”⁸³ In the following two decades, the KGB would increasingly encounter religious believers, such as this one, who actively stood against the Soviet regime. After years of government repression of the Church, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, some Lithuanian Catholics began to join in with a larger Soviet dissent movement in speaking out against actions of the Soviet regime. These believers were instrumental in forming an organized and popular Catholic dissident movement that lasted until the end of the Soviet Union. Along with arrests of individual priests and petitions for fair legal treatment, this dissident movement produced the *samizdat* publication, *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, which formed a crucial means of disseminating information and unifying the community of religious dissenters. The publishers of the *Chronicle*, which was modeled after the Soviet-wide *samizdat* journal, *The Chronicle of Current Events*, drew from existing dissent movements, but also added a particular element to the Lithuanian

⁸³ “Report of P. Kolgov...,” *KGB Documents*, kgbdocuments.eu, 02/19/1970, accessed 08/06/2014, 114.

dissent movement: Catholic religiosity. The religious dissent movement in Lithuania, which operated separately from the mainstream Catholic hierarchy and was sustained by unofficial networks of Catholic believers, sought to fight the influence that the KGB and the Soviet regime had upon the Church as a whole and particularly upon leaders in the Church.

In working to highlight the injustices of the Soviet regime, and particularly the KGB, the dissident movement helped to increase awareness and anger about the regime's treatment of the Church both within Lithuania and on an international scale, while simultaneously helping to invigorate the Lithuanian nationalist cause. The priests who formed the core of the movement worked outside the mainstream of the Soviet-controlled Catholic hierarchy, often coming into conflict with non-dissident priests who did not want the dissidents to worsen Church relations with the government. In calling attention to the actions of the Soviet government through petitions, direct confrontation with government officials, and later, the publication of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, the Catholic dissident movement fundamentally changed the terms of the relationship between the KGB and the Lithuanian Catholic Church, helping the Church as a whole develop a more active and aggressive relationship with the regime.

Several factors helped to start the Lithuanian Catholic dissent movement in the late 1960s. The Khrushchev reforms of the early 1960s first helped to revitalize Soviet hopes for an ideologically robust Communism, and in 1961, the Party revealed a new program that promoted a lessening of coercive practices on the part of the government, as well as increased tolerance for criticism of the regime.⁸⁴ Yet while Thaw policies allowed increased space for dissenting opinion and granted the Soviet citizenry with more tools to express this opinion, Khrushchev's strict

⁸⁴ Smolkin-Rothrock, "A Sacred Space is Never Empty," 16.

policy towards religion ignited frustration within the Lithuanian Catholic community, meaning that by the end of the 1960s, the earlier hopes for a more permissive attitude towards Catholicism had been extinguished. Additionally, the 1968 decree “On the procedure for the examination of proposals, declarations and grievances by the citizens,” in which the Supreme Soviet indicated that petitions should be directed to local governmental institutions, implicitly assured the right of petition to all citizens. Because of these changes, Lithuanian Catholics felt that they had a means for expressing discontent with the restrictive 1966 legislation on religion, as well as other actions they disagreed with.⁸⁵

Petitions served as some of the first overt signs of dissatisfaction with the regime. Earlier petitions tended to be instigated and signed solely by priests, often grouped by diocese, and expressed discontent with the general religious situation in Lithuania. These petitions eventually led to larger, more widely circulated petitions, and tended to address specific problems: the arrest of a priest for teaching religion, the obstacles to gaining entrance to the seminary, or the exile of bishops Steponavičius and Sladkevičius, for example.⁸⁶ From September 1970 to January 1972, four relatively high-profile arrests occurred that helped to solidify the concerns of many Lithuanians in regards to persecution of the Catholic Church, helping to catalyze the creation of a discrete dissident movement, and all were protested with widely circulated petitions. These arrests all dealt with imparting Catholicism to children, but unlike arrests that occurred earlier in Soviet Lithuania, these provoked widespread reaction from the population. In doing so, these arrests and further anti-Church actions on the part of the Soviet regime induced many priests to

⁸⁵ Vardys, 128.

⁸⁶ "The Trial of Rev. Prosperas Bubnys," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #1, March 19, 1972, 32; "The Trial of Father Zdebskis," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #1, March 19, 1972, 4; "A Petition of the Clergy of Vilnius Archdiocese," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #1, March 19, 1972, 43.

form networks of trusted fellow clergy and laity to do what they could to defend the Catholic Church from attack.

The first of these high-profile arrests, of Jesuit priest Juozas Šeškevičius, demonstrates the way in which early dissidents attempted to appeal to Soviet legal structures. Arguing against his exile from his home church, Šeškevičius appealed to Soviet claims of rule of law, asking, “If I have supposedly violated Soviet laws, then I have served my sentence and have even received a good characterization. In addition, when I was released my rights were not curtailed, thus why am I being punished once again and even lifelong without any trial?”⁸⁷ One petition on Šeškevičius’s behalf further demonstrates these appeals to legal structures. Garnering 190 signatures from members of Šeškevičius’s local parish, the petition argued, “To a nonbeliever religion appears to be worthless or even harmful, but to us believers it is a matter of great importance. Restrictions placed on the practice of our religion are more painful to us than material wrongs.” The petition ended by stating, “We trust that the Soviet government will adhere to its Constitution and satisfy our requests.”⁸⁸ In calling upon the Soviet government to adhere to its own laws, these Catholic dissidents followed a process employed by dissidents throughout the Soviet Union. Benjamin Nathans has described this process as *civil obedience*, in which dissidents emphasized the Soviet government’s pretensions of “socialist legality” in order to pressure Soviet leaders.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ “The Persecution of Father Šeškevičius,” *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #1, March 19, 1972, 39.

⁸⁸ “A Petition from the Believers of the Parish in Stirniai and in Molėtai Rayon,” *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #2, May 1972, 84.

⁸⁹ Benjamin Nathans, “The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol’Pin and the Idea of Rights under “Developed Socialism,” *Slavic Review*, 66.4 (Winter 2007), 633.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, such appeals to the legal system of the Soviet Union remained one of the dissident movement's primary methods of protest. These appeals, however, rarely provoked the intended action on the part of the Soviet government. In the case of the petition on behalf of Šeškevičius, his supporters received a reply from the Soviet Council of Religious Affairs which flatly denied the requests on the petition, stating, "Regarding the demand 'not to interfere when priests teach religious truths to children in church', this is contrary to our laws, just as is the demand to release the priests who had been sentenced for gross violations of the laws concerning religious cults."⁹⁰ This response was common; while the Soviet government would receive Lithuanian Catholic petitions, it never took the action recommended by the petition.

Sometimes arrests led dissidents to more overt confrontations with Soviet law enforcement, as in the case of the highly publicized 1971 arrest of Father Juozas Zdebskis. Zdebskis had a history of so-called "reactionary" behavior, having already had his license to work as a priest temporarily revoked in 1969, and his arrest captured the special attention of contacts outside Lithuania.⁹¹ The September 1971 edition of the Moscow-based *samizdat* publication *A Chronicle of Current Events* carried Zdebskis's story, explaining that on July 16, Zdebskis was teaching a group of children when he and his class were interrupted by a committee of ten officials, who then photographed and questioned the children.⁹² Because Zdebskis's case was well known, the KGB worked to ensure that his November trial would run according to plan. KGB officials were assigned with the tasks of monitoring agents connected to Zdebskis as well as strengthening those agent connections of priests close to Zdebskis. The

⁹⁰ "Moletai Rayon," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #3, August 20, 1972, 133.

⁹¹ Archbishop Tamkevičius, "The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania," *lkbkronkia.lt*, accessed on 8/5/2014; 19690730_plan_0421

⁹² "Religious Persecution," *Chronicle of Current Events* #21, September 11, 1971, 287.

document with these assignments provided precise instructions to official officials. “In order to prevent adverse events during the trial of Zdebskis,” it stated, “arrange for Soviet party activists to visit the court hearing in order to restrict access to the courtroom the monastic element and fanatic believers.”⁹³ In another attempt to dissuade believers, the KGB constantly postponed the date of Zdebskis’s trial, finally revealing only on November 11 that the trial would take place the following day.⁹⁴ By orchestrating every aspect of the trial, KGB officials hoped to display adherence to legal procedures, while ultimately remaining secure in the trial’s outcome.

Believers sent several petitions on Zdebskis’s behalf, one of which was signed by 1,190 people. The petition spoke to the general religious oppression within the republic, decrying Zdebskis’s arrest: “Father Zdebskis was once again arrested in Prienai for having, as we heard, prepared children who were brought by their parents for their first confession. If this is a crime, then freedom of conscience and of religion must be a mere dream.”⁹⁵ Despite the regime’s attempt to conceal the date of the trial, the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* claims that on the day itself around 500 believers flocked to the courtroom. The *Chronicle* also explains how police tried to control the crowd, putting one boy in jail for 15 days and attempting to send everyone away. One policeman was reported yelling, “Chase the churchmice out of here!”⁹⁶ For the Lithuanian religious community, the trial was not merely a singular event, but a sign of the Soviet regime’s refusal to treat Catholics fairly. Comparing their persecution to the persecution of the ancient Jewish nation under Syrian King Antioch, the editors of the *Chronicle* wrote,

⁹³ LYA f. K-30 ap. 1, b. 882, l. 113. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

⁹⁴ "The Trial of Father Zdebskis," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #1, March 19, 1972, 9.

⁹⁵ "News in Brief," *Chronicle of Current Events* #22, November 10, 1971, 28.

⁹⁶ "The Trial of Father Zdebskis," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #1, March 19, 1971, 10.

“Father Zdebskis' trial had the same purpose—to keep the nation under an atmosphere of fear so that no one would dare to demand more freedom.”⁹⁷

In their petitions, believers tried to prove first to the Soviet government that laws should be applied equally to all citizens, appealing to ideals of socialist legality trumpeted by Khrushchev. In December 1971, for example, 17,000 believers signed a petition addressed to Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union, complaining of the recent arrests, the shortage of priests caused by strict seminary admission, dilapidated church buildings, as well as other concerns. They asked the government to grant them freedom of conscience and religious practice, emphasizing, “It is not pretty words in the press or over the radio that we desire but serious efforts by the government which would enable us Catholics to feel like equal citizens before the laws of the Soviet Union.”⁹⁸ When this method failed to gain appreciable results, the dissident movement moved to the international sphere, showing those outside the country that Soviet laws, were not, in fact, universally or fairly applied. By 1970, the all-Soviet *Chronicle of Current Events* had established contacts within Lithuania and regularly reported on the area. In 1972, the petition addressed to Brezhnev was sent on to the Secretary General of the United Nations. While the Secretary General did not comment on the petition, it had the intended effect of attracting international attention, garnering articles in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *New York Times*, and various other newspapers.⁹⁹ The May 22 self-immolation of Romas Kalanta only helped to focus international attention on Lithuanian dissent. Unfortunately, the regime maintained power over many within the upper echelons of the

⁹⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁹⁸ "A Memorandum from the Roman Catholics of Lithuania," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #2, May 1972, 54.

⁹⁹ *New York Times*, Mar 28, 1972 “17,000 Lithuanians Charge Discrimination,” 5.; *Chicago Sun-Times*, “Lithuanians Rip Russians,” 1972

Lithuanian Catholic hierarchy, and the Vatican too was reluctant to publicly speak out against the Soviets.¹⁰⁰

Because the regime seemed determined to ignore expressions of discontent in the form of petitions and public protest, priests opposed to the Soviet regime felt that a new method of communication was needed in order to spread the story of Lithuanian Catholic oppression. In March of 1972, the first article of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* was collected and distributed. According to the memoirs of the priest Sigitas Tamkevičius, one of the first organizers of the *Chronicle*, several priests met, discussing the need for “a publication which would awaken national and especially religious consciousness and would reflect the problems of Catholic life.”¹⁰¹ Tamkevičius and collaborators Petras Plumpa-Pluiras and underground nun Genovaite Navickaite then compiled information on the recent trials and various Soviet actions against the Catholic Church.

The process of collecting and editing the material posed many risks. One problem occurred because of the relative rarity of typewriters, which were illegal and very difficult to hide. In particular, typewriters with a Lithuanian alphabet were extremely hard to come by and extremely hard to attribute to non-dissident purposes if found by the KGB. Using an illegal “Era” copy machine, the collaborators distributed copies to trusted friends, who would often create more copies of the *Chronicle* in turn. Eventually, the editors hoped the *Chronicle* would reach the West, so that international pressure would be put on the Soviet Union to alter its religious policies. After three months, the *Chronicle* reached the United States and was published in emigrant newspapers there, soon spreading to Lithuanian emigrant communities around the

¹⁰⁰ Archbishop Tamkevičius, "The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania," *lkbkronkia.lt*, accessed on 8/5/2014.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

world.¹⁰² Inspired by the Moscow *Chronicle of Current Events* but maintaining a religious focus, the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* quickly proved to be a great success, arousing the interest of Lithuanian believers, the KGB, and international observers alike.¹⁰³

The KGB recognized the *Chronicle* as a threat immediately and quickly sought to locate its creators. First notified of the existence of the *Chronicle* in April of 1972 by agents within the Catholic Church, the Lithuanian KGB soon made investigation of the *Chronicle* an assignment of high priority.¹⁰⁴ In August of 1972, Criminal Case No. 345, addressing the *Chronicle*, was opened. By this point, the KGB had gathered some information on the *Chronicle*, but its main attention was directed at publishers of underground religious literature who were not directly connected with the publication, while the real editor, Tamkevičius, was not yet mentioned. KGB officials sought out suspected collaborators, investigating the handwriting of possible collaborators, and investigating typewriters in order to determine which ones were most likely to have been used by *Chronicle* editors, as well as questioning agents within the Catholic hierarchy and searching the homes of suspects.¹⁰⁵

By 1973, the KGB had targeted on several suspects, aiming to arrest them and thus put a stop to the nationalist sentiment and religious fanaticism they felt the *Chronicle* engendered.¹⁰⁶ In October 1973, the investigation department of the KGB approved the “Plan of Secret Service and Strategic Means and Investigation Acts to Halt the Organized Hostile Activity of the Group of People Publishing the *Chronicle* and Other Religious and Ideologically Harmful Literature.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² "KGB Struggle Against Kronika in Lithuania and in the West," lkbkronika.lt, accessed on 8/5/2014.

¹⁰³ Archbishop Tamkevičius, "The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania," lkbkronika.lt, accessed on 8/5/2014.

¹⁰⁴ LYA f. K-40, ap. 1, b. 199, l. 89. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ LYA f. K-1, ap. 10, b. 396, l. 97. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

¹⁰⁷ LYA f. K-40, ap. 1, b. 199, l. 104. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

Fifteen suspects were named in the plan, including Zdebskis and Tamkevičius. At this point, the KGB had managed to usefully deploy agents to actively gather information, eventually arresting Petras Plumpa-Pluiras on November 19, 1973.¹⁰⁸ By 1974, the KGB's circle of suspects had narrowed considerably, but the KGB still had not closed in on their ultimate target, Tamkevičius. On March 20, 1974, KGB agents searched the apartment and garage of Father Tamkevičius, finding two issues of the *Chronicle*.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, Tamkevičius was arrested and sent to prison, but his collaborators carried his work on, continuing to publish the *Chronicle* until 1988. Further operations to arrest the editors of the *Chronicle* commenced, with varying degrees of success throughout the period, most notably in 1982/3 with KGB's "Operation Spiderweb."¹¹⁰

The KGB's methods to combat dissidents did not just take the form of punishing dissidents for teaching children or assisting the *Chronicle*, however. The KGB also worked to establish a counter-propaganda campaign about the dissidents and the *Chronicle*. In 1973, in the October plan to halt the *Chronicle*, a disinformation campaign was planned in order to prevent a negative reaction to the arrests of *Chronicle* leaders by local and emigrant believers. "In order to reduce an undesirable reaction, quickly prepare and publish an article in republic publications and in *Gimtasis kraštas*, a newspaper intended for Lithuanian emigrants, exposing the present actions as those of speculators seeking to use the feelings of believers to profit," the order stated.¹¹¹ A plan to discredit the "priests-reactionaries" conceived in August 1974 obligated local KGB officials to collect material discrediting arrested suspects in the eyes of priests and believers by sending letters signed by 'a group of priests' condemning their activities. Zdebskis in

¹⁰⁸ "Case No. 305," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #13, 1974, 6.

¹⁰⁹ "Case No. 345," *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #10, 1974, 15.

¹¹⁰ LYA f. K-11, ap. 1, b. 3549, l. 3, 4. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt; LYA f. K-40, ap. 1, b. 235, l. 282-288. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

¹¹¹ LYA f. K-40, ap. 1, b. 199, l. 105. KGB Veikla Lietuvoje. Kgbveikla.lt.

particular bore the brunt of many KGB-led rumors, including that he kept mistresses and had a son.¹¹² Setting aside the effectiveness of these rumors, they played an important role for the KGB in that they helped to move the public conversation about arrests of priests away from questions of politics or religion and instead towards a more sensationalistic, criminal portrayal of the priests' actions.

In 1979 Father Tamkevičius explained his dissent to the Soviet regime thusly: “As a priest I have not only the right, but the obligation, to fight against atheism, which, according to my deepest convictions, has during the postwar years created a spiritual vacuum. It has destroyed moral foundations and opened the gates to a multitude of crimes which the prewar, deeply religious Lithuania did not even imagine.”¹¹³ His ardent defense of his beloved Church did not match with the rhetoric espoused by the official leaders of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, such as the rector of the country's, who supposedly gave an interview to an English-language Moscow newspaper, *Moscow News*, in 1976. Although the interview's veracity was later disputed, in the article, the rector states, “There is full freedom of conscience in Soviet Lithuania.... Soviet law guarantees the rights of believers.”¹¹⁴ Even more divisive than the split between loyal and dissident clergy, however, was the change in the relationship between the KGB and the Catholic Church. Because so many members of Lithuanian clergy participated in the dissident movement, the KGB could no longer be confident that by asserting control over a few of the top church officials, they could largely control the entire apparatus.

¹¹² “KGB Struggle Against the Kronika in Lithuania and in the West”, *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, lkbkronika.lt, accessed 8/5/2014.

¹¹³ “An Open Letter from Fr. Sigitas Tamkevičius to the Prosecutor's Office of the Lithuanian SSR,” *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #40, October 19, 1979, 47.

¹¹⁴ Viktoras Rutkus, qtd. in “Myth and Reality,” *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #24, October 1, 1976, 4.

To some degree, the Lithuanian dissent movement grew out of Soviet-wide political forces, yet the movement's particularly religious character arose as a reaction to Lithuanian Catholicism's years of institutional repression by the Soviet regime and the unofficial community of believers that was able to overcome attempts by the KGB to extinguish it. For the KGB, who ultimately wanted to control not just the public's actions, but also their attitudes, the dissident movement made their task immeasurably harder. No longer could the KGB optimistically speak of the inevitable withering away of the Church, for the dissident movement, at the very least, highlighted that there were many people involved with the Church who vehemently sought to protect it. Furthermore, the Catholic dissident movement's work in calling attention, both locally and internationally, to the Soviet government's treatment of the Catholic Church placed the KGB under a much greater position of scrutiny. The *Chronicle* especially, in giving a voice to a previously silenced group of believers, fundamentally altered the position of the Church in regards to the KGB as a whole, placing the KGB in a position of reactive defense and highlighting the degree to which Catholicism maintained its hold upon the self-identity of many Lithuanians. On the whole, the Catholic dissident movement opened the door for dissent throughout the nation, starting with pleas for legality and more limited requests that eventually led to a broader, more explicitly nationalist movement that was able to expand the boundaries of Catholic and secular protest in Lithuania.

Conclusion

In 1974, underground nun Nijole Sadunaite was arrested and sent into exile for assisting with the publication and distribution of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*. Informed by her guard of her sentence, Sadunaite is reported to have written, "The security agents made me very happy when they said that even were I exiled for ten years, they would not

allow me to take a single vacation. It means that Lithuania is alive! The security police fear us!”¹¹⁵ For Sadunaite and other dissidents like her, promoting the *Chronicle* and protesting Soviet oppression of the Catholic Church was not merely work to improve the lot of the Church, but also the nation of Lithuania as whole.

In the context of the Soviet Union as whole, the Lithuanian Catholic Church posed a challenge to the Soviet order that was unique not in substance, but in scale. Aspects of Catholic belief that threatened the Soviet Union—nationalistic ties, appeal to youth, the presence of an established, non-Soviet belief system, ties to the West, and opposition to the state policy of atheism—could all be found in other religions within the Soviet Union. Yet in Lithuania, these problems all converged to form a uniquely potent obstacle in the Soviet attempt to win the loyalty and faith of its Lithuanian citizens. Because of the ties that the Catholic Church had to national self-identity in Lithuania, the KGB could never be fully successful in curbing Catholic belief by focusing solely on the institutional apparatus of the Church. The individual relationship that everyday believers in Lithuania maintained with the Church, combined with the extremely high percentage of Lithuanians who professed Catholicism, made the KGB struggle to eradicate Catholicism one that needed to be fought on a personal level. For the KGB, fighting manifestations of Catholicism meant fighting to maintain the priority of Soviet ideas and Soviet identity among the Lithuanian populace.

Fighting in the realms of the official church apparatus, unofficial belief, and later, against the dissident movement, the KGB faced in the Catholic Church a grave challenge to the same Soviet social order they were tasked with protecting. Because Lithuania’s nationhood had long been intimately tied to the Lithuanian Catholic Church, struggles to preserve the influence of the

¹¹⁵ “Our Prisoners,” *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* #41, January 1, 1980, 98.

Church were also struggles to maintain the possibility of identifying as a Catholic and as a Lithuanian. While the KGB was able to constrain the institutional power of the Catholic Church in the early decades of Soviet Lithuanian rule, the KGB could never fully undermine the unofficial connections that everyday Catholics believers maintained with the Church, and as such, were unable to prevent the Church from developing a dissent movement that would eventually play a crucial role in gaining Lithuanian independence.

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