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# THE ATTITUDE OF BELIEVERS TO THE CONFESSIONAL POLICY OF THE SOVIET REGIME IN LITHUANIA IN THE PERIOD 1944–1953

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In the summer of 1944 Lithuania became one of the republics of the Soviet Union in which radical political and social reforms were to be carried out. These reforms gradually began to change the activities of all the churches existing in the country. The latest Lithuanian historiography has comprehensively revealed the scope of the persecution of Lithuania's churches in the Stalin era – a lot is known about the methods by which the Soviet regime carried out its anti-church policies.<sup>1</sup> In analyzing this apparently exhausted problem, however, one is justified in asking whether the faithful did not oppose such policies from the outset, and did not defend their repressed clergy, but instead passively observed the closing of churches? In historiography the opposition of the faithful to the Soviet regime in the USSR is usually associated with the activities of the bishops and clergy. In Lithuania such resistance did not generally begin until the 1960s and 1970s, when underground organizations appeared and “The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania” began to be issued.<sup>2</sup> Believers did,

<sup>1</sup> Vardys Vytautas **Stanley**, *The Catholic Church, Dissent and Nationality in Soviet Lithuania* (Columbia University Press, 1978), 62–79; Regina **Laukaitytė**, “Attempts to Sovietize the Catholic Church in Lithuania, 1944–49” – *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 3 (1998), 110–135; Kazys **Misius**, “Bažnyčių uždarinėjimas Lietuvoje pokario metais” – *LKMA Metraštis*, 12 (1998), 75–101; Arūnas **Streikus**, *Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje (1944–1990)* (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos centras, 2002), 88–154; *Krikščionybės Lietuvoje istorija* (Vilnius: LKMA, 2006), 462–475; Darius **Petkūnas**, *The Repression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania during the Stalin Era* (Klaipėdos universiteto leidykla, 2011), etc.

<sup>2</sup> Михаил **Шкаровский**, *Русская Православная Церковь при Сталине и Хрущеве* (Москва: Издательство Крутицкого подворья, 2005), 217–261; Pranas **Dauknyis**, *The Resistance of the Catholic Church in Lithuania against Religious Persecution* (Rome, 1984), 48–54; **Streikus**, “The Resistance of the Church to the Soviet Regime from

however, try various methods to circumvent the constraints on religious life, and to resist the policies of the regime in the Stalin era (1944–1953). In reality, they did not have many alternatives.

In this paper we would like to discuss more specifically and in greater detail two episodes concerning the attitude of believers to the actions of the Soviet authorities: 1) parishioners' efforts to use legal methods – demands and requests – to put pressure on government institutions, and in this way to defend the repressed clergy and to prevent churches from being closed, and 2) the “moving” of the faithful to the underground, efforts to maintain the traditions of religious life, ignoring the discriminatory Soviet laws and the demands of the local authorities. In the first case the authorities completely ignored the protests, and the believers failed to halt the wave of repressions against the priests. However, in the second case the officials of the Soviet regime had to retreat and reopen a majority of the churches that they had put on the list of churches marked for closure in 1948 and 1949.

The research is based on the sources contained in the Lithuanian archives – the correspondence of government officials, the complaints and requests sent to the offices of the Soviet authorities (to Moscow and Vilnius, to the Council for Religious Cults at the LSSR Council of Ministers (CRC); this institution appeared in Vilnius in September 1944), as well as on an analysis of the existing data in criminal cases involving members of the clergy. Thus the analysis sought to embrace the characteristic occurrences that reflected the “voice of the people” and the regime's view of those occurrences. The object of the research is the people, the moods of believers, and their expressions.

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In contrast to Latvia and Estonia, Lithuania is a mono-ethnic Catholic state. In fact, Lithuania was the only Catholic region in the Soviet Union. At the beginning, the middle, and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an absolute majority of the inhabitants – more than 80% – were Catholic Lithuanians. This situation encouraged the Soviet regime to pay particular attention to the Catholic Church in Lithuania. Due to its universality, its subordination to the Vatican and the latter's clear hostility to the atheistic Bol-

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1944 to 1967” – *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Pasauliui apie mus, 2006), 84–112.

shevik regime, the Catholic Church was completely distrusted by the Soviet authorities. The most painful and fateful blows against the Catholic Church in Lithuania were struck in the years 1948–1949. Having dealt with disloyal Ordinaries and priests in this brief period, and having completed the registration of the country's churches, clergy and parishes and the nationalization of church property, having liquidated all religious orders, leaving only one state-controlled seminary, etc., the structure of the Catholic Church in Lithuania changed radically, and the autonomy of the Ordinaries' functions was undermined.<sup>3</sup>

The churches of Lithuania's religious minorities also encountered the regime's persecution. The Soviet authorities sought to centralize the management of the churches and religious communities functioning in the USSR, in order to simplify their administration and control by establishing councils representing them, and centres<sup>4</sup> (even for those faiths that had traditionally never had such a church organization). In Lithuania this principle was only partially observed, because the authorities concentrated only on the larger religious communities. The tactic of ignoring the smaller denominations was maintained, with the expectation that their scanty members disperses, after which the community itself would rapidly disappear. There were very few religious minorities in Lithuania: during the 1923 census 30 religions were identified in the country, but only seven of them had more than 1,000 followers (Catholics 85.7%, Jews 7.65%, Lutherans 3.28%, Old Believers 1.59%, Orthodox 1.13%, Protestants 0.53% and Muslims 0.05% of the total population). All of the other religious communities combined had only 998 members.<sup>5</sup> The quantitative proportion of minorities changed little over two decades, except for the Jewish community, which was eliminated during the German occupation.

Only the Orthodox Church in Lithuania consolidated its structure in the post-war period (in contrast to the total weakening of all of the

<sup>3</sup> Laukaitytė, "Attempts...", 134–135.

<sup>4</sup> Михаил **Одинцов**, Совет по делам религиозных культов при СНК СССР в 1944–1945 гг.: обязанности и сфера компетенции, организационная структура и основные направления деятельности. <http://www.rusoir.ru/president/works/186> January 18, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Lietuvos gyventojai. Pirmojo 1923 m. rugsėjo 17 d. visuotino gyventojų surašymo duomenys* (Kaunas: Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, [1924]), XL.

other creeds). Just as in the Ukraine, in 1944–1948 the Council of the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council of Ministers of the USSR demanded that the Lithuanian Orthodox bishop begin a campaign against Catholicism, to criticize its dogmas, discredit its doctrine, etc. In order to strengthen the prestige and structure of the Church (there were only 44 Orthodox parish churches and 48 priests), a theological seminary was founded, the Orthodox churches damaged in the war were rebuilt and repaired, the relics of saints were returned from Moscow for adoration by believers, two Orthodox monasteries were permitted in Vilnius, while Catholic monasteries were closed throughout the country, accompanied by continuous discrimination against the scattered monks and nuns. However, Soviet support for Orthodox communities was not welcomed by the local authorities in the Lithuanian SSR, who in many cases opposed the privileges granted to the Orthodox diocese. By the autumn of 1948 the local authorities had succeeded in convincing the Soviet central government not to base its struggle against Catholicism on the potential of the Orthodox Church.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Catholic Church was the main target of the Soviet regime's confessional policies in Lithuania, and not just because of the regime's fanatical atheism. Lithuanian Catholics then considered and today still consider Catholicism to be one of the most important components of their national consciousness. From the times of the national revival in the nineteenth century in tsarist Russia, successive generations of Lithuanians realized that their small nation could only survive by opposing the influences of foreign cultures and religions.<sup>7</sup> One of the most prominent events in Lithuania's history is connected with the resistance of Catholics to the restriction of the freedom of their church activities, as symbolised by the events in Krazhiai (a small city in the depths of Lithuania) at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the people did not allow tsarist government officials to close one of the churches in their town. For several months the people stood watch in the church, not allowing the ostensory containing the Blessed Sacrament to be removed and resisting the Cossacks who had

<sup>6</sup> Laukaitytė, "The Orthodox Church in Lithuania during the Soviet Period" – *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 7(2002), 92–93.

<sup>7</sup> Tomas Remeikis, *Opposition to Soviet Rule in Lithuania, 1945–1980* (Chicago: Institute of Lithuanian Studies Press, 1980), 16.

been dispatched to restrain them. The events in Krazhiai were followed by the public trial that found broad resonance in Lithuania and throughout the world. It became entrenched in popular memory as the terrible “Krazhiai Massacre”, which raised national consciousness and developed a sense of national solidarity and self-determination.<sup>8</sup>

After 1944, however, when the losses of Lithuania’s Catholic Church were significantly greater (it lost not only many churches and chapels, but also cathedrals, seminaries, and all of its monasteries) there was no “second Krazhiai”. What had changed over the intervening 50 years? Was it the consciousness of the people or the country in which the crude policy of discrimination against believers was repeated? What defensive measures were the people able to take in the middle of the twentieth century?

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It must be emphasised that in the Stalin era neither the various ranks of the clergy nor believers were passive observers of the destruction of religious life. In the years 1944–1947, when the registration of churches and priests had not yet been completed, and almost all of the Catholic bishops and heads of other churches had been arrested, the clergy persistently defended its rights. Bishops and the clergy of various confessions wrote complaints to government institutions in which they protested against the banning of religious publications, the teaching of religion and group catechising in churches, and also drew attention to the impropriety of the large church taxes; parish pastors and monasteries protested the confiscation of church buildings and land, and bishops reacted to the more frequent arrests of members of the clergy. In 1948 the situation changed greatly – both the new people in the leadership of the churches and the clergy, although still at liberty, lived in an atmosphere of observation and terrorization. However, after the lessening of the dissatisfaction expressed by the clergy, believers began to defend their rights more actively – there was most likely not a single church whose parishioners did not protest against the discriminatory activities of the government directly affecting them in the years 1948–1953.

<sup>8</sup> *Kražių skerdynės*. Ed. Leonas Mulevičius (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidykla, 1993), 151; Abas **Stražas**, “Lithuania 1863–1893: Tsarist Russification and the Beginnings of the Modern Lithuanian National Movement” – *Lituanus*, 42/3 (Fall 1996). [http://www.lituanus.org/1996/96\\_3\\_03.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/1996/96_3_03.htm) January 18, 2013.

In the Stalin era in Lithuania, hundreds of members of the clergy were arrested (in 1944–1953, 365 were convicted).<sup>9</sup> In 1946–1947 four of the five bishops remaining in Lithuania suffered repression. In 1944–1946 the main scheme for the repression of Lithuania’s Catholic clergy, which was essentially maintained later, became clear – they were charged with relations with the partisan underground or anti-Soviet propaganda. When evidence for this was insufficient, they were charged with anti-Soviet activities that had allegedly been committed in still independent Lithuania (more active political and social activity from 1918–1940, especially work in youth organizations, would serve as proof), anti-Soviet agitation and “collaboration” in the years of the German occupation.

In the first post-war years, people could have had an influence on the fate of arrested priests if their criminal cases came to trial – usually at the military tribunal of the Lithuanian SSR NKVD/MVD. At least two defence strategies became clear at the trials. First of all, the distinctive circumstances of the investigation were made public at the trial – the accused priests and witnesses often renounced their testimony, declaring that the interrogators had obtained it by force or deceit. On the other hand, the priests being tried and their lawyers would undertake an effective defence, demanding that the witnesses they called be heard, and these witnesses “neutralized” those chosen by the interrogators (there was an effort to declare them to be biased and politically unreliable), collected certificates about how those being tried rescued Jews during the years of the German occupation, interceded for former Soviet activists, etc.

For example, the court returned the case of Reverend Vladas Pozhela three times for additional investigation. During the German occupation he had served as the chaplain of Shiauliai prison, and former political prisoners testified and wrote statements to various institutions about how V. Pozhela had helped the prisoners and had collected food products for them, etc.<sup>10</sup> Even though the court failed to prove his guilt, V. Pozhela

<sup>9</sup> Vytautas **Tininis**, *Sovietinė Lietuva ir jos veikėjai* (Vilnius: Enciklopedija, 1994), 72.

<sup>10</sup> December 20, 1946 interrogation transcript of V. Pozhela; statements signed by 16 and three persons to the Lithuanian MIA [Ministry of Internal Affairs] tribunal (in the latter, in which persons were testifying against V. Pozhela – thieves and recidivists are discredited; the May 30, 1947 statement signed by 7 persons to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Lithuanian SSR Supreme Council Justas Paleckis; statement of Petras Zhivoltas to the Lithuanian SSR MIA prosecutor (for this statement he was fired from his job at the editorial staff of the “Tiesa” newspaper), Lithuanian Special

was sentenced to 25 years in a labour camp by the Special Council of the USSR NKVD/MGB “for betraying the homeland”. In 1946, after arresting Bronius Matusevichius, the pastor of Dotnuva, the chairman of the Kedainiai district security service received at least three statements in which people affirmed that they had escaped repression by the Germans due to this priest. As many as 93 persons signed one of the statements.<sup>11</sup> Probably the most signatures on a statement sent to the Lithuanian SSR Interior Affairs and Security Ministers, however, were collected by the inhabitants of Betygala – 296 of them testified that their arrested 75 year old pastor Pranas Janulaitis was “a good man who never fought against the Soviet authorities and never became involved in political matters, but only carried out his direct duties as a servant of the faith”.<sup>12</sup>

In the defence strategy used by the Russian Orthodox and Old Believers, a noticeable role was played by the testimonies of former Soviet partisans regarding the fact that during visits to the clergy they would receive food and moral support or at least not be betrayed, even though the clergy knew a lot about them.<sup>13</sup>

However, politicized trials did their work. After looking over the multitude of criminal cases involving members of the clergy, there were only a few in which the arrested person was released, whereas all of the others (even those cleared by the above-mentioned trial) failed to regain their freedom. Their cases would increasingly often be sent to Moscow – to the Special Council of the USSR NKVD/MGB, which issued uniform

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Archive (Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas, LYA), fund K 1 (Lithuanian SSR division of KGB), inventory 58, file P 14208, l. 187–188, 209–210, 211, 1–37, 1–38 et al.

<sup>11</sup> Statements to head of Kedainiai district security service: on November 22, 1946 Bronislovas and Edvardas Daugela, on November 23, 1946 Feliksas Mikutavichius, statement of citizens of the Dotnuva district, *Ibid.*, file 9324/3, l. 152–1, 152–5, 152–6.

<sup>12</sup> June 3, 1948 petition, *Ibid.*, file 36078/3, l. 200–202.

<sup>13</sup> Statement signed by four former partisans about the loyalty of the Ibenai Old Believer parish clergyman Joanikij Abramov and addressed to the Soviet government, *Ibid.*, file 25345/3, l. 139; June 15, 19, 21, 1950 testimonies of four former partisans in the case of Jurgelishkiai Old Believer clergyman Josif Marzuto, *Ibid.*, file 17932/3, l. 64–65, 67, 70–72, 73–74; January 13, 1950 statement of former partisan Luka Kudrashov to USSR Interior Affairs Minister, Fyodor Kudrashov – LSSR Interior Affairs Minister in the case of Old Believer Epifan Rybakov, *Ibid.*, file P 12100, l. 120, 122–123; November 14, 1944 statement of former partisan Alefina Maimusova to the head of the Lithuanian SSR NKGB in the case of Orthodox priest Luka Golod, *Ibid.*, file 4012, l. 36; April 6, 1951 testimony of Vera Reznikova in the case of Orthodox priest Aleksandr Nesterovich, *Ibid.*, file P 12162, l. 70 et al.



verdicts involving various lengths of incarceration in labour camps or prisons.

In the cases of priests Antanas Rukas and Kazimieras Pukenas, the Special Council of the USSR NKVD/MGB issued a verdict after the LSSR NKVD/MVD war tribunal found them not guilty. The latter pastor of Kazokine K. Pukenas was acquitted twice! The court discussed the case of pastor of Vidishkiai A. Rukas three times; after an acquittal verdict was reached, like K. Pukenas, he was not freed, but the case was returned to the war prosecutor for additional investigation. The Special Council sentenced K. Pukenas to 10 years, and A. Rukas to 7 years in labour camps.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned above, various parishes' believers defended against the closure of churches much more effectively. The great campaign of closing Lithuania's churches began during the time of their registration. According to Soviet law, clergymen of all confessions could work in their parishes only after they had received a certificate of registration from the CRC of the LSSR Council of Ministers; religious communities (parishes) could function (and their corresponding buildings could be used for cult purposes) when the local Soviet executive committee registered the so-called twenty-parishioner board with its executive and inspection committees. The executive committee of the parish had to conclude a contract with local Soviet authorities to place at its disposal the church's nationalized property, to pay taxes for its use, to perform repairs, etc. The long delayed registration of Catholic churches and "servants of cults" took place in 1948. During this period about 200 churches, i.e. almost one-third of the total, were closed or planned to be closed in the immediate future.<sup>15</sup>

The cessation of such a radical decrease in the number of active churches was probably the only clear victory achieved by believers in Lithuania. The resistance of the residents of smaller cities was especially determined. They showed great solidarity, collecting hundreds of signatures. It is interesting that the lowest-level Soviet officials, i.e. collective

<sup>14</sup> December 26, 1945, September 14, 1946 verdicts of the LSSR NKVD army war tribunal court in the case of K. Pukenas. *Ibid.*, file P 5483, l. 102–103, 135–136; the verdicts of the decisions of the same court in the case of A. Rukas: March 7, June 29, September 26, 1947 verdicts, *Ibid.*, file 36133/3, l. 125–128, 200–203, 244.

<sup>15</sup> 1952 second quarter informational report of B. Pushinis, Commissioner of the CRC to the Lithuanian SSR Council of Ministers, Central State Archive of Lithuania (Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas, LCVA), fund R 181, inventory 3, file 32, l. 51–52.



farm (*kolkhoz*) chairmen and district deputies, who probably had illusions about the Soviet regime's religious policies, participated actively in protests against the closure of churches.

In 1948 twenty local district and village deputies signed a petition addressed to Lithuanian SSR Supreme Council Chairman Justas Paleckis demanding that the church in Sheshtokai not be closed, and that its out-buildings not be confiscated;<sup>16</sup> analogously, the leaderships of three collective farms and about 60 parishioners signed a petition demanding permission for a priest to visit the church in Upyna in the Luoke district at least once a month;<sup>17</sup> the chairmen of three *kolkhozes* signed a statement requesting that a priest be assigned to the church in Kontauchiai;<sup>18</sup> after learning about the order to the Chairman of the Alytus District Executive Committee to expel the pastor of Punia parish, three people's deputies and 122 believers opposed it;<sup>19</sup> the statement of the Parish Committee for the appointment of a priest to Skardupiai church was signed by the chairmen of two *kolkhozes*;<sup>20</sup> when the Prienai Executive Committee was transferring the pastor of Ishlauzhas, the local *kolkhoz* chairman signed a "mercy plea" addressed to the CRC Commissioner including 15 pages bearing the signatures of 1057 parishioners (the request was nonetheless disregarded and the pastor was transferred)<sup>21</sup> et al.

Disappointed with Lithuania's government institutions, believers often appealed to the Soviet government, addressed requests to the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union and to Stalin himself. Their argumentation was essentially one and the same. Their demands most often based on the freedoms granted in the Stalin-era constitution, stressing the deep roots and importance of religious values. The believers emphasised that the churches built with their funds and hands and in which their parents and

<sup>16</sup> July 16, 1948 statement of the deputies to J. Paleckis, *Ibid.*, inv. 1, file 26, l. 194.

<sup>17</sup> Statement of the "Ginteniai", "Upyna", "Kirkliai" collective farm leaderships and collective farm workers to the CRC Commissioner, *Ibid.*, file 44, l. 33.

<sup>18</sup> June 18, 1950 statement of the "Saufetekis", "Galybe", "Naujoji vaga" collective farm chairmen to the CRC Commissioner, *Ibid.*, l. 41.

<sup>19</sup> September 1, 1949 statement of the Punia neighbourhood deputies, church committee and believers to the CRC Commissioner, *Ibid.*, file 33, l. 103.

<sup>20</sup> Skardupiai parish committee statement to the CRC Commissioner signed by the chairmen of the "Gulbinishkiai" and "Skardupiai" collective farms, *Ibid.*, file 33, l. 61.

<sup>21</sup> June 25, 1950 "Mercy plea" to the CRC Commissioner, *Ibid.*, file 44, l. 42–43.

ancestors had prayed for centuries were being encroached upon. However, their requests contained no shortage of the new Soviet rhetoric – stressing that the petitioners were conscientiously carrying out their obligations to the state, and that collective farm workers, employees or old people (“Soviet peasants”, “working class Catholics”, “believing workers”) were seeking justice. It was argued that when travelling to distant churches on Sundays, they were unable to participate in the lectures, meetings, etc. organized by Soviet officials. The believers easily integrated the priests into their changed life (according to the faithful of one parish, on holidays the priest had to serve the religious needs of his parishioners, while on work days he can “help strengthen our young collective farms”<sup>22</sup>).

In many petitions the declared trust in the government sounded like a demand to accept responsibility for freedom of conscience. Nevertheless, direct dissatisfaction with the regime only rarely slipped into the texts of such petitions. It could hardly be otherwise. The anti-religious policies of the Soviet regime in 1948–1953 were carried out against the background of collectivization, the suppression of resistance by armed partisans and large scale deportations. In such a situation the declared loyalty of the faithful was essentially only an expression of preliminary self-defence and accommodation to the real conditions of life. After the war the critical situation that occurred in Krazhiai at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the faithful not only sent delegates to the tsar, but also did not abandon the church that was to be closed, was avoided. This time life was being destroyed from its very foundations, and dealing with dissidents had become an everyday matter. There were no opportunities to attract the attention of the broader society by publicizing events in the country or abroad.

The Soviet government always tried to avoid publicity about its anti-church activities. The press was absolutely silent about the registration of churches and priests – “cult servants” in 1948, and related information regarding the scale of the closure of churches and arrests of members of the clergy. No explanation of Soviet laws on church matters or comment about their implementation was ever made public. In other words, the implementers of church policies carefully avoided “mobilizing the

<sup>22</sup> Statement of Skardupiai parish committee to CRC Commissioner (in 1949), *Ibid.*, file 33, l. 61.

attention of the faithful to the struggle with religion”.<sup>23</sup> Their target was to neutralize the unavoidable dissatisfaction and opposition of the believers. When conflicts arose, therefore, an effort was made to ascertain and frighten the most active, and to channel events towards fruitless correspondence with higher institutions. Positive changes could only take place in cases in which the opinions of the representatives of the Soviet central government and the government of the Lithuanian SSR differed, or a clear violation of the law had taken place.

Although the Soviet system declared that it represented the interests of the “people”, government institutions were not inclined to adjust their decisions, especially ideological ones, and thus the complaints or demands of the faithful were usually not heard. In the worst cases, those who resisted Soviet anti-religious policies had to wait for reciprocal actions. The security services would seek to find out who had initiated the collection of signatures, while the local authorities tried to minimize the level of dissatisfaction. One should note that the highest institutions in the Soviet Union did not become directly involved in the details of religious policy – all of the petitions of the faithful were normally returned to the direct executors of religious policies (the Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults) in Vilnius, who would also reply to the petitioners.

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Although the conditions for church activities changed drastically during the decade of Stalin’s rule, they did not initially have a great effect on the religiosity of the people, especially in smaller towns. As could be expected, the religious life that was not tolerated by the Soviet regime began to function underground, and was expressed in illegal forms. The USSR’s annual religious statistics showed a declining trend in the number of persons taking part in rites, but as in other areas of Soviet public life, the official statistics had implications and did not reflect the real situation. On the contrary, the Soviet government had to look for methods to fight the continuously arising new forms of religious expression, observing the peculiar “globalization” of the problem. For example, as a result

<sup>23</sup> April 9, 1954 statement of B. Pushinis, Lithuanian Commissioner of the CRC, to Ivan Polianskii, Chairman of the CRC at the USSR Council of Ministers, *Ibid.*, file 80, l. 48.

of the closure of Catholic churches on a massive scale in Belarus, and by not allowing the opening of Orthodox churches and other churches in the Kaliningrad region, during the major church holy days or even on ordinary days the faithful inundated the shrines on the border of Lithuania as well as those of the Catholics, Orthodox and Old Believers in Vilnius and Kaunas.<sup>24</sup> The believers of other religions most likely resorted to similar “migration” tactics. In Lithuania there was a widespread phenomenon in which people tried to carry out the most important religious obligations (the sacraments of confession, baptism, marriage, etc.) in places where they hoped not to be recognized.

No special sacred space was needed for many religious minority cults (religious services usually took place in ordinary halls or apartments), and the services could be conducted by persons who had no special spiritual education but had impeccable moral qualifications and had mastered religious practices, and some communities even did without them. These factors greatly increased the possibilities for the survival of the religious minorities in the USSR under the Soviet regime.

Religious minorities were eliminated from Lithuania’s major cities – in 1948–1951 even previously registered churches and houses of worship were consistently closed, until there were only one or two left (except for the Old Believers, Orthodox, Lutherans and Reformed Evangelicals). The communities of religious minorities whose houses of worship the Soviet government did not register or whose networks were completely uprooted (Jews, Baptists, Adventists, Methodists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims and Karaites) continued to exist underground. The faithful would gather in a conspiratorial manner in each other’s homes and cemeteries, and “illegal” (i.e. unregistered) clergy also appeared.<sup>25</sup>

In 1948 the Lithuanian SSR registered only two Jewish communities – in Vilnius and Kaunas – but stubbornly ignored applications for the registration of communities that existed in other cities, so they acted “illegally”.<sup>26</sup> In 1951 the Commissioner was alarmed that the Old Believers

<sup>24</sup> July 17, 1952 statement of Commissioner B. Pushinis to I. Poliaskii, *Ibid.*, file 58, l. 91–92.

<sup>25</sup> Secret statement of April 7, 1954 of Commissioner B. Pushinis to Antanas Sniechkus, First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, *Ibid.*, inv. 3, file 35, l. 44.

<sup>26</sup> 1952 IV quarter informational report of Commissioner B. Pushinis, *Ibid.*, file 32, l. 130.

were distancing themselves from the Supreme Council of the Old Believers formed by the Soviet government – they were creating new parishes with unregistered clergy.<sup>27</sup> Of the 56 houses of worship of the Evangelical Lutherans that had operated before the war, only 33 remained in 1951,<sup>28</sup> and only five of the 14 Reformed communities remained registered in 1953.<sup>29</sup> Only one of the six Lithuanian Muslim mosques was registered, but the faithful would gather in officially closed mosques and adjacent cemeteries and performed rites in homes.<sup>30</sup> After 1948 the Soviet regime successively closed down communities of Baptists (in 1948 eight communities were registered), Methodists (6) and Seventh Day Adventists (6), but they survived even though, due to their small number, they were forced to unite and operate illegally.<sup>31</sup> The Soviet security services had added some Protestant, Old Believers and Jewish branches to the list of extremely dangerous sects. In 1951, for instance, it was planned to move 48 Jehovah's Witness families from Lithuania to the depths of the USSR.<sup>32</sup> The repressions are not known to have helped the regime to deal with this religious community or with other underground church denominations.

Catholics and believers of the more numerous religious minorities had more opportunities to satisfy their religious needs, and thus the scale of their transfer to the underground was relatively smaller. Nevertheless, the efforts of the authorities to regulate religious life through permits/prohibitions forced believers to carry out many of their traditional rituals secretly, violating prohibitions. The liquidated church structures and especially persecuted activities (Catholic monasteries, religious brotherhoods,

<sup>27</sup> Statement of Commissioner B. Pushinis [1951] to I. Polianskii, *Ibid.*, inv. 1, file 49, l. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Secret report of I. Polianskii "Information about religious cults in the USSR in 1951" at Bureau of Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Russian Federation State Archive (Государственный архив Российской Федерации, GARF), fund R 6991, inv. 3, file 85, l. 161.

<sup>29</sup> 1953 fourth quarter informational report of Commissioner B. Pushinis, LCVA, fund R 181, inv. 1, file 36, l. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Report of Commissioner Pushinis "List of registered mosques as of January 1, 1952", *Ibid.*, file 58, l. 3.

<sup>31</sup> 1952 fourth quarter informational report of Commissioner B. Pushinis, *Ibid.*, inv. 3, file 32, l. 131–133, etc.

<sup>32</sup> Михаил Одинцов, "Совет Министров СССР постановляет: 'Выселить навечно!'" (Москва, 2002). <https://religiophobia.appspot.com/jw/smspv.html> January 20, 2013.

the propagation and distribution of religious literature, teaching of the catechism to children, etc.) went underground.<sup>33</sup> All chains (central and local) of the Soviet authorities knew that the underground church existed and fought against it. “Unmasked” individuals usually suffered, but the authorities failed to significantly weaken the underground. On the contrary – after 1953, as the regime became less severe, the trend of its growth and proliferation became clear.

## CONCLUSIONS

As it began to implement anti-church policies in Lithuania, the nascent Soviet regime encountered visible opposition from Church leaders and believers. In the first post-war years the opposition initiative was led by the clergy and church leaders. They reacted to the regime's efforts to eliminate churches from public life, confiscate church property, etc. In 1948, after the registration of churches and priests that was accompanied by the terrorization of the clergy and arrests was completed, the clergy's opposition weakened, but believers began to defend their rights more actively.

The attack against the churches in 1948 and 1949 coincided with the terror against the “kulaks”, partisan families and their supporters during the period of mass deportations. In such circumstances the resistance organised by believers was not only peaceful, but in a certain sense even “pro-Soviet” – they did not mount an uprising against the authorities, but declared that they were obedient citizens of the Soviet state. The anti-religious policies were opposed while not avoiding the new rhetoric about the rights guaranteed by the Stalinist constitution, i.e. the defence of church interests was not linked with criticism of the regime. The Soviet regime successfully stifled the scope of the opposition: dissatisfaction was directed at fruitless correspondence with higher institutions, and due to the information blockade all cases of dissatisfaction remained local and thus did not have any social consequences.

Confronted with the evident hostility of the government representatives and being unable to legalize their communities and houses of

<sup>33</sup> Streikus, *Sovietų valdžios antiibažnytinė politika...*, 128; Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos: XX a. istorijos bruožai* (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 1997), 152–158.

worship in accordance with Soviet laws, the believers of various denominations (especially the religious minorities) continued their religious life illegally, underground. This underground movement was established in the Stalin era, and helped churches to ensure the continuity of their activities and structure.

The inertia with which the faithful of Lithuania encountered the confessional policies of the Soviet regime and their efforts to ignore, circumvent or resist the constraints on religious life slowed the process of making society atheistic. The situation later began to change to the detriment of religion, when the generation that had matured under Soviet indoctrination grew up.