

Reviews

*Land of Crosses: the Struggle for Religious Freedom in Lithuania,
1939-1978*

by Michael Bourdeaux,

Augustine Publishing Company, Chulmleigh, Devon, 1977, xx + 339
pp., £3.00. (Keston Book No. 12).

Few Englishmen can name accurately and in any geographic order the three Baltic Republics, fewer still the names of their capital cities. Yet Lithuania has had a long history, as tortured and confused as that of Ireland. At one time the mainspring of opposition to the Tatar hordes, and the centre of an empire which stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Lithuania has been fought over and for by Russians, Poles and Germans. Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox have battled for the soul of its people, and its language which as a literary form precedes most of the acknowledged tongues of the Baltic region has been at times ignored by its own aristocrats, proscribed by its rulers, forcibly rendered into alien scripts, or denied any expression as the authentic voice of a proud and distinctive culture.

Modern Lithuania emerged from the break-up of the Tsarist Empire. Its brief twenty years of freedom followed a century or more of nationalistic revival, fanned by the ideals of the French Revolution. The struggle was mainly against Russian political and Polish cultural domination, and the re-emergence of the language played the major part in the restoration of a greater Lithuanian consciousness. The Soviet Union recognized Lithuanian independence in 1920.

All this is said by way of prelude to considering Michael Bourdeaux's careful and moving chronicle of the religious history of the country since 1939. Under the share-out agreed between Molotov and Ribbentrop the Baltic States were handed back to the Soviet Union, which had reluctantly seen them establish a genuine independence twenty years earlier. There then began a savage and pitiless persecution of all those in all three states who had been the leading figures in their ebullient na-

tional development. In Lithuania a Communist Party, which in a free election in 1935 had mustered a derisory 1790 votes, produced the members of a People's Parliament for which the population voted in a 95 per cent poll on a single list, and which then unanimously approved the reabsorption of their land into the USSR.

One year later Germany invaded Russia. The Lithuanians revolted at once and support for the Soviet regime melted away. The new provisional government of independent Lithuania lasted six weeks before the Nazi invasion. Four years later the Russians were back, and a new phase of torment began. There was little to choose between the methods of either set of invaders, and indeed little to distinguish in spirit the 20th-century persecutors from those of the centuries which had preceded them. The viciousness of the persecution of religion is given an added edge by the desire to suppress and humiliate Lithuanian nationalism as such.

The majority of present-day Lithuanians are Roman Catholics. The last known figures would give 85 per cent of the population to this Christian allegiance, and *Land of Crosses*, which is based to a considerable degree on the clandestine *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, is the story of the crucifixion of a people. During the Stalin years 300,000 Lithuanians were deported to Siberia, and similar numbers from Estonia and Latvia. Few have ever returned. The names of known victims of torture and death add up to many thousands. Those who are rightly concerned with what is happening today in, say, Central American republics of similar size and population should reflect on these facts too.

Michael Bourdeaux's book consists largely of documents elucidated and presented to portray the fate of the Christians of Lithuania in the 40 years since the great betrayal. The confessors of Christ range from martyred bishops to children or old women. Their simple words before the persecutors echo down the ages from those of Christ before his judges to extracts from the Roman martyrologies. The conversations recorded in the *Chronicle* often present the weird unreality of discourse which Bernard Levin has recently described as Martian. To me there is a reminder of a poignant hour of conversation in a shuttered presbytery with a Lithuanian priest, on a summer's day in a city in the USSR.

The title of the book comes from Lithuania's most sacred shrine, her hill of Calvary, in Siauliai; it is planted with crosses by the faithful, despoiled by the oppressors and as regularly replanted with a new crop of crosses. The book is compulsive reading.

PHILIP L. DANIEL

Note: *Land of Crosses* is now out of print, but copies can be purchased from Keston College.