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Lithuanian Catholic Clergy and the KGB

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The research for this article is mostly based on the archival documents of the former KGB office in Lithuania, which are now located in the Lithuanian Special Archive (Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas (LYA)). The most important documents are from the department which directly controlled and tried to influence the activity of the religious confessions, and include departmental memoranda and operational files on priests. The article does not cover the whole spectrum of KGB operations directed against the church, but concentrates primarily on the recruitment of KGB agents among the Catholic clergy.

Bohdan Bociurkiw has distinguished two approaches to religion on the part of the Soviet authorities: 'fundamentalist' and 'pragmatic'. The 'fundamentalists' operated on the assumption that it would be possible to eliminate religion quickly, while the pragmatists, 'less optimistic about the immediate success of atheistic propaganda', persistently strove to 'sovietise' religious organisations, 'both for reasons of international security and for the sake of the regime's legitimization among the believing masses' (Bociurkiw, 1973, p. 41). These two approaches often reinforced each other: turning church leaders into obedient instruments of the regime helped to weaken church resistance to attacks on it. The policy of the KGB was predominantly of the 'pragmatic' variety.

In Soviet times there were two main types of KGB operative: informers and agents. The informers monitored public sentiment and reported on dissident or resistance activity, while the agents influenced decision-making and carried out government instructions. As far as religion was concerned, government control was exercised through the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), whose activity was less secret in character than that of the KGB, but the KGB also played an important role, and in Lithuania its role was arguably more important than that of the CRA.

The Most Important Task: Undermining the Church Leadership

One of the aims of a successful 'pragmatic' policy was to install an obedient leadership in any given church or religious institution. In 1941 the NKGB (*Narodny komissariat gosudarsvennoi bezopasnosti*, its name until 1946) produced proposals on how to undermine the Catholic Church in Lithuania, which had become part of the Soviet Union in that year. The plan was to organise a split between the passive or 'moderate' and the active or 'reactionary' church leaders and priests. The archbishop of Kaunas, Juozapas Skvireckas, was identified as the main representative of the first group,

and his coadjutor, Bishop Vincentas Brizgys, as the main representative of the second. After that task had been completed the aim was to continue to stimulate discord within the ranks of the 'moderate' clergy. Soviet troops were shortly forced to retreat from Lithuania, but the country was reoccupied in 1944 and the NKGB plan was put into operation.

On 4 September 1944 the Commissar of the NKGB of the Lithuanian SSR Aleksandras Guzevičius signed a directive to the chiefs of the NKGB district departments which identified the main work with clergy as 'dealing with the leaders of the Catholic Church with the aim of bringing them under our influence' (Directive, 1944). In 1945 and 1946 attempts were made to recruit all the bishops remaining in Lithuania as agents or informers of the NKGB. Various types of pressure or inducement were used. The archbishop of Vilnius, Mečislovas Reinys, was promised that if he agreed to collaborate all his relatives who had been sent to places of deportation in 1941 would be released. The bishop of Telšiai, Vincentas Borisevičius, was threatened with imprisonment because of his links with the 'freedom fighters'.¹ In order to persuade the vicar of the Kaunas archdiocese, Stanislovas Jokūbauskis, the NKGB temporarily released from labour camp the famous statesman of the independence period, Fr Vladas Mironas, a signatory of the Independence Act in 1918 and prime minister in 1938–39, but who had been recruited as an agent while in labour camp, so that he could exert influence on the church hierarchy. Jokūbauskis signed an appeal to clergy and believers urging them to end armed resistance, but refused to become a collaborator with the NKGB. The heads of the other dioceses also withstood NKGB blackmail. The response was repression; by mid-1947 there was only one bishop left in Lithuania.

The authorities' plan was to replace the former bishops with recruited priests. At first the efforts of the MGB were directed towards the Kaunas archdiocese, which fell vacant after the death of Jokūbauskis in early 1947 (there is a good deal of indirect evidence that he was poisoned). The MGB (*Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, its name from 1946 to 1953) had prepared itself for such an occasion. In July 1946 it had recruited the canon of the diocese (*kanauninkas*, a member of the diocesan council), Juozapas Stankevičius (codenamed 'Neris'), and had worked out the tactics whereby he would acquire the confidence of the other members of the diocesan council. The plan was successful: first he became chancellor (*kancleris*, the head of the diocesan office), and then on 3 February 1947 he was elected as the administrator of the archdiocese. Immediately after his election he started to operate on the premise that only close collaboration with the Soviet authorities could protect the institutional structure of the church from complete destruction. The authorities' plan was that Stankevičius would eventually become the administrator of all the dioceses in the Lithuanian SSR. In 1949, with the help of the MGB and the local representative of the Council for Religious Affairs, he was elected as administrator of the bishoprics of Vilkaviškis and Kaišiadorys.

From late 1949 the diocese of Telšiai was administrated by Fr Petras Maželis, who had also consented to cooperate secretly with the MGB and had been given the codename 'Petraitis'. Fr Justinas Juodaitis, who administrated the diocese from 1947 to 1949, had been recruited as well, but according to the MGB he had been delivering unsatisfactory information and even disinformation, and had therefore been arrested and sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment.

From 1950, then, most of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was run by men controlled by the Soviet security services. Stankevičius was the administrator of the Kaunas archdiocese, the leading diocese of the church, until 1965; he was thus *primus inter pares* among the church administrators, and church activity in Lithuania

therefore depended closely on his relations with the Soviet authorities. He publicly approved Soviet policy and helped to implement it, attempting by various means (including public appeals and instructions to priests) to reduce guerrilla resistance, actively supporting Soviet foreign policy and international Soviet peace initiatives, and urging the populace to participate in Soviet elections. Although he said nothing in approval of mass deportations of the Lithuanian people he did not protest either. Particularly in the early 1960s he showed a reserved attitude towards the Holy See, corresponding with the anti-Vatican position of the Soviet government (and he was never made a bishop by the Vatican). The Soviet authorities also aimed to regulate the inner life of the church and its pastoral activity. Hardly compatible with the mission of the church was Stankevičius' circular requiring priests to comply with the secular authorities' prohibition on teaching religion to children. Because in practice he alone controlled the interdiocesan seminary in Kaunas, he was also responsible for toleration of the interference of the state authorities in the selection of its students and in the curriculum.

It must be stressed, however, that the Soviet security services never had full confidence in Stankevičius. In March 1949 secret microphones were installed in his office, and they revealed that Stankevičius told two people about his meetings with MGB officers, and that he often voiced antisoviet sentiments (Report, 1949a). The following month he became the object of more intensive surveillance.

Holes in the Web

Alongside the recruitment of church leaders, the MGB also worked with ordinary priests. In early 1948 Department 'O' of the Lithuanian SSR MGB, which at the time controlled the work of religious organisations, had 142 agents keeping a watch on Catholic priests; of these 57 were priests themselves (Report, 1948). In 1956 there were 60 recruited priests out of a total of about 900 working in Lithuania. Comparable figures for other denominations were 4 agents out of 22 Lutheran clergy and 4 out of 52 Orthodox (Report, 1957). In 1970 there were over 100 recruited Catholic priests. This is not in fact such a large number given that virtually all priests were subjected to attempts to recruit them.

Much attention was devoted to shortcomings in the practice of priest recruitment at a meeting of the LSSR KGB leadership on 27 February 1961. The head of the department responsible for church surveillance made some suggestions for improvements. According to him, important elements in the successful recruitment of clergy were 1) to analyse thoroughly the personal features of the candidate; 2) to make sure he was not a 'religious fanatic' (if he was, attempts to recruit him would be a waste of time); 3) to prepare and carefully verify the compromising material. Besides, he added, for priests it was usually very hard to endure recruitment, especially the need for a written promise to collaborate. He therefore proposed the gradual involvement of priests once they had been recruited (Shorthand, 1961).

During the first decade of the Soviet occupation the most effective recruitment technique was threatening the target with punishment for real or imaginary crimes against the Soviet regime. Later, when resistance had declined and almost all the priests against whom it was possible to compose cases of a political nature were already in labour camps, this approach became less effective. The KGB therefore began to make more use of other techniques: appealing to the self-interest of priests or morally discrediting them. Priests recruited in these ways were also found to be more reliable than those simply frightened by the threat of punishment.

With moral blackmail the MGB operatives used not only any real evidence of morally suspect behaviour, but often also fictional evidence which they themselves had created. As a typical example of the latter we may take the attempt to recruit a seminary lecturer, Romualdas Grucė. In 1949 he was arrested when walking with a girl. MGB operatives threatened to announce that they were lovers unless he cooperated with them (Report, 1949b). He refused, but had to leave the seminary and after some months was arrested and sentenced.

The Soviet security forces paid particular attention to the only functioning seminary for priests in Lithuania. Their ideal was that the seminary would prepare only priests faithful to the regime and unfit for the priesthood. So far there is no concrete evidence of infiltration of informers into the seminary, although in the early 1950s the MGB issued directives to this effect, but it is well known that all wishing to study at the seminary were thoroughly vetted and that attempts were made to recruit them. 'Religious fanatics' and those refusing to cooperate with the KGB (*Komitet gosudarsvannoi bezopasnosti*, its name from 1953) on principle had no chance of entering the seminary. Nevertheless the KGB was fairly unsuccessful in recruiting agents. In November 1955 a commission from Moscow inspecting the work of the Fourth Section² of the LSSR KGB stated that 'an absolutely unsatisfactory situation exists in the field of infiltration and recruitment of agents in the Catholic seminary in Kaunas. At the moment there are only three agents among the students of the seminary' (Dokladnaya, 1955). This was out of a total of 77 students in autumn 1955. The situation was not much better 25 years later: out of 50 seminarians seven had been recruited, and the KGB assessed its operative conditions as worse than ever before (Report, 1980). The KGB also controlled the selection of seminary lecturers and members of the seminary's governing body. In the mid-1950s there were four KGB agents among the lecturers. In 1953 Canon Kazimieras Žitkus (recruited in 1947, with the codename 'Radeikis') was appointed rector of the seminary, but the KGB was found him unsatisfactory, suspecting that he did not pass on to them all the information he received, and regarding him as too passive.

It is clear from various KGB notes and reports that a considerable percentage of the recruited priests were not useful: some of them avoided passing on the more important information, some deliberately passed on disinformation, and some would coordinate their reports with the individuals on whom they were to inform.

New Conditions, Old Methods

The most successful period for the KGB was the 1960s and 1970s, when the leadership of all dioceses and the seminary was in the hands of KGB agents. In 1959 the priests Viktoras Butkus and Romualdas Krikščiūnas went to study in Rome. This was an initiative of the Lithuanian SSR KGB, which in 1956 had proposed sending some trustworthy agents to study at the pontifical universities. The plan was that after coming back they would hold important posts in the church hierarchy. According to a KGB report

There is no reason to think that after finishing these studies 'Saulė' will become an enemy of the Soviet system and that as a professional jurist he will defend the interests of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, he is now ready to leave the clergy and to make a statement against the Vatican, but at the moment this is inappropriate, because we foresee for him a role in undermining the church in Lithuania from the inside. (Note, 1961)

After gaining a doctorate in theology in 1961 Butkus returned to Lithuania and was the rector of the seminary until 1989. In 1969 Krikščiūnas was consecrated as a bishop and from 1973 to 1983 he was the apostolic administrator of Panevėžys diocese.

The case of the priests Butkus and Krikščiūnas constituted only one part of the penetration of the Vatican which the KGB started in the mid-1950s and which continued during the Second Vatican Council and after. Reliable priests were sent to Rome to disseminate false information about the position of the Catholic Church in Lithuania, to compromise priests living in Rome who had left Lithuania in 1944, and to inform the Soviet authorities about the plans of the Holy See. Some of them were also seeking authorisation and titles to administer dioceses in Lithuania; according to the KGB, this would raise their authority in Lithuania and create 'excellent circumstances for implementing the policies of the Party in the field of religion' (Report, 1963).

Juozapas Matulaitis-Labukas, who was consecrated a bishop in 1965, had already promised in spring 1959 to maintain regular contact with KGB officers in order to discuss problems connected with the improvement of relationships between the clergy and the government (Note, 1959). In the mid-1960s this link was formalised, and Bishop Matulaitis-Labukas was given the codename 'Daktaras'. Bishop Matulaitis-Labukas replaced Stankevičius, who was eventually repudiated by the Soviet authorities after it became clear that Stankevičius had no chance of becoming a bishop; the authorities needed a new man who would be ready to collaborate but who would also enjoy greater authority in the church. Matulaitis-Labukas was ideally suited for this role. During the Stalin era he had spent ten years in Siberian labour camps, and had close relations with Bishop Matulionis, who himself enjoyed huge authority because of his sufferings in Soviet prisons. The administrator of the Vilnius archdiocese, Česlovas Krivaitis, and the administrator of the Kaišiadorys diocese, Povilas Bakšys, who gained the title of prelate (*prelatus*) during the fourth session of the Second Vatican Council, also became KGB agents (Report, 1963).

The way in which church leaders and priests recruited by the KGB were usually used was as agents of influence. During the 1940s and 1950s their task was to help the authorities to limit the activity of the church as far as possible and to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime with their public statements. From the 1960s, when resistance to restrictions on religious life became more active, the recruited clergy were required to propagate the view that opposition and the struggle for the rights of believers were counterproductive since they worsened relations with the government and divided the church. On 14 February 1979 a plan was drawn up for compromising the Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights (*Katalikų komitetas tikinčiųjų teisėms ginti*).³ It resolved

to charge the agents at the top of the Catholic Church with curbing the extremism of the abovementioned persons, not permitting them to intervene in matters of diocesan administration, denouncing such attempts as factional actions which lead to sectarianism and the destruction of the church from inside. . . . Through influential agents among the clergy and the church community to strengthen the opinion that the extremist activity of the committee members is senseless and harmful, because it strains the relations between the church and the state so that the government will make the sanctions against the church stricter. (Plan, 1979)

During the 1970s criticism of Soviet church policy in Lithuania was voiced ever more strongly by Catholic believers and clergy. Priests recruited by the KGB were losing

their effectiveness, and the church leadership was no longer able to ignore the voice of the religious activists. Useful light is shed on the tensions by an attempt on the part of the authorities to launch an official religious periodical which they planned would strengthen the position of loyal priests by endorsing the correctness of their stance (Omerakh, 1976). However, the moderates in the church did not rush to accept this favour granted by the authorities. The knowledge that the magazine would be used by the authorities for propaganda purposes, and fear of provoking protest from active priests, induced the hierarchs who would be responsible for publishing the magazine to be careful. In February 1979 the chairman of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, Bishop Povilonis, expressed his reservations on the issue in a letter to the secretary of the Liturgical Commission, Fr Vaclovas Aliulis:

We will not be able to produce one like the newspapers in East Germany. We will have to give some space to Peace – and not that which is connected with Christ, but that which is useful for others. The *Chronicle* [the underground periodical *The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church – AS*] will start making comments ... Priests will rebuke us: this magazine is being published, but we have no catechism, and catechisation is forbidden. I think the first thing we must do is publish the catechism in a mass edition. (Letter, 1979)

In these circumstances the makers of Soviet religious policy were forced to think once again about the renewal of the church leadership. In the early 1980s some compromised church leaders were sacrificed: the administrator of Vilnius archdiocese, Krivaitis, resigned; the apostolic administrator of Panevėžys diocese, Bishop Krikščiūnas, was removed by the Vatican. After the death of Bishop Matulaitis-Labukas in 1979 Bishop Liudvikas Povilonis became the apostolic administrator of Kaunas archdiocese and the chairman of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference. Though he had earlier been recruited by the KGB, his relations with the active part of the church were far more cordial than those of his predecessor.

In order to neutralise the movement for the rights of believers the Soviet authorities also started to look for ways of painlessly returning to diocesan administration the bishops Vincentas Sladkevičius and Julijonas Steponavičius, who had been forcibly removed earlier. A compromise was reached only in the case of the former.

Bishops Povilonis and Sladkevičius, who enjoyed great authority among the active priests, were able to maintain the unity of the church while also avoiding the situation whereby the church leadership would be isolated and have no influence over the active part of the church.

It was becoming ever more difficult for the KGB to find new collaborators among the clergy. After the emergence of an underground press it became easier for those who were being blackmailed to escape KGB traps. In 1984, for example, the priest Rokas Puzonas published details of KGB attempts to recruit him (Puzonas, 1987). After an alternative mechanism for the preparation of priests started to function, in the shape of a secret seminary,⁴ it was more difficult to recruit agents among ordinands too. Aiming to make more effective use of the remaining agents among the clergy in providing important information about the opposition, the KGB was even planning to involve them in the struggle for the rights of believers in order that they should gain the confidence of the active priests (Plan, 1978).

During the last decade of the Soviet regime, then, the possibilities for interference in the internal life of the Catholic Church in Lithuania and control over it were

substantially diminished. However, the legacy of infiltration continued to cause problems for the church after the end of the Soviet regime. When a law on lustration was adopted in 1999 (Law, 1999), the bishops urged clergy who had collaborated with the KGB to give full details to a special commission which was set up. It is not clear, however, how many responded to this call. The archbishop of Kaunas, Sigitas Tamkevičius, the former leader of Catholic opposition to the Soviet regime in Lithuania, has expressed the opinion that priests who were formerly KGB agents may continue their pastoral work if they did not harm anyone and have not concealed the fact of their collaboration. In his view only a small proportion of the priests who collaborated with the KGB were in a position to harm others. So far the archbishop has not seen the need to suspend any clergyman who has told him about his ties with the KGB. The other bishops have taken a similar position on this issue.

Notes

- 1 After the Soviet reoccupation of Lithuania in 1944 widespread guerrilla resistance broke out and continued until 1953. At the beginning there were some 30,000 partisans in the forests. They are often called the 'freedom fighters'.
- 2 The Fourth Section was a subdivision of the KGB which worked with all kinds of opposition and practised counterintelligence. Its field of responsibility was broader than that of Department 'O', which was responsible only for religious affairs.
- 3 The Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights was founded in November 1978. The Committee members (originally five priests: Alfonsas Svarinskas, Sigitas Tamkevičius, Juozas Zdebskis, Jonas Kauneckas and Vincas Vėlavicius) declared that it would be a public organisation monitoring believers' rights in Soviet Lithuania and gathering and disseminating information about violations of those rights. From 1978 to 1983 the Committee released 53 statements. After the arrest of some members and the blackmail of others the Committee ceased its public activity in 1983.
- 4 Secret preparation for the priesthood began in Lithuania in the early 1970s and continued until the end of Soviet rule. Candidates studied separately, in consultation with particular priests who also examined them; eventually they would be ordained by bishops Steponavičius or Sladkevičius.

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