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LONG AWAITED NEW PAGE IN THE HISTORY
OF SOVIET ERA CHRISTIANITY

Darius Petkūnas, *The Repression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania during the Stalinist Era*, Klaipėda, 2011, 255 p.

A certain kind of freeze has settled during the last decade in Lithuania in the field of research on the anti-religious policies of the Soviet regime. After the publications issued at the beginning of the past decade, outlining the main contours of this topic¹, no other noteworthy studies in which the situation of the religious communities in the Soviet era were analyzed have appeared. Therefore, the monograph of Darius Petkūnas appearing at the end of last year was a pleasant surprise to the author of these lines whose academic biography had begun in this area. There is an additional happiness that the book was published in the English language, which indicates the efforts of Lithuania's Church historians – sovietologists to participate more actively in international academic discourse.

First one has to note that the reviewed book at least in part fills the clear gap that existed in the field of modern Church history investigations. Up to now most of the attention was clearly devoted to the development of the dominant in Lithuania Catholicism, the specific situation of Orthodox believers was also investigated a great deal while the history of the Lutheran faith leaving clear footprints in the history of Lithuania's culture in the 20th century, especially in its second half was left on the sidelines.²

¹ Irena Miklaševič, *Polityka sowiecka wobec Kościoła katolickiego na Litwie, 1944–1965*, Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2001; Arūnas Streikus, *Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje 1944–1990 m.*, Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimų centras, 2002; Regina Laukaitytė, *Staciatikių Bažnyčia Lietuvoje XX amžiuje*, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2003.

² Probably the most prolific worker in this field Arthur Hermann wrote mostly about the problems of Lithuania's Lutheran history up to World War II and the period of the Nazi occupation.

Relying on the archival documents of the Soviet government institutions responsible for the implementation of anti-religious policies as well as the collection of documents remaining in the archive of the prominent Lithuanian Lutheran minister Jonas Kalvanas, Petkūnas microscopically reconstructs only one aspect of the complicated history of Lithuania's Lutheran Church (LLC) – the efforts of the Soviet regime with the use of repressive measures to erase totally this confession from the map of the country's religious and cultural life. This is revealed by analyzing two interrelated threads of these repressive policies: in the spring of 1945, less than a week before the end of the war, the deportation of ordinary Church members was carried out from which about 300 Lithuanian Lutheran families suffered as well as the repressive pressure against Lutheran clergy lasting through the whole first decade of Soviet rule.

In the second half of the book the author convincingly shows that after the return of the Soviets the first mass deportation of Lithuania's population was carried out that the investigators of Soviet terror simply call the deportation of persons of German nationality, in fact was directed against the local Lutheran community. Identifying the adherents of Lutheran faith without any scruples as Germans, the majority of the persons appearing in the lists of deportees were of Lithuanian nationality, many of whom before the occupation stood out as active proponents of making the Lutheran faith more Lithuanian, backers of its integration into the religious life of Lithuania. In many instances the only proof of the "Germanness" of the deported family were the certificates provided by the local executive committees in which Lutherans were traditionally called "Germans". Such a nature of this deportation encouraged the Lutherans remaining in Lithuania to hide their confessional identity and this allowed the Soviet authorities to justify the massive closing of Lutheran churches. Unfortunately, the book's author did not try to explain what was the reaction of the local Catholics to the stigmatization of fellow countrymen of another faith. That would allow one to see better whether the quite problematic question at the beginning of the 20th century of the distinction between confessional and national identity had been resolved. Some of the details in the book's account would

testify that the confessional reserve and the mutual stereotypes related to them were still flourishing. Looking from the perspective of today, one is a little saddened by the discussions of some Lutheran clergy whether the deportation of the Lutherans from Lithuania was organized ... by the Jesuits (p. 50).

In the third part of the book the author reveals the repressions carried out by the Soviets against Lutheran priests by the fate of five ministers. Four of them (Gustavas Rauskinas, Jurgis Gavėnis, Jonas Mizaras, and Erikas Lejeris) in 1945–1950 were sentenced by Soviet courts allegedly for anti-Soviet agitation and sent to complete their punishments in Siberian labor camps. Therefore, half of the Lutheran priests remaining in Lithuania after the war suffered from Soviet repressions. That is a very large percentage, keeping in mind that the Lutheran pastors, feeling the greater threat from the ruling attitude toward them as representatives of German culture or even Nazism, behaved much more carefully than Catholic priests (p. 75). The author does not try to answer the question (I have to admit that to answer it unambiguously would be very difficult) of whether some kind of rational logic determined the targets of the repressive policies or were they carried out without any preliminary plan. Nevertheless, after an analysis of the biographies of the convicted, certain concurrences can be noticed. All of them had finished higher theological schools and were ordained as priests before the occupation; in the 1930's they were active supporters of the "Help" society, seeking to diminish the German influence in the LLC.

The persons, who managed to escape repressions, did not have any continuing theological education, entered priestly service after the 1941 repatriations when after the departure to Germany of the larger part of the Lutheran clergy there did not remain anyone to serve the still numerous Lutheran parishes, were of quite old age (Ansas Baltris, Mikas Preikšaitis, Fridrichas Megnys). The only exception in this group was Jonas Kalvanas, who completed theological studies at the Vytautas the Great University in Kaunas and Riga University in 1939, and was ordained as a priest in the summer of 1940. He was the youngest among the Lutheran pastors remaining in Lithuania. Even though he remained free, in the years of Stalinist terror this minister was forced to work in no

less complicated conditions, surrounded on all sides by Soviet security agents. His fate is revealed in the last section of the third part. The author of the monograph relies here the most on the file of the operative surveillance of Kalvanas remaining in the Lithuanian Special Archives in which the existing documents up to now had not been introduced into academic discourse. For this reason this section of the book is probably the most intriguing and valuable from the aspect of historiography.

In general one can assert that the discussed study is the first serious attempt, relying on previously unused sources, to open to Lithuanian and foreign readers a page of the complicated fate of a small religious community in the Soviet system. The narrative of the book, interspersed with interesting illustrations (unfortunately, their source is not always indicated), provides the joy of pleasant and light reading. On the other hand, the author did not dare to make broader generalizations about the gathered really interesting materials or bolder interpretations of the presented facts. Therefore, quite a few topics remaining in the margins of this book, the professional analysis of which would help reconstruct the complete view of the history of the LCC in the Soviet era, are waiting for future researchers, or perhaps even the author himself.