

INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE CRIMES OF THE  
NAZI AND SOVIET OCCUPATION REGIMES IN LITHUANIA

**IV. The Second Soviet Occupation: First Phase (1944-1953)**

**IV.1 Crimes**

**IV.1.7 Suppression of Religious and Cultural Life**

**Persecution of Religion in 1944-1953**

**CONCLUSIONS**

*Approved on April 20 2005*

The Commission discussed the report submitted by Dr. Arūnas Streikus “Persecution of Religion in 1944-1953” and the conclusions of the study. The Commission also acquainted itself with the evaluation of this report by Dr. Regina Laukaitytė, and has adopted the following Conclusions.

**1. Stimulation of Confessional and National Disagreements.**

In contrast to the first occupation when the religious institutions were sought to be destroyed fast, more pragmatic approach prevailed in the second occupation period. The idea of the new approach was to use religion as proof of the regime’s legitimacy by completely limiting pastoral activity of the religious organizations and effectively controlling the spiritual leadership thereof. This metamorphosis expressed itself in the creation of new institutions in the Soviet Union controlling religious life in 1943-1944.

In 1944-1953 Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Lithuania received obviously preferential treatment compared to other religious confessions. However, it was obvious that the ROC had limited possibilities to compete with Catholicism in Lithuania; therefore Soviet authorities put all their efforts on the isolation of Lithuanian Catholic Church from the Vatican, or the creation of a so-called national church. However, there were no priests, in good standing who were willing to publicly declare their rejection of Papal authority. So, the Soviet authorities had to make do with severing any connections that the Lithuanian Catholic Church had with its spiritual and administrative centre. Any attempts to contact the Holy See without informing the authorities were seen as “spying for the Vatican”.

**2. Radical Restrictions on Religious Life in 1948-1949.**

Soviet antireligious policies changed in 1948, as the tendency towards the increase in armed resistance became apparent. The independency of the Church and its opposition to the regime were sought to be broken mainly by measures of external impact. In 1948-1949 Lithuanian Catholic Church was forced to assume additional features of a Soviet religious cult. After harsh pressure was used, Catholic parishes and their clergy were forced to register with the institutions of the Soviet authorities, and by doing so they had to officially obey the new, essentially unacceptable rules of religious life that were imposed on the Church. Enforced registration became an effective tool of the Soviet authorities for the regulation of the internal operation of religious organizations. Among other things, the new rules allowed for the regulation of the distribution of the network of parishes. First, the number of Catholic churches that operated in the major Lithuanian cities of Vilnius and Kaunas was reduced several times. In total 90 churches in Lithuania were closed in 1945-1952. Registration documents were not issued to Catholic monasteries – by 1949 there were no legally operating monasteries left in Lithuania and monks had to adjust to their new illegal status. The imposition of economic restrictions on

religious organizations occurred together with the forced registration campaign: religious organizations lost the remainder of the real estate they had left after previous sanctions, and discriminatory taxes were imposed on the clergy.

### **3. Restrictions Imposed on the Small Religious Communities.**

Small religious communities were treated unequally by the Soviet regime. 4 mosques, 3 Orthodox Churches, 3 Lutheran Churches and one Evangelical Reformed Church were officially closed in Lithuania in 1948–1953. Small Jewish religious communities were refused registration in Panevėžys, Šiauliai and Klaipėda due to intensified anti-Semitic attitudes.

### **4. Repressive Action against Clergy.**

Soviet ideology assigned clergy to the camp of “class enemies”, and propagating religious beliefs was regarded as ideological sabotage, and anti-state activity. 362 Catholic priests were arrested and sentenced with the aim of weakening and discrediting the Church, and not because they were actually involved in the underground struggle. 8 Old believer *nastavniks*, 4 Orthodox priests and 4 Lutheran pastors were also arrested.

### **5. Enforcement of Atheism on Society.**

An important part of Lithuania’s Sovietization was the atheistic indoctrination of society. All means available to impose Soviet ideology were mobilized for this purpose: the party and the Komsomol organizations, schools etc. The Soviet constitution acknowledged only antireligious propaganda. Society forfeited its ability to learn the substance of religion, as the majority of books on religion were withdrawn from libraries, and it was extremely difficult to get permission to publish new ones. So far, the status of a believer in Soviet Lithuania has not been researched.

### **6. Changes in the Tactics of Antireligious Policy.**

After radical changes imposed on the Catholic Church in 1948-1949, the pressure on it eased a little at the beginning of the 1950s. Yet, the objectives of the Soviet antireligious policy remained the same. Starting from the beginning of the 1950s, the main focus was placed on the destruction of the Church from within. The main measures employed were the attempts to infiltrate the clergy and to strengthen the control of the only Seminary of the time. The majority of these measures were applied for the destruction of other religious minorities from within.

Chairman of the Commission

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