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# Women Against the Evil Empire? Lithuanian Catholic Nuns and Anti-Soviet Activities of the 1970s–1980s

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*Abstract.* This article addresses the question: What was the role of Lithuanian nuns in anti-Soviet Catholic activities and in dissident networks of the 1970s and 1980s? We analyse examples of nun communities and individuals involved in anti-Soviet activities. We also reveal how women chose the path of resistance, the difficulties and risks they faced, including Soviet persecution and repression. Several factors encouraged and helped sustain the nuns' underground activities in the 70s and 80s. First, nuns were already used to operating in underground conditions due to Soviet anti-Catholic policy; because of Soviet repressions against monastic life in the 1940s and 1950s, they were living in tiny convents or alone, working lay jobs and hiding the fact that they were nuns. Second, nuns had the required skills to publish, print, and disseminate underground press and were encouraged by the Second Vatican Council to lead an apostolic lifestyle and engage in underground work.

**Keywords:** *Nuns, Resistance, Catholic, Anti-Soviet, 1970s, 1980s.*

*Anotacija.* Šiame straipsnyje tiriama, koks buvo Lietuvos vienuolių moterų vaidmuo antiso-vietinėje katalikų veikloje ir disidentų tinkluose aštuntajame ir devintajame dešimtmečiuose. Analizuojama keletas vienuolių bendruomenių ir asmenų, dalyvavusių antisovietinėje veikloje,

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pavyzdžių. Taip pat atskleidžiama, kaip moterys pasirinko pasipriešinimo kelią, sunkumus ir rizikas, su kuriomis teko susidurti, įskaitant sovietų persekiojimą ir represijas. Vienuolių moterų pagrindinę veiklą aštuntajame ir devintajame dešimtmečiuose skatino ir padėjo palaikyti keletas veiksnių. Pirmia, vienuolės jau buvo įpratusios veikti pagrindinio sąlygomis dėl sovietų antikatalikiškos politikos. Dėl sovietų represijų prieš vienuolių gyvenimą 1940–1950 m. jos jau gyveno mažyčiuose vienuolynuose arba vienos, dirbo pasauliečių darbą ir slėpė, kad yra vienuolės. Antra, vienuolės turėjo reikiamą išgudžių leisti, spausdinti ir platinti pagrindinę spaudą. Antrojo Vatikano susirinkimo dvasia skatino jas gyventi pagal apaštališkąjį tikėjimą ir jį skleisti.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** *vienuolės, pasipriešinimas, katalikai, antisovietinė veikla, aštuntasis dešimtmetis, devintasis dešimtmetis.*

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2024, Lithuania lost one of its most praised and most well-known heroes of anti-Soviet resistance and former political prisoner – Nijolė Sadūnaitė (22 July 1938 – 31 March 2024). According to knowledge easily accessible on the internet, Nijolė was “a Lithuanian clandestine Catholic nun of the Soviet period who worked with the Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania”, a political prisoner and also the “first female in history” who received the “Lithuanian Freedom Award”<sup>1</sup>.

Sadūnaitė was recognised beyond her country and community. For example, in 1988, while reviewing Nijolė’s memoirs, published in English and called “A Radiance in the Gulag”, the *Los Angeles Times* did not shy away from declaring that “Her story is a glistening little gem to add to the treasury of Christian literature”<sup>2</sup>.

Also, not only Catholics admired and praised her – and still do. For example, the former Lithuanian constitutional court head and the MEP Dainius Žalimas, representing the liberal Lithuanian party “Laisvės partija”, wrote on his social media after Nijolė died:

*...Nijolė Sadūnaitė has been forever stuck in my memory since my teenage years.  
As in this 1987 August 23 photo<sup>3</sup> – full of dignity, proud, brave, with large tinted*

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<sup>1</sup> KIDDER, Rushworth M. An „Underground Nun“ in Lithuania. Nijole Sadunaite works for religious freedom, and views Gorbachev with skepticism. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1989 04 24 [accessed 2025 11 15]. Available from: <https://www.csmonitor.com/1989/0424/pjole.html>; TAPINAS, Laimonas, et al. (red.). Lietuvos katalikų bažnyčios kronika. *Žurnalistikos enciklopedija*. Vilnius: Pradai, 1997, p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> GOLDKAMP, Dick. The Lady and the Chekists: A Radiance in the Gulag by Nijole Sadunaite. *Los Angeles Times*, 1988 01 17 [accessed 2025 11 15]. Available from: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-01-17-bk-36735-story.html>

<sup>3</sup> N. Sadūnaitė was one of the organizers and leaders of the famous 1987 08 23 anti-Soviet public demonstration at Adomas Mickevičius monument in Vilnius. *Nijolė Felicija Sadūnaitė*. [Accessed 2025 11 15].

*glasses, giving mystery. She was an example to follow in discovering the truth and fighting for Freedom. At the same time, we wanted to believe that the occupiers were right, that America and the CIA were actually behind Nijolė...*<sup>4</sup>

Sadūnaitė was also honoured by the former liberal mayor of Vilnius, Remigijus Šimašius, who said that although she was a modest nun, Nijolė played a significant role in Lithuanian resistance against the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

What was so special about that woman, who not only successfully integrated into male-dominated Lithuanian dissident networks but also managed to achieve such a high impact? And what was the role of other Lithuanian nuns who participated in anti-Soviet Catholic activities?

This article is dedicated to finding the answer to these questions. We are going to analyse not only the case of Nijolė Sadūnaitė (who is the clear inspiration for this research), but also the entire participation of Lithuanian nuns in the Catholic network of dissidents.

In mainstream English, the term *nun* is understood as “a member of a female religious group that lives in a convent” or as “a member of a female religious group whose members promise to obey the orders of the leader of the group, to be poor, and not to marry”<sup>6</sup>. In Lithuanian, the translation would be “vienuolė”. This mainstream term reflects the general understanding that the life of nuns is guided by the so-called evangelical counsels, or counsels of perfection: chastity, poverty, and obedience (in Lithuanian: skaistybė, neturtas, paklusnumas). Thus, in this article, a “nun” is defined as a Catholic woman who rejects family life (choosing to live in a religious female community instead), agrees to share all property with other community members, and obeys the community’s superior or leader. We use the term “sister” as a synonym for “nun.”

The aims of this article are:

- a) To describe the ways nuns participated in the dissident network of Soviet Lithuania in the 1970s and 1980s.
- b) To analyse some examples of nun communities and individuals that were involved in anti-Soviet activities.

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Available from: <https://www.genocid.lt/centras/lt/2971/a/>; *Seserys amžinybėje*. [Accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://www.marijostarnaites.lt/?p=939>

<sup>4</sup> Facebook post by Dainius Žalimas. 2024 04 01 [accessed 2025 01 15]. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/dainius.zalimas/posts/pfbid0tqKmiFsX2tqiwxRDjdZmzp7ipDwb3Vt3Y8UM3MjU2J-gxzPGuiPkkafdGxFxMxQtl>

<sup>5</sup> Facebook post by Remigijus Šimašius. 2024 03 31 [accessed 2025 01 15]. Available from: [https://www.facebook.com/SimasiusRemigijus/photos/kai-1987-metais-rugpj%C5%AB%C4%8Dio-23-dien%C4%85-prie-adomo-mickevi%C4%8Diaus-paminklo-vyko-mitinga/949463303218374/?\\_\\_mmr=1&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/SimasiusRemigijus/photos/kai-1987-metais-rugpj%C5%AB%C4%8Dio-23-dien%C4%85-prie-adomo-mickevi%C4%8Diaus-paminklo-vyko-mitinga/949463303218374/?__mmr=1&_rdr)

<sup>6</sup> *The word “nun” at Cambridge online dictionary*. [Accessed 2025 11 14]. Available from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nun>

c) To reveal how women chose this path, the difficulties and risks they faced, including Soviet persecution and repression.

To reach these aims, the article will also discuss the historical context, in particular Catholic life during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, the forms of Church resistance, and the broader anti-Soviet resistance.

Lithuanian Catholic life under the Soviet occupation, the dissident movement, and the role of the Catholic church in it are not new topics in Lithuanian historiography. Arūnas Streikus analysed the situation of the Catholic Church in Lithuania during the Soviet occupation, as well as the monastic and lay religious life, in multiple publications. In his work, Streikus uses a broad collection of archival documents from Lithuanian and Vatican archives. His research method is based on the critical analysis of historical sources. His work is characterised by a broad study of various aspects of Lithuanian Catholic life under the Soviet occupation, from resistance to collaboration with the Soviet regime.<sup>7</sup>

Another vital author to us is Aušra Pažeraitė. Her research on Lithuanian monasteries and convents was novel and essential due to the different methodology – surveys and questionnaires to monks and nuns, which she and Lithuanian historian Regina Laukaitytė collected in the early 1990s<sup>8</sup>.

However, the novelty of our research lies in its deeper contextualization and focus on Lithuanian underground nuns' 70s- and 80s-era resistance. The methods we are using are critical analysis of historical sources, revealing the underground activities of nuns and the repressions against them.

First of all, we will focus on the online archive/database and printed volumes of the Lithuanian main underground anti-Soviet periodical, the "Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania"<sup>9</sup> ("Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios kronika", "LKB Kronika" or the "Chronicle")<sup>10</sup>. This archive website also contains memoirs of dissidents who worked

<sup>7</sup> STREIKUS, Arūnas. *(Ne)meilės trikampis: Šventojo Sosto Rytų politika, sovietų režimas ir Lietuva*. Vilnius: Naujasis Židinys-Aidai, 2024; STREIKUS, Arūnas; KUZMICKAITĖ, Daiva Kristina; ŠIMKŪNAS, Vidmantas. *Iš sovietinės patirties į laisvės erdvę: vienuolijos Lietuvoje XX a. antroje pusėje*. Vilnius: Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademija, 2015; STREIKUS, Arūnas (sud.). *Lietuva ir Šventasis Sostas (1922–1938): slaptojo Vatikano archyvo dokumentai*. Vilnius: Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademija, 2010; STREIKUS, Arūnas. *Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje (1944–1990)*. Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2002; STREIKUS, Arūnas. The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania and Its Soviet Past. In Lucian Turcescu, Lavinia Stan (eds.), *Churches, Memory and Justice in Post-Communism* (p. 203–221). Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; STREIKUS Arūnas. Shifts in Religiosity in the Face of Soviet Type Urbanization: the Case of Lithuania. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2017, Vol. 48, No. 2, p. 235–249; STREIKUS, Arūnas. Religious Life in a Displaced Society: the Case of Post-War Lithuania, 1945–1960. In Tomas Balkelis, Violeta Davoliūtė (eds.), *Population displacement in Lithuania in the 20th Century. Experiences, Identities and Legacies* (p. 211–235). Leiden/Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> PAŽĖRAITĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos vienuolijos totalitarinio režimo sąlygomis. *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos suvažiavimo darbai*. 2003, t. 18.

<sup>9</sup> In this article, if not the full name, we will refer to it as „LKB Kronika“ or „Chrinicle“.

<sup>10</sup> Access to the archive [accessed 2025 11 15]: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/en/>

for “LKB Kronika” and digitised material from this and other underground periodicals (for instance, “Aušra”, or “Dawn” in English). We are also using archival documents from the Lithuanian Special Archives and published source collections, including materials from political trials.<sup>11</sup>

Another essential type of source is memoirs, biographies, and life stories of nuns, published in various formats, from digital to print. An example is the published memoir “Gerojo Dievo globoje” by Nijolė Sadūnaitė<sup>12</sup>. Some fragments of such memoirs and testimonies were also published in Lithuanian Mass media – for instance, Panevėžys news site “Sekundė”<sup>13</sup>.

## 1. Historical Context and roots of nuns’ activities

### Soviet occupation and repressions against the Catholic Church

In June of 1940, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied the Baltic states under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols. The three independent Baltic countries were annexed as constituent Republics of the Soviet Union in August 1940. In June 1941, the occupation of the Baltic states by Nazi Germany took place. In 1944, the Soviet Union recaptured most of the Baltic states during the Red Army’s Baltic Offensive. These events were tragic for Baltic people of all languages, beliefs, religions and confessions.

Soon after the first Soviet occupation, mass imprisonments and deportations began. These processes soon targeted the Catholic Church as well. According to A. Streikus:

*The totalitarian Soviet regime, which declared Marxist historiosophy as the only scientific worldview, sought to completely change the nature of man and society according to it, subjecting them to all-encompassing state control. (...) ...one of the most important goals of the sovietization process was to carry out the forced atheism of society, restrict the activities of religious institutions and destroy them<sup>14</sup>.*

Before the Soviet invasion, religion in Lithuania held special significance – the society was not very secularised. The Catholic Church had an effective, autonomous system of social communication. Religion in Lithuania was linked to national identity. Therefore,

<sup>11</sup> For instance: *Lietuvos vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniame teisme*. Arūnas Streikus, Jonas Boruta (red.). Vilnius: Katalikų akademija, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> SADŪNAITĖ, Nijolė. *Gerojo Dievo globoje*. Chicago, Ill: Ateities leidykla, 1989.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance: SAVICKIENĖ, Daina. Seserys tikėjime ir pasipriešinime. *Sekundė*, 2022 07 04 [accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://sekunde.lt/leidinys/sekunde/seserys-tikejime-ir-pasipriesinime-2/>

<sup>14</sup> STREIKUS, Arūnas. *Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje (1944–1990)*. Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2002, p. 7–8.

the Soviet regime saw the Catholic church as a potentially powerful opponent<sup>15</sup>. Soon, various tactics to control and repress the Catholic church were developed by the Soviet regime, such as the nationalisation of the church estate. Multiple churches were turned into warehouses, other administrative or industrial buildings. There were numerous arrests, imprisonments, and some clergy and religious people were sent to forced labour camps, while deportations also began. At the end of 1946, Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius was shot in Vilnius and received the death penalty by the Soviet military court<sup>16</sup>. In 1953, Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys died in prison in Vladimir<sup>17</sup>. Although the methods of fighting with the Catholic Church were changing during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania (for instance, they were softer under Nikita Khrushchev), people having ties with the Church were subjected to repressions even after Stalinism<sup>18</sup>. Also, strong control of religion and atheist policies became part of the Soviet curriculum, as well as the anti-religious propaganda and disinformation.

These repressions touched the monasteries, convents and houses of congregational sisters as well. Since 1944, monasteries and other houses of followers of religious life (e.g., sisters of congregations) were closed – at first arbitrarily and, from 1948, by special decrees of the Soviet government. Until 1949, all Catholic monasteries in Lithuania known to the Soviet authorities were liquidated, both male and female. For example, the Franciscans' (Order of Friars Minor Conventual) monastery in Vilnius was closed in 1949. Even the slightest monastic activity was forbidden.<sup>19</sup>

All monastic and religious communities' property was nationalised.<sup>20</sup> Monks and nuns were no longer allowed to work in any educational, social, or medical care institutions. In 1945–1947, most of the Polish monks and members of religious communities from Vilnius and the Vilnius region were repatriated to Poland.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Lietuvos TSR MVD kariuomenės Karo Tribunolas. Nuosprendis Vincento Borisevičiaus baudžiamojoje byloje. 1946 m. rugpjūčio 28 d., Vilnius. In *Lietuvos vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniame teisme*. Arūnas Streikus, Jonas Boruta (red.). Vilnius: Katalikų akademija, 2000, p. 183, 185.

<sup>17</sup> STREIKUS, Arūnas. Įvadas. Represijos prieš vyskopus – sudėtinė sovietų valdžios antireliginės politikos Lietuvoje dalis. In *Lietuvos vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniame teisme*. Arūnas Streikus, Jonas Boruta (red.). Vilnius: Katalikų akademija, 2000, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> GOECKEL, Robert F. Soviet Religious Policy in the Baltics under Khrushchev, 1957–1964: Domestic Repression and International Engagement. *Politics and Religion*, 2010, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 352–388.

<sup>19</sup> PAŽĖRAITĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos vienuolijos totalitarinio režimo sąlygomis. *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos suvažiavimo darbai*, 2003, t. 18, p. 757.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to mention that Lithuanian state, after the independence was declared in 1990, pursued the policy of restitution of lost property (including real estate) rights to the monastic and religious communities. See, for instance: Decree of Lithuanian government „Dėl nuosavybės teisės atkūrimo Švč. Nekaltosios Mergelės Marijos seserų tarnaičių kongregacijos Lietuvos provincijai į gyvenamąjį namą Panevėžyje, Tilvyčio g. 11“, adopted on 2000 10 24 [accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.111903?jfwid=11xblwq72b>

<sup>21</sup> PAŽĖRAITĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos vienuolijos totalitarinio režimo sąlygomis. *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos suvažiavimo darbai*, 2003, t. 18, p. 758.

These actions against monastic and religious life took place due to the Soviet anti-religious policy. According to Soviet law, “religious cults” could be practised but not “spread”. Monasteries were seen as serving no purpose and were instead viewed as a threat; therefore, they were illegal. Active religious life moved underground.<sup>22</sup>

Some monks, nuns and religious people experienced direct Soviet repressions. In 1949–1955, Mother Augustina-Ona Galdikaitė, the founder and superior general of the Franciscan Congregation of the Divine Heart of Jesus (Dieviškosios Jėzaus Širdies pranciškonų kongregacija), was sentenced and sent to the Soviet labour camps (Gulag). Uršulė Novickaitė, superior general of the so-called Sisters of the Poor (Švč. Mergelės Marijos Nekaltojo Prasidėjimo Vargdienių seserų kongregacija, or Vargdienės seserys) experienced a similar destiny from 1950 to 1957. As a result of these repressions, monks, nuns, and religious women communities split – to live alone or in small groups (usually from 2 to 7 persons), and began to work in state or church jobs, hiding their real identity of monastic and religious lives<sup>23</sup>.

The sisters’ main jobs were in various medical institutions. Sometimes – but not often – they even managed to get a job in kindergartens and schools. Sisters usually also worked as church organists, cleaners, and parsonage hostesses. However, secretly, they catechised children, worked with young people, organised adorations and processions in churches, and took tours of significant historical and religious sites.<sup>24</sup>

## Resistance of the Lithuanian Church and society

The Soviet repressions against Lithuanian residents provoked the resistance. It happened in many ways, using both armed and unarmed means.

The return of the Soviets to Lithuania in 1944 was marked by armed resistance to Sovietization. The ten-year armed resistance, also known as the Partisan War or the fight of so-called “forest brothers”, took place in 1944–1953. Armed fighting covered much of Lithuania today, but was focused on rural areas and forests. During the entire period, at least 50,000 people actively participated in the armed resistance as fighters. One hundred thousand people participated in the whole resistance movement as members of underground organisations and supporters. Over 20,000 partisans lost their lives in this war.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> LAUKAITYTĖ, Regina. Katalikų ir religinių mažumų pagrindis Lietuvoje 1944–1956 m. *Bažnyčios istorijos studijos*, 2012, No. 5, p. 372–376, 390–391.

<sup>23</sup> PAŽĖRAITĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos vienuolijos totalitarinio režimo sąlygomis. *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos suvažiavimo darbai*, 2003, t. 18, p. 759.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Anti-Soviet Resistance (1944–1953), the official website of the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania*. [Accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://www.genocid.lt/centras/en/2390/a/#:~:text=The%20ten%E2%80%9393year%20resistance%2C%20also,resistance%2C%20and%20about%20100%2C000%20people>

Catholic priests were among the supporters of the partisans, though most did not participate directly.<sup>26</sup> Some of them suffered the repressions. The ideology of the armed resistance was based on Lithuanian interwar patriotism, anti-collectivisation, the ideal of democracy and the Catholic faith.<sup>27</sup> However, women were the minority – according to Lithuanian historian Enrika Kripienė, “out of the 50,000 people who took part in the armed resistance, around 250 – or 0.5 per cent – were women”<sup>28</sup>. Women, however, often provided significant support for the partisan network, including providing food and clothing and offering other, more direct assistance.<sup>29</sup>

As total female participation in the armed fight against the Soviets in post-war Lithuania was low, little is known about whether religious sisters or nuns had any role at that time. Most likely, the sisters were not actively involved for several reasons: the monasteries, convents, and other sisters’ houses were already under persecution and pressure due to restrictions on monastic life, and sisters more often operated in cities than in the countryside. Also, their skills and professional training, such as publishing, were better suited to later unarmed resistance.<sup>30</sup> Logically, the Soviet destruction of consecrated and monastic life was significant here – it took time for communities that suffered the repressions to rebuild and attract new members.

As society resisted from the mid-1940s, so did the church. The policy of the Soviet authorities, directed against the Catholic Church, restriction of its activity, and repression of bishops, was the reason why, eventually, Lithuanian bishops started to organise the activities of the Church underground. In Lithuania, a phenomenon eventually emerged – the so-called underground Catholic Church, which operated in addition to the “official” one.<sup>31</sup> The underground Church – including illegal communities of female

<sup>26</sup> GAILIENE, Danutė. Why Are Suicides So Widespread in Catholic Lithuania? *Religions*, 2018, No. 9, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> See: STREIKUS, Arūnas. Lietuvos katalikų pilietinio aktyvumo pavyzdžiai ir ribos XX amžiuje. In *Demokratija Lietuvoje: pilietiškumas ir totalitarizmas XX amžiaus istorijos lūžiuose*. Vilnius: Naujasis židinys-Aidai, 2011, p. 143–150, 359–367; GAILIUS, Bernardas. *Partizanai tada ir šiandien*. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2006; *Unknown war: anti-Soviet armed resistance in Lithuania and its legacies*. Arūnas Streikus (red.). London, New York: Routledge, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> PLATŪKYTĖ, Domantė. Women partisans among Lithuania’s Forest Brothers: from lovers to fighters. *LRT*, 2020 09 12 [accessed 2025 11 15]. Available from: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1227079/women-partisans-among-lithuania-s-forest-brothers-from-lovers-to-fighters#:~:text=Out%20of%20the%2050%2C000%20people,Genocide%20and%20Resistance%20Research%20Centre>

<sup>29</sup> PETRAUSKIENĖ, Aistė. Moteris Lietuvos partizaniniame kare: nuo formalaus reglamentavimo iki praktinio veikimo. *Acta historica universitatis Klaipedensis*, 2021, t. 42, p. 241–261. ĖMUŽIS, Marius. *Partizanė. Monika Alūzaitė – moteris laisvės kovose*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> PLATŪKYTĖ, Domantė. Women partisans among Lithuania’s Forest Brothers: from lovers to fighters. *LRT*, 2020 09 12 [accessed 2025 11 15]. Available from: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1227079/women-partisans-among-lithuania-s-forest-brothers-from-lovers-to-fighters#:~:text=Out%20of%20the%2050%2C000%20people,Genocide%20and%20Resistance%20Research%20Centre>

<sup>31</sup> JASELIŪNAS, Egidijus. Periodinės savilaidos formavimasis: sovietinio disidentizmo reiškiny ir Lietuvos katalikiškasis judėjimas. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 1(11), p. 15.



consecrated life – eventually became some of the most critical hubs of the unarmed resistance of Lithuania.

Although the Soviet authorities managed to suppress and eliminate Lithuanian armed resistance in the early 1950s, various forms of illegal, unarmed underground activities continued until the end of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Some of the later forms of unarmed resistance (such as the underground press – periodicals, printing and disseminating various leaflets) were developed already during the armed resistance war. The youngest generation – from young school pupils to the university students – took over the resistance ideas, learned methods and formed short-lived, but considerable underground youth organisations<sup>32</sup>.

The 1970s were especially fruitful for the Lithuanian dissident movement. Main streams of unarmed resistance (1953–1990) were consolidated and gained shaped during this period: so called “Human Rights” movement (defined, mainly, by the Lithuanian Helsinki group), Catholic movement (determined by the illegal publishing, religious education, missions), Lithuanian Nationalism-based movement, that demanded political reestablishment of illegally occupied and annexed Lithuanian state (Lithuanian Liberty League), so called “Ethnic culture” and “Ethnic religion” movement (based on the ancient Baltic religious and ethnic traditions). There were also various groups and circles of artists and writers. Even the Socialists and various Western-inspired subcultures can be seen as resisting the Soviet system in the Lithuanian SSR of the late Soviet period<sup>33</sup>.

### **Broader resistance networks within the USSR and their connections to occupied Lithuania**

Some influences on the Lithuanian Catholic dissident movement also came from Soviet Russia. Historian V. Klumbys notes that the Lithuanian unarmed resistance was “influenced by ties with Russian dissidents, established at least in the 1960s.” In the 1960s, “ideas for defending human rights came from Russia” to Lithuania, “which manifested themselves here in the defence of religious rights.”<sup>34</sup>

Lithuanian historians agree that there was undoubtedly a connection between the Catholic underground, one of the most prominent trends of Lithuanian unarmed resistance, and the Russian dissident movement. Researcher Egidijus Jaseliūnas claims that the forms and principles of Russian dissidents and Lithuanian Catholic Church resistance members were very similar. For instance, the representatives of both movements, although operating in secret, attempted to comply with Soviet laws. For example,

<sup>32</sup> KARENIAUSKAITĖ, Monika. Lietuvos neginkluotojo antisovietinio pasipriešinimo antrosios sovietų okupacijos metais ištakos ir veiksniai. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2011, Nr. 2(30).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> KLUMBYS, Valdemaras. Pogrindžio leidinys „Perspektyvos“ (1978–1981): intelektualiosios savilaidos pradžia Lietuvoje. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 2(12), p. 185.

the Catholic Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Believers (Tikinčiųjų teisių gynimo katalikų komitetas) declared that it would not pursue political goals.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1970s, the ties between the participants of the Lithuanian unarmed resistance and the Russian dissident Sergei Kovalyov (1930–2021)<sup>36</sup> were of particular importance. He helped the information of the “Chronicle” reach the wider Soviet Union and abroad by reprinting the information from this publication in the Russian “Chronicle of Current Times”<sup>37</sup>. It is not a coincidence that the trial of Sergei Kovalyov took place in Vilnius, Lithuania.<sup>38</sup>

Here, it could also be mentioned that religious Lithuanian women during the Soviet period were not the only ones to resist the Soviet system. Russian Orthodox women also formed dissident groups. These Russian groups saw Christian Orthodox tradition as the physical and spiritual space where women could find new hope, strength and spiritual shelter. Opposing Soviet values to Christianity for them was a way to resist the inequality and misery of Soviet women’s lives, which was still present despite some achievements of the Soviet system in terms of women’s rights<sup>39</sup>.

## 2. Nuns and Catholic resistance movement of the 1970s and 1980s: analysis of cases

The anti-Soviet Catholic movement of the 1970s and 1980s is seen today as one of the most numerous, longest-lasting, and most impactful on the broader map of the Lithuanian unarmed anti-Soviet resistance. This movement centred on the longest-lasting Lithuanian underground publication – The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania. Nuns were an essential part of this movement. Lithuanian Catholic religious women mostly participated in these activities:

- a) Publishing, printing, disseminating, or smuggling illegal publications.
- b) Spreading religious knowledge and education.
- c) Missions, for instance, in Central Asia’s part of the USSR – to serve local Catholics.

<sup>35</sup> JASELIŪNAS, Egidijus. Periodinės savilaidos formavimasis: sovietinio disidentizmo reiškiny ir Lietuvos katalikiškasis judėjimas. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 1(11), p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> More about his activities: GILLIGAN, Emma. *Defending human rights in Russia: Sergei Kovalyov, dissident and human rights commissioner, 1969–2003*. Routledge, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> TICHOMIROVAS, Sergejus. Sergejaus Kovaliovo veikla disidentiniame judėjime ir jo ryšiai su Lietuva. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2007, Nr. 1(21), p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> *Lithuanian Special Archives*, found, (f.) K-1, inventory (inv.) 58, file (f.) 47684/3.

<sup>39</sup> More on Soviet Russian women dissidents’ networks and their relation to the Orthodox Church more in: RUTHCHILD, Rochelle. Feminist Dissidents in the „Motherland of Women’s Liberation”: Shattering Soviet Myths and Memory. In Barbara Molony, Jennifer Nelson (eds.), *Women’s Activism and „Second Wave” Feminism* (pp. 99–120). London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

However, there were also cases when nuns were participating in broader peaceful resistance networks – for instance, joining their efforts with the human rights movement. We will discuss these cases too.

It is difficult to estimate how many nuns took part in the movement. According to Požėraitė, most monasteries and convents that operated in Lithuania during the Soviet era either lost their archives or did not collect them out of caution. As this author claimed, among nuns and monks, there were few active participants in the underground resistance, because the activity was risky for both ordinary members and the leaders of the convent, which had already been operating underground. Due to the particularly vigilant KGB surveillance, the leaders of the Church and monasteries were constantly forced to limit their more visible activity. Also, the number of nuns in Soviet Lithuania was generally low. We have no data on the Soviet period, but in 1993, there were 24 congregations and groups of nuns, including 993 professed sisters, 44 novices, and 48 postulants<sup>40</sup>. It is not possible that this number was higher in Soviet times.

As already mentioned, some Lithuanian Catholics, including clergy, had organised into the so-called “underground” Catholic church. Also, as already mentioned, monasteries and congregations, after monastic life in the Lithuanian SSR became illegal, started operating underground as well. Lithuanian Catholic periodicals and the Catholic dissident movement were formed in such an underground Church environment as a way to resist restrictions on spiritual life<sup>41</sup>.

As the “Chronicle” – the most essential Lithuanian Catholic anti-Soviet underground periodical – began publication, Sisters from various religious female congregations were actively involved in its work. Religious women’s “homes” – that were secret already – became “hubs” of resistance, where the press was published or disseminated secretly. So, nuns were especially active in printing and disseminating the illegal press<sup>42</sup>.

How was anti-Soviet Catholic resistance shaped and experienced in several particular cases, the communities of sisters? How was it reflected in the biographies of the nuns who were particularly active in underground work? We will look into some cases more closely.

The first case is the case of *Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family* (*Šventosios Šeimos seserų kongregacija*, “*Šventosios šeimos seserys*”). The founder of this congregation is Elžbieta Bendoravičiūtė (1906–1937). The founder, before becoming a nun, had rejected the arranged marriage her family had set up. Later, she graduated from an adult education school and commercial courses. Elžbieta had professional knowledge in accounting and bookkeeping. Supported by like-minded people, Elžbieta wrote the

<sup>40</sup> PAŽĖRAITĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos vienuolijos totalitarinio režimo sąlygomis. *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos suvažiavimo darbai*, 2003, t. 18, p. 756, 765, 768.

<sup>41</sup> JASELIŪNAS, Egidijus. Periodinės savilaidos formavimasis: sovietinio disidentizmo reiškiny ir Lietuvos katalikiškasis judėjimas. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 1(11), p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> SPENGLA, Vidas. *Bažnyčia, „Kronika“ ir KGB voratinklis*. Vilnius: Katalikų akademija, 2001, p. 63.

statutes and, on March 11, 1931, founded the mentioned congregation. The community lived according to the Rule of the Third Order of Francis (lay Franciscans). The goal was to help poor people with care, education, and assistance<sup>43</sup>.

So, as we see, even the founder of this community was an emancipated woman who rejected social norms and found her own way to fulfil her calling. The example of the founder inspired sisters, especially during the Soviet period. Many sisters of this congregation were involved in illegal publishing. Some members of this congregation have publicly shared stories about how they were involved in the sisters' community and illegal anti-Soviet activities. For instance, according to Sister Lina Agnietė Striokaite (b. in 1964), in her hometown of Vilkaviškis, underground life was lively since her childhood, so as she was growing up, her motivation and interest in it constantly grew. Her family was also involved. Agnietė personally met with nuns who would organise youth meetings, religious holidays, and commemorations, and conduct catechesis. Also, at only ten years old, she learned about the existence of the "Chronicle" and began studying various conspiracy methods.<sup>44</sup>

The biography of sister Ona Vitkauskaitė (1935–2021) is impressive. She had an engineering degree and worked in line with her education for some time. As a sister, she actively disseminated the Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania. The "Chronicle" widely documented her life and sacrifice<sup>45</sup>.

Another sister of the same congregation, Genovaitė Navickaitė (b. 1947), was from a religious, patriotic family. Her brother Zenonas became a priest, and Genovaitė got training as an accountant. She later attended medical school and became a nurse. She was introduced to nuns by her brother and witnessed her faith both in the hospital and, later, in prison (after her arrest by the Soviets).<sup>46</sup>

Another vital congregation is called the *Congregation of the Servants of the Most Holy Virgin Mary* (Švč. Nekaltosios Mergelės Marijos tarnaitės, "Marijos tarnaitės"). Founder: Father Honorat Koźmiński OFMCap (1829–1916). In 1902, sister Jadvyga Korzeniowska came to Plungė, Lithuania, as a provincial to create the province of Žemaičiai. During

<sup>43</sup> Švenčiame 90-ies metų gimtadienį! Žvilgsnis į istoriją. [Accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://seimosseserys.lt/tyli-dievo-pergale-apie-dar-viena-kovo-11-aja/>

<sup>44</sup> ANDRULYTĖ, Faustina Elena. Konspiracija kaip gyvenimo būdas. Šventosios Šeimos seserys ir „Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika“. *Bernardinai*, 2023 01 08 [accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://www.bernardinai.lt/konspiracija-kaip-gyvenimo-budas-sventosios-seimos-seserys-ir-lietuvos-kataliku-baznycios-kronika/>

<sup>45</sup> Ona Vitkauskaitė. [Accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/ona-vitkauskaite; Del-tarybines-teises-normu-pazeidimo-nuteisiant-Ona-Vitkauskaite-ir-kt-tikinčiuosius.Tikinčiuju-teisems-ginti-kataliku-komitetas,Dokumentas-Nr.41,1980-12-01.> [Accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://lbbkronika.lt/index.php/ttgkk-dok-nr-40-52/3593-del-tarybines-teises-normu-pazeidimo-nuteisiant-ona-vitkauskaite-ir-kt-tikinciuosius>

<sup>46</sup> Onos Vitkauskaitės ir Genovaitės Navickaitės teismas. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 46 [accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://lbbkronika.lt/index.php/46-kronika-1980-m/2154-onos-vitkauskaite-ir-genovaites-navickaite-teismas; Genovaitė Navickaitė laisvėje. LKB Kronika, 1982, Nr. 53> [accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://lbbkronika.lt/index.php/53-kronika-1982-m/2471-genovaitė-navickaite-laisveje>

the Soviet occupation, this congregation was one of the resistance centres. The mission of this congregation is to honour God with their consecrated life, to get involved in the saving mission of Christ, especially in the rural environment. United in a sisterly community, nuns serve their neighbours, following Christ and Mary<sup>47</sup>.

The already-mentioned N. Sadūnaitė was part of this community. She entered the illegal monastery right after high school. She later got professional medical training, due to the risk of being accused of not having a job, which was a crime under the Soviet regime. She became a nurse and also worked as a factory secretary. Her motivation to be involved in the resistance was very strong, despite risks and losses, because her definition of happiness was to find a way of life that “coincides with the will of God”:

*Throughout the time, as much as circumstances allowed, I tried to contribute to the great and holy work — to help the Church in Lithuania, which was injured, persecuted, and despised in every way by the Soviets. The LKB Chronicle carries out that holy work, showing everyone the wounds inflicted on the Church; encouraging them to remain faithful to Truth and Love. Therefore, as much as possible, I reproduced the LKB Chronicle, other underground and religious literature. Twelve years ago, during interrogations, I promised KGB Major Vytautas Pilelis that, if God allows me to return from the Gulag, I will reproduce the LKB Chronicle again.<sup>48</sup>*

One more critical hub of the residence – *The Congregation of the Sisters of Eucharistic Jesus* (*Eucharistinio Jėzaus seserų kongregacija*, “*Eucharistietės*”). It was founded in 1947 by the Jesuit Priest Pranciškus Masilionis (1902–1980) during the Soviet occupation. From its institution, the Congregation was active in the pastoral ministries, missionary work, and the resistance movement. The sisters were working under constant persecution, resisting the Soviet regime, seeking freedom of faith in the country and defending human rights. Many of the sisters were involved in underground publishing of the “Chronicle” and in religious education. During the Soviet period, sisters were organising and leading religious movements for lay people, such

<sup>47</sup> *Marijos tarnaitės Lietuvoje*. [Accessed 2025 11 07]. Available from: <https://www.marijostarnaites.lt/?p=931>; *Seserys amžinybėje*. [Accessed 2025 11 07]. Available from: <https://www.marijostarnaites.lt/?p=939>

<sup>48</sup> „Per visą laiką, kiek tik leido sąlygos, stengiausi prisidėti prie didžio ir švento darbo – pagelbėti sužalotai, persekiojamai ir visaip sovietų niekinamai Bažnyčiai Lietuvoje. Tą šventą darbą atlieka LKB Kronika, parodydama visiems Bažnyčiai daromas žaizdas; skatindama išlikti ištikimais Tiesai ir Meilei. Todėl pagal galimybes dauginau LKB Kroniką, kitą pagrindinę ir religinę literatūrą. Prieš 12 metų per tardymus pažadėjau KGB majorui Vytautui Pileliui, jei tik Dievas leis sugrįžti iš Gulago, vėl dauginu LKB Kroniką.“ SADŪNAITĖ, Nijolė. *Gerojo Dievo globoje*. Chicago, Ill: Ateities leidykla, 1989, p. 47.

as Friends of the Eucharist<sup>49</sup>, founded in 1969. The sisters were interrogated, searched, and imprisoned<sup>50</sup>.

A member of this community, Gerarda Elena Šuliauskaitė (b. 1932), studied Lithuanian language and literature at Vilnius University and worked there later. She lost her job due to her dissident activities, but was not imprisoned. A nun since 1972, she has published the underground press since 1975. Sister Gerarda is known as one of the editors of the “Chronicle”, and she is one of the few women awarded the Lithuanian Freedom Prize<sup>51</sup>.

Sister Julija Kuodytė (1924–2013) had a medical degree and worked in various medical facilities in Lithuania before and after joining the convent. From the 1950s, she lived in a secret convent house at K. Donelaičio St. 36, Kaunas (now Dobužinskio St. 3), which became one of the centres of the underground movement. Julija was actively involved in underground activities throughout her monastic life. In the 1970s, she became involved in publishing work of the “Chronicle”. For her activities, she received Lithuanian state awards.<sup>52</sup>

The other community member, Bernadeta Mališkaitė (b. 1955), also studied Lithuanian language and literature. Until 1985, she was a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family. She published and disseminated underground press and was also one of the editors of the “Chronicle”. She managed to avoid imprisonment. She is also awarded the Lithuanian Freedom Prize<sup>53</sup>.

Sister Gema Jadvyga Stanelytė (b. 1931) in 1969 became the co-founder (together with Pranciškus Masilionis) and leader of the already-mentioned youth underground Catholic organisation “Eucharistijos bičiuliai” (the Friends of Eucharist). She was involved in underground publications and dissemination, and organised a Catholic pilgrimage to the Hill of Crosses near Šiauliai. She was on missions to Soviet Georgia

<sup>49</sup> Lithuanian name of this movement was „Eucharistijos bičiuliai“. It was a secret Catholic Lithuanian youth organization. One of the founders and long-time leader of the organization was Sister Gema (J. Stanelytė) of Congregation of the Sisters of the Eucharistic Jesus. Organization members practiced personal prayer with the Eucharist, cultivated spiritual and intellectual education. Lithuanian patriotism was emphasized. The Friends of the Eucharist were supported by priests, nuns, and political prisoners. The members studied the Bible, conducted secret catechesis, organized retreats, distributed the “Chronicle” organized religious journeys to Šiluva, the Hill of Crosses, restored demolished roadside crosses. It was most active in Birštonas, Kaunas, Panevėžys, Šiauliai, and Vilnius. There were about 200–300 active members. More information about Eucharistijos bičiuliai: LABANAUSKAS, Ramūnas. Eucharistijos bičiulių sąjūdžio ištakos ir raida 1969–1973 m. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2003, Nr. 1(13).

<sup>50</sup> BAŠKIENĖ, Rasa. Eucharistinio Jėzaus seserys. *Bernardinai*, 2017 11 01 [accessed 2025 11 16]. Available from: <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2017-11-01-eucharistinio-jezaus-seserys/>

<sup>51</sup> Elena Šuliauskaitė. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/elena-suliauskaite/>; Ses. Gerarda Elena Šuliauskaitė. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/gerarda-elena-suliauskaite>

<sup>52</sup> GELŽINIS, Arvydas. *Julija Kuodytė 1924 12 07–2013 11 08*. 2024 12 07 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: [https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos\\_datos/2024/20241207\\_kuodyte\\_biog.pdf](https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos_datos/2024/20241207_kuodyte_biog.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Bernadeta Mališkaitė. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/bernadeta-maliskaite/>

(1974–1976), Armenia, and Moldova (1976–1980)<sup>54</sup>. All of these activities were seen as illegal by the Soviet regime. On the 16th of December, 1980, sister Gema was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in the forced labour camp. Released in 1982 before serving her term (due to protests against her arrest that were not limited to Soviet Lithuania), she returned to her activities, including work for the “Chronicle” and religious education of children and youth.<sup>55</sup>

Aldona Raižytė (b. 1945) was most active with kids and youth work. As an educator by training, she joined the Franciscan Sisters in 1965, but soon transferred to “eucharistietės,” which better suited her charisma and desire to work with children and youth. She was very active in informal Catholic youth education (which was illegal during Soviet times). In 1969, she became one of the most active members of the organisation “Eucharistijos bičiuliai”. She also participated in underground publishing activities.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, Regina Teresiūtė (b. 1958) entered a monastery right after high school. She was very active in work with youth and children, and in missions across the whole USSR – mainly serving communities of Lithuanian deportees and Lithuanian soldiers in the Soviet army. She also printed and disseminated various underground documents and helped priests<sup>57</sup>.

One more important nun was Ada Urbonaitė (sister Benvenuta, 1921–2009) from a female Franciscan congregation. She was the founder of the underground publication Rūpintojėlis (The Sorrowing Christ, 1977–1990). In 1939, after becoming a Catholic nun, she started her pedagogical work at Kaunas Montessori kindergarten, but in 1948, she was banned from working with children by the Soviet regime. After taking a short course, she began working as a librarian at the Trades Union Library. She learned to type in 1958 and began to type forbidden works by Lithuanian priests and philosophers. She was also disseminating these publications in the underground<sup>58</sup>.

Other vital congregations, according to A. Pažeraitė<sup>59</sup> – women of St. Casimir (“kazimierietės”)<sup>60</sup> and the Sisters of the Poor (“Vargdienių seserys”)<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> *Jadvyga Stanelytė*. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/jadvyga-stanelyte/>

<sup>55</sup> GELŽINIS, Arvydas. *Jadvyga Gema Stanelytė, 1931 10 29*. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: [https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos\\_datos/2021/20211029\\_stanelyte\\_biog.pdf](https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos_datos/2021/20211029_stanelyte_biog.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> GELŽINIS, Arvydas. *Aldona Raižytė 1945 07 31–2025 07 31*. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: [https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos\\_datos/2025/20250731\\_raizyte\\_biog.pdf](https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos_datos/2025/20250731_raizyte_biog.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> *Regina Teresiūtė*. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/regina-teresiuote/>

<sup>58</sup> *Ada Urbonaitė*. Interview NSV56, Loreta Vincloviėnė, 2019 01 05. The Oral History Archive of Vilnius University on Soviet and post-Soviet transformations. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n312842>

<sup>59</sup> PAŽĖRAITĖ, Aušra. Lietuvos vienuolijos totalitarinio režimo sąlygomis. *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos suvažiavimo darbai*, 2003, t. 18, p. 759.

<sup>60</sup> *Kazimierietės (LSSC)*. „Pašvęstasis gyvenimas Lietuvoje“ [accessed 2025 10 10]. Available from: <https://www.vitaconsecrata.lt/kazimierietes-lssc/>

<sup>61</sup> Švč. Mergelės Marijos Nekaltojo Prasidėjimo Vargdienių Seserų Vienuolija. *Istorija*. [Accessed 2025 10 10]. Available from: <https://www.vargdieniu.lt/istorija>

Women of consecrated life who gathered around “Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania” and other underground publications were well prepared and professionally equipped for such a task. Women nuns and sisters had the required education and skills (such as typing and editing, and skills in literature and languages). For instance, the already mentioned Ada Urbonaitė was trained as a librarian<sup>62</sup>. Forced to operate and run their communities underground in conditions of conspiracy, these ladies also developed organisational skills that were very useful in the printing and publishing of the illegal press<sup>63</sup>.

It might not be a coincidence that nuns took over this dangerous role. Having a family would have made it more challenging to engage in certain forms of resistance. For instance, in 1983, three women, who were arrested during the trial of a priest and publisher of the underground press Sigitas Tamkevičius, issued a public statement to Soviet authorities, offering to serve the prison and labour camp terms instead of the arrested and imprisoned priests<sup>64</sup>. If they had family and children, such heroism would be more difficult to imagine.

It is essential to mention that nuns’ underground activities were not limited to the Catholic church. They contributed to the broader dissident movement in human rights defence activities. For instance, Nijolė Sadūnaitė found contacts and was involved in the human rights movement. In November 1988, Sadūnaitė was accepted into the Lithuanian Helsinki Group<sup>65</sup>. Sister Gema Stanelytė kept well-developed connections with the Russian dissidents in Moscow<sup>66</sup>.

While Aldona Raižytė signed various dissident protest documents. She protested human rights violations, such as unjust imprisonment and psychiatric violence against dissident Petras Cidzikas (1944–2019)<sup>67</sup> from the underground organisation Lithuanian Liberty League (Lietuvos laisvės lyga).<sup>68</sup>

But these links are not surprising. The main aim of the Lithuanian “Chronicle” was to document facts of human rights violations in the LSSR and the USSR and to illegally pass that information to the other side of the Iron Curtain<sup>69</sup>. It was primarily focused on

<sup>62</sup> Ada Urbonaitė. *Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija*. [Accessed 2025 10 10]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/ada-urbonaite/>

<sup>63</sup> SAVICKIENĖ, Daiva. Seserys tikėjime ir pasipriešinime. *Sekundė*, 2022 07 04 [accessed 2025 10 10]. Available from: <https://sekunde.lt/leidinys/sekunde/seserys-tikejime-ir-pasipriesinime-2/>

<sup>64</sup> Aldonos Šukytės, Bronislavos Valaitytės ir Janinos Judikevičiūtės pareiškimas TSRS Generaliniam Prokurorui bei LTSR Vyriausiajam Prokurorui, 1983 12 15. *LKB Kronika*, 1984 m. sausio 6 d., Nr. 61. Chicago, IL: Lietuvos Kronikos Sąjunga, 1987, p. 66–68.

<sup>65</sup> *Apie Laisvės premijos laureatę Nijolę Sadūnaitę*. [Accessed 2025 10 18]. Available from: [https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p\\_r=40045&p\\_t=290553](https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=40045&p_t=290553)

<sup>66</sup> *Jadvyga Stanelytė*. [Accessed 2025 10 18]. Available from: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/jadvyga-stanelyte/>

<sup>67</sup> More about Petras Cidzikas: *Petras Cidzikas. information prepared by the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania*. [Accessed 2025 10 18]. Available from: <https://www.genocid.lt/centras/lt/3044/a/>

<sup>68</sup> GELŽINIS, Arvydas, *Aldona Raižytė 1945 07 31 – 2025 07 31*. [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: [https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos\\_datos/2025/20250731\\_raizyte\\_biog.pdf](https://www.genocid.lt/UserFiles/File/Atmintinos_datos/2025/20250731_raizyte_biog.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> JASELIŪNAS, Egidijus. Periodinės savilaidos formavimasis: sovietinio disidentizmo reiškiny ir Lietuvos katalikiškasis judėjimas. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 1(11), p. 8.



defending religious rights, but did not limit itself to that. Documents of other dissident networks and organisations – for instance, the Lithuanian Helsinki Group – were also published in the illegal Catholic periodicals.<sup>70</sup>

### 3. Repression and Resilience

In this chapter, we will describe methods that the Soviet authorities used to suppress the Lithuanian Catholic resistance, including nuns' underground activities, and the creative resilience strategies of the movement and its members. We will discuss the factors that impacted the success of the resistance networks and the fact that the publication of the Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was not stopped by the Soviet authorities, despite extensive efforts.

The described Catholic underground activities were seen as criminal by the Soviet regime. Due to the publication of the “Chronicle”, the criminal investigation was active for several years<sup>71</sup>. For their activities, nuns – just like the other members of the resistance – were seen as dangerous to the Soviet regime. The KGB often interrogated sisters. Some of them – for example, already mentioned several times, sister N. Sadūnaitė of “Marijos tarnaitės” and the sisters of “Šventosios šeimos seserys” – were imprisoned in the Soviet prison camps. The Franciscan nun A. Urbonaitė experienced such actions of the Soviet regime:

*On October 14, 1980, the KGB searched the small apartment of Ada Urbonaitė (Kaunas, Apkasų 108-2). In the evening, security officers took away five bags of books and writing paper and Ada Urbonaitė herself in three cars. The interrogation lasted until 10 p.m.*<sup>72</sup>

Other examples of arrested sisters: G. Navickaitė<sup>73</sup> and O. Vitkauskaitė. Multiple sisters were interrogated, searches were carried out in many houses that served as convents. Sisters Genovaitė and Ona were convicted: Vitkauskaitė received a sentence of 1.5 years, Navickaitė – 2 years of imprisonment (served the sentence in Panevėžys).<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Lietuvos Helsinkio grupės Dokumentai: Nr. 22 ir Nr. 23. *Aušra*, 1980, Nr. 22. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/ausra-nr-22/lietuvas-helsinkio-grupes-dokumentai-nr-22-ir-nr-23>

<sup>71</sup> Lietuvos SSR valstybės saugumo komiteto (KGB) pranešimas apie baudžiamosios bylos iškėlimą dėl leidinio „Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios kronika“ gaminimo ir platinimo fakto. 1984 m. rugpjūčio 6 d. *Lithuanian Special Archives*, found. (f.) K-40, inventory (inv.) 1, file (f.) 246, p. 106–108.

<sup>72</sup> „1980 m. spalio 14 d. būrys KGB iškratė mažą Ados Urbonaitės butelį (Kaunas, Apkasų 108-2). Vakarop saugumiečiai trimis automašinomis išsivežė 5 maišus knygų bei rašomojo popieriaus ir pačią Adą Urbonaitę. Tardymas užtruko iki 22 val.“ Apie Ados Urbonaitės tardymą. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 46 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/45-kronika-1980-m-2/2148-tardymai-ir-kratos>

<sup>73</sup> Genovaitė Navickaitė laisvėje. *LKB Kronika*, 1982, Nr. 53 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/53-kronika-1982-m/2471-genovaite-navickaite-laisveje>

<sup>74</sup> Onos Vitkauskaitės ir Genovaitės Navickaitės Teismas. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 46 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/53-kronika-1982-m/2471-genovaite-navickaite-laisveje>

N. Sadūnaitė, as mentioned, was a political prisoner in 1974–1980 (arrested in 1974 for her role in publishing the “Chronicle”).<sup>75</sup>

J. Kuodytė was interrogated multiple times. On August 12, 1980, the KGB searched the mentioned secret convent in Donelaičio 36, Kaunas, due to her activities and found multiple prohibited published materials. On October 9, the same year, she was questioned at the Soviet Lithuanian prosecutor’s office.<sup>76</sup>

There are examples from the underground press demonstrating that repressions against the unarmed resistance network members could even affect their family members. In the case of N. Sadūnaitė, her brother was a target several times. As Sadūnaitė wrote in her memoirs book: “Unable to cope with me, my ‘friends’ began to terrorise my brother’s family.”<sup>77</sup>

A similar situation happened to the sister of Ona Vitkauskaitė. According to the “Chronicle” of the 1980s, on 20th of August that year, Vitkauskaitė’s sister, Bronė Vitkauskaitė, was questioned at Kaunas KGB headquarters. The interrogator wanted to know if she was involved in reading and disseminating the underground press. Bronė was informed that her sister might end up in jail for 12 years due to her activities in printing and multiplying “Chronicle”. After the interrogation, Bronė experienced severe pressure to quit her job.<sup>78</sup>

What helped nuns to hide and operate in such conditions? It could be that nuns did not have families or children to risk. Definitely, the fact that nun communities had to split and go underground during the Stalinist period was very significant. Their members were used to living almost secret lives, functioning as nuns alone or in small groups. These habits created favourable conditions for resistance, as the smaller communities and individuals living alone were more difficult for the KGB to detect.

For instance, as already mentioned, A. Urbonaitė (sister Benvenuta) of the Franciscan order lived alone during the entire Soviet period. Her apartment was unfortunately detected and searched by the KGB on October 14, 1980 and identified as a potential hub of resistance<sup>79</sup>. The fact that she was living alone reduced the risk of nuns at other locations being detected.

Nuns also studied instructions on how to handle searches and interrogations. When the home of Aldona Raižytė was searched in the 1980s, the KGB, among other illegal

<sup>75</sup> *Nijolė Felicija Sadūnaitė*. [Accessed 2025 11 15]. Available from: [https://www.genocid.lt/centras/lt/2971/a/Seserys\\_amžinybėje](https://www.genocid.lt/centras/lt/2971/a/Seserys_amžinybėje). [Accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://www.marijostarnaites.lt/?p=939>

<sup>76</sup> Kratos ir tardymai. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 45 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/45-kronika-1980-m/kratos-ir-tardymai?highlight=WyJhcGtsYXVzXHUwMTE3IiwZ2Vub3ZhaXRcdTAxMTciLCJuYXZpY2thaXRcdTAxMTciXQ==>

<sup>77</sup> SADŪNAITĖ, Nijolė. *Gerojo Dievo globoje*. Chicago, Ill: Ateities leidykla, 1989, p. 41.

<sup>78</sup> Kratos ir tardymai. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 45 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/45-kronika-1980-m/kratos-ir-tardymai?highlight=WyJhcGtsYXVzXHUwMTE3IiwZ2Vub3ZhaXRcdTAxMTciLCJuYXZpY2thaXRcdTAxMTciXQ==>

<sup>79</sup> Apie Ados Urbonaitės tardymą. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 46 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/45-kronika-1980-m-2/2148-tardymai-ir-kratos>

publications, detected the printout called “Patarimai, kaip laikytis tardymo metu” (“Tips on how to behave during interrogation”)<sup>80</sup>.

It is also important to note that, according to Arūnas Streikus, women were less suspicious to the KGB than Catholic men. The Soviet authorities, still guided by their sexist biases, did not take Catholic women seriously and were highly mistaken. So, the KGB underestimated the female potential<sup>81</sup>.

Last, but not least, the Lithuanian underground church had fewer hierarchical limitations than the official one. It attempted to follow the “spirit” of the Second Vatican Council. The Council, held in 1962–1965, gave the Catholic dissident movement in Soviet-occupied Lithuania a vital impetus. According to E. Jaseliūnas, it “encouraged the renewal of monasteries that had moved to illegal activity at the end of the fifties”. Priests began to operate in the underground conditions actively, taking care of catechising, missions, and illegal publishing<sup>82</sup>.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the principles of freedom of faith and the active involvement of the clergy and laity in evangelisation were raised. Therefore, it is not by chance that restrictions on freedom of belief triggered the activity of the Lithuanian Catholic underground, as the Council provided an ideological justification for it. Under the influence of the Second Vatican Council, priests and nuns also became involved in defending human rights. Spreading religion became a form of resistance in an atheism-oriented regime<sup>83</sup>.

## Conclusions

Lithuanian nuns’ anti-Soviet resistance in the 1970s and 1980s was a part of the resistance of the Catholic church. Its impacts can be traced to the Lithuanian anti-Soviet armed resistance of the 1940s and 1950s (that also developed unarmed resistance methods such as underground publications and had many Catholic priests as supporters), to Russian dissident movement (that had direct contacts to Lithuanian resistance network of the 1970s and 1980s and gave inspiration to the form of the main Lithuanian underground Catholic periodical, the “Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania”).

<sup>80</sup> Kratos ir tardymai. *LKB Kronika*, 1980, Nr. 45 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://lkbkronika.lt/index.php/45-kronika-1980-m/kratos-ir-tardymai?highlight=WyJhcGtsYXVzXHUwMTE3IiwZ2Vub3ZhaXRcdTAxMTciLCJuYXZpY2thaXRcdTAxMTciXQ==>

<sup>81</sup> Džiazuojanti istorija. Kodėl vienuolijos sovietmečiu buvo visuomenės pasipriešinimo bazė? *LRT*, 2021 04 07 [accessed 2025 11 10]. Available from: <https://www.lrt.lt/radioteka/irasas/2000147441/dziazuojanti-istorija-kodel-vienuolijos-sovietmeciu-buvo-visuomenes-pasipriesinimo-baze>

<sup>82</sup> JASELIŪNAS, Egidijus. Periodinės savilaidos formavimasis: sovietinio disidentizmo reiškiny ir Lietuvos katalikiškasis judėjimas. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 1(11), p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> JASELIŪNAS, Egidijus. Vatikano II susirinkimo nutarimų įtaka katalikiškojo pasipriešinimo formavimuisi Lietuvoje. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2002, Nr. 2(12), p. 63–65, 76; LABANAUSKAS, Ramūnas. Eucharistijos bičiulių sąjūdžio ištakos ir raida 1969–1973 m. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2003, Nr. 1(13).

Several factors were encouraging and helping to maintain the nuns' underground activities of the 70s and 80s. First, nuns were already used to operating in underground conditions due to Soviet anti-Catholic policy; because of Soviet repressions against monastic life in the 1940s and 1950s, they were living in tiny convents or alone, working lay jobs and hiding the fact that they were nuns. Second, nuns had the required skills and literacy to publish, print and disseminate underground press and were encouraged by the Second Vatican Council to lead an apostolic lifestyle and work. Most of the nuns were highly educated and emancipated women – able to self-organise, network, and work in conditions of great secrecy. It can also be noted that nuns had no family obligations and could therefore entirely sacrifice themselves to this dangerous work. They were also less suspicious to the KGB than the priests.

Nuns' activities were not limited to underground publishing. They worked in the fields of religious children's education and missions, and they contributed to the human rights movement.

Nuns did experience Soviet repressions. Several of them were arrested and sentenced, and even more were persecuted and threatened by the Soviet regime in other ways. But because of well-developed conspiracy techniques, Soviet authorities never managed to break down the resistance.

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# Moterys prieš blogio imperiją? Lietuvos vienuolės katalikės antisovietinėje veikloje XX a. aštuntajame ir devintajame dešimtmečiuose

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## Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje ieškoma atsakymo į klausimą, koks buvo Lietuvos vienuolių moterų vaidmuo antisovietinėje katalikų veikloje ir disidentų tinkluose aštuntajame ir devintajame dešimtmečiuose. Analizuojama keletas vienuolių bendruomenių ir asmenų, dalyvavusių antisovietinėje veikloje, pavyzdžių. Taip pat atskleidžiama, kaip moterys vienuolės pasirinko pasipriešinimo kelią, sunkumus ir rizikas, su kuriomis teko susidurti, įskaitant sovietų persekiojimą ir represijas. Tyrimo metodas – kritinė istorinių šaltinių analizė: pirmiausia internetinis archyvas (duomenų bazė) ir spausdinti pagrindinio Lietuvos pagrindinio antisovietinio periodinio leidinio „LKBK kronika“ tomiai. Taip pat naudoti Lietuvos ypatingojo archyvo dokumentai, publikuoti šaltiniai bei kolekcijos, pavyzdžiui, publikuoti politinių teismų dokumentai. Kitas svarbus šaltinis – vienuolių atsiminimai, biografijos ir gyvenimo istorijos, publikuotos įvairiuose šaltiniuose – nuo skaitmeninių iki spausdintų. Lietuvos vienuolių antisovietinis pasipriešinimas buvo Katalikų bažnyčios pasipriešinimo dalis. Aštuntajame ir devintajame dešimtmečiuose vienuolių pagrindinę veiklą skatino ir padėjo palaikyti keletas veiksmų. Pirmiausia, vienuolės jau buvo įpratusios veikti pagrindinio sąlygomis dėl sovietų antikatalikiškos politikos; dėl sovietų represijų prieš vienuolių gyvenimą 1940–1950 m. jos gyveno mažuose vienuolynuose arba vienos, dirbo pasauliečių darbus ir slėpė, kad yra vienuolės. Antra, vienuolės turėjo reikiamų įgūdžių leisti, spausdinti ir platinti pagrindinę spaudą. Be to, tvyrant Antrojo Vatikano susirinkimo dvasiai, jos buvo skatinamos gyventi atvirai ir pagal apaštališkąją tikėjimą, nors tai prieštaravo sovietinei antibažnytinei politikai. Taip pat galima paminėti, kad vienuolės neturėjo šeiminių išpareigojimų, todėl galėjo visiškai pasiaukoti pavojingam pagrindinio darbui. KGB jos taip pat buvo mažiau įtartinos nei kunigai. Visgi kelios vienuolės buvo suimtos ir nuteistos, be to, persekiojamos, joms visai grasino sovietų valdžia.

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