

Mother Russia by Luba George

No let-up in war on the Vatican

The Pope would like to go to Lithuania, but Moscow has geared up its anti-Catholic campaign there.

Three months before the Pope's scheduled arrival in Poland on June 8, in the overwhelmingly Catholic neighboring Soviet Republic of Lithuania, Moscow is conducting a crack-down against the Catholic Church, exposing once again the sham of Gorbachov's *glasnost* and "democratization" campaign. One of the most cherished goals of Pope John Paul II is a papal visit to Lithuania, which Moscow has repeatedly blocked to date.

"We must strengthen our arguments against religious views everywhere and we must decisively and skillfully dethrone clerical extremism," declared the Lithuanian Communist Party chief, Petras Griskevicius. Speaking at the Lithuanian Central Committee Plenum in mid-March, he said: "We must eradicate all forms of nationalist narrow-mindedness and conceit, nationalism, and chauvinism."

The Lithuanian plenum follows Gorbachov's late-February tour of the Baltic states. Speaking in the Latvian capital of Riga, Gorbachov, praising the role of the Russian "soldier-liberator," signaled the final phase of "Russification" of the Baltic states.

Lithuania, one of the three Baltic republics incorporated by force into the Soviet empire in 1940, has strong Catholic traditions and close historical and cultural ties with Poland. They once formed the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Ethnic Lithuanians are about 80% of the republic's population of 2.8 million.

The Pope, who closely follows events in Lithuania, was refused permission to go there in 1984 to attend ceremonies marking the 500th anniversary of the death of the nation's patron St. Casimir, who is also patron saint of Poland. He lived in the "most troubled of times" and represents the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's struggle against Russian incursions. He and his father, Casimir IV ("The Great"), King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, strongly opposed the alliance of the Genoese Pope Sixtus IV with Moscow, warning that recognizing the Russian Czar (Caesar) would mean legitimizing "Moscow, the Third Rome."

This year marks the 600th anniversary of the conversion of Lithuania to Roman Catholicism and its (Jagiellonian) dynastic union with Poland in 1387. (Jagiello was St. Casimir's grandfather). Vatican sources report that the Soviet authorities have announced that no Lithuanian priest will be allowed to leave the country this year—or to attend the anniversary celebrations scheduled in Rome, later this year. No wonder. Moscow has never forgiven the Vatican's refusal to recognize the Soviet Union's wartime annexation of the three Baltic Republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

Moscow's diatribes denigrating the role of Catholicism and Western ideas in Lithuanian and Ukrainian history have become the order of the day. The campaign centers on the argument of official Soviet historians that the roots

of Lithuania's "spirituality" lie in its pagan past and that the "reactionary" Catholic Church—"in the service of imperialism"—has been hostile or indifferent to those countries' interests.

Thus, during the 600th anniversary celebrations (main festivities June 28, 1987) an extensive Soviet propaganda campaign, four years in preparation, will emphasize the "pre-Christian" elements of Lithuania's heritage. Publications prepared include: a history book documenting Papal bulls urging Catholics in Western Europe to participate in the crusades against "freethinking pagan Lithuania"; Romualdas Granauskas' tale, "The Sacrifice of the Ox," about the final days of the last pagan priest in Courland; and a piece by Kreve-Mickevicius which, according to the publisher's brochure, "evaluates critically the introduction of Christianity into Lithuania, revealing that Christian dogmas are foreign to the world view of the common people."

Moreover, Western monitoring sources report "heightened repression" prohibiting Catholic instruction and public religious activity. The *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, forced underground recently, regularly reports on details of violations of religious rights in Lithuania. The latest issue (71st) writes of Catholic priests and believers becoming subject to increasing threats and harassment by the Soviet KGB authorities. Those sentenced for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" face six to seven years of imprisonment at regime camps or exile. Some have been forced to recant and sign petitions denouncing "reactionary Vatican circles."

The Kremlin is still making unofficial overtures to invite the Pope to Moscow in 1988, but the Pope will only agree if he is allowed to visit both Lithuania and Kiev.