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Religious Feasts and the Soviet Regime: The Case of Cross-Days and May Devotions

Abstract. This paper looks at two Catholic spring feasts: Cross-days (three days before the Ascension Day) and devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary during the May month (May Devotions). By the middle of the twentieth century, these two feasts were celebrated in rural areas throughout Lithuania. The local community regulated and controlled both feasts by setting their start time, the ceremonial practices followed, the scenario, and the route. Both feasts experienced significant difficulties in Soviet times, during which Cross-days completely disappeared from the ritual calendar, while May Devotions were organised and celebrated secretly in private family spaces. This article addresses the question of what led to the disappearance of one feast and the survival of the other, drawing on field research data collected by the author since 2003.

Keywords: religious feasts, Soviet era, control, regulation

Introduction

This paper focuses on two Lithuanian Catholic spring feasts: Cross-days or Rogation Days (three days before Ascension) and the May Devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated in rural areas across the country until the middle of the twentieth century. The majority of scholarly attention has focused on historical facts and liturgy,¹ especially the chants and psalms of the May Devotions,² while Jonas Mardo-

¹ Juozas Vaišnora, *Marijos garbinimas Lietuvoje* (Roma: Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademija, 1958), pp. 59–66.

² Alfonsas Motuzas, 'Katalikiškosios pridedamosios pamaldos Lietuvoje. Gegužinės ir birželinės pamaldos. Sekminės', *Liaudies kultūra*, 2 (2000), 14–19; Alfonsas Motuzas, 'Liaudies pamaldumo Švč. M. Marijai praktikos Lietuvoje', *Soter*, 40 (2011), 81–96; Virginija Kvasaitė, 'Marijos Nekalto Prasidėjimo Valandų giedojimo ypatumai Kartenos apylinkėse', in *Lietuvos lokaliniai tyrimai*, ed. Gintautas Zabiela and Gabija Juščiūtė (Vilnius: Versmė, 2003), pp. 920–28 (pp. 926–27).

sa has examined the May Devotions practices of Lithuanian deportees in Siberia,³ and his is certainly the most comprehensive research on Cross-days in Lithuania, generally.⁴ Mardosa concludes that the celebration of Cross-days began to decline as early as the 1920s and 30s, and that by the Second World War, the celebration had essentially ended, though he does not delve further into further changes during the Soviet era.⁵

In this article, I will compare the fate of these two feasts during the Soviet era, particularly from the perspective of regulation and control, and seek to discover why one festival declined while the other survived. My findings are based on field research I have undertaken since 2003, as well as relevant published material. While researching cross-crafting heritage in Lithuania, I began to collect information relating to the rituals connected with crosses or saints' images, and consequently I included questions about Cross-days and May Devotions. The material was collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and part of the collected data can be found in my articles on cross-crafting.

May Devotions

The Catholic Church has devoted the month of May to the honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and devotions have been a regular feature of life in many Catholic regions since the early to mid-nineteenth century.⁶ These services were strictly regulated by the Church and, at first, were held exclusively in church buildings in towns and boroughs. But many rural people found it difficult to participate, both because of the intensity of springtime farm work and the great distances between remote farms and their nearest churches. People thus began to organise services in their own villages and their local May Devotions practices began to evolve without Church regulation. Eventually, these localised

³ Jonas Mardosa, 'Lietuvių tremtinių Sibire gegužinės pamaldos (XX a. penkto dešimtmečio vidurys – šešto dešimtmečio pabaiga)', in *Florilegium Lithuanum: in honorem eximii professoris atque academici Lithuani domini Eugenii Jovaiša anniversarii sexagesimi causa dicatum*, ed. Grasilda Blažienė, Sandra Grigaravičiūtė, and Aivas Ragauskas (Vilnius: Vilniaus pedagoginio universiteto leidykla, 2010), pp. 151–60.

⁴ Jonas Mardosa, 'Kryžiaus dienos XX a.: krikščioniška ir žemdirbiška tradicija', *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, 21 (2002), 89–106.

⁵ Mardosa, 'Kryžiaus dienos XX a.', p. 97.

⁶ Vaišnora, *Marijos garbinimas Lietuvoje*, p. 61.

Devotions became one of the essential forms of religious life in rural communities, regulated instead by a consensus of community members.

Each evening in May, villagers would gather in a chosen house (usually the largest in the settlement) to pray and chant to the Blessed Virgin Mary, at a small temporary altar with the image of the Virgin. In some areas, people gathered outside to pray, at a standing cross, a small chapel, or in the village cemetery.⁷ In such cases, a small altar was installed at the cross, while in some West Lithuanian villages inhabitants used to pray and chant at a small chapel containing a statue of the Virgin Mary;⁸ in such cases, the chapel itself played the role of an altar. During the May Devotions, people prayed mostly in the evening, or after work, but in some places at lunch time. Usually people would agree in advance when to start services and the ceremony was attended by inhabitants of all ages – parents, children, grandparents, and young people.

There was no firm structure to these May Devotions, but they usually included the singing of Marian anthems, a litany to Mary, and such like. Venerating the Virgin Mary, people would also pray, asking for good weather and for blessings for fields and crops, both of which were important for rural country life. The May Devotions served both religious and social functions, creating opportunities to meet and communicate with peers, and both close and distant neighbours. Older people discussed everyday affairs, politics, farm work, and shared experiences. On Saturdays, after the services, young people would organise dances.

Cross-Days (Rogation Days)

Another spring religious holiday, widely celebrated in Lithuania since the sixteenth century, is the Rogation Days, observed on the Monday to Wednesday before Ascension Day.⁹ As in the case of May Devotions, people soon began to celebrate the feast in localised ways, in their own villages.

⁷ Vacys Milius, 'Kryžiai ir koplytėlės lietuvių liaudies papročiuose', *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, 11 (1997), 207–17 (p. 213); Skaidrė Urbonienė, 'Šilalės valsčiaus kryždirbystės tradicijos', in *Šilalės kraštas*, ed. Edvardas Vidmantas (Vilnius: Margi raštai, 2006), pp. 558–73 (p. 573).

⁸ Urbonienė, 'Šilalės valsčiaus', p. 573.

⁹ Vaišnora, *Marijos garbinimas Lietuvoje*, p. 136.

The main element of the ceremony was a procession around the village's outdoor crosses, hence the common alternate name of 'Cross-days', and the performance was again regulated by a consensus among community members. They would decide the start time, the order in which the procession would visit the crosses, and so on. The Cross-days scenario was similar across Lithuania and most members of the community were involved. Before each event, women and girls would decorate all the destination crosses with foliage and flower-wreaths. In some places, ceremonies were performed in the morning, before breakfast; in others, at lunchtime, or the afternoon. The beginning of the gathering and procession was marked by an audible signal — the sound of tin sheet or board being beaten, the sound of a drum, blowing trumpets, or horns. If the village or town had a church, crosses would be visited after the Mass, with the priest in attendance. In smaller villages, the processions were held without a priest. Sometimes, the community invited a priest to consecrate fields where crosses could be found, but in many cases, they were blessed by villagers themselves sprinkling holy water without the help of a clergyman. The route of the procession would depend on the number of crosses, their location in the area, and other factors. In some places people visited only three crosses, one a day for three days, but in general, during this feast, the procession visited, prayed, and chanted at all crosses included in the route. The ritual finished in the village cemetery, where believers would chant the Litany of Saints and remember the dead.

Cross-days were important to the rural calendar cycle. As in other Catholic countries, they are designated as harvest supplication days. In other words, the Cross-days, and associated prayers, were held to regulate the weather — rain, drought, hail — and, by extension, to ensure a good harvest.

The Impact of Soviet Occupation

Soviet occupation changed May Devotions and Cross-days practices. It was an extremely unfavourable period for religious life overall: atheist ideology was strongly inculcated, and people were prevented from conducting religious ceremonies. Soviet authorities actively tried to suppress and exterminate religious rites, including the Cross-days and May Devotions, and public religious rites were especially condemned. Consequently, during this period, public religious celebra-

tions became much rarer and moved to either the Church's domain or to private quarters.

As public religious practice was quite dangerous in the Soviet period, it was easier for traditions to survive if they could be performed in a private space. This suited May Devotions better than Cross-days. In the post-war period during the month of May, local communities would stop to pray and chant together in one house or outside at a cross or chapel, but May Devotions continued in homes, with only family in attendance, throughout the Soviet period. According to Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, this enabled families to 'preserve a significant portion of the old traditions'.¹⁰ The services, supported by family members, the community, and the Church, brought together all ages, including children, and thus became one of the main mechanisms of religious upbringing, greatly strengthening children's and young people's religious identity in the face of Soviet atheist principles, and developing Lithuanian patriotism in response to the hegemonic regime. According to Jonas Mardosa, Lithuanian deportees in Siberia also organised such May Devotions services, sometimes with songs of patriotic character.¹¹ This sacred service in exile thus contributed to the preservation of links with the homeland and became a form of resistance there, too.¹²

Nevertheless, due to very active atheistic policies, Soviet authorities partly managed to divert people, especially young, from religious life. Jerry Pankhurst has pointed out some of the more important social control mechanisms favoured by the Soviet state, including: forbidding formal religious education for children; hampering the participation of children in religious activities; controlling baptism rites; actively seeking out believers and attempting to 're-educate' them; publishing and disseminating antireligious propaganda, and more.¹³ Most attention was paid to children's atheist education with, in Lithuania for example, weekend dances held in schools and houses of culture, deliberately organised by local Soviet authorities to distract young people from May

¹⁰ Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, 'Šeima ir kalendorinės šventės sovietinėje Lietuvoje', *Lietuvos etnologija: socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos*, 16 (2016), 9–34 (p. 34).

¹¹ Mardosa, 'Lietuvių tremtinių', p. 158.

¹² Mardosa, 'Lietuvių tremtinių', p. 160.

¹³ Jerry Pankhurst, 'Religious Culture: Faith in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia', in *Digital Scholarship at UNLV* (2012), ed. Dmitri N. Shalin, pp. 1–32 (pp. 22–23), https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture/7/ [accessed 14 May 2020].

Devotions. According to some respondents, the Soviet government succeeded in implementing their target and young people gradually abandoned May Devotions rituals, preferring to go to the programmed dances instead of praying together with their parents at home or in church. As one respondent has noted, 'These dances seduced young people'.¹⁴

Public space was occupied by communist ideological feasts and events, with new traditions ('invented', in Hobsbawm's terms¹⁵) carefully designed to replace the old Christian ones. This was the case in other republics of the Soviet Union¹⁶ as well as other countries in the Soviet bloc.¹⁷ Under the Soviet regime, many religious people effectively lived double lives. As Anna Lubecka has noted in her research on the ritual year in Poland, 'At home, traditional Polish values were cherished, and religious and patriotic rituals were celebrated, while in the public sphere new holidays and celebrations enacting the communist ideology were observed'.¹⁸ By suppressing the old and creating (or inventing) new holidays, Soviet ideologists sought to control the lives of ordinary people. However, that was possible only with holidays enacted in public spaces as it was difficult to control any holiday celebration in the private family space. Religion disappeared from public life, while religious expression assumed a 'domesticated' character, to

¹⁴ Male respondent (born 1923), Duokiškis town, Rokiškis municipal district, 2005.

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14 (p. 1).

¹⁶ Žilvytis Šaknys, 'Politics and festivals: Lithuania's Shrove and Midsummer', in *Politics, Feasts, Festivals*, ed. Gábor Barna and István Povedák (Szeged: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, 2014), pp. 136–50 (p. 139–42); Mare Köiva, 'Calendar Feasts: Politics of Adoption and Reinstatement', in *Estonia and Poland: Creativity and Change in Cultural Communication*, ed. Liisi Laineste, Dorota Brzozowska, and Wladislaw Chlopicki (Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, 2013), pp. 59–82 (pp. 67–75), www.folklore.ee/pubte/eraamat/eestipoola2/koiva.pdf [accessed 5 July 2017]; Pankhurst, 'Religious Culture', p. 22.

¹⁷ Bożena Gierek, 'Interference of Politics in Celebrating "Dożynki" – The Harvest Festival in Poland in the 1950s', in *Politics, Feasts, Festivals*, ed. Gábor Barna and István Povedák (Szeged: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, 2014), pp. 171–92 (pp. 171–88); Anna Lubecka, 'Polish Ritual Year – A Reflection on Polish Cultural Policy', in *Estonia and Poland: Creativity and Change in Cultural Communication*, ed. Liisi Laineste, Dorota Brzozowska, and Wladislaw Chlopicki (Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, 2013), pp. 83–98 (pp. 89–92), www.folklore.ee/pubte/eraamat/eestipoola2/anna.lubecka.pdf [accessed 5 July 2017].

¹⁸ Lubecka, 'Polish Ritual Year', p. 92.

use Tamara Dragadze's term, describing the shift of religious practice from public to private, from outside the home to its interior.¹⁹

These domesticated traditions – communal meeting and chanting during May Devotions, sometimes the singing of patriotic hymns and songs – embodied a resistance to the Soviet regime which quite strongly motivated some individuals (especially those who returned from exile or were very religious, or who had connection with perished partisans or close relatives in exile) to perform services. Thus, despite the external regulations imposed by Soviet authorities to prevent people from taking part in religious rituals, May Devotions were practised throughout the entire Soviet period, though mostly because of the efforts of the older generation.

Cross-days were more troublesome. The peculiarity and essence of this ritual was its public face, namely, publicly conducted processions visiting crosses in a certain area. Soviet authorities managed to suppress this tradition by various repressive regulatory measures, such as a prohibition against organising processions and leaving work to take part in them. According to some scholars, the Cross-days had already begun to decline in the 1920s and 30s, when after the land reform, villages were divided into single farmsteads.²⁰ Despite this, Cross-days were celebrated as before in many places in Lithuania. Many of the respondents remembered them from their childhoods in the first half of the twentieth century and even from the early years of the Soviet period. According to my data this tradition persisted in some villages until the end of the 1960s.²¹ Cross-days in small towns also gradually vanished from the streets and took place exclusively inside churchyards. In some areas the practice lasted a little longer, in others, less, but in the early 1970s the festival disappeared even from churchyards; it could not be performed in the limited churchyard space as one of its main goals was to attend crosses in the fields and pray for the harvest.

In some places the ritual survived somewhat longer due to the attitude of local officials. According to my respondents, government

¹⁹ Tamara Dragadze, 'The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism', in *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice*, ed. C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 148–56 (p. 150).

²⁰ Mardosa, 'Kryžiaus dienos XX a.', p. 97.

²¹ Skaidrė Urbonienė, 'Kalendorinės šventės', in *Viduklė*, ed. Antanas Pocius (Kaunas: Naujasis lankas, 2002), pp. 1042–51 (p. 1049); Skaidrė Urbonienė, 'Kryždirbystė Juodupės valsčiuje', in *Juodupė. Onuškis*, ed. Jonas Šedys, Venantas Mačiekus, and Edita Korzonaitė, 2 vols (Vilnius: Versmė, 2012), pp. 1323–32 (pp. 1331–32).

officials differed in their positions on this religious ceremony. Some of them very strictly controlled the behaviour of residents during the Cross-days, others looked more leniently upon the ritual. One respondent recalled a situation when the district chair, who was Russian, learnt about a procession and came to see it. Observing it, he said, 'That's nothing, a nice custom'.²² Thus, during his time of leadership, people were able to visit the crosses without interruption.

Respondents also had their own opinions as to why the celebration of Cross-days disappeared from the ritual calendar. According to one, the custom was abandoned not because of direct regulation by the Soviet authorities, but because of (1) the disappearance of the villages themselves when, after the massive melioration of lands, people from the old villages were moved into newly built urban settlements and small towns, and (2) the tradition being supported mostly by the older generation. When older people passed away, or were not able to coordinate the procession, and there were no enthusiasts who would make the effort, there was no one who would take responsibility for organising it. Respondents attributed this process to the weakening of religiosity: 'the faith disappeared', or 'the belief was suffocated'.²³

The disappearance of the Cross-days in the 1960s corresponds with the Soviet Union's most active period of campaigning against religion. According to Atko Rimmel, there were three main mechanisms: (1) the stifling of church activity by administrative, legal, and economic means; (2) a propaganda war through the media; and (3) the disruption of religious traditions through the creation of secular equivalents.²⁴ According to Arūnas Streikus, the general course of anti-religious politics was mitigated in Lithuania after the death of Stalin, but the struggle against the folk faith and participation in Church rituals nevertheless began to strengthen at that time²⁵ and atheistic pro-

²² Male respondent (born 1923), Lapieniai village, Rokiškis municipal district, 2005.

²³ Male respondent (born 1925), Leliūnai town, Utena municipal district, 2013.

²⁴ Atko Rimmel, '(Anti)-Religious Aspects of the Cold War: Soviet Religious Policy as Applied in the Estonian SSR', in *Behind the Iron Curtain. Estonia in the Era of the Cold War*, ed. Tõnu Tannberg (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 359–92 (p. 390), <https://www.etis.ee/Portal/Publications/Display/d99831d2-41d2-4fdd-9f49-0b3668a0dc03> [accessed 22 June 2017].

²⁵ Arūnas Streikus, 'Atlaidai Žemaičių Kalvarijoje ir Šiluvoje: jų pobūdis bei reikšmė sovietmečiu', *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, 28 (2006), 339–44 (p. 340).

paganda reached its peak of intensity.²⁶ During this period, significant decline and even disappearance of Cross-days practices can be seen.

Concluding Remarks

Both feasts discussed in this paper experienced significant difficulties in the Soviet period. The format of the May Devotions allowed them to be performed both in private and public spaces, while the Cross-days festivals vanished, their public format making it impossible to conduct the visitations to crosses. During the Soviet era, Cross-days thus completely disappeared from the ritual calendar, while May Devotions were secretly organised and celebrated in family circles throughout the entire period. The Soviet time saw the intervention of external regulation — ideological (atheistic propaganda) and physical (land melioration destroying villages and traditional community life) — as well as other methods of control — various prohibitions directed against the conduct of religious rituals — which made a significant impact on these ceremonies. One festival moved from public space into the private space; the other died out.

After the restoration of the independent Lithuanian state in 1990, there was a small revival of May Devotions. At the same time some local communities tried to revive Cross-days processions, but these attempts failed. Currently, May Devotions exist only in the Church space; only a few elderly respondents admitted that they pray at home every evening on May month. Why these two festivals have not been revived on any large scale and are not alive in community and family life today is a question for future research.

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²⁶ Arūnas Streikus, 'Antireliginė propaganda Lietuvoje 1944–1970 metais', *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, 14 (2004), 88–99 (p. 97).

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