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# Watching, Listening and Learning: *KGB Agentura* in Soviet Lithuania

ROBERT HORNSBY

## *Abstract*

This article explores the KGB's use of undercover agents to forestall and investigate dissenting behaviour in the Lithuanian SSR during the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing primarily on declassified KGB documents from the Lithuanian Special Archive, it presents new details on the scope, methods, targets and results of agent work as the Soviet regime moved away from the mass repressions of the Stalin years, highlighting both change and continuity, as well as key successes and failings in this sphere.

IN 1954 THE KGB UNCOVERED 20 DIFFERENT UNDERGROUND groups in Lithuania, with a combined total of more than 200 members.<sup>1</sup> November 1956 then saw a major public disorder in the city of Kaunas, with thousands of citizens in the streets chanting hostile slogans, attacking Communist Party premises and fighting running battles with police (Weiner 2006). In spring 1957, KGB reports recorded five people killed by what the authorities called 'terrorists' (most likely meaning remnants of the partisan struggle) over the preceding 12 months, along with numerous assaults, attempted murders and suspicious fires.<sup>2</sup> A review of Lithuanian KGB investigations during the early part of the 1960s listed, among others, 283 instances of people sending threatening or slanderous letters to authorities; 42 cases of anti-Soviet slogans written in public spaces; 160 instances of people illegally flying the flag of independent Lithuania; and 215 cases of threats made against Party and collective farm activists.<sup>3</sup>

Preventing and investigating dissenting behaviours like those outlined above was always fundamental to the domestic duties of Soviet state security. Indeed, the ability to fulfil this task effectively became more important in the wake of Stalin's death in 1953 and the concomitant move away from extraordinarily widespread and often arbitrary repression as

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<sup>1</sup>Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas, Lithuanian Special Archives (hereafter LYA), f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 619, l. 114.

<sup>2</sup>LYA, f. K-1771, ap. 190, b. 11, ll. 1–11.

<sup>3</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, ll. 169–85.

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a primary means of social control. In the very first edition of the KGB's in-house methodological journal *Sbornik*, in 1959, Lieutenant Colonel M. A. Belyanskii outlined the five basic components of the security organs' arsenal for tackling such 'harmful activities': *agentura*, external observation, perustration of correspondence, background checks and the use of operative (for example, bugging) devices (Belyanskii 1959, p. 87). Of these five, myriad reports described *agentura* (agent network) as 'the main weapon of the security organs' in this fight.<sup>4</sup>

*Agenturnaya rabota*, meaning 'agent work', is defined in Vasily Mitrokhin's *KGB Lexicon* as 'setting up an intelligence and counter-intelligence agent apparatus and using it to carry out allotted tasks' (Mitrokhin 2002, p. 155). Accordingly, an agent was someone—usually, but not always, a Soviet citizen—who 'agrees voluntarily (or under pressure) to carry out secret KGB assignments in the interests of the Soviet state' (Mitrokhin 2002, p. 151). Undercover agents were used by the KGB in various contexts: for espionage, for economic purposes (such as stealing and copying foreign technology) and more (Harrison & Zaksauskiene 2016). The present article focuses on agent work as part of KGB efforts in policing dissenting activity, both manifested and potential. Here, agents operated under the supervision of a KGB professional known as an 'operative worker' (*operativnyi rabotnik*), who might oversee perhaps a dozen agents simultaneously: recruiting and coaching them, setting tasks and receiving information. Naturally, agents came in many guises. Some were friends and even family of people in whom the KGB had taken an interest; some were taxi drivers and waiters, while others might be classmates, colleagues or patients in the same hospital ward. The information they relayed to the security organs could include everything from plans to flee the country and the whereabouts of banned literature through to the songs and jokes heard at night in student dorms.

The fact that the KGB utilised undercover agents in its policing of the Soviet masses is hardly a revelation; it was widely, if often vaguely, known by citizens. The subject is mentioned in a multitude of dissident memoirs and biographies; for example, though typically with little concrete detail on what the practice entailed (Bukovsky 1978; Grigorenko 1982; Sakharov 1990). Indeed, in contrast to scholarship on East Germany and the Stasi especially, literature on KGB informers has developed rather slowly (Bruce 2010; Gieseke 2014; Lewis 2021). Work on *agentura* during the Stalin years has mostly emphasised that, although valued by the state, this was generally a sphere of low quality work with decidedly patchy results (Burds 1996; Heinzen 2007). For subsequent years, articles by Tatyana Vagramenko and Arunas Streikus have provided insights into the extent to which KGB agents managed to infiltrate Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses and the Lithuanian Catholic clergy respectively, though in both cases the author's focus was the community targeted rather than KGB practice (Streikus 2006; Vagramenko 2021). Other accounts have considered agent recruitment. Vahe Lskavyan, for example, has made the point that, like industrial enterprises across the USSR, the KGB in Latvia engaged in 'storming' in this sphere: hurriedly recruiting agents at the end of the month, quarter and year in order to meet targets set from above, with limited regard for quality

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, l. 201.

(Lskavyan 2022). Presenting case studies from internal KGB documents intended for sharing ‘best practice’, Mark Harrison has provided valuable detail on the interactions that underpinned the agent recruitment process, as well as agents’ varied motivations for agreeing to cooperate with the KGB (Harrison 2023).

The wider literature on the evolution of the Soviet security organs after 1953 has typically emphasised that the KGB, from which many Stalin-era ‘toughs’ were removed and replaced by better educated and more sophisticated operatives after the mid-1950s, became both less brutal and more effective (Fedor 2011). Oleg Kharkhordin wrote that, ‘it was under Khrushchev that the remaining spaces in the grid of mutual surveillance were successfully eliminated’, as authorities, in tandem with ordinary citizens, established a system of ‘relentless and rational surveillance’ (Kharkhordin 1999, p. 291). The introduction of *profilaktika* (prophylactic measures) during the 1950s—which essentially saw low-level offenders intimidated into conformity rather than jailed at the first sign of inappropriate behaviour—is perhaps the best example of this new rationality and efficiency (Cohn 2018). An exploration of *agentura* practices during the 1950s and 1960s offers a useful prism through which to evaluate this central theme in the extant literature. Further, scholars have long been clear that the security organs played a critical part in keeping the Soviet system stable, but an enduring inaccessibility of key evidence has made it difficult to piece together the ‘nuts and bolts’ of how this worked on the ground (Knight 1990).

While by no means a phenomenon that touched all lives, all of the time—far from it, in fact—agent work was integral to how the KGB fulfilled its allotted role as the ‘sword and shield’ of the Communist Party, encompassing a variety of measures that characterised the transition away from the mass repression of the Stalin years. Nonetheless, the evidence shows not only a number of significant departures from previous practice—beyond simply reining in mass repression—but also important continuities with earlier approaches and perceptions. While KGB penetration into the different corners of everyday life was remarkably extensive, insidious and effective at times, agent work could also fall well short of measuring up to the security organs’ fearsome reputation for omniscience.

A detailed exploration of agent work is now possible thanks to the fact that the Lithuanian Special Archive has, in recent years, made available an unprecedented amount of formerly classified documentation on KGB domestic activity. For the present article, hundreds of newly accessible files have been analysed—including reports on specific cases and summaries of wider KGB developments—with a view to presenting both broad patterns of activity and telling individual cases. The timeframe for the article begins with the early to mid-1950s, when Stalin’s death was followed by a radical reshaping of the USSR’s domestic security situation, including the ending of mass terror and the issuing of amnesties that dramatically shrank the Gulag population, along with the reconstitution of the Soviet security organs as the KGB. While perhaps not such a pronounced watershed, the late 1960s represent a useful endpoint on the basis of both important political shifts across the communist regime (as deepening conservatism took hold and attitudes towards dissent, especially non-Russian nationalism, hardened) and within the KGB specifically, once new chairman Yuri Andropov took over at the Lubyanka in 1967 and began to forge a slicker and better resourced operation through the 1970s and beyond.

In terms of the ‘dissenting behaviour’ referenced at the outset, it is firstly worth noting that boundaries here are not always clearly defined. Plenty of the cases below feature individuals whose transgressions were either very minor or even non-existent in a concrete sense; the authorities’ concerns were often fundamentally rooted in who a person was rather than what they had actually done. The key point in this context is that the KGB, perceiving either a real or potential political challenge, considered it necessary to take measures. Similarly, while the article centres on affairs inside the Soviet Union, there was not always a clear dichotomy between domestic and international matters in this respect, not least since Soviet authorities were (not wholly incorrectly) convinced that outside forces were seeking to facilitate unrest and instability inside the USSR, and were thus also inclined to take their efforts at ensuring domestic stability beyond the Soviet border at times.

Of course, Lithuania—which accounted for only about 1% of the overall Soviet population—was not exactly a microcosm of the wider USSR. It had a very recent history of non-communist, and even anti-communist, governance between the world wars, and had subsequently witnessed a sustained grassroots struggle against the imposition of Soviet power, as the ‘forest brothers’ fought a prolonged partisan campaign against occupation (Zubkova 2009).<sup>5</sup> Even as ‘Sovietisation’ of the republic made noticeable progress across the 1950s and 1960s, this recent history remained very much alive in the thinking of the KGB (Davoliute 2013; Leinarte 2021). Being situated at the USSR’s Western border was also important in terms of heightened security concerns, as was the fact that multiple foreign intelligence agencies had established a presence there before, during and after World War II (Falkov 2023). Nonetheless, the chairman of the Lithuanian KGB in Vilnius had limited scope to deviate from the rules, priorities and practices decreed by Moscow. Lithuania was subject to the same basic ‘template of rule’ that had been developed and applied elsewhere around the USSR (Harrison & Zaksauskiene 2016). As such, while the KGB in Lithuania faced challenges that were to some degree distinct from those seen elsewhere, they also operated within much the same constraints and used much the same tools as did their colleagues throughout the country.

### *Targets and rationale*

In its efforts to forestall and to investigate dissenting activity, the KGB mainly focused upon two broad constituencies: those it perceived as dangerous opponents of Soviet power, and those understood to be most susceptible to agitation by the former. In the mid-1950s especially, the principal concern for the KGB in Lithuania (and various other republics) was the return home of nationalists, clerics, bourgeois-era political figures and more in the series of amnesties that began after Stalin’s death. According to KGB figures, almost 19,500 individuals previously convicted of especially dangerous state crimes were freed to go home to Lithuania, and just over 17,500 families were also released from the ‘special settlements’ in the Soviet East to which they had been deported as authorities

<sup>5</sup>According to Zubkova (2009, p. 321), a total of around 270,000 people were arrested, killed or exiled by Soviet authorities in the struggle to pacify postwar Lithuania.

sought to starve partisan fighters of crucial support.<sup>6</sup> Initial rhetoric from Party bosses about those amnestied presenting ‘no great danger to the state’ and being ‘fit to return to honest working life’ clearly did not tally with the attitude of the security organs (Dobson 2009). As the KGB saw it, many of those being freed had been rightly jailed and wrongly released. Reports never considered the idea that Stalin-era convictions might be unsafe. On the contrary, plenty cautioned that many returnees showed all the outward signs of leading a blameless existence but were nonetheless ready to take up weapons and fight Soviet power again, should a suitable situation (such as war or civil unrest) arise.<sup>7</sup> From the outset, then, the security organs were especially eager for information about the attitudes, habits and plans of thousands of returnees.

The Catholic Church—many of whose clergy were to be found among the returnees—was another enduring focus of KGB attention, with the security organs making repeated complaints about priests and other clergy ‘slandering’ the Soviet regime and trying to stir the outside world to come to their defence.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most succinct in this respect was a report which bluntly asserted that although some of Lithuania’s 875 Catholic priests worked within Soviet laws and did not interfere with public life, others, following orders from the Vatican, were trying to render a harmful political impact on believers, and sending abroad slanders about restrictions on religious life inside Lithuania.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, KGB monitoring of figures from the interwar period of Lithuanian history who remained *in situ* (many had fled the country) usually presented this as a group from within which many were intentionally working, again under the influence of foreign powers, to undermine the Soviet social and political order by seeking to exert bourgeois cultural and political influence on the next generation. Also operating in tandem with the USSR’s international enemies, according to the KGB, were many of the Lithuanian émigré groups based in Western Europe and North America. One evaluation of the West Germany-based Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania (*Vyriausiasis Lietuvos išlaisvinimo komitetas*—VLIK), for example, described it as ‘a key centre of efforts to undermine the USSR for many years’.<sup>10</sup> Neutralising the social and political threat from such enemies was a top priority of KGB agent work.

While interest in the above ‘enemies’ would always remain strong, by the later part of the 1950s an additional focus for *agentura* work emerged. The enemies of communism, the KGB insisted, had become more subtle. Rather than the overtly subversive activities of earlier years, such as supplying partisans, the West and its lackeys had switched to a strategy that aimed at undermining the Soviet regime ideologically. This included

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, ‘Ob operativnoi obstanovke i osnovnykh napravleniyakh v rabote KGB pri SM Litovskoi SSR po linii burzhuaiznykh natsionalistov’, KGBdocuments.eu, 3 February 1966, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_79k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_79k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024. Davoliute (2016, p. 56) gives a figure of 80,000 deportees in total having returned to Lithuania by 1970.

<sup>7</sup>Obzornaya spravka o provedennykh meropriyatiyakh po delu agenturnoi razrabotki ob”ekta “Mantas”, KGBdocuments.eu, 10 August 1963, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2003e\\_44k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2003e_44k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 881, ll. 24–8.

<sup>9</sup>Ob operativnoi obstanovke i osnovnykh napravleniyakh v rabote KGB pri SM Litovskoi SSR po linii burzhuaiznykh natsionalistov’, KGBdocuments.eu, 3 February 1966, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_79k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_79k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>10</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 653, l. 201.

popularising ‘patriotic’ (meaning anti-communist) attitudes and ideas and propagating harmful bourgeois cultural tastes among two key sectors of society: young people and members of the intelligentsia.<sup>11</sup> Both of these groups were presented in KGB materials as loyal on the whole but nonetheless harbouring in their midst at least some who were either dangerously naïve about Western intentions or else insufficiently steadfast and mature in their political convictions. In February 1958, for example, the KGB complained (somewhat disingenuously) that proliferating ‘harmful activity’ among students and members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia stemmed in large part from the influence of unreformed returnees on ideologically weak members of those two constituencies.<sup>12</sup> A November 1964 thesis (*tezis*) by Filip Bobkov insisted that the West targeted the cultural intelligentsia specifically ‘because they influence public opinion and participate in the ideological upbringing of the Soviet people’ (the intelligentsia of the non-Russian republics was especially important to authorities set on Sovietisation) and young people ‘because of their role in the construction of communism, and because they have limited life experience and are sometimes ideologically unsteady’.<sup>13</sup>

The overall number of agents recruited and deployed by the KGB continued to climb throughout the 1960s, but agent work was never truly massive in scale. Figures for 1959 showed 2,904 agents and 2,531 ‘trusted persons’ in Lithuania at that stage—with by no means all of these dedicated primarily to political policing—representing about one agent for every thousand people in Lithuania, a ratio that was nonetheless markedly higher than the average for the USSR as a whole (Harrison 2019, p. 2).<sup>14</sup> By 1969, the combined figure of agents and trusted people stood at approximately 10,000 (Harrison & Zaksauskiene 2016, p. 141). This was not, then, an operation through which everyone was watching everyone else all the time. KGB documents very consistently argued that the agent network in any given sphere was not nearly big enough. In part, these complaints reflected a not-so-subtle attempt to acquire more resources, as well as a seemingly insatiable desire for intelligence, but the data also bear out the substance of the claim to some considerable extent. In 1956, for example, figures showed that the KGB had on its books a combined total of only 52 agents for work among young people and members of the intelligentsia in Kaunas, a city with five higher education institutes, seven technical colleges, 15 specialised schools, 35 middle schools and 32 seven-year schools, as well as a plethora of research institutions, and cultural centres.<sup>15</sup> In the second half of the 1960s, a review of dissenting activity complained that some town and district KGB branches still had no agents at all for intelligence gathering among young people (while others had no reliable agents), a point which higher officials angrily insisted that heads of

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 634, l. 3.

<sup>12</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, ll. 209–15.

<sup>13</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 325, l. 28.

<sup>14</sup>The ‘trusted person’ role was another invention of the post-Stalin years (see Fedor 2011). It overlapped in some important ways with agent work (both trusted persons and agents collected and passed on information of interest to authorities), but KGB reports were clear that the two were not interchangeable, with trusted people not used for operative tasks such as monitoring specific individuals or informed about KGB activity in any specific way. See, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 618, ll. 96–106.

<sup>15</sup>LYA, f. K-1, ap. 18, b. 115, l. 277.

those branches ‘need to think carefully about’.<sup>16</sup> In 1969, after more than a decade in which students had been a growing focus of agent work, the Kaunas City Polytechnic had a total of 20 agents for work among 8,000 students and 1,194 members of academic staff.<sup>17</sup>

Agent work was characterised by both mass surveillance of broad groups and selective surveillance of specific individuals. Some agents were taken on for a single task—such as tracking down a particular partisan fighter in hiding or monitoring a specific work colleague suspected of hostile activity—and then ‘let go’ once that operation was completed. Others would continue for years, moving from one operation to another as circumstances dictated. Some agents were recruited by *kompromat*; this was essentially blackmail, with cooperation presented as the only route to avoid punishment for previous transgressions, from wartime collaboration to drunken political rants and even hosting an orgy, in one case. Other agents were approached by operative workers on the basis of their individual skillsets (one report marvelled at how easily a candidate was able to make new friends and win trust) and political loyalty, while a few took the initiative themselves, volunteering information unbidden and eventually becoming serial informers.<sup>18</sup> Agents were not distributed evenly across the republic but concentrated in those geographical areas, social groups and institutions (and corners of institutions) deemed most problematic. Data on KGB agents within the Catholic clergy, for example, suggest an average presence of closer to one in ten, rather than one per thousand, during the period in question (Streikus 2006, p. 65).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, a 1963 report noted that of the 17 agents operating at Vilnius State University, five were in the medical faculty, four were in the faculty of history and philosophy, three in the natural sciences and two in economics, with a further one each in the juridical, chemistry, and physics and mathematics faculties. Several faculties had none. Tellingly, the report in question called for the recruitment of additional agents not just in the faculties of physics and mathematics, and chemistry, which had few already, but also in history.<sup>20</sup>

### *Information sought and acquired*

The key responsibility of agents was to provide the KGB with human intelligence. This could involve anything from summarising public responses to events such as Yuri Gagarin’s space flight in 1961 or the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia through to gathering and passing on information that helped prevent politically undesirable behaviour or revealed those responsible for actions that had already taken place. While the post-Stalin security organs placed markedly less stock in denunciations from members of the public than previously—Vladimir Semichastnyi wrote that as KGB chairman he still received ‘a sea of denunciations’ but most were soon found to be little more than

<sup>16</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 671, l. 153.

<sup>17</sup>LYA, f. K-21, ap. 1, b. 92, l. 68.

<sup>18</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, l. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Streikus notes 60 priests out of 900 were agents in 1956, with that total rising to over 100 priests by 1970.

<sup>20</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 630, l. 5.



score-settling and rumour—agents might also be deployed to verify such ‘signals’ where deemed appropriate (Semichastnyi 2002, p. 208).

Without question, plenty of intelligence successes were chalked up to agent work. Stool pigeons in cells and camps reported on nationalist prisoners’ plans to rejoin old comrades once released, uncovered lies told during interrogation sessions, and informed on underground groups among detainees.<sup>21</sup> Informants in dorms and classrooms told authorities which students were circulating banned poetry or listening to foreign radio stations, warned of talk about public protests and attempts to flee the country, and pre-empted plans to distribute leaflets (Borodkin & Ilyukhin 1963).<sup>22</sup> When one target of KGB interest went into hospital, he soon made friends with a fellow patient in the same ward and began discussing his plans to form a new political party, not realising that the new acquaintance had been placed there deliberately by the KGB (Sknarin 1963, p. 34). Very occasionally, agent reports might also confirm that an individual previously under suspicion had indeed changed their ways, prompting their case to be closed and moved to the archive.<sup>23</sup>

More than a decade after the first Gulag returnees had arrived back in Lithuania, KGB headquarters in Vilnius was still clamouring for more information about them. In July 1968, branches across the republic were ordered to obtain (as discreetly as possible) details on how many returnees lived in any given district; how old they were; whether they socialised together, and whether any anti-Soviet sentiments were expressed during this socialising; whether any were members of hunting societies (and thus had access to guns); how many worked as teachers, and whether they constituted ‘suitable’ people for such responsible posts; and whether their children showed negative or positive attitudes toward Soviet power.<sup>24</sup> To some extent, this breadth of interest reflected the security organs’ notoriously unquenchable thirst for information about anything and everything within their purview. This was especially understandable in the context of developments in Czechoslovakia that summer; authorities in the Baltic states were prepared for potential spillover unrest (Hornsby 2023, p. 311). Nonetheless, some of the details requested above were sufficiently rudimentary as to suggest that the KGB did indeed fall some way short of the omniscience it desired, even after years of scrutinising returnees.<sup>25</sup> Although hard to prove definitively, this was quite possibly a result of markedly greater reliance on recruitment of agents through *kompromat* in this sphere, since agents recruited that way repeatedly proved unreliable. Indeed, the fundamental conclusion of the report that resulted from the July 1968 order was that ‘our position among nationalists and enemy elements is not good enough in quantity and especially in quality’.<sup>26</sup>

Information generated by agent work also played an important role in the Lithuanian KGB’s faltering efforts to track down key figures from the postwar partisan resistance movement who had managed to evade capture, though sheer quantity of effort was

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 1320, l. 132.

<sup>22</sup>See, also, LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 10; LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 10.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-11, ap. 1, b. 1731, ll. 7–8.

<sup>24</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 659, ll. 87–9.

<sup>25</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 659, ll. 87–9.

<sup>26</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 671, l. 139.

seemingly more telling at times than the quality of agent work carried out. In the search for members of the 'Kestutis' armed band, the KGB had more than 50 agents at work in 1955. They created cover stories that enabled agents to move into areas where wanted individuals were suspected to be living, and even set up fake bandit groups for others in hiding to make contact with.<sup>27</sup> After picking up rumours that one of the most wanted Lithuanian 'bandits'—the partisan leader Adolfas Ramanauskas—had been spotted in the south of the republic, agents increased observation of multiple people known to be connected to him in various districts. An experienced agent was appointed to a post on a collective farm where one of Ramanauskas's known associates worked and lived, with the aim of building a relationship that might yield valuable information about the target. Another agent, purportedly returning from prison as an unreconstructed enemy of the regime, was also given a job in the same district and began trying to get in touch with his old friend Ramanauskas. By the time the partisan leader was eventually captured in autumn 1956, the KGB had an estimated 30 separate agents gathering information on his potential whereabouts. Once apprehended, he was sentenced to death and duly executed.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the best example of the level of effort expended on tracking down 'bandits' was the search for Antanas Kraujelis, the last major partisan leader to evade capture. Each time the KGB worked out his location, he somehow managed to escape before being picked up, perhaps suggesting that agents used by the KGB were playing a double game and warning Kraujelis when authorities closed in (Burds 1996).<sup>29</sup> Reports later acknowledged that initial attempts to use agents in the search had failed because those close to the target had mostly not trusted them. The ongoing inability to capture their man clearly irked and embarrassed the Lithuanian KGB. In 1964 it moved the process into a higher gear, managing to recruit a slew of new agents (including two described as being 'among the very closest contacts') who either had past friendships with Kraujelis himself or with people close to him, as well as placing agents in numerous villages where it was believed that he might be hiding.<sup>30</sup>

One of the key agents, codenamed 'Dana', made the critical breakthrough when she developed a relationship with a woman whose brother had previously helped to hide Kraujelis, discovering through their subsequent conversations that Kraujelis had since assisted the same brother in funding the construction of their new home. By November, 'Dana' reported that, having visited the home of the woman in question several times and observed suspicious behaviour there (not least when 'Dana' was prevented from wandering down a certain corridor, which was subsequently locked), she suspected that Kraujelis was being hidden in a secret annexe. Others were also at work building trust with targets and gleaning what information they could. An agent codenamed 'Azholas', who had, years previously, been close to Kraujelis and his friends, verified through old acquaintances both the name of the village where he was hiding and the fact that he was concealed in a newly built house belonging to a former prisoner. KGB professionals then

<sup>27</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 510, ll. 213–26.

<sup>28</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 510, l. 8.

<sup>29</sup>Burds shows that penetration of the agent network by double agents was a repeated problem for the security organs in postwar Ukraine.

<sup>30</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, l. 191.

took over, covertly observing the property in question and receiving permission from the procurator's office to conduct a search. In attempting to do so, on 17 March 1965, they discovered what was believed to be the entrance to a secret bunker. As they tried to prise open the bunker, Kraujelis opened fire with a machine gun and was killed in the ensuing firefight.<sup>31</sup> For all that this represented, to the KGB, the successful culmination of a high priority operation, it had nonetheless taken two decades and an extraordinary quantity of resources to come to fruition.

Gathering information was not quite the alpha and omega of *agentura* activity, however. Agents were also used in a rather more activist manner at times, to help reshape the social environment in which they operated. For example, when an *agentura* operation got underway against four dissident priests in the late 1960s—the quartet had tried to raise a petition about oppression of the church and regime interference in the work of seminaries, calling on their flocks to pray for a more enlightened approach from political authorities—agents were deployed not only to investigate the details of their ‘harmful activity’, such as attending mass to report back on the content of sermons, but also to undermine the priests’ moral authority among their respective flocks wherever possible, spreading doubt about their judgement and lifestyles.<sup>32</sup>

Another illustrative case from 1960 centred on an agent whose sister had married a man previously convicted as an enemy. The agent in question was given the task of discreetly talking his new brother-in-law around, explaining the correctness of Communist Party policies and exerting a positive ideological influence. According to the agent's subsequent reporting, his efforts on this front proved a success, with the target becoming more diligent in his working life and taking a more active role in public affairs.<sup>33</sup> A similar case centred on a young poet, whose verses were deemed inappropriately religious and pessimistic in tone, and who had privately voiced strong criticism of various regime policies. Judging her misguided and immature rather than outright hostile, in 1963 two agents were assigned to use their powers of persuasion to ‘tear her away from the clergy and put her onto the correct path of Soviet patriotism’. Again, the subsequent report declared victory in this endeavour, stating that the young woman had since begun to participate more actively in public life and political studies, becoming editor of her factory's wall newspaper, and would shortly enter higher education.<sup>34</sup> In this context, then, it seems that the KGB had not given up entirely, as some of the extant literature has suggested, on earlier aspirations of reforging problematic citizens' inner convictions rather than just their outward behaviour (Cohn 2017).

While the above report clearly framed the young woman's decision to enter university as evidence of a previously negative outlook undergoing transformation, higher education was nonetheless a sector that was riddled with anxieties for the KGB. Both the student body and members of academic staff were a major focus of *agentura* from the second half of the 1950s onwards. After facing strong criticism from Moscow for failings in its agent work among young people in particular, in February 1958 the Lithuanian KGB reported that it was

<sup>31</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, ll. 16–23.

<sup>32</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 881, ll. 24–8.

<sup>33</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 619, l. 330.

<sup>34</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 323, l. 37.

selecting new agents and pouring new resources into its operations within higher education, as well as strengthening ties to Party and *Komsomol* branches in universities and vocational schools.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, in June a review by Lithuanian KGB leaders stated that agent work in places of study in the republic was still not good enough, despite the acquisition of new agents.<sup>36</sup> Over a decade later, in 1969, they were still complaining that the agent network within higher education institutions was too small and that, as a result, emerging problems were not always handled in a timely and effective manner.<sup>37</sup>

This seemingly perpetual dissatisfaction at the state of agent work was especially telling. At the institutional level, the KGB continually sought more information in the name of ensuring political security and stability, seemingly never complacent about the situation inside Lithuania. Nonetheless, agent work on the ground could generate somewhat paradoxical results. Its successes, such as revealing the prevalence of critical sentiments among members of the intelligentsia or uncovering clandestine groups among university students, were liable to be held up as testament that the agent network was not big enough. This paradox is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that, despite repeated entreaties from the highest levels for an agent network that was ‘smaller but better’, along with some substantial purges of agents over the years, the overall number of agents in fact increased rather than decreased across the era.

Agent reports from within the Lithuanian student body repeatedly spoke of individuals and groups singing anti-Soviet and anti-Russian songs in dormitories, mocking regime propaganda, and drinking toasts to Lithuanian independence.<sup>38</sup> An agent within one group of students labouring on a collective farm reported on his comrades calling the Soviet armed forces ‘bandits’ and insisting that partisan fighters were the real liberators of Lithuania, with another adding that his blood boiled whenever he heard the phrase ‘glory to the Party’.<sup>39</sup> At the Vilnius Artistic Institute, agents reported on students making ‘ideologically harmful’ art and praising bourgeois artists, and on staff teaching that abstractionism (effectively banned in the USSR) was ‘real art’ but Soviet society did not understand it, and that they should ignore the vitriol against it.<sup>40</sup> In March 1957 an agent among the student body, codenamed ‘Optika’, exposed members of a group entitled ‘Free Lithuania’ that was, according to the KGB, attempting to stir a nationalist mood among the wider student body.<sup>41</sup> Another agent, ‘Lepsna’, first established a friendship with the neighbour of a student said to be making nationalist pronouncements. Before long, ‘Lepsna’ was inside the social circle of his target, receiving anti-Soviet and nationalist materials and viewing illicit collections of ‘bourgeois literature’ and ‘camp poetry’ in his apartment, for good measure also informing the KGB of key people with whom the target

<sup>35</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, l. 197.

<sup>36</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, l. 237.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 671, l. 146.

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-1, ap. 18, b. 92, l. 20; LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 630, l. 7.

<sup>39</sup>LYA, f. K-41, op. ap. 1, b. 651, l. 35.

<sup>40</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, l. 229; LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 630, ll. 71–4.

<sup>41</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, l. 231. Eight members of the group were arrested, a notably high figure for cases like this.

associated and recommending several of them as deserving of ‘operative attention’ (meaning closer investigation) themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Revelations like these rarely led to arrests and convictions, but they did frequently underpin what Edward Cohn has rightly presented as one of the key policing developments of the age: *profilaktika*. Agent reports provided much of the information presented in prophylactic sessions, when those deemed to be becoming ideologically wayward but not yet fully oppositional were confronted about their wrongdoing and warned about the consequences of continuing their ‘harmful’ behaviour, and also helped the KGB make decisions about which offenders were ‘genuine enemies’ and which were simply ‘misguided’, with sharply differing consequences (Cohn 2017). In fact, the inherent intrusiveness of agent work was key to this new practice. As Nazrullaeva and Harrison show, a key point of prophylaxis was to demonstrate to the offender that the KGB saw and heard everything, thus intimidating the individual under suspicion into passivity (Nazrullaeva & Harrison 2023). Since professional KGB operatives were relatively few,<sup>43</sup> that image of ubiquity necessitated drawing upon evidence, such as accounts of private conversations, obtained through *agentura*. In fact, agents’ evidence could be integral both at the onset and the conclusion of the process, with their reports subsequently used to confirm whether the targeted individual had indeed changed their behaviour in practice, as they invariably promised to do when confronted.<sup>44</sup>

Evidence like that provided by ‘Lepsna’ on the possession of illegal literature was generally not admissible for use in court, if a case even made it that far. What agent work generally did in this context was provide information aimed at preventing future manifestations of protest or give the KGB a clear idea of when and where to find formal evidence in any given investigation. Sometimes this meant providing a basis for listening devices or cameras to be planted by technical specialists, for searches to be conducted and people to be covertly photographed or for mail to be intercepted and read. In some instances, the guidance provided was especially direct. One affair outlined in the journal *Sbornik*, for example, noted a case in which an agent had seen an incriminating diary secreted in the home of a KGB target. This information was passed on to the agent’s operative worker, a search warrant was obtained from the procurator’s office, and the diary in question was then formally ‘discovered’ during the ensuing search and was thus admissible for use in court (Stikhin 1959).

Like students and academics, members of the creative intelligentsia also came under scrutiny. Agents reported on young writers aping ‘reactionary’ Western authors and rejecting the need for ‘party-mindedness’ in literature and art.<sup>45</sup> A report about harmful moods at Lithuania’s opera and ballet theatre in early 1958 warned that some staff there were socialising with Gulag returnees and helping to spread rumours and anti-Soviet literature that they provided.<sup>46</sup> Another agent reported on colleagues in a state choir mocking official news reports, playing cards and drinking during their free time, holding

<sup>42</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, l. 232.

<sup>43</sup>Nazrullaeva and Harrison (2023) point to only about 1,200 in Lithuania around this time.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, l. 237.

<sup>45</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 630, l. 631.

<sup>46</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 534, ll. 209–25.

anti-Soviet conversations and attending church while on tour, with one member also said to be producing and distributing religious postcards to other artists.<sup>47</sup> Following an infamous tirade against a number of liberal-minded cultural figures by Nikita Khrushchev in 1963 (Zubok 2009, p. 213), agents in Lithuania reported on waves of grumbling among the local intelligentsia. Some defended artists and works under attack, such as the writer Ilya Ehrenburg and the film *Il'ich's Gate*, complaining of Stalinist attitudes surviving among cultural officialdom and calling for more room to innovate. Other reports described nervous writers trying to send material abroad ahead of an expected clampdown, and reading and writing memoirs about members of the bourgeois-era intelligentsia.<sup>48</sup> Despite the best efforts of members of one secret cultural discussion circle in Vilnius, who strived to keep out interlopers by keeping participants few and by carefully vetting those who did attend, KGB agents still managed to record their discussions and debates at considerable length.<sup>49</sup>

As always, the KGB's reaction to signs of ferment among the intelligentsia was to call for expanded agent recruitment in this sphere. One February 1963 report, for example, demanded the acquisition of new agents in republican film studios and publishing houses, as well as among the service staff of youth cafes and clubs, if need be by firing and replacing workers who were deemed less politically reliable.<sup>50</sup> As of summer 1966, reports show that the Lithuanian KGB was operating ten agents within the Union of Writers, five in the Union of Composers and four in the republican film studio, among many others. The healthcare sector was not immune to this kind of infiltration either, with 20 agents among the republic's 'medical intelligentsia', spread across a range of hospitals and institutes.<sup>51</sup>

Agent work could also focus on time and physical space. Agents around the country were put on raised alert for the duration of the XXIII Communist Party congress in spring 1966: they were ordered to be especially observant and swift in reporting any extraordinary situations they encountered.<sup>52</sup> The port city of Klaipeda provides a good example of the KGB's attention to physical space. Among the 20,000 people employed at the docks there, the KGB had more than 130 agents at work by the mid-1960s. Many of those were focused on preventing prospective attempts to flee the country by sailors going to sea, with agents onboard ships detailed to watch specific individuals who had been reported making politically inappropriate remarks. Others were also on the lookout for subversive activity among the foreign sailors who docked, some of whom were, not unreasonably, presumed to be working for foreign intelligence.<sup>53</sup> For this purpose, the KGB in Klaipeda maintained dozens of safe houses, along with eight permanently closed-off observation points both at the dock itself and in town.<sup>54</sup> Restaurants known to be popular with foreign sailors, like the 'Klaipeda' and the 'Neptune', were also sites where KGB agents quickly

<sup>47</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 619, ll. 111–13.

<sup>48</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 630, ll. 1–7.

<sup>49</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 637, ll. 14–6.

<sup>50</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 630, ll. 7–9.

<sup>51</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, l. 197.

<sup>52</sup>LYA, f. K-1, ap. 3, b. 639, ll. 163–66.

<sup>53</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 634, l. 16.

<sup>54</sup>LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 367, l. 5.

proliferated among both staff and customers.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, almost all of the staff of the city's 'Interclub' (International Marine Club) were replaced with KGB agents, both to report undesirable behaviour among patrons and to rebuff any critical remarks by foreigners, in a bid to shape a more positive impression of the country.<sup>56</sup>

Especially acute in the context of seeking to forestall subversive activity, as the KGB saw it, was the need to keep an eye on the growing flows of people—such as tourists and those coming on private visas and cultural exchanges—visiting the republic from outside of the USSR. One report stated that of the approximately 1,000 foreigners who came to Lithuania in 1960–1961, the KGB suspected 94 of being connected to foreign intelligence, seeking to establish contacts with local citizens in order to acquire sensitive information and stir unrest.<sup>57</sup> Alarming, local youth were often keen to interact with visitors, crowding around foreigners in the streets and seeking to buy cigarettes, clothing, records and chewing gum from them. According to the KGB, such encounters frequently led to anti-Soviet remarks and conversations being heard.<sup>58</sup> Reports also described foreign visitors being used by the local clergy to smuggle appeals and petitions out of the country for publication abroad.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, the number of KGB agents in and around the USSR's burgeoning tourist industry grew quickly. In Vilnius, agents were soon stationed at all the main sites on the (state-organised) itineraries of tour groups, such as the central library, the university and the city orchestra. Information provided by such agents might then lead to KGB professionals secretly entering and searching hotel rooms, or examining items that guests deposited in cloakrooms and left luggage.<sup>60</sup>

While the surveillance of large groups, such as returnees, could at times seem as clumsy and imperfect as that of the Stalin years, selective surveillance of specific targets was a more notable strength. One of the most instructive examples of extended KGB interest in a single individual is that of Juozas Keluotis: a writer, journalist and scholar of the 1930s and 1940s who was twice jailed as an enemy once the Soviet regime took power. Freed in 1956 and still holding considerable prestige among both émigré groups and the contemporary intelligentsia inside Lithuania, Keluotis remained an object of KGB interest and harassment for many years, even though he never became a vocal dissenter. This apparent fixation revealed much more about the attitude of the KGB than it did about the actions of Keluotis himself.

Here, the notion that the security organs were becoming more insidious and effective as they also grew less brutal finds clear support. One agent inside his social circle, codenamed 'Takas', reported in April 1963 that Keluotis was complaining in private of how he wanted to work, but the KGB would not allow anyone to employ him or publish his writing, and that he needed medicine and medical treatment, but nobody would help him find either. Rather than the sledgehammer tactics deployed by the security organs in previous years, the ensuing KGB actions demonstrated a new flexibility. On the pretext of 'Takas' showing concern for

<sup>55</sup>LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 367, l. 12.

<sup>56</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 634, ll. 160–76.

<sup>57</sup>'Tsentral'nomu komitetu kommunisticheskoi partii Litvy', KGBdocuments.eu, 14 August 1961, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_84k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_84k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>58</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 623, l. 105.

<sup>59</sup>See LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 671, l. 144.

<sup>60</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 650, l. 43; LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 652, ll. 13–7.



his friend's welfare but in reality seeking only to win his trust, a note from his operative worker told the agent he should earn Keliuotis's gratitude by using purported 'connections' to get him checked into a hospital or health resort for the needed treatment (something that was in reality taken care of by the KGB).<sup>61</sup> Another agent within his social circle around that time revealed that Keliuotis was somehow receiving literature from abroad and was passing it on to artists that he knew in exchange for material help with his difficult living conditions, since he was being denied both work and a pension. The follow-up note this time instructed the agent 'Mir', to engage him in casual conversation about the foreign literature: where it came from, what it included, whom he passed it on to and more, but also to avoid any political discussions unless Keliuotis first broached the theme himself.<sup>62</sup>

In summer 1963 another agent, code-named 'Misha' (who also built trust by assisting with a personal matter, in helping Keliuotis secure a pension) provided an overview of conversations taking place during social evenings at the home of Keliuotis. 'Misha' wrote that Keliuotis had declared that the Soviet authorities were destroying him both morally and physically, describing Marxism as a 'false god' and insisting that drunkenness, thieving and bribery all prospered under communism.<sup>63</sup> The following autumn, 'Takas' was again reporting on private conversations, this time noting that Keliuotis complained bitterly about there being KGB agents among his friends, adding that he was becoming increasingly suspicious of those around him (but not of 'Takas' himself, it seems). The KGB operative worker's response was to seek ways of exacerbating this tendency, to ensure that Keliuotis became ever more uncertain of those around him and increasingly isolated from the young writers and others with whom he liked to associate.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, by 1967 an agent named 'Istochnik' wrote that Keliuotis was still meeting regularly with young people who came to seek his advice and to discuss literature and art. 'Istochnik' was then directed to find out from conversation with Keliuotis who was visiting him, where they worked, and what advice he gave to them.<sup>65</sup>

As in plenty of other cases, agent work with Keliuotis could involve more than simply obtaining and relaying information. Eventually, following some extended cajoling by agents 'Gintaras' (an expert in the preservation of Lithuanian historic monuments) and 'Butkus' (a journalist), who seemingly played on both his cultural passions, his vanity and his straitened personal circumstances, Keliuotis was persuaded to do something he had for years steadfastly rejected. In December 1971 he spoke out in the press with words of praise for Soviet economic and cultural achievements, also offering criticism of the interwar Lithuanian regime as well as the work of reactionary émigré organisations.<sup>66</sup> Paying careful attention to responses to the piece—and subsequently having it republished in a more prominent newspaper, to gain a bigger audience—KGB sources acknowledged that some people both inside and outside Lithuania had (correctly)

<sup>61</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 372, l. 94.

<sup>62</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 372, l. 125.

<sup>63</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 372, ll. 156–57.

<sup>64</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 372, l. 205.

<sup>65</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 372, ll. 319–20.

<sup>66</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 365, l. 301.



perceived that pressure must have been applied to the author. Nonetheless, they revelled in the fact that the interview had further isolated Keliuotis from his sympathisers at home and abroad.<sup>67</sup> Even so, two years further down the line, another agent, 'Kibirkštis', revealed that Keliuotis now claimed to have written ten volumes of stories and memoir material about his time in the Gulag, which he was seeking to smuggle abroad for publication. Naturally, the next instruction to 'Kibirkštis' was to find out where these manuscripts were hidden and what they said.<sup>68</sup>

Keliuotis was far from alone in facing such intrusive treatment. A November 1963 agent report on Valentinas Gustainis—a journalist, scholar and diplomat during the bourgeois era—showed not only that he had produced a 650-page memoir about his years in the camps (he had been jailed in 1941 and released in 1956), the deportation of his family and the destruction of the old Lithuanian intelligentsia, but that he had unknowingly entrusted one of only two existing copies to an undercover KGB agent for safekeeping.<sup>69</sup> Eighteen months previously, agents reported that another former political prisoner and member of the old Lithuanian intelligentsia, Zigmas Toliušis, was producing and gathering materials about important figures from the interwar years in order to keep their memory alive among younger generations of Lithuanians. Six different agents were then assigned to work their way into his social circle in order to find out what they could about both his foreign connections and domestic visitors.<sup>70</sup> Despite his evidently taking care to prevent agents entering his orbit (sources described how Toliušis mostly only trusted and associated with other former prisoners), the KGB soon enough had informers participating in his Saturday evening get-togethers, working to sow distrust and discord between those closest to him, with one agent who had formerly been imprisoned alongside Toliušis also opening up a fake 'channel' for him to send and receive information from contacts abroad.<sup>71</sup>

With the post-Stalin security organs increasingly eager to present their work as being aimed not at domestic 'enemies' but at hostile forces abroad, efforts to ensure domestic stability increasingly had an international dimension, as reflected by many *agentura* operations (Chebrikov 1977). Among the boldest in this respect were operations targeting the Catholic Church. As early as August 1956, the Lithuanian KGB initiated a new stage in the security organs' struggle against the influence of the Vatican inside the USSR. Entitled simply 'Students', the plan began with a reminder that in earlier years, Lithuanian students from Kaunas used to undertake theological study in Rome, Vienna, Munich and Graz. The proposal was to revive this practice, including the creation of relevant preparatory courses at Kaunas University, but with the KGB deciding and preparing the candidates who were put forward. Conceived from the start as a multi-year operation, the goal was to gain information on anti-Soviet plans among the Catholic

<sup>67</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 373, ll. 179–83; LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 369, ll. 272–73.

<sup>68</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 375, ll. 109–10.

<sup>69</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 346, ll. 317–18.

<sup>70</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 365, ll. 18–24.

<sup>71</sup>LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 366, ll. 43–8. Toliušis was also pressured to write something for the press but steadfastly refused to offer public praise for a system that had jailed him for four years. LYA, f. K-30, ap. 1, b. 365, ll. 302–7.

hierarchy, to discredit individuals and institutions and exacerbate divisions, to learn about Vatican connections and interests inside Lithuania, and to strengthen the hand of KGB agents within the Lithuanian clergy.<sup>72</sup>

By October 1959, the KGB had agents ‘Pushis’ and ‘Saule’ ready for despatch to Rome, where they were to study at the College of St Casimir, a seminary established in 1945 primarily to train Lithuanian priests. Their orders were to acquire information about plans aimed against the USSR and the People’s Democracies, to spread disinformation about Soviet affairs, and to acquire documents and forms useful for the KGB’s Rome resident.<sup>73</sup> Another three years down the line—once the pair had eventually overcome the suspicions of their teachers and classmates in Rome—the results started to look impressive. Agent ‘Saule’ was, according to KGB reports, approached by someone from British intelligence keen to know about launch sites for rockets inside Lithuania and had become a conduit for secret messages between the Vatican and the Episcopate in Lithuania, duly telling KGB officials which priests to keep an eye on. He also updated the KGB about Vatican efforts to stir unrest among foreign Catholic students inside the Soviet Union. ‘Saule’ was then instructed that, if approached to do so, he should first hesitate but then agree to work for Vatican intelligence, and that he should also write (under a pseudonym) an ‘exposé’ of Vatican political activity for the socialist bloc media and seek ways of undermining the relationship between the top Church hierarchy and the leadership of St Casimir’s.<sup>74</sup>

Another key field in which agent work aimed at ensuring domestic stability reached beyond Soviet borders was the attempt to neutralise hostile efforts on the part of émigré organisations. The security organs estimated that there were about 700,000 Lithuanians outside the USSR by the mid-1960s, asserting that the country’s enemies were especially keen to make use of such people for their own ends.<sup>75</sup> Dividing that émigré population into ‘progressives’, ‘neutrals’ and ‘enemies’, KGB reports claimed that Soviet successes were starting to win favour among the ‘progressive’ group, prompting Western powers to back more than 40 groups from the ‘enemy’ cohort ever more heavily, including funding for about 40 different publications and 20 radio stations.<sup>76</sup> Again, the KGB wanted to get its own people inside these organisations, both to find out their plans and to sow discord and disinformation. Another purpose was to show their Western backers that these groups had been compromised, in the hope that this would cause their funding to dry up. Similarly, the KGB aimed to make such émigré groups as unpalatable to Western public opinion as they possibly could, by ‘exposing’ members’ supposedly debauched lifestyles and purported wartime collaboration with Nazism to help stymie financial support and willingness to play host to such organisations (Bertelsen 2021).<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 615, ll. 8–11.

<sup>73</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 615, ll. 78–9.

<sup>74</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 617, ll. 200–11.

<sup>75</sup>‘Rabota apparatov upolnomochennykh KGB v raionakh’, KGBdocuments.eu, 4 June 1964, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_55k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_55k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>76</sup>‘Prikaz predseatelya komiteta gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti pri Sovete Minsitrov soyuza SSR’, KGBdocuments.eu, 3 March 1964, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_14k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_14k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>77</sup>As Bertelsen (2021) shows, the KGB’s ‘Department D’ was created in 1959 for the purpose of forging documents to discredit émigrés and to drive wedges within their communities.

Virtually all Lithuanian émigré organisations were targets for penetration. Former nationalists within the USSR who had since become agents were instructed to initiate exchanges of correspondence with émigrés abroad and sometimes, if they were sufficiently trusted by the KGB, to visit them in person, since their bona fides as former political prisoners made them especially influential. Some émigrés were invited to visit their homeland (or else had pending applications approved), primarily to ‘size them up’ as potential double agents. In the case of the Union of Lithuanian Students of the USA, the KGB managed to get an agent (‘Don’) inside the organisation who was the brother of a founder member. Plans for infiltration of the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania centred on an agent (‘Salyutas’) who was the son of a member of the organisation’s leadership. In the case of the Baltic Society, based in West Germany, the KGB managed to place an agent among Prussian Lithuanians who had been allowed to emigrate, and he was soon interacting with senior figures of the Lithuanian émigré community more widely.<sup>78</sup> By September 1968, the KGB had established a special group within the new Fifth Department for ‘active measures against the ideological centres of Lithuanian emigres’, focusing on uncovering and exposing their activities *via* agents with friends and relatives in capitalist countries.<sup>79</sup>

One especially striking case in this respect involved an individual, codenamed ‘Mantas’. Born in 1922, ‘Mantas’ was a Lithuanian nationalist who had served in the German army during the war and fled to Austria as the conflict ended. Sent back to the USSR against his will in 1954, ‘Mantas’ was desperate to escape abroad as soon as possible. Suspecting him of secret involvement with US intelligence, and keen to penetrate the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania, the KGB constructed an elaborate ruse. Unbeknown to ‘Mantas’, a successful escape to West Germany (*via* Poland) was made possible by a series of undercover KGB agents. Thanks to the involvement of more undercover agents in Germany, ‘Mantas’ was soon in touch with real Lithuanian émigré organisations there as well as with US intelligence. Then, in late 1955, the Americans sent him back to Lithuania (with fake money, documents, a spy camera and an ampule of poison inside a tie) to make contact with underground oppositionists and to gather information on various ‘sensitive’ sites around the republic. All the time, ‘Mantas’ was unwittingly sharing the addresses and plans of new contacts in the Lithuanian underground, revealing ciphers and more as the KGB used him as an agent ‘in the dark’ against the Americans, uncovering their operations and feeding back disinformation.<sup>80</sup>

### *Shortcomings in agent work*

Studying KGB agent work—and reading near-verbatim reports of private conversations in particular—can easily create a sense of the security organs’ virtual omniscience. Indeed, this was a notion that the authorities were more than happy to propagate. In their

<sup>78</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 653, ll. 201–19.

<sup>79</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 659, ll. 85–6.

<sup>80</sup>‘Mantas’ reportedly committed suicide in July 1956 as he tried to avoid capture by Polish and East German border police while seeking (again, with unknown KGB assistance) to sneak back into West Germany. LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 324, ll. 247–62.

methodological thinking on policing, the Soviet regime had long placed great stock in deterring wrong-doing not primarily *via* the harshness of punishment but by creating the sense that capture was inevitable.<sup>81</sup> While there is little evidence to suggest that the average citizen had a sense of the true dynamics of KGB agent activity, it was widely known that informers existed. Further, data from the 1980s SIP (Soviet Interview Project) survey showed that almost 80% of recent emigres declared it ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to tell who might be a KGB informer (Bahry & Silver 1987). This was, in itself, presumably a notable deterrent to dissenting activity.

The above notwithstanding, the relevant archival materials contain myriad complaints about failings in KGB work. Again, this reflected the fact that the KGB perpetually aspired to know more about its targets. Some weaknesses also highlighted the difficulties of adapting to a new *modus operandi* after years of pervasive Stalin-era lawlessness, and of absorbing the impact of post-Stalin cuts to funding and personnel. However, plenty of complaints about failings and botched operations also testified that the security organs were not always as omnipotent or effective as some observers assumed (Shlapentokh 2001).

An August 1957 review of recent shortcomings in Lithuanian KGB work complained of weak staff being assigned to important cases, which then went unsolved; of agent work being too passive; and of insufficient supervision from Vilnius over regional branches.<sup>82</sup> A February 1964 review noted that the Lithuanian KGB had, over the course of several years, accumulated 28 different investigations into ‘especially dangerous state crimes’ that remained unsolved.<sup>83</sup> It also complained about cases being incorrectly closed; suspects being wrongly released; KGB workers not understanding the legal considerations of the investigation process; and investigations being started too slowly, sometimes days after the events under scrutiny had taken place.<sup>84</sup> A February 1965 review then noted, among others things, problems of legal cases being initiated by the KGB without enough evidence; poor work in studying crime scenes, including flawed handling of evidence before fingerprinting; and staff assigned to cases being changed too frequently, causing investigations to move slowly and even to break down.<sup>85</sup>

Agent work in particular could throw up a variety of problems. Agent recruitment always involved plenty of missteps, especially among those considered enemies of the regime. Of the 40 agents employed in the search for former partisan fighters in the Šiauliai region, for example, most were chosen for their personal links to ‘bandits’ or their families, but more than half of them produced no material at all.<sup>86</sup> Many agents would be ‘let go’ on

<sup>81</sup>See, for example, ‘Rassledovanie cherezvychainnykh proisshestvii i zadachi organov gosbezopasnosti po uluchsheniyu etoi raboty’, KGBdocuments.eu, 23 September 1964, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_68k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_68k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>82</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 533, ll. 107–12.

<sup>83</sup>‘Rassledovanie cherezvychainnykh proisshestvii i zadachi organov gosbezopasnosti po uluchsheniyu etoi raboty’, KGBdocuments.eu, 23 September 1964, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_68k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_68k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>84</sup>‘Rassledovanie cherezvychainnykh proisshestvii i zadachi organov gosbezopasnosti po uluchsheniyu etoi raboty’, KGBdocuments.eu, 23 September 1964, available at: [https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e\\_68k.pdf](https://www.kgbdocuments.eu/assets/documents/2002e_68k.pdf), accessed 9 September 2024.

<sup>85</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 326, ll. 110–27.

<sup>86</sup>LYA, f. K-1, ap. 10, b. 275, l. 42.

suspicion of providing disinformation or otherwise ‘not cooperating honestly’.<sup>87</sup> One report from 1960 complained of agents within the Catholic Church deliberately blowing their own cover or not sharing information they knew about ongoing anti-Soviet activity.<sup>88</sup> Of eight agents within the Lithuanian clergy of Šiauliai by the end of the 1960s, only two were supplying information that was regarded as ‘deserving of attention’.<sup>89</sup> In seeking to explain ongoing failings in agent work among returnees in 1957, one report lamented that too many agents were not trusted by the targets to which they were assigned and insisted that while the KGB kept trying to acquire better agents, it simply could not do so.<sup>90</sup> Part of the problem here, it seems, centred on operative workers’ inability or unwillingness to break with *kompromat* as a method of recruitment, despite many years of evidence that it produced decidedly patchy results, and official guidance which made clear that agents recruited on the basis of patriotism were preferable. Even by the end of the 1960s, a total of 109 out of 195 agents on KGB books in Šiauliai had been recruited by *kompromat*.<sup>91</sup> Always under pressure to have agents at work, one review admitted that operative workers sometimes had little option but to take on as agents people whom they did not fully trust.<sup>92</sup>

Reviews complained of operative workers keeping agents on the books even though they failed to fulfil set tasks or to produce useful material for long stretches of time. In Šiauliai in 1960, for example, over 100 agents did not produce any material at all that year.<sup>93</sup> One doctor, codenamed ‘Vitautas’, who was recruited by *kompromat* in 1963, was later found to have never given any information at all, even after several years.<sup>94</sup> While a newly recruited agent in Klaipėda (codenamed ‘Edit’) was hailed for giving 54 separate reports in her first eight months, an operative worker with ten agents on his roster received only 21 communications in total across two and a half years, with nine of these being only informational in nature rather than of operational interest.<sup>95</sup>

Some operative workers were criticised for giving agents tasks that ran a serious risk of them being exposed.<sup>96</sup> Other cases saw operative workers lambasted for setting only vague assignments for their agents, such as directing them simply to follow a target and see what happened. Some were criticised for failing to keep a detailed record of their meetings with agents, as they had been instructed to do.<sup>97</sup> Others were too hasty or too trusting. One operative worker was chastised after an agent provided him with information about a colleague sharing anti-Soviet views. The operative worker did not verify the matter properly but right away called in KGB technical services, who then went to great lengths to plant a bug in the target’s apartment. It later transpired, however,

<sup>87</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 510, l. 216.

<sup>88</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 275, l. 37.

<sup>89</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, l. 32.

<sup>90</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 533, l. 112.

<sup>91</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, l. 93.

<sup>92</sup>LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 491, l. 53.

<sup>93</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 275, l. 34.

<sup>94</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, l. 30.

<sup>95</sup>On agent ‘Edit’, see LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 367, l. 6. On the operative worker with a particularly unproductive agent network, see LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, ll. 92–110.

<sup>96</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, ll. 31–4.

<sup>97</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, l. 10.

that not only had the agent in question provided deliberately false information, but also that he had already been struck off for this offence before, and had in fact been making anti-Soviet remarks himself.<sup>98</sup>

A KGB conference in 1962 complained that poor training of agents was one of the principal reasons why agent work was found lacking at times.<sup>99</sup> The following year, an article in the KGB's in-house journal, *Sbornik*, entitled 'Do Not Forget About the Political Education of Agents', set out how this should be done, *via* a vignette about a Moscow State University student whom Western intelligence had apparently tried to recruit but who ultimately came to serve Soviet security instead. The central message of the account was that success came through extensive and individually tailored contact between the operative worker and the individual in question. During frequent meetings, lasting up to three or four hours, the operative worker in the story carefully rebuffed Western propaganda claims and answered in detail any and all questions the individual asked about domestic affairs, the international situation and more (Kozel'tseva 1963). The result, according to *Sbornik*, was that the student in question learned how to evaluate nefarious Western activity correctly and eventually decided to pursue a career in intelligence work upon graduation.

In reality, the scenario presented above was highly idealised. With operative workers typically handling around a dozen agents at any given point, such heavy investment of time can hardly have been common. Indeed, a host of reports complained that operative workers often met their respective agents only once per month, which was described as insufficient for proper training, and not necessarily at any length then.<sup>100</sup> There is little direct trace in the available archival materials of the training in counter-intelligence skills that agents were supposed to be provided with—such as how to identify disinformation and to spot enemy agents at work—aside from the fact that reviews more than once insisted this was an area in which improvements were needed, especially at the periphery.<sup>101</sup> We do know a little more about the ideological training of agents, however. This seems to have been neither particularly sophisticated nor carefully tailored to the individual in question. The record indicates that, most often, the training consisted of operative workers setting for agents an array of stirring reading materials that lionised great acts of Soviet patriotism, exposed the treachery of foreign intelligence services, and boasted of the achievements and bright future of Soviet Lithuania.<sup>102</sup> Commonest of all were readings that foregrounded the apparent heroism of the security organs themselves, their deeds during the war as well as their ongoing efforts to expose the machinations of imperialism among Lithuanian nationalists.<sup>103</sup>

An audit of spending on agent work in 1962 also revealed anomalies which suggest that the security organs were far from immune to the informal economic practices and lax husbanding of resources that characterised much of the broader Soviet economy. The

<sup>98</sup>LYA, f. K-1, ap. 10, b. 275, l. 12.

<sup>99</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, l. 100.

<sup>100</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 670, l. 106.

<sup>101</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 510, l. 145.

<sup>102</sup>See, for example, LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, ll. 186–204.

<sup>103</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 639, l. 200.

report noted, for example, that KGB operative workers were only permitted to make token payments to agents as a sign of gratitude when a concrete task had been set and fulfilled. However, some were ignoring this rule and paying their agents either monthly or quarterly, regardless of material produced. One complaint cited an agent who had produced no material at all for a long period but had nonetheless been paid six times (at a combined total of R210) during 1960–1961. Some operative workers were also criticised for paying agents with alcohol, while others were found to be rewarding only those agents with whom it was easy for them to meet.<sup>104</sup> Lastly, lots of operative workers were failing to submit the necessary paperwork after making payments to agents (explaining how much they had been paid and what for), instead claiming money and materials without any explanation of what they were for.<sup>105</sup>

At least as serious, the secrecy that was supposed to surround agent work also failed badly at times. Safe houses—where KGB operative workers met with agents for debriefing and to set tasks—could be especially problematic. Each safe house was supposed to have a ‘legend’ attached to it—a cover story about who lived there and why people visited it, sometimes at all hours of the day—but plenty did not. Residents of safe houses, often but not always retirees from the KGB or militia, were also supposed to be thoroughly vetted, along with their family and close friends; if anyone deemed untrustworthy entered any of these groups, the safe house might be closed down. As repeated reviews complained, however, plenty were falling short in this area, with cover stories and vetting long overdue, and with landlords and others occasionally breaking secrecy among friends. In fact, numerous safe houses were found to remain operational after their cover had been blown, while others continued to function even once the agents formerly attached to them had been sacked under suspicion of being untrustworthy.<sup>106</sup> Some safe houses were chosen with insufficient care for location, for example, leaving agents unable to enter and exit without being overlooked by the rest of the street.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, when the Lithuanian KGB received an anonymous letter in 1958 from a concerned citizen expressing suspicions about goings-on at a nearby apartment, it turned out that the location in question was actually one of its own safe houses.<sup>108</sup>

### *Conclusions*

In spite of the problems set out above, one of the first steps undertaken by the KGB’s Fifth Department—created by new chairman Yuri Andropov in 1967, specifically to spearhead the fight against the burgeoning dissident movement—was an expansion of the security organs’ agent network among students and members of the intelligentsia.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, the holdings of the Lithuanian archives demonstrate that the KGB continued to make wide use of agent work in policing dissenting activity deep into the Gorbachev period. While political authorities in

<sup>104</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 311, ll. 88–92.

<sup>105</sup>LYA, f. K-51, ap. 1, b. 311, l. 92.

<sup>106</sup>LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 342, ll. 52–60.

<sup>107</sup>LYA, f. K-18, ap. 1, b. 342, ll. 53–5.

<sup>108</sup>LYA, f. K-25, ap. 1, b. 10, ll. 27–9.

<sup>109</sup>LYA, f. K-41, ap. 1, b. 671, l. 86.



post-Soviet Russia showed little enthusiasm for any substantive reckoning with those who previously informed on others to the KGB, this was undertaken with rather more vigour across the Baltic states as a whole, and especially in independent Lithuania (Pettai & Pettai 2014). Even so, while the available source material on this theme has grown considerably in recent years, a tremendous amount remains hidden.

While we can say little with any great certainty about how effective agent work was in deterring citizens from undertaking any dissenting activity, it clearly did help to ensure that myriad plans for acts of protest were ‘nipped in the bud’ by the security organs and served to identify for authorities those responsible for a plethora of circumscribed acts. As recent scholarship has shown, however, any political benefits accrued from widespread use of undercover agents in policing ought to be set against the broader social and economic damage that resulted from regimes’ reliance on such activity (Harrison 2023). This was also a field in which a host of blunders and missteps—a feature of agent work across the years—can be observed in the archival record. There were both clear continuities with the security organs’ Stalinist heritage in this sphere—not least, in thinking about ‘enemies’ *en masse*—but also some especially notable changes, such as the flexibility displayed in handling (and manipulating) specific individuals.

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