

# LITHUANIAN LATVIANS IN THE LEADERSHIP OF EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN LITHUANIA, 1941–1951

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper is dedicated to Lithuanian Latvians Erikas Leijeris and Jonas Kalvanas and their leadership of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church from 1941 to 1951, through their personalities and attitude to the occupation regimes that took place in Lithuania during WWII and shortly after, a significant part of Lithuanian Lutheran Church history is revealed. Repressions towards clergy and constant surveillance marked this period. However, despite sovietization and challenging post-war living conditions, the Consistory president (Leijeris) and vice-president (Kalvanas) managed to uphold the Lutheran Church.

**Keywords:** Erikas Leijeris, Jonas Kalvanas, Kaunas Consistory, sovietization, Lithuanian Latvians.

## INTRODUCTION

During the occupations of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, most Lithuanian Lutheran clerics left the country, leaving open the question of the future of church leadership. In 1941, the new Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Consistory was established in Kaunas, led by Lithuanian Latvians Erikas Leijeris and Jonas Kalvanas. Pastors who stayed in Lithuania and a few laymen formed the Evangelical Lutheran Consistory in Kaunas; its full legal title was Evangelical Lutheran Consistory of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.

A combination of Lithuanian Special Archive files and an article by Auksė Noreikaitė inspired the author to explore these Latvian Lithuanians in the leadership of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church during WWII and in the Stalinism period. The topic of Lutheran leadership during the Stalinism period is part of the author's doctoral thesis on the sovietization of the Church from 1944 to 1953; the Consistory of the Lutheran Church is an essential aspect of the sovietization process and the Church being the subject of the Soviet religious policy. Lithuanian Lutheran Church stands out in many aspects compared to its northern neighbours, including the importance of Lithuanian Latvians in the Church's Consistory and amongst the Lutheran community during WWII and Soviet occupation.

As Auksė Noreikaitė writes in her paper "*Lietuvos latviešu tēls Lietuvos un Latvijas pierobežā*" (2019) on Lithuanian Latvians and their image and identity during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, religion was essential in Latvian-Lithuanian relationships, especially in the regions with intensive Latvian settlement in Lithuania (Noreikaite 2019, 133). Latvians and Lutherans were not always perceived positively due to their different lifestyles and behaviours. However, pastor Erikas Leijeris and his service from 1941 until 1949 in Žeimelis parish and Lutheran Consistory has marked a positive attitude towards Lutherans and Latvian Lithuanians in Žeimelis territory and eastern north Lithuania (Noreikaite 2019, 126, 150–151).

The aim of the paper is to describe the personalities of Erikas Leijeris and Jonas Kalvanas, their activities, and relations with Soviet rule from 1941 to 1951, highlighting the importance of Lithuanian Latvians in developing and maintaining the Lithuanian Lutheran Church during this period. The chronological brackets are from establishing the Kaunas' Consistory to the trial and death of Erikas Leijeris in 1951 and Jonas Kalvanas stepping down from the formal leadership of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church. The primary method is the historical genetic method, which is the narration of the Church and the experience of the two main individuals in the context of Soviet religious policy using the archive sources (mainly Lietuvos Ypatingasis Archyvas – LYA, Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas – LCVA) and related literature. Most of the archive files used are marked as "secret" or "completely secret" by various Soviet institutions.

Darius Petkūnas have previously studied Lutheranism in WWII and Soviet Lithuania (Petkūnas 2011; 2014). Soviet religious policy and repressions against the churches have been of interest to Arūnas Streikus, focusing primarily on the Roman Catholic church but providing a great insight into religious circumstances from 1944–1990 (2002). Jānis Tervits has studied Lithuanian Latvian Baptist history and religious connections between Latvia and Lithuania (1999). Lithuanian Lutherans have been the focus of Arthur

Hermann (2000; 2003), and Erikas Leijeris' life and death in the context of Žeimelis have been analysed by Nerija Putinaitė (2010).

## THE CONSISTORY, WAR AND RELIGIOUS POLICY

The intensive repatriation process took place in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation; most of the Lutheran clergy, both Lithuanian and German, were forced to leave or decided to flee the country to save themselves in fear of the Red Army returning. This process caused a significant change in clergy and affected the Lithuanian Lutheran Church at the higher levels, and the previous Consistory was not functioning – only eight pastors remained in Lithuania. In the spring of 1941, Erikas Leijeris, together with Jonas Kalvanas, pastors Gustavas Rauskinas (Gustavs Rauskiņš, native Latvian), Martynas Preikšaitis and layman Mikas Preikšaitis, through “pastoral conference” formed the Kaunas Consistory which functioned as the main supervision body of Lutherans in Lithuania. All the pastors who formed the Consistory were young and adamant about serving the remaining Lutherans in Lithuania. Later, the members of the Consistory changed, but Leijeris and Kalvanas stayed in position throughout the wartime and into the Soviet regime and the changes that it brought.

The new Consistory promptly informed the Soviet officials about the formation of the Consistory, as Erikas Leijeris was careful to complete all the formalities according to the Soviet state requirements. This organisation of Lutherans during the war and its sheer existence was later portrayed as a devious usage of the Soviet Constitution (LYA-K19-1-35, 10). Tauragė was the spiritual centre of Lithuanian Lutherans and was the biggest congregation; it stayed like that through the Soviet occupation and became the seat of the Bishop of the Lithuanian Lutherans, with Jonas Kalvanas becoming the bishop in 1976.

As the WWII events unfolded in the Baltics, many civilians left or tried to leave Lithuania, thus affecting the number of Lutherans in Lithuania. Jonas Kalvanas estimated in 1941–1942 that there could be around 40 000 Lutherans in Lithuania, including German Lutherans and Latvian Lutherans. In 1948, when the biggest waves of repatriation and migration due to war had ended, Soviet officials reported that there could be around 10 000 Lutherans in Lithuania, the biggest part being Lithuanian Latvians (LYA-K19-1-35, 10). This number is suggested to be imprecise by several authors due to the “German” factor of Lutherans (Sudokiene 2013, 78). When the Soviet state carried out the census, many of the citizens were scared to reveal their belonging to the Lutheran Church because they

could be easily counted or confused as Germans and faced difficulties with antifascism and repressions towards Germans in afterwar Soviet Lithuania.

During the Nazi occupation, Lithuanian Lutheran churches were allowed to continue their work (Petkūnas 2011, 157). Because of this, Lutheran Church during the Nazi period is portrayed as collaborative and Anti-Soviet; for example, “Most of the Lutheran clergy called the believers for material help to fight the Soviet Union. Some of the pastors joined the German army as capelans.” (LYA-K19-1-35, 9).

Things got tense with the Red Army occupying Lithuania and starting an antireligious policy as part of the sovietization process. All the members of the Consistory were put through surveillance and were repressed in various ways, even resulting in the trial and death of Erikas Leijeris. The clergy were deemed as “anti-Soviet elements”, their personas were checked, and family members and friends were affected. For example, the characterization of Jonas Kalvanas and his whereabouts before the Soviet occupation and in wartime “During the German occupation was one of the leading members of Lutheran Church and curated anti-Soviet propaganda amongst Lithuanians [...] after the liberation [of Lithuania] did not stopped communicating with the Germans” (LYA-K-30-704A, 7–8).

The commissioners of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) created these kinds of working and existing conditions and executed the existing religious policy, which included house raids and arrests, agents and informers gathering information on the Church’s life and attitude towards the regime.

## CHURCH PRESIDENT-SENIOR ERIKAS LEIJERIS

Erikas Leijeris (Ēriks Leijeris) was born in 1906 in Biržai, where he also attended gymnasium. While Darius Petkūnas describes him as a “native Lithuanian”, MGB files refer to Leijeris as a Latvian, similar to Kalvanas. Due to the health conditions (epilepsy), some of the church presidency tasks were delegated to Jonas Kalvanas (LYA-K19-1-35, 13). Leijeris gained experience during the interwar period as the Consistory member of the Latvian part of the Lithuanian Church; his main parishes after 1941 were Žeimelis, Pakroujai, Biržai and other congregations in the east-north Lithuania. In Žeimelis, church was his best-known service; after rehabilitating him in 1989 and upon regaining of Lithuanian independence, the street next to Žeimelis Lutheran Church was named after E. Leijeris.

Darius Petkūnas, after analysing the Lutheran church during the Stalinism period, points out Leijeris’ conscious attitude towards the task he had gained during the war, the non-collaborative attitude to CARC and faithful service

to the institution and churchgoers (Petkūnas 2011, 158–159). Leijeris was subjected to constant pressure, and as the Lutheran clergy often did help out and look after people deemed anti-Soviet, providing metric information for people who had lost identification documents or needed a new identity. This was a great deal of frustration for CARC and MGB officials, one of the re-occurring accusations towards the Lutheran clergy. For example, in 1948, Martinas Nauekas wanted to acquire new documents and “turned to Kalvanas, told him about the deserting the Soviet Army and asked [Kalvanas] to provide the metric certificate for obtaining the [Soviet] passport. Kalvanas agreed and gave the metric certification” (LYA-K-30-1-704A, 57).

An actual conflict with the Soviet regime escalated after Leijeris wrote a telegram to Stalin in 1948. The Consistory leader wrote to Stalin about the Jonišķis Church, which had been seized by Soviet officials and subsequently closed. Despite the local CARC’s authority on religious matters, Leijeris chose to write directly to Stalin himself regarding the fate of the church and the possibility of oppressive actions towards the clergy, ignoring the regional CARC and its authority (Petkūnas 2011, 159).

CARC arrested him on 30 December 1949, on charges of possessing dangerous literature (the Memorandum of Pastor Mizaras). Leijeris was tried in the spring and early summer of 1950. Leijeris was charged with Soviet Unions’ Penal Code 58-12 (non-reporting of a “counter-revolutionary activity”: at least six months of imprisonment) and sent to Krasnoyarsk GULAG, where he was incarcerated by the regime in the barracks for those with poor health (Petkūnas 2011, 165–166). Leijeris passed away on 31 December 1951, due to poor health and camp conditions, after still remaining active and keeping correspondence with clergy in Lithuania. In his memory, a monument-cenotaph was built in the Lutheran cemetery with a Latvian inscription “Ēriks Leijeris”.

## **CHURCH VICE-PRESIDENT JONAS KALVANAS**

Jonas Kalvanas was a prominent Lutheran Church Member who served as the first bishop of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church in 1976. He was considered the guardian of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church during the Soviet era and continued to serve until Lithuanian independence was achieved in 1991. After his passing in 1995, his son Jonas Kalvanas Jr. took over as the head of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church.

Jonas Kalvanas Sr. was born in 1914 in Ruobežai, in a Lithuanian-Latvian family. Kalvanas studied theology at Kaunas University and also at the University of Latvia, where he defended his candidate’s thesis on Reformation in Lithuania. Kalvanas was ordained in 1940 by German,

Lithuanian and Latvian pastors to reflect his personality and approach to church life. In 1941, together with Erikas Leijeris and others, he became a member of the Consistory and, in 1942, was made vice-president. Together with Leijeris, they managed the church life, congregations, and relationships with CARC and other Soviet institutions. Kalvanas took over Tauragė Church and many other congregations, but Tauragė was the most prominent for all the Lithuanian Lutherans (LCVA R 181-1-3, 17).

Jonas Kalvanas in reports by MGB agents and informants, was portrayed as clearly anti-Soviet and loyal to Lutheran Church. With the extensive amount of material gathered from sermons, funerals, correspondence, and everyday chats with the Kalvanas family members, one can look into MGB's strategy of dealing with the highest level of Lutheran clergy. In September of 1945, Kalvanas, in a funeral, said about the deceased, "You did not die your own death, because you chose the other power, not your own. God punished you for betraying your homeland" (LYA-K-30-704A, 7). This clearly shows two things – Kalvanas' rather fearless attitude towards the regime and that even in funerals, there were always ears and eyes, who later reported to local authorities.

CARC and MGB in early 1947 tried to use *kompromat* against Kalvanas to obtain his knowledge of the Church and recruit him, but to no success (Petkūnas 2011, 186–187). Not long after, he was called back to the MGB headquarters in Vilnius to undergo further questioning. During the interrogation, he was asked about various church-related matters, including his involvement with the former clergy, the forest brothers, and potential Red Army deserters. Despite the intense cross-questioning, Kalvanas maintained his composure and honesty, explaining that he had simply offered church aid to those in need. Kalvanas family house was searched on 13 May 1948 for five hours from 4.20 to 9.20, but nothing incriminating was found (LYA-K-30-704A, 236–237b). Soon after Leijeris' arrest and trial, Jonas Kalvanas resigned from the vice-president's position in concern that something could happen to him. In truth, CARC and MGB's frustration regarding the Kalvanas surveillance and lack of success continued long after his resignation in 1951.

## **RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LITHUANIAN AND LATVIAN CHURCHES**

Since the author's previous papers and research have mainly focused on the Latvian Lutheran Church during the Stalinism period, one raises a question of whether the "Latvianness" of the Lithuanian Church played an important role between the two neighbouring Churches during difficult

times. So far, there has not been any significant research on Latvian Lithuanians and their possible connection to the Latvian Lutheran Church as a possible survival tactic during the sovietization period.

The first impression of the reason behind the lack of close connections between the leadership is how Leijeris and Kalvanas gained their position compared to Latvian Archbishop Gustavs Tūrs. As it was said before, the Lithuanian Church was only called “Soviet” and operated under Soviet conditions, whereas its northern neighbour was subjected to significant Soviet influence to the highest levels of the church. Adding the Soviet control of the churches and their possible ties that could strengthen their position in Lutheran society, such unification was not definitely encouraged, as one of the main CARC principles was to isolate churches, congregations, and people, subjugating them into collaboration or renouncing the active practicing of faith.

Some archive files reveal that, for example, in 1949, Jonas Kalvanas had good relationships with Latvian Lutheran pastors and Old believers and, through trustworthy people, kept constant communication with pastors Zibo and Leitneris, who were in Kaliningrad at that time (LYA-K-30-1-704A, 260). After giving up the position in the Church Consistory, there was a proof of Kalvanas communicating to Lutherans in Latvia in 1952 (Petkūnas 2011, 216). This vastly differs from the Latvian Lutheran Church and their almost encouraged relationship with Estonian Lutherans – sending congratulations, attending Consistory meetings, joining the CARC-curated ecumenism movement, etc. This proves the different, and in Soviet eyes, untrustworthy nature of Lithuanian Lutherans, who used their autonomy and small community to keep the church relatively uncontaminated.

Jānis Tervits has examined Latvian-Lithuanian Baptists; for example, Baptist pastor Jonas Inkenas, who was also born in Biržai one year prior to Leijeris in a Lithuanian family and served in Lithuanian and Latvian congregations until 1951, was deported and after returning in 1956 was forbidden to practice in Lithuania, continued his service in Latvia (Tervits 1999, 214). A similar case was that of Gustavs Rauskiņš, who was born a native Latvian in Mazsalaca, chose to serve in Latvian-Lithuanian congregations and, after returning from Siberia, resided in Lithuania, since clergy was often forbidden to practice in their native republic.

## CONCLUSIONS

The author concludes that these two personalities are significant in the history of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, as the tactics towards the Council for Religious Affairs and other Soviet control authorities

allowed the church to be preserved during the occupation period, with Jonas Kalvanas later even becoming the bishop of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church. Erikas Leijeris' faith and service were like those of other leaders of the churches in the late Stalinism – trialled and exiled, some of them came back, and some, unfortunately, did not. Kalvanas' approach to approach to CARC and the sovietization process turned out to be most efficient in the long run – he lived to see the Lithuanian Lutheran Church and Lithuanian state become free again and served as an important link between interwar Lithuania and independent Lithuania since 1991, raising the next generation of Lutheran clergy both literarily (Jonas Kalvanas jr. became the next ELCL bishop in 1995) and figuratively.

The ties between Lithuanian Latvians and Latvians are unique in the way that they helped to maintain the church or to keep pastors in service in times of need, and this kind of migration between nationality and language should be studied more in northern Lithuania and southern Latvia, especially concerning the Lutheran Church. These occurrences were rare between Latvians and Estonians, placing Lithuanian Latvians and Lutherans in a special position.

The author believes that a new perspective of collaboration between congregations across the Lithuanian-Latvian border could bring an insight into the overall sovietization process of Lutheran Churches, grass-roots level church activities, and personal connection as critical factors for churches coping with aggressive Soviet religious policy.

The “Latvianness” of Kalvanas, Leijeris and others should be studied further using other, more personal sources to reveal to what extent their self-identity may have influenced the decisions regarding the Lutheran Church and Latvian congregations.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CARC – Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults of the USSR Council of Ministers

ELCL – The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania

LCVA – Lithuanian Central State Archives

LiSSR – Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic

LYA – Lithuanian Special Archives

MGB – Ministry for State Security, 1946–1953



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# LIETUVAS LATVIEŠI LIETUVAS EVAŅĢĒLISKI LUTERISKĀS BAZNĪCAS VADĪBĀ, 1941–1951

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## ANOTĀCIJA

Pētījums veltīts Lietuvas latviešiem Ērikam Leijerim un Jonam Kalvanam un viņu darbībai Lietuvas Ev.-lut. baznīcas vadībā no 1941. līdz 1951. gadam. Viņu personību un attieksmes pret padomju varu analīze atklāj svarīgu Lietuvas luterāņu vēstures posmu. Šajā periodā izteiktas sovetizācijas, represiju un pēckara grūtību apstākļos Kauņas konsistorijas prezidents (Leijeris) un viceprezidents (Kalvanas) spēja noturēt Baznīcas darbību.

**Atslēgvārdi:** Ēriks Leijeris, Jons Kalvans, Kauņas konsistorija, Lietuvas latvieši.

## Kopsavilkums

Otrā pasaules kara laikā Baltijas evaņģēliski luteriskās baznīcas piedzīvoja milzīgas pārmaiņas un dažādas reliģiskās politikas totalitāro režīmu iespaidā. 1941. gadā Kauņā tika nodibināta jaunā Lietuvas Evaņģēliski luteriskā konsistorija, kuru vadīja Lietuvas latvieši Ēriks Leijeris un Jons Kalvans. Viņu vadībā Lietuvas luterāņu baznīca turpināja savu darbību Otrā pasaules kara laikā un pirmajos pēckara gados, spītējot padomju varas politikai un centieniem sovetizēt baznīcu.

Darba mērķis ir raksturot Ērika Leijera un Jona Kalvana personību, viņu darbību un attiecības ar padomju varu no 1941. līdz 1951. gadam, uzsverot Lietuvas latviešu nozīmi Lietuvas luterāņu baznīcas attīstībā no 1941. līdz 1951. gadam. Izmantojot arhīvu avotus no Lietuvas Valsts arhīva, Lietuvas speciālā arhīva un literatūru, raksts atklāj staļinisma perioda politiskos, sadzīvīskos un reliģiskos apstākļus un represijas pret garīdzniekiem, tostarp Ērika Leijera tiesāšanu un izsūtīšanu. Tauraģes draudzes mācītājs un konsistorijas priekšsēdētāja vietnieks un mācītājs Jons Kalvans no 1941. līdz 1951. gadam bija izšķirošs cīņā pret padomju reliģisko politiku draudžu slēgšanā, padomju centieniem luterāņu kopienas iznīcināšanā.

Autore secina, ka šīs abas personības ir nozīmīgas Lietuvas Evaņģēliski luteriskās baznīcas vēsturē, jo izvēlētā taktika pret Reliģijas kulta lietu padomi un citām kontroles iestādēm ļāva baznīcu saglabāt arī okupācijas periodā. Šīs tēmas tālāka izpēte ir nepieciešama, jo Lietuvas luterāņu baznīcas un Latvijas luterāņu baznīcas saites nebija spēcīgas. Taču sakarības bija un varēja atklāties vairāk informācijas par sovetizācijas procesu Baltijā.