

## Terror Documented



Dear Mission Friends:

Early in 1999 our Dominican Master General in Rome asked for friars to volunteer to work in the former Soviet republic of Lithuania. Communism had fallen and the last Soviet tanks had pulled out of Lithuania in 1993. Fr. David O'Rourke from our Western Dominican Province answered the call. Although he states that he still does not speak Lithuanian, I can remember seeing him at the age of 66 studying the difficult language with a tutor in the library of our St. Albert's Priory. Since his arrival in Lithuania in the fall of 1999, we have reported in this newsletter all of the various ministries and projects he has carried out, from university and seminary teaching to working with the archdiocese of Vilnius on marriage preparation and family support programs. We would like to share with you, in a two part series, Father O'Rourke's latest project: a documentary film on the Lithuanian resistance to the

Soviet occupation. With the permission of the *Catholic Voice* of the Diocese of Oakland, we are reprinting correspondent Gerald Korson's article, and some historic photographs, that first appeared in its Nov. 3, 2008 edition.

In Christ's Peace,  
*Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.*

Most Americans know little or nothing about the half-century Soviet occupation of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Fewer still perhaps know of the Soviet use of terror, forced deportation, slave labor, mock trials, torture and execution as a matter of government policy in order to keep the Baltic nationals under their iron rule.

Dominican Father David O'Rourke, a canon lawyer for the Oakland Diocese and parochial administrator of Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Point Richmond, is out to change all that. He and a fellow Dominican, Father Ken Gumbert of Providence College, have collaborated to produce a documentary film that they hope will reach millions of American viewers through their local public broadcasting affiliates.

The film, "**Red Terror on the Amber Coast**," looks back at the Soviet occupation of the Baltic republics and the Lithuanian resistance movement between 1939, shortly before the first Soviet occupation began, and 1993, when the last of the Russian army left the country.



*Lithuania President Valdas Adamkus and Fr. David O'Rourke, O.P. Adamkus appears in the film and has endorsed it.*



*One of the few surviving photographs of the mass deportation to Siberia on June 14, 1941.*

The story is told largely through interviews with Lithuanians who lived through the years of terror, including former prisoners and the “Forest Brethren” resistance fighters who stood up to the Soviet oppressors.

The inspiration for the film project came together almost by accident. Father O’Rourke studied and taught at Lithuania’s Vilnius University during the 2000-01 academic year and helped set up a family life program for the local diocese. Walking through the downtown area one afternoon, he came to the former KGB (Soviet secret police) headquarters, which in the days of the occupation doubled as a prison where the accused were interrogated, tortured, and sometimes killed. Inexplicably, the building was not locked, and he wandered inside for an impromptu self-tour.

*“For two hours I went from cell to cell, alone and in absolute silence,” said Father O’Rourke. “It was one of the most chilling experiences of my life.”*

At the same time, Father Gumbert was on sabbatical in Czechoslovakia, making a documentary on the Soviet takeover in that nation after the Communist *putsch* (surprise revolt, or *coup d’etat*) of 1948. (That film, “Saving Grace,” later won a 2005 Gabriel Award from the Catholic Media Association.) The two priests got together and began investigating the little-heralded genocide that took place in the Baltic republics.

*“We were given full access to the country’s film and photo archives,” said Father O’Rourke. These archives included photos of the Forest Brethren, victims of the oppression and Soviet*

propaganda films.

Getting the people to tell their personal stories was far more difficult, he said. *“I did not know Lithuanian, and I actually worked in the KGB archives for several years before the people were willing to discuss matters with me,”* he said. *“They were not ready to trust an American coming in from the outside because there were so many American carpetbaggers in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union that it took them awhile to realize that my intentions were not exploitative. That took several years. Even as a priest, I was seen as an American first.”*

It was not until 2006 that the two Dominicans—Father Gumbert, the filmmaker, and Father O’Rourke, the writer—were ready to return with a camera crew for the videotaped interviews.

*“It took a long time to write the film,” explained Father O’Rourke. “The film we have is not what we started out to do four years earlier. We started out to tell a story about the ‘partisan’ resistance, but as we began interviewing people we found that the ‘partisans’ were just one part of a much bigger story about the Soviet use of terror as the key element in state-sponsored control.”*

The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were among several nations that gained their independence from Russia after



*Temperatures in the long Siberian winter fell to 40 degrees below zero, so life expectancy among the slave laborers was short. Millions died of exposure and hunger.*

World War I ended in 1918. In late August 1939, Germany and Russia signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact—sometimes called the Hitler-Stalin Pact or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—a mutual non-aggression agreement that pledged neutrality should either nation wage war against a third party and secretly divided Poland, Finland, and the Baltic states and others in the region as German or Russian “spheres of influence.”

The move was a surprise, as Nazis and Communists had clashed in the past and remained mortal enemies. Within a week of that pact, on September 1, Adolph Hitler’s Germany attacked Poland from the west; 16 days later, the Soviets invaded Poland from the east.

By mid-October, the Josef Stalin-led Soviet Union had forced Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania to sign agreements allowing the Soviets to set up

military bases and place tens of thousands of troops in each of these countries, ostensibly to defend the Baltic republics from potential aggressors in the now-raging war.

In June 1940, nearly simultaneous with the fall of Paris to Germany, the Soviets invaded and occupied all three Baltic nations with a combined force of a half-million troops. Powerless to defend themselves,

the three states allowed their armies to be disarmed, made additional concessions, and were forced to participate in sham elections that installed communist majorities in their parliaments. These parliaments then petitioned for and were granted annexation to the Soviet Union.

The deportations and genocide soon began with “decapitation,” a policy that called for the arrest and deportation or execution of the nations’ political, social and cultural elite. Ordinary citizens were also targeted. The worst of it was a massive sweep orchestrated on June 13, 1941, in which tens of thousands of Baltic civilians and their families were arrested.

Herded to the railway stations, the men, women and children were separated and packed into cattle cars destined for any of the more than 400 forced-labor camps, collective farms, prisons, and inhabitable places



*The KGB placed bodies of executed partisans in public, watching for reactions of shock and grief in order to discover family members, who were then arrested or whose farmsteads would be burned to the ground.*

of exile in Siberia. Many would die there of abuse and starvation; most would never return.

It was those in leadership whom Stalin was primarily determined to eliminate, “*anybody who was a custodian of the national sense and national identity—teachers, scientists, artists, philatelists,*” said Father O’Rourke.

(Next month’s newsletter will continue with this little-known chapter of Hitler-like atrocities toward the Baltic partisans, the courageous if unsuccessful Lithuanian resistance, and the reason, according to Fr. O’Rourke, “they’re afraid it will happen again,” since, as we have recently witnessed, “Russian imperialism is not dead.”)

*If you or someone you know would like to receive a DVD of “Red Terror on the Amber Coast,” please so indicate on the return envelope and include a donation of \$10.00 each.*

In the wilderness  
justice will come to live and  
integrity in the fertile land;  
integrity will bring peace,  
justice give lasting security.

My people will live in a  
peaceful home, in safe  
houses, in quiet dwellings.

*Isaiah 32: 16-18*



**Prayer to St. Martin de Porres,  
Patron of the Dominican Mission Foundation**

*Brother Martin, when you were here on earth,  
you spent your life loving God  
and your neighbor. Now that you live in the  
presence of God in paradise, intercede for those  
who stand so much in need of the healing help  
of God and beg the Divine Physician to give us  
health of soul and body. Amen.*