

The Catholic Church, Enemy of the People: the Soviet Secret Police against the Vatican*

ALEKSANDR NEZHNY

Recently opened archives have made it possible to trace certain general patterns in the relationship between the Soviet authorities and the Vatican. The policy varies, of course, and does not proceed in a completely straight line. If the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs of Soviet Russia, Georgi Chicherin, wrote in November 1922 to Iosif Unshlikht, the president of the state political directorate, 'bear in mind that in our international relations we have to take particular account of the influence of the Catholic Church' and requested that he moderate 'particular persecution of Catholic clergy', this simply proves that Soviet diplomacy needed a more or less stable basis for gaining aid and recognition from the West. However, communist ideology was prepared to cut the throat of its own foreign policy simply in order to satisfy its concealed desire to destroy the church in general and the Catholic Church in particular; and all the more so because the persistent opposition of Catholic clergy, in particular of Archbishop Jan Cieplak to the seizure of church records and valuables was a severe irritant to the workers' and peasants' state.

The famine of 1921–2 in the Volga region provided the justification for the seizure of valuables from Orthodox and Catholic churches and from synagogues. Soon, however, nationwide starvation became the government's excuse to destroy the church. In May 1922 Cardinal Gaspari informed Archbishop Cieplak that

the Holy Father has received your telegram. He is redeeming the church valuables and from now on leaves them to Your Grace to deal with. The price that you set will immediately be forwarded to Mr Chicherin, who has been informed in advance, or to any other person nominated by the government.

The authorities were thus apparently to be satisfied with a redemption fee; but less than a year later Cieplak and 13 other Catholic clergy were on trial.

The trial lasted six days. The prosecutor was the Deputy People's Commissar of Justice Nikolai Krylenko, who shortly before had passed the death sentence on the Metropolitan of Petrograd, Veniamin (Kazan'sky), and I would guess that none of the accused was under any illusion about what the outcome of the trial would be. If any of them did have a glimmer of hope it would have been extinguished by the prosecutor's speech: 'the Catholic Church has always been the enemy of the people; in his encyclical the pope has condemned all socialist doctrines.' The Revolutionary Tribunal sentenced Archbishop Jan Cieplak and Konstantin Butkevich, priest of the church of St Yekaterina in Petrograd, to death by firing squad, which the authorities

*This article was first published in Russian in *Russkaya mysl'*, 5 June 1992.

were wont to describe as 'our best weapon for the defence of society'. The rest of the accused, including the Exarch of the Greek-Catholic Church, Leonid Fedorov, were sentenced to various terms in prison. At this time a 'Catholic Mission for Aid to Russia' was active in Moscow. Its slogan was 'The Pope of Rome for the Russian nation'. The director of the mission, Edmund Walsh, wrote to Petr Krasikov, head of the so-called 'liquidation department' of the People's Commissariat of Justice and active from the earliest days of Soviet power in ruthless suppression of the church and religion in Russia:

Since Archbishop Cieplak and Fr Butkevich have been sentenced to death, I ask for your assistance in obtaining permission from the relevant authorities to visit them before the sentence is carried out. It is the usual practice in civilised countries to allow those who have been sentenced to death to receive spiritual comfort in accordance with their religious beliefs.

Meanwhile the sentence was postponed. It was necessary, firstly, to try to persuade international public opinion that the convicted men were in fact enemies of Soviet power, and, secondly, to attempt to bargain, in exchange for their lives, for the release of communist activists arrested in the West. Chicherin informed the plenipotentiary representative of Soviet Russia in Poland that

Cieplak and Butkevich used their influential position and the ecclesiastical administrative structures to turn people's minds against the Soviet government. They may not have issued an open incitement to revolt, but the way they characterised Soviet power meant that such an incitement was the only way out. Their constant message was: 'Soviet power stands between you and God'.

Chicherin gave instructions to another ambassador about the proposed exchange for Cieplak.

It would be best of all to get Gel'ts, but it is possible that this will not happen and that it will be easier to get the Bavarian communists. In any effort to get the Bavarian communists, pressure from the Vatican will play a decisive role.

For its part, the Vatican tried to save the priests, and Monsignor Pizzardo, expressing the concern of the pope, wrote to the first secretary at the Russian embassy in Italy:

The Holy See would welcome a decision to grant freedom for all religions; and indeed, the pope has not asked for any particular privileges for the Catholic faith, but has expressed the desire that belief in God and the Christian faith should cease to be a reason for punishment.

Archbishop Cieplak was actually exchanged for one of the German communists and sent to Poland. The petition for the pardon of Konstantin Butkevich was turned down, however, nor was Walsh allowed to see him before his execution.

The secret police kept the remains of the Catholic Church, destroyed in Stalin's Russia, under its constant control. As the years went by and the international situation changed the clutch of the KGB still did not weaken. In 1974 Yuri Andropov, then chairman of the KGB, sent a note to the Central Committee of the Communist Party about the Vatican policy of strengthening and broadening ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. (In this note, incidentally, Fr Aleksandr Men' is described as 'a priest with pro-Catholic leanings'. So this is what the secret police thought of the pure and tolerant Christianity of this Orthodox priest.) Andropov writes:

The Vatican makes extensive use of the channels of tourism, scientific and technical exchanges and private visits. In 1972–3 alone, according to our incomplete evidence, 380 Catholic activists visited the Soviet Union. These included: a professor from the University of Louvain in Belgium, the Jesuit Antoine Elens; Offermans of the centre for the study of Marxism at the Gregorian University; Huber, a doctor of philosophy and theology at the same university; and Bubenek of the Russian Catholic Centre in France. The Roman Catholic priest Galasso, who is in the USSR on a long-term basis serving the Italian community in the city of Tol'yatti, has been actively involved in establishing contacts with the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Vatican is using every method to develop its contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church: its ultimate aim is to locate and support those in the church who in its opinion are capable of developing organised opposition to the state structure in this country and of offering resistance to atheism.

Is this not remarkable? The Vatican, it would seem, has been attempting to weave together a real counterrevolutionary network within the Russian Orthodox Church. Using whom? The KGB agents 'Antonov', 'Abbat', 'Adamant', 'Pavel' or 'Drozdov', which is what these revered metropolitans have been for so many years? But this is perhaps not even the worst thing. Apparently the perfidious Catholics have also been trying to awaken in Orthodox priests the desire to draw the Christian sword again all-powerful state atheism. This is what concerns Andropov. But he reassures the party leadership: 'The state security organs are closely monitoring all the contacts that the Vatican has made with the Russian Orthodox Church and are taking measures to disrupt its schemes to use the church in its activities directed against the USSR.'

And so we come to 1986 – the fortieth anniversary of the shameful Council of L'vov which 'consecrated' the execution of the Greek-Catholic Church. The ideologists of the Central Committee of the CPSU prepared a memorandum – secret of course – for the party leaders: *O nekotorykh meropriyatiyakh v svyazi s 40-letiyem L'vovskogo tserkovnogo sobora (Measures to be Taken in Connection with the Fortieth Anniversary of the L'vov Church Council)*. It contains no state secrets; just abominable lies about the Greek-Catholic Church, about attempts 'to use religion for antisoviet aims', and of course about the 'antisoviet activities of the Vatican'.

The party gave its blessing and the KGB surrounded the shameful celebrations with secret police, planted their disguised agents among the clergy and successfully made complete fools of the foreign journalists. This is how it looked in the KGB report, however:

The KGB of the Ukrainian SSR and the KGB of the L'vov *oblast'* took counterespionage measures in connection with the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Council of L'vov which abolished the Uniate Church in the USSR. A considerable number of KGB agents were involved in the organisation and execution of these measures, including 'Adamant', 'Antonov', 'Luk'yanov', 'Skala' and others. The celebrations, in which almost 300 guests and ten representatives of Orthodox churches abroad took part, passed off in an acceptable manner as far as we are concerned. They also had a positive influence on foreigners, several of whom gave interviews of a positive nature.

All kinds of restrictions could be introduced on access to our archives, but if they are

not, we are very soon going to have a much more complete picture about the stance of both party and government towards the Vatican over the past 70 years.

(Translated from the Russian by Alice Vessey)