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The Fate of the Catholic Clergy in the USSR, 1917–39*

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> The clergy is one of the most faithful instruments of counterrevolution.
>
> *Orka* (Minsk)
> 14 December 1929.

> The GPU ... keeps up systematic persecution of the Catholic clergy because they represent an intellectual and moral force which is independent of communist control.
>
> Jean Herbette, French Ambassador to Moscow, 16 April 1928, AMAD, côté 126, p. 80.

Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church in Russia has its origins in the tenth-century realm of Kiev. This includes the lands encompassed by the Soviet state after the Treaty of Riga in 1921. Until the fall of the tsar the Catholic Church in Ukraine, Belorussia, the Crimea, the Transcaucasus and European and Asiatic Russia (excluding the Kingdom of Poland and the dioceses of Vilna and Kovno in Lithuania) had several dioceses[1] and more than 500 parishes as well as 504 parish churches, 141 daughter churches and 591 livings.[2] There were a thousand priests of various nationalities, mainly Polish, followed by Lithuanian, German, Latvian, Armenian, Georgian and Belorussian and a small number of Russians. Three rites were represented: the Latin rite predominated, with the Armenians second and a small number of Greek Catholics.

At the start of the 1920s, a few years after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and when a section of the Catholic population and its priests had emigrated, the Catholic Church in Soviet Russia numbered 1,600,000 faithful, of whom Poles made up 75–80 per cent, about 400 priests serving some hundreds of parishes in Ukraine (the dioceses of Zhitomir, Kamenets Podolsky and Tiraspol (with its administrative centre at Saratov on the Volga)), in Central Belorussia (the diocese of Minsk), in European Russia (the archdiocese of Mogilev), in Asiatic Russia (the diocese of Valdivostok and the apostolic vicariate of Siberia), in the Transcaucasus and in the Crimea

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(administrated from Saratov). Besides these, there were 56 parishes of the Armenian-Catholic Church in Georgia and elsewhere.[3] The Catholic Church in Russia ranked fourth largest after the Orthodox Church, Islam and Judaism.

The Aim of the Communist Regime: the Liquidation of the Catholic Clergy

The fathers of communism in Russia drew up plans for a wholly atheist state. Religion, along with private property, had been declared enemy number one, a fundamental obstacle to social justice. The mass media continually reiterated the message that 'The communist regime will be realised only when society has freed itself from religion.'[4] Two well known ideologists, Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, who wrote a handbook on communism published in 1925, stressed Lenin's teaching that 'Religion and communism cannot coexist either in theory or in practice.'[5] Statements like this help to explain how atheism in Soviet Russia straightaway took on a militant nature, the Party assuming responsibility for the struggle against all forms of religious belief.

The wiping out of religion had been scheduled for the very near future: the end of the 1930s.[6] The fate of the clergy was easy to foresee. Right from the start Catholic priests were represented as the worst enemies of the revolution and of communism. They became synonymous with defenders of the old regime, conspirators, agents of foreign powers, spies. 'Our country is the only one in the world where the clergy is regarded as an army of parasites whose speciality is to spread the poison of religion. In our country this army is put in the most appropriate place: in the ranks of the enemies of the revolution.'[7]

The struggle against religion and the clergy began in the course of the revolution. By the mid-1920s the reprisals had become very well-organised and methodical, involving a two-pronged attack by the political police (the GPU) and the League of Atheists, later to become the League of Militant Atheists, whose role the Party saw as extremely important especially amongst young people and children.

The GPU used terror, provocation, arrests, prisons, deportations to Siberia and to the Gulag and death sentences. The League of Atheists, by contrast, was crucial to the ideology and the organisation of all antireligious measures in all spheres of daily public life: in culture, art, film, recreation, propaganda, the mass media and teaching. Its chairman, Yemel'yan Yaroslavsky (1878–1943), a member of the Central Committee, was indefatigable in his work, planning and motivating new forms of struggle against religion and the clergy, and the policies pursued by the League were extremely aggressive, primitive and blasphemous.[8]

Methods

The Repression of the Clergy by Legal Means

Articles 23 and 65 of the Soviet Constitution of 1918 and later on the decree by the All-Russian Central Committee (VTsIK) of 13 October 1925 on elections to national soviets classified clergy of all faiths in the category of people deprived of civil rights ('*lishentsy*'). While it is true that Stalin's 1936 Constitution, for propaganda reasons, recognised the civil rights of the clergy, this carried no weight in practical terms. A year later the Moscow journal *Antireligioznik* wrote that it was necessary 'to achieve a total liquidation of all reactionary clergy'.[9] Shortly afterwards this goal was achieved as far as Catholic priests were concerned.

Prosecutions for Political Offences

In the struggle against the church and the clergy the GPU, an unerring and terrible instrument of the Party, had a whole arsenal of the weapons of a totalitarian state at its disposal. Continual secret surveillance, summonses, provocation, allegations of immoral behaviour (a technique much favoured by the GPU),[10] the impossibility of being allowed to hold down a job and the perpetual threat of arrest all made people believe that life would be more bearable in the labour camp on the Solovetsky Islands.[11]

One of the main aims of the GPU was the recruitment of agents and informers from amongst the ranks of the clergy. Their methods included brutal physical and mental pressure, blackmail, threats of prison, anonymous murder, the deportation of the family to Siberia.[12] We know now just how successful they were.[13] The commitment with which the GPU gathered its required intelligence was part of the drama of daily life in the USSR for the clergy of all churches. There were more important problems, however. From 1918 onwards the Cheka and its later manifestations the GPU and the NKVD chose to wage war against the church and the Catholic clergy in the USSR principally by indicting priests for the most compromising offences: political offences. The penal code allowed for the severest penalties for these, so this method was regarded as the most effective.

About 20 Catholic priests faced arrest on political grounds and the firing squad in the turbulent years of 1918–21. A model operation which set the pattern for the mass trials of clergy for the whole inter-war era was the trial of 14 priests from St Petersburg including Archbishop Jan Cieplak (1858–1926), which took place in Moscow from March 1923. All the accused were regarded as counterrevolutionaries and Polish spies. Two death sentences were pronounced. One, against Mgr K. Budkiewicz, was carried out instantly.[14] From this point onwards the legal and propaganda ploy whereby Catholic priests in the Soviet Union were put on trial for political crimes became normal practice. Proceedings were tailored to fit the nationality of the accused. German priests were accused of spying for Germany. Armenians, Georgians, Russians and Ukrainians were charged with espionage for foreign powers, the Vatican or the international bourgeoisie, paving the way for the armed invasion of Soviet territory.[15]

A reliable source on the true causes of the arrests and trials of Catholic priests in the USSR are the reports of the French ambassador to Moscow, M. Jean Herbette, which were sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris from 1926 to 1930. The ambassador was concerned to know the fate of people who had been imprisoned, deported to the Gulag in Siberia or condemned to death. He sought information from the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs in Moscow, where his contact was invariably the commissar, Georgi Chicherin (1872–1936). The ambassador expressed his doubts about accusations of political crime. In his report of 31 January 1928 on one of his interviews with Chicherin he cited his typical reply: 'We have never arrested a Catholic priest on religious grounds. We have prosecuted only on grounds of counterrevolution and espionage.'[16] In a report sent several months earlier (17 October 1927) the ambassador noted that it was impossible to imagine that all the Catholic priests imprisoned should be to a man spies or conspirators: 'The improbability of such an assertion is self-evident when one looks at the list of priests in jail which I have attached to my despatch No. 529 of 30 August, and when one is acquainted with the personal details of some of these clergy.'[17] His opinion, expressed in the same report, on the true causes of the persecution of Catholic priests

is worthy of note: 'One therefore has the right to presume that the charges of espionage and conspiracy are being systematically invoked to mask the real reason for arresting Catholic priests, which is solely to stop the Catholic faith being practised in the USSR.'[18] Some months later, in his report of 16 April 1928, he added: 'But in practice the Soviet administration, represented notably by the GPU, keeps up systematic persecution of the Catholic clergy because they represent an intellectual and moral force which is independent of communist control.'[19]

Forced Confessions

The GPU found a way of backing up their political indictments of the clergy. Their most effective tools in the campaign of disinformation conducted abroad were the self-criticisms and self-accusations by Catholic clergy published in the press. From 1923 Soviet newspapers published Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian editions which occasionally published statements by the most well-known Catholic clergy – apparently given freely and spontaneously – in which they denied the existence of religious persecution in the USSR. These declarations were extorted by blackmail and torture or quite simply fabricated.[20] The imprisoning of Catholic priests was represented as the direct result of their political crimes.

The first document of this kind was an open letter to Pope Pius XI dated 9 November signed by Fr Andrei Fedukovich of Zhitomir, who was at the time in prison in Khar'kov; in fact this letter was edited by the GPU. It was first published in the journal *Kommunist* (10 November 1924) and then in various other journals. Its alleged author denied the existence of religious persecution in the USSR and attributed the arrests of priests to their political activity and espionage for Poland. For about 15 years the Soviet press frequently referred to this letter and to other statements of the same type as a measure to counter public opinion in the West which was continually raising the question of religious persecution in the USSR.[21]

Collective Political Trials

With the aim of speeding up the process of wiping out the Catholic Church and the Catholic clergy the GPU opted for collective political trials. It is worth noting at the outset that all the trials, with notable exceptions such as the trial already referred to in Moscow in 1923,[22] were not of a judicial but of an administrative nature. The trials were run by the GPU; they were conducted in secret and the whole procedure was subject to no public control.[23] The verdicts were delivered by a *troika* composed of three GPU (later NKVD) officers. All the charges and verdicts referred to Article 58 of the Penal Code of the RSFSR of February 1927. Its 14 sub-clauses, dealing with a range of counterrevolutionary crimes, allowed for very flexible interpretation, and this meant that the presiding judges and the *troika* never had any difficulty finding a political crime to suit the prisoner; whether serious or slight it meant a penal sentence.[24]

A whole series of collective trials took place between 1923 and 1938.[25] Here we can mention only a few. In November 1923 the GPU tried 47 lay people and priests of the Greek-Catholic rite.[26] In several collective trials from 1926 to 1928 about 70 priests were condemned to 5–10 years in the Gulag.[27] Collectivisation in the years 1929–31 entailed a wave of arrests of Catholic priests. On this occasion charges of political crimes were reinforced by accusations of hostility towards the kolkhozes. According to incomplete sources, 142 mainly Polish and German clerics were

arrested. In September 1930 the GPU tried 30 Polish priests arrested in Khar'kov in Ukraine. They received death sentences which were changed to 8 or 10 years in the Gulag.[28] At the same time collective trials took place in Moscow, Odessa and elsewhere of several dozen German priests arrested in Ukraine, southern Russia and the Crimea. The sentences were the same. In 1936 a group of about 20 priests accused of belonging to 'a fascist and counterrevolutionary organisation of Roman Catholic and Uniate clergy in right-bank Ukraine'[29] were sentenced in Ukraine.

When mass reprisals began in 1936 a last series of trials took place in 1937–38, in Minsk (Belorussia), in Kiev (Ukraine), in Siberia (some dozen priests condemned to death) and in the labour camp on the Solovetsky Islands. The last group of Catholic priests being deported to Siberia was arrested at that time. They were all condemned to death, and the sentence was carried out within two weeks. Priests were frequently put on trial together with lay people also accused of political crimes.

Catholic priests were deported to different labour camps in the north[30] and in Siberia.[31] Some were deported, at the outset or even after serving their terms of forced labour in the camps. They were sent principally to Siberia and Central Asia where it was very difficult to live.

The notorious labour camp on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, founded on 25 May 1920 on the territory of a famous Orthodox monastery, played an important role in the tragic history of Orthodox and Catholic priests in the Soviet Union.[32] Between 1924 and 1937 more than a hundred Catholic priests[33] were sent there.[34] It was closed down in 1939.

Between 4 October and 25 November 1937, 34 Catholic priests of different nationalities (16 of them Polish) were condemned to death by the *troika* of the NKVD. They were shot by NKVD agents between 1 November and 8 December.[35] At the same time and in the same way they put to death more than 1000 prisoners who according to those in charge of the labour camps kept on engaging in propaganda and counterrevolutionary activity.[36]

Incomplete data put the number of Catholic priests suppressed in the USSR between 1918 and 1938 at 470. From 1918 to 1934 about 25 per cent of them left the Soviet Union either legally[37] or illegally. Around 270 died, mostly in the Gulag. More than 120 were put to death by firing squad.[38]

In 1927, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet authorities proclaimed an amnesty. The French ambassador to Moscow, Jean Herbette, made official representation to the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs asking them to inform him 'how this act of clemency applied to Catholic priests'. On 2 December he received the reply that 'The amnesty does not apply to priests who have violated the security of the state. Priests detained or deported by order of the GPU do not therefore benefit at all because all sentences passed by the GPU are deemed to be for crimes against state security.'[39] There is no evidence that the amnesties of 1927 and 1932 (the fifteenth anniversary of the Revolution) applied in any way to Catholic priests.

The Independence which Cost Liquidation

The dramatic history of the Catholic Church in the USSR between the two world wars demonstrates how it managed to keep its independence. The price was the physical liquidation of its clergy and a large proportion of the faithful, a process lasting some 20 years. By the end of 1938 there was not a single Catholic priest of Soviet citizenship in the country who was not in prison. There were only two

churches open, one in Moscow and one in Leningrad; these were kept under constant surveillance and frequented by diplomats. (At the start of the 1920s there had been 1200 churches.) The two priests who had permission to minister there were both foreigners. All the others who had survived were in the Gulag. All the administrative structures of the Catholic Church ceased to exist at the start of the 1930s. Religious life descended into the catacombs. Barely 12 priests out of those who had stayed in the USSR lived long enough to see the years after the Second World War. Amongst those who died were martyrs and confessors of the faith.

On 16 January 1989 the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR published a decree *Supplementary Measures with the Aim of Doing Justice to the Victims of the Reprisals which Took Place in the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s.* This decree saw the start of the rehabilitation of people condemned in political trials. The trials and sentencing of hundreds of Catholic priests and millions of other people were 'discounted for lack of evidence of having committed any crime'. The decree did not mention the victims of the 1920s, although there was no difference between the victims of the years covered by the decree and the victims of the preceding decade.

Notes and References

1. They were: the archdiocese of Mogilev which took in the whole of Belorussia and the whole of European and Asiatic Russia; and the dioceses of Zhitomir, Kamenets Podolsky and Tiraspol (with its administrative centre at Saratov on the Volga).
2. *Elenchus cleri et ecclesiarum Archdiocesis Mohiloviensis in Russia in diem 5 Decembris 1932* (Warsaw, 1932), p. 59.
3. *Elenchus cleri ...*, p. 59; A. Brunello, *La Chiesa del Silenzio* (Rome, 1953), pp. 3–4; *Die Römisch-katholische Kirche in der Sovietunion*, (2nd edition, Kirche in Not/Ostpriesterhilfe, 1990), pp. 19–20.
4. *Persécutions religieuses en Russie: documents et faits* (Geneva, March 1930), p. 6; also A. Janvier, *Les communistes contre Dieu* (Paris, 1942), p. 42.
5. *Azbuka kommunizma* (Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel'stvo Ukrainy, 1925), pp. 184–85.
6. The five-year antireligious plan approved on 15 May 1932 said: 'By 1 May 1937 there will be no need for a single house of prayer on Soviet territory and the idea of god will be expunged as it is a sign of medieval obscrutantism and a brake on the development of the people.'
7. *Bezbozhnik*, no. 11, 1927.
8. M. d'Herbigny, *La guerre antireligieuse en Russie soviétique: La 'Campagne'de Noel (décembre 1929–janvier 1930)* (Spes, Paris, 1930); *Le front antireligieux en Russie, avril–novembre 1929* (Spes, Paris, 1930).
9. *Antireligioznik*, no. 8, 1937, p. 14. Quoted by A. Wiśniewski, *Stosunek państwa do Kościoła w ZSSR* (Wilno, 1938), p. 96.
10. See A. Wenger, *Rome et Moscou 1900–1950* (Paris, 1987), p. 371.
11. *Témoin de Dieu chez les sans-Dieu: Journal de prison de Mgr Boleslas Sloskans* (Mareil-le-Marly, 1986), p. 122.
12. Wenger, *op. cit.*, p. 272.
13. *ibid.*, p. 372.
14. J. J. Zatko, *Descent into Darkness: The Destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia 1917–1923* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), pp. 139–89.
15. D. Nowicki, *Mosca e Solowski* (*sic*) (manuscript), p. 1; Irina Osipova, *Sud'ba russkikh katolikov 1923–47* (manuscript, Moscow, 1996), p. 2.
16. Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Archives Diplomatiques, 37, Quai d'Orsay, 75007 Paris (AMAD), côté 126, p. 65a.
17. AMAD, côté 126, pp. 39–40.
18. *loc. cit.*

[19] AMAD, côté 126, p. 80.

[20] Such as the statement by the apostolic administrators of the dioceses of Zhitomir and Kamenets Podolsky published on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in the Soviet newspapers *Visti* (4 January 1928), *Pravda* (5 January 1928) and *Izvestiya* (5 January 1928). See Wenger, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

[21] R. Dzwonkowski, 'Taktyka walki z Kościołem katolickim w ZSSR w okresie międzywojennym', *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL*, no. 1/2, 1994, pp. 54–58.

[22] The trials of 1922 which took place in Minsk (Belorussia), Kamenets Podolsky (Ukraine) and Yaroslavl' on the Volga (Russia) were of a judicial nature; so was that of P. T. Skalsky in Moscow in 1928 (AMAD, côté 126, pp. 62–72). In these trials all the prisoners were judged by military tribunals. See R. Dzwonkowski, *Represje wobec duchowienstwa katolickiego w ZSSR 1918–1939* (manuscript, Lublin, 1996), pp. 35 and 41.

[23] AMAD, côté 126, p. 40.

[24] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gives an excellent commentary on Article 58 of the Penal Code in the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*. The equivalent in the Penal Code of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine was Article 54. In the first Penal Code of the RSFSR political crimes were defined in articles 62, 69, 119 and 121.

[25] I. Osipova, *Kratky perechen' protsessov po katolicheskom dukhovenstve* (manuscript, Moscow, 1996).

[26] I. Osipova, *Sud'ba russkikh katolikov ..., passim.*

[27] R. Dzwonkowski, *Represje ...*, p. 37.

[28] *ibid.*, p. 38.

[29] *ibid.*, p. 39.

[30] Chiefly to camps which were part of the SLON system (Solovetskiye Lagerya Osobogo Naznacheniya – Special Camps at Solovki. From the end of the 1920s SLON stood for Severnyye Lagerya Osobogo Naznacheniya – Special Camps in the North). Another system of camps was SEVURLAG – the network of camps in the northern Urals and several others in Siberia, Kazakhstan and elsewhere.

[31] SIBLAG (Sibirskiye Lagerya – The Siberian Camps); SEVVOSTLAG (Severno-Vostochnyye Lagerya – North-eastern Camps (Kolyma, Magadan and others)). In 1930 the general term Ispravitel'no-Trudovyye Lagerya (Corrective Labour Camps) was introduced.

[32] H. Owsiany, *Z historii i geografii łagrów solowieckich* (manuscript, Warsaw, 1996), p. 7.

[33] Total established by the author.

[34] J.-N. Danzas, *Bagne rouge: Souvenirs d'une prisonnière au pays des Soviets* (Cerf, Juvissy, 1935).

[35] Below are the dates on which the death sentences were pronounced and the actual dates of execution (established by the author's research).

Name of priest	Death sentence	Execution date
1. Baranowski Piotr	09.10.37	03.11.37
2. Batmanishvili S.	14.10.37	01.11.37
3. Bellendir Adam	09.10.37	03.11.37
4. Dornhof Aleks.	10.10.37	01.11.37
5. Dziemian Józef	09.10.37	03.11.37
6. Dziemieszkiewicz	09.10.37	03.11.37
7. Erk Ludwig	25.11.37	08.12.37
8. Eroyan Stefan	09.10.37	03.11.37
9. Fiks Martin	25.11.37	08.12.37
10. Hański St.	25.11.37	08.12.37
11. Jarmołowicz A.	09.10.37	03.11.37
12. Jurewicz Edw.	09.10.37	03.11.37
13. Kappes Alojz	10.10.37	01.11.37

14. Kapusto Piotr	04.10.37	01.11.37
15. Karpiński Józef	09.10.37	03.11.37
16. Kowalski Józef	09.10.37	03.11.37
17. Łukasz Jan	09.10.37	03.11.37
18. Łukjanin Józef	09.10.37	03.11.37
19. Madera Piotr	25.11.37	08.12.37
20. Mioduszewski J.	25.11.37	08.12.37
21. Okks Martin	25.11.37	08.12.37
22. Opolski Ign.	25.11.37	08.12.37
23. Paul Peter	04.10.37	03.11.37
24. Rau Franz	14.10.37	03.11.37
25. Riedel Peter	09.10.37	03.11.37
26. Szaciłło Albin	09.10.37	03.11.37
27. Schönberger And.	09.10.37	03.11.37
28. Szymański Wacl.	25.11.37	08.12.37
29. Szyszko Ryszard	24.11.37	08.12.37
30. Ter Karapetyan	25.10.37	08.12.37
31. Weigl Peter	09.10.37	03.11.37
32. Wolf Michael	09.10.37	03.11.37
33. Żawryd Jan	14.10.37	01.11.37
34. Żukowski Ant.	04.10.37	12.10.37

See also: I. A. Reznikova, 'Polyaki na Solovkakh', in *Polyaki v Rossii: istoriya ssylki i deportatsii. Tezisy dokladov konferentsii* (Leningrad, 1955), pp. 31–35, 63.

[36] H. Owsiany, 'Echa solowieckie', in *Literatura rosyjska XX wieku: nowe czasy, nowe problemy* (Warsaw, 1922), pp. 170–71.

[37] Exchanges of political prisoners took place, chiefly with Poland but also with Lithuania and Latvia. A total of some 70 priests were exchanged for communists imprisoned in these countries (as researched by the author).

[38] Osipova, *Kratky perechen'* ..., pp. 4–6.

[39] AMAD, côté 126, pp. 50–54. See also P. A. Croghan, A A, *The Peasant from Makeyevka: Biography of Bishop Pius Neveu, A A* (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1982), p. 228.

(Translated from the French by Anne Walters)