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REMARKS ON THE SITUATION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE USSR IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

In recent years there has appeared more interest in the history of the Catholic Church in the territory of the former Soviet Union, which must be viewed as a positive phenomenon, since because of the political conditions this was one of the more neglected issues¹. Therefore I consider it useful to present the following remarks based on less frequently used archival materials.

In the territory of the USSR nine units of Church administration were distinguished since 1923: the Mokhilov archdiocese, the Vladivostok (far-eastern) diocese, the Tyraspol diocese (the South Ukraine and the Volga river district), Zhitomir, Kamenets–Podohlyan, Minsk dioceses, the vicariat apostolic of Crimea and Caucasus, the vicariat apostolic of Siberia and the apostolic administration for the Catholics of Armenian denomination. The majority of them came into being only after 1917. The Minsk and Kamenets dioceses, cancelled as the result of repressions following the Polish January uprising in 1863 were reactivated respectively in 1917 and 1918 and for the more effective administration Siberian vicariat and Vladivostok diocese were isolated from the great Mokhilov archdiocese². The spectacular gesture of Pope Pius XI, who in 1926 through his special legate bishop Michel d'Herbigny called into being a secret Catholic hierarchy in the USSR and established eleven apostolic administrations, was of no practical conse-

¹ More extensively see R. Dzwonkowski, *Stan badań nad historią Kościoła i życiem religijnym katolików obrządku łacińskiego w ZSRR (1917–1990)* (*The State of Research on the History of the Church and Religious Life of the Roman-Catholics in the USSR, 1917–1990*), "Znaki Czasu" 1991, № 24, pp. 114–133.

² More extensively see B. Kumor, *Granice metropolii i diecezji polskich (966–1939)* (*Boundaries of the Polish Metropolises and Dioceses, 966–1939*), Lublin 1969–1972, offprint of the periodical "Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne", v. 18–24, pp. 283–288; R. Dzwonkowski, *Kościół katolicki obrządku łacińskiego w ZSRR po 1918. Zarys problematyki* (*The Roman Catholic Church in the USSR after 1918. An Outline of its Problem*), in: *Odrodzenie Kościoła katolickiego w byłym ZSRR. Studia historyczno-demograficzne*, comp. by E. Walewander, Lublin 1993, p. 82ff.

quence, since the majority of the bishops consecrated were soon imprisoned (i.a. Bp. Antoni Malecki from Leningrad) and Bp. Boleslaw Sloskans, the apostolic administrator of Mokhilov and Minsk and the structures were eventually broken up³.

There is serious controversy as to the number of the Catholics in the USSR in the interwar period⁴. The Soviet Union as an atheist state did not carry any official research on the subject of its citizens' religious persuasion and various means were used to complicate the preparation of suitable Church statistics. The latter, when they were made, were not exact as a large part of society were afraid to manifest openly their attachment to the Church in the conditions of systematic anti-religious policy the state. The actual character of this policy was very aptly manifested by one of the slogans placed in periodical "Bezbozhnik" ("The Atheist") in January 1923: "we have dealt with the earthly tsar, now we shall get rid the heavenly ones"⁵. Therefore more or less exact statistics are mainly approximate estimates made by the priests. As a result one should approach many materials very cautiously. Of most importance doubtlessly *The Statistical Index of Churches and Priests in Mokhilov Archdiocese*, giving the numbers for 1923, submitted to the Polish Legation in Moscow by Archbishop Jan Cieplak⁶. Compiled even before the mass persecution of Catholicism, it may to a large extent illustrate the actual state of affairs, although its credibility and completeness is certainly open to doubt. Our knowledge of the numbers of

³ With the exception of the Moscow bishop Pie-Eugene Neveu that remained under the patronage of the French Embassy; more extensively see R. Dzwonkowski, *Tajna hierarchia katolicka i administracja kościelna w ZSSR 1926–1936 (The Secret Catholic Hierarchy and Church Administration in the USSR 1926–1936)*. "Ład" 1990, № 49 (323), p. 1, 4–5; H. Stehle, *Tajna dyplomacja Watykanu (Secret Vatican Diplomacy)*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 78–94, including the index: *Tajna hierarchia w Związku Radzieckim (The Secret Hierarchy in the Soviet Union)*, year 1926, p. 94; on the fortunes of the imprisoned bishops e.g. F. Rutkowski, *Ks. Biskup Antoni Malecki 1861–1935 (Bp. Antoni Malecki 1861–1935)*, Warszawa 1936; B. Sloskans, *Zeuge Gottes bei den Gottlosen. Gefängnistagebuch, Zeugen des Glaubens 2, Kirche in Not (Ostpriesterhilfe, München 1988)*.

⁴ See M. Iwanow, Z. J. Winnicki, *Katolicynaterenie byłego ZSSR; kontrowersje wokół liczebności — szacunki bieżące i potencjalne (Catholic on the Territory of the Former USSR: Controversies about Numbers — Current and Potential Estimates)*, in: *Odrodzenie Kościoła katolickiego w byłym ZSSR*, p. 177ff.

⁵ Cit. after J. Urban, *Walka z Antychrystem. Przeciw prześladowaniu religii w Rosji bolszewickiej (The Campaign against the Antichrist. Against the Persecution of Religion in Bolshevik Russia)*, Kraków 1930, p. 6.

⁶ The index also gives the data for the period before 1917 Revolution: The Central Archives of Modern Records (further as AAN), Polish Embassy in Moscow, № 70, pp. 46–51; it is quoted by M. Iwanow, *Pierwszy naród ukarany. Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921–1939 (The First Punished Nation. Poles in the Soviet Union 1921–1939)*, Warszawa — Wrocław 1991, pp. 278–283. Incidentally it is worth noting that index given in this work differs somewhat from the original document (e.g. it omits the Żlobin parish in Byelorussia, and gives an imprecise name for Worodźków parish «as Borodeków» and Nieporoty «as Niepotęty»).

believers in other Church administration units is still smaller. Thus we take as the starting point the information given in *Report for the Unione Catholique Conference* of March 1926⁷.

When analysing the accessible data one can estimate cautiously that in the first years after the creation of the Catholic Church in the USSR there were about 1600–1650 thousand believers, over 580 churches and parishes and almost 400 priests⁸. The majority of believers (70–80 per cent) were Poles.

The attitude of the Soviet state to the Catholic Church was part of its broader religious policy. The Soviet authorities aimed to liquidate all forms and symptoms of religious life. The combat against religion was one of the most characteristic features of the communist doctrine⁹. According to Lenin the Church and religion were “organs of bourgeois reaction serving to oppress and the exploit the working masses”, therefore every true communist had to be accordingly an enemy of religion¹⁰. In fact Bolsheviks, who attempted to acquire unlimited power, meant to destroy the strongest potential adversary to the realization of those plans, who had enormous influence on the believers. Hence they attacked the soonest and with the most impetus the numerically dominant Orthodox Church. Severe blows were also struck against denominations with traditionally dominating influence on the life of believers, such as Islam and Judaism, and even (although a little later, i.a.

⁷ J. Wróbel, *Polityka ZSRR wobec Kościoła katolickiego w latach 1917–1939 (The Policy of the USSR towards the Catholic Church in 1917–1939)*, in: *Polacy w Kościele katolickim w ZSRR*, comp. by E. Wałewander, Lublin 1991, p. 108 and 88.

⁸ There were also estimates that augmented the number of Catholics to 2 million, *AAW*, Polish Embassy in Moscow, № 70, p. 3, *Pismo Poselstwa Polskiego do Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych w Warszawie z 22 stycznia 1923 r. (A Letter from the Polish Legation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw of January 22, 1923)*. For the exact possessions of particular administrative Church structures see R. Dzwonkowski, *Kościół katolicki w dawnym ZSRR (The Catholic Church in the Former USSR)*, “Zeszyty Historyczne”, Paryż 1992, fasc. 102, pp. 104–105; M. Iwanow, *Pierwszynaródlukarany*, pp. 277–281; see also A. Brunello, *La Chiesa del Silenzio*, Roma 1953, pp. 3–4 (the author estimates the number of Poles to be at least 1.1 million from among 1.63 million Catholics, while he raises the number of Catholic priests more than twice: up to 912; cit. after B. Cywiński, *Ogniem próbowane (Tested with Fire)*, v. 1; *Korzenie tożsamości (The Roots of Identity)*, Rzym 1982, p. 57).

⁹ Let us draw attention to the very apt opinion of Rev. Jan Urban, in the inter-war period editor-in-chief of an important Catholic periodical “Przegląd Powszechny”: “Religious persecution in the Bolshevik state is not only a campaign against the official representatives of Churches, the clergy, or “clericalism”, motivated (...) by an alleged abuse of religion for political purposes. In Russia a combat is directed against the foundations of any religion, the very idea of God, which is claimed to be a simple superstition harmful to the real interests of proletariat”, J. Urban, *Prześladowanie religij w Rosji (The Persecution of Religion in Russia)*, “Przegląd Powszechny” 1930, v. 185, p. 129.

¹⁰ Cit. after A. Wiśniewski, *Stosunek państwa do kościoła w ZSRR (The Attitude of the State towards the Church in the USSR)*, Wilno 1938, p. 26.

because of good relations with the Germans) against small Protestant Churches.

A vigorous attack was made on the Catholic Church, especially resistant to attempts at penetration and incapacitation, being an international organization directed from beyond the borders of the USSR. In the struggle for the rule over souls it was the most serious adversary of totalitarian ideology, in fact the only legally operating force of opposition and the highest moral authority for hundreds of thousands of believers. The persecution of the Church was closely linked with the fact that a large part of believers were Poles, towards whom the Soviet authorities had definite political plans (the so-called "Polish exiled community experiment" which had to sovietize the Polish community and to strengthen the interests of communism¹¹. Until that time the position of the Catholic Church, which moreover played a very important role as the symbol of Polish tradition and national values, as well as spiritual ties with the Fatherland, thwarted these plans; the ultimate failure of the "Polish exiled community experiment" in the 1930s gave one more reason for doing away with the Catholic Church. There was also another, very important cause of this mass attack on the Church, namely the Western parts of the Soviet state were inhabited by many Byelorussian-Catholics (according to propaganda "Catholicized Byelorussians") and (these were fewer) Ukrainian-Catholics, who did not fit within the scheme of one undivisible Russia, making difficult the process of sovietization and in the farther perspectives Russification of those lands (especially of Byelorussia).

No wonder, then that the ruthless persecution of religion, although it embraced all the denominations, especially affected the Catholic Church. An eloquent testimony to this, with regard to the beginnings of the 1920s, is the letter of the Polish Republic Delegation for Repatriation Matters to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw (from March 7, 1923):

"The Germans (so in the original! — A.P.) are here in quite a different situation. German *Kirches* are open and pastors perform their normal work. The famous German grammar-schools: *Peterschule* and *Annenschule*, attached to Evangelical parishes continue their work; lectures are delivered in the German language and spirit. The German communes continue running their schools and orphanages without any obstacle (...)”¹².

In the policy of the Soviet authorities towards Catholicism one can distinguish several essential stages. In the first one, lasting roughly speaking

¹¹ For more extensive discussion of the experiment see M. Iwanow, *Pierwszynaródukarany*, pp. 109–233.

¹² AAV, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, p. 487.

until 1922, the Church suffered severe blows, however without a concrete plan from above. This was the period of the so-called war communism, when the new rulers — busy solving various political problems and desirous of gaining support of the largest possible part of society — could not declare an open war against religion. Therefore these years were marked by a relative tolerance, under the conditions of totalitarian system, of course. Soon, however, the authorities took planned action, especially spectacular in the years 1922 and 1923 (trials of priests, closing down of churches). This was accompanied by a massive antireligious campaign which was to turn believers away from the Church and undermine their confidence in the clergy; the latter were ridiculed and discredited as were religious rites and the faith itself. Trials of clergymen were organized, during which — a notable fact — accusations were above all made of political and moral offences, and to a smaller extent religious ones. The alleged moral decay of the clergy was emphasized with special force¹³.

The failure of this policy at the end of the 1920s triggered off a massive organized attack on the Church aimed at its final liquidation. Many priests were then arrested, many died in result of long incarceration in lagers (among other on the Solovetski Islands) or deportation. Repressions also reached the most devoted believers who supported the Church by defending its rights. The Catholic organizations and brotherhoods such as the Congregation of Tertiary Sisters and Brothers, The Holy Rosary Brotherhood, Congregation of Mary's Children, were ruthlessly done away with¹⁴. As a result of growing terror some of the priests renounced their ministry and made anti-religious declarations¹⁵.

The legal basis of the state's religious policy was the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of Russia from January 23, 1918, about "the separation of Church and state and the division of school and Church", confirmed later by article 13 of the Constitution of the RFSSR from July

¹³ This is vindicated by the very titles of many articles that appeared in Polish-language press in the USSR, e.g. *The Black Edifice of Falsehood, Hypocrisy and Counter-revolution Is Shaking*, "Orka" (Minsk), № 84, October 24, 1929; *Rev. Kazimius — a Hooligan In Soutane — Was Treated With Too Much Leniency*, "Orka" (Minsk), № 96, December 14, 1929; *From the Secrets of the Order of Immaculate Conception. Memories of the Former Nun*, "Bezbożnik Wojujący" 1931, № 5/10/, pp. 6-8.

¹⁴ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, № 10183, pp. 16-17. Report K. Grendyszyński, the consular attaché in Leningrad. December 18, 1929; AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, № 71, p. 248. Copy of the report of the Polish Consulate General in Minsk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, April 26, 1929.

¹⁵ The phenomenon of the priests' apostasy assumed the largest proportions in Byelorussia, AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, № 10182, pp. 38-39. Letter of the Polish Consulate General in Minsk to the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of January 20, 1930, on the subject of the apostasy of the priests in the USSR.

1918, as well as the executive order of the People's Commissariat of Justice of the RFSSR from August 24 about *The Manner of Putting into Practice the Decree concerning the Separation of Church from State and of School from Church*¹⁶.

The January decree contained 13 points and in comparison with later religious legislation was relatively moderate. Remarkable is especially point two: "within the frontiers of the Republic it is forbidden to issue any local regulations or dispositions that would constrain or confine freedom of conscience or establish any privileges resulting from the religious persuasion of citizens"¹⁷. Faced with the antireligious policy of the state, however, this regulation was of little practical consequence. On the one hand the decree ensured the freedom of conscience and equality of citizens' rights regardless of their denomination (art. 3), introduced the secular nature of public-state activities (art. 4), ensured freedom of religious rights if they did not infringe upon the public order and citizens' rights (art. 5), on the other hand, however, it removed religious instruction from schools and all state and private educational institutions, permitting only the private teaching of religion (art. 9), subordinated all the religious unions to the regulations of private associations (art. 10) with the reservation that they could not have a legal status or be subjects of property rights (art. 12) or take advantage of any state or self-government subsidies (art. 10). On the strength of the decree the property of religious associations was nationalized while buildings and objects of worship were transferred to adequate religious unions for free use only, on terms established by local or central state authorities (art. 13). It was a severe blow to the Church that the registry records were taken over by adequate state organs (art. 8), which largely diminished the Church's influence on believers and reduced its income¹⁸.

The decree changed radically the legal status of the Church, by depriving it any legal-state elements and confining its activity to the narrow framework of a private organization, whose only aim is to satisfy the religious needs of believers. The nationalization of religious property,

¹⁶ By the word *Tserkov'* the legislation understood Churches of all denominations, including the Catholic Church.

¹⁷ Cit. after A. Wiśniewski, *Stosunek państwa*, p. 22; this work continues to be a valuable analysis of the Soviet religious legislation, and has been until now seldom quoted in the literature; from foreign-language works, e.g. G. Codévilla, *Stato e Chiesa nell'Unione Sovietica*, Milano 1972; W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, New York 1962; *Religion in the USSR*, comp. by R. Conquest, London — Sydney — Toronto 1968.

¹⁸ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N^o 10184, p. 100. Report by Alfred Emeryk Pomiński, First Secretary of the Polish Legation in Moscow, January 17, 1930: *Zagadnienie religii w ZSRR. Sytuacja Kościoła katolickiego (The Problem of Religion in the USSR. The Situation of the Catholic Church)*; A. Około-Kulaś, *Bolszewizm a religia (Bolshevism and Religion)*, "Przegląd Powszechny", 1922, v. 155–156, pp. 195–196.

including churches and objects of worship, gave the state the right to interfere in the inner relations of the Church, in the same time largely constraining the declared freedom of conscience.

The illusory character of religious tolerance declared in the decree soon became obvious. Half a year later an executive instruction was issued which replaced the hitherto Church structure with parish committees, independent of one another and not subordinated to the clerical hierarchy (the so-called *dvadtsatki*, composed at least of twenty believers), responsible for the use of churches and objects of worship which constituted state property and were only leased to them and at any claim of the authorities could be taken over by the local Council of Delegates (art. 8), and even — with time — could be used for non-religious purposes¹⁹. Among the duties of the *dvadtsatki*, whose membership had to be each time confirmed by the authorities, was the hiring of priests for ministry (which indicated that the state wanted to abolish the clerical hierarchy and to make believers independent of the Church) as well as paying the choir and the sexton etc. Moreover they were authorized and even obliged to perform “a number of supervisory functions with respect to Church authorities, which was completely at variance with the principles of the Catholic Church system, as well as police-political functions”, the functions whose infringement or forbearance could be punished with severe consequences²⁰. According to this instruction the church possessions that did not serve religious purposes (such as apartment houses, land, etc.), remained the exclusive property of the state (art. 16), churches were deprived of the right of running public registers (art. 20), it was forbidden to indicate a person’s denomination in passports and other personal documents (art. 28). It was categorically forbidden to place religious symbols in state and social institutions (art. 29), the procedure of obtaining permits for religious rites (e.g. processions) in public places was made difficult (art. 31), so that in fact they depended on the good will of the authorities²¹.

Consequently, from the very beginning of Bolshevik rule the organizational cohesion of religious life was shattered and the possibility of its influencing believers was limited. A process started of methodical and gradual stifling of all forms of the Church’s activity²². Various decrees,

¹⁹ AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, p. 157. Report of the Polish Legation in Moscow of June 18, 1923, on the subject: *Stan prawny Kościoła w Rosji Sowieckiej (The Legal Status of the Church in Soviet Russia)*.

²⁰ Cit. after AAN, Polish Embassy in Paris, N° 165, pp. 79–80. Letter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Polish Legation in Paris of June 19, 1922 (the list of Soviet abuses of the Catholic Church in Russia) distributed for the wide unofficial use in the press.

²¹ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N° 10183, p. 3. Report by K. Grendyszyński: AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, p. 157. Report of the Polish Legation in Moscow of June 18, 1923.

instructions and dispositions consistently aimed at making development and very existence of the Church impossible. The regulation of the Riga Treaty of 1921 concerned with ensuring people of Polish nationality the freedom to practice religious rites remained a dead letter (art. 7). The art. 7 ensured people of Polish nationality in Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine free development of culture, language and religious life, respect for the Church organization and right of the Church and religious societies to independent development but “in the limits of the internal legislation” what, as a matter of fact, cancelled this guaranty²³.

In such conditions the circular issued at the end of February 1919 seemed to be especially hypocritical. It read: “Indeed only now the believers of particular religions are granted complete freedom of professing their faith”²⁴.

The antireligious Soviet legislation attached special weight to education. In order to divest the Church of influence on the upbringing of young generations, as early as in 1918 the authorities withdrew lessons of religion from school and forbade the clergy to take any post in them (this related even to the former priests who each time had to apply for a special permit of the People’s Commissariat of Education). Subsequent instructions, i.a. from March 3, 1919, April 23, 1921, and January 3, 1922, gradually limited the possibility of teaching religion to children and youth up the eighteenth year of age, and finally, under drastic penalty, the parents were forbidden to teach religion to their children²⁵, and even to bring them up in religious spirit²⁶. In 1924 a regulation was introduced, forbidding juveniles to take part in religious services and rites at which the Gospel was read, which was thought as synonymous with teaching and dissemination of faith. In the

²² The book *Azbuka Komunizmu*, published in 1920 by M. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhenski, explains the means of combat against religion in the following way: “We should fight against the backward religious persuasions of the people not only with energy and persistence but also patience and circumspection. If we wished to impose atheism by force (...), then instead of rendering a service to antireligious propaganda we would interfere with it, as persecution of the Church would only arouse the people’s sympathy with Her”. Cit. after d’Herbigny, *Wschód prawosławny a katolicy (The Orthodox East and Catholics)*, “Przegląd Powszechny”, 1924, v. 164, p. 8.

²³ See *Komentarz do art. VII Traktatu Ryskiego (Commentary to art. 7 of the Riga Treaty)*, AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, pp. 78–85.

²⁴ NKVD, RESSR circular of February 28, 1919, cit. after A. Wiśniewski, *Stosunek państwa*, p. 41.

²⁵ Instruction from January 3, 1922; the text is quoted by F. MacCullagh, *Prześladowanie chrześcijaństwa przez bolszewizm (The Bolshevik Persecution of Christianity)*, Kraków 1924, pp. 458–459; J. Urbani, *Prawodawstwo religijne w Rosji Sowieckiej (Religious Legislation in Soviet Russia)*, “Przegląd Powszechny”, 1930, v. 186, p. 136.

²⁶ Permission was given only for private teaching of religion in groups not more than three people with the consent under the supervision of adequate organs (instruction from December 1923); AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N° 10184, p. 101. Report by A. Poniński.

years that followed the pressure on education grew even stronger. Atheistic propaganda at schools was very aggressive²⁷. To show how stringent was the course we need only mention the secret instruction of the Commissariat of Education issued in the Autumn 1928, which enjoined the people's teachers to develop surveillance of the pupils and their families in religious matters and to visit their homes in order to control their attitude to faith²⁸. The action of discrediting religion took the form of a psychological terror, verging on absurdity. Let us quote a fragment of memoirs of a Polish woman from Byelorussia: "It was hard on us and on the children, at school, where several times a week they looked through our underwear and seeing a cross on our chest held us up to ridicule in front of the class and made us take it off"²⁹.

Although art. 5 of the decree about the separation of Church and State guaranteed the right of the free performance of religious rites, soon a number of legal regulations were issued that limited this freedom. Thus the order of the People's Commissariat of Justice from February 14, 1919, and August 25, 1920, demanded to remove from churches all the relics whose public worship was regarded as a kind of "psychologically dangerous" anti-Soviet demonstration³⁰. In December 1921 the priests were required to submit the authorities the drafts of their sermons³¹. The authorities interfered even in such details as regulations concerning the ringing of bells³². On the strength of the disposition from February 12, 1923, all religious pictures were removed from private shops, workshops, studios and surgeries. Earlier, as

²⁷ Cf. the characteristic title of the work published in Polish: A. Łukaczewski, *Socjalistyczne wychowanie mas pracujących i walka z religią (Socialist Upbringing of the Working Masses and the Fight against Religion)*, Moskwa 1933.

²⁸ See note 26.

²⁹ Cit. after A. Niciejewska, *Uderzyłam pięścią o żelazną bramę ... Wspomnienia z Białorusi 1936–1954 (I Struck My Fist against an Iron Gate ... Memoirs from Byelorussia 1936–1954)*, "Więź" 1992, № 7/405, p. 57. More extensively see: A. Patek, *Polityka władz radzieckich wobec Kościoła katolickiego i jego wyznawców na Białorusi w okresie międzywojennym (The Policy of Soviet Authorities towards the Catholic Church and Her Believers in Byelorussia in the Interwar Period)*, in: *Spółczesność białoruskie, litewskie i polskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej 1939–1941*, comp. by M. Giżejewska and T. Strzembos z., Warszawa 1995, pp. 22–32.

³⁰ Especially wide repercussions were aroused by the profanation of the relics of the Blessed Andrzej Bobola at Połock in June and July 1922, more extensively see F. Rutkowski, *Arceybiskup Jan Cieplak (1857–1926). Szkic biograficzny (Archbishop Jan Cieplak. A Biographical Sketch)*, Warszawa 1934 (chapt. X: *W obronie relikwii (In Defence of Relics)*, pp. 188–213; A. Kwiatkowski, *Profanacja zwłok bł. Andrzeja Boboli (Profanation of the Body of the Blessed Andrzej Bobola)*, Kraków 1927.

³¹ "Misje Katolickie" 1922, № 472, p. 127.

³² AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, № 66, p. 72. Copy of the note of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Deputy People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs in Moscow from April 27, 1922.

soon as in 1919, all chapels were liquidated at schools and other educational institutions, in prisons, hospitals and alms-houses³³. The regulation about the lack of legal status of religious organizations meant that they practically could not print any books or periodicals.

Of serious consequences to the Church was the decree issued in February 1922 about confiscation of church valuables, wherein also objects indispensable to everyday liturgical use, such as monstrances or chalices. Although formally this step was interpreted as a necessity in counteracting hunger, in fact the authorities intended to continue the undermining of the Church. An eloquent testimony to this was the rejection of the parishoners' proposals of offer silver or other valuables in return for the liturgical objects confiscated. Here especially the Moscow church in *Mala Gruzinka* could serve as a spectacular example. It catered for Catholics from half the city and the *guberniya*, and was so poor that the committee listing its possessions found only "four small silver objects of worship of total weight of 2 and 3/4 lb"³⁴. The dramatic circumstances were used to this effect that the churches and relics were systematically desecrated, clergymen were presented as men insensitive to the tragedy of the starving, the Holy Sacrament was profaned and believers and priests who stood up for them were subject to repressions, and many were sentenced to death³⁵. The protesting priests were accused of counter-revolutionary action and of hiding "the property of others" and many spectacular trials were staged.

One of the first was the so-called Minsk trial at the turn of May 1922³⁶. About ten persons were accused wherein three clergymen with vicar general and Minsk dean Rev. Adam Lisowski (the latter was sentenced to capital punishment, i.e. shooting, changed, however, into many years of imprisonment)³⁷.

Wide repercussions in the USSR and especially outside its borders were aroused by a famous Moscow trial of archbishop Jan Cieplak, the highest

³³ A. Wiśniewski, *Sosunek państwa*, pp. 33–34, 78.

³⁴ Cit. after AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 66, p. 69. Copy of the note of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

³⁵ AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, pp. 11–12. Copy of the *Memorial w sprawie zagrożonej egzystencji Kościoła katolickiego w Rosji i na Ukrainie (Memorial on the Subject of the Threatened Existence of the Catholic Church in Russia and the Ukraine)* directed to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1923; AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 66, p. 68. Copy of the note of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

³⁶ The course and character of the trial was presented by one of the accused, Rev. Jan Wasilewski: *Wspomnach Antychrysta. Wspomnienia księdza z Rosji bolszewickiej (In the Grip of the Antichrist. Memoirs of a Priest from Bolshevik Russia)*, Kraków 1924, especially pp. 125–184. See also Report of the Polish Legation in Moscow to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, from June 16, 1922, AAN, Polish Legation in Athens, N° 45, p. 40–43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

dignitary of the Church in the state, as well as of 14 priests (and one seminarist) from Petrograd, in March 1923. The clergymen were accused of refusal to hand over church valuables, of founding a counter-revolutionary organization and of hostile propaganda³⁸. Despite international protests the Soviet authorities sentenced the accused archbp. Cieplak and prelate Konstanty Budkiewicz to death (only the latter was executed), while others were doomed to many years of imprisonment³⁹.

The next move that limited the Church's rights was a decree issued on August 3, 1922, about the way of organizing religious societies (one of two forms — besides the groups of believers — of religious life in the USSR) and the announcement (in supplement) of a special instruction about the way they were to be registered. The very procedure of registration was made difficult (registration was a necessary condition for the activity of such a union) because a demand was made to register within three months of the announcement of this instruction (art. 7) and the number of member-founders was raised to at least 50 persons “not limited juridically in their rights” (art. 5). To show that the authorities strove for complete control over these societies it is enough to mention their demand to submit to suitable organs a list of founders providing a lot of additional details — apart from the first name and surname and address — also social and financial status, social and official position until 1914 and period of being a member of the given denomination. Religious associations were deprived of legal status (art. 12), of the right of managing church property (art. 10) and a possibility of taking advantage of any assistance from the state as well as social organizations and institutions (art. 13), all their affairs and activities were subjected to the control by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs and its organs (art. 11). The model statute of the society deprived them of a

³⁸ AAN, Polish Legation in Athens, N° 207, pp. 1–7. The indictment of Archbishop Cieplak and 15 priests; A. Patek, *Polacy w Rosji i ZSRR (Poles in Russia and the USSR)* in: Polonia w Europie, comp. by B. Sztydlowska-Cegłowa, Poznań 1992, p. 325.

³⁹ AAN, Presidium of the Cabinet in Warsaw, N° 5786/23 and 6697/23 (protests against the execution of Rev. Prel. K. Budkiewicz and the sentencing of Archbishop J. Cieplak and other priests as well as against the persecution of Polish clergy and Catholics in the USSR), Archbishop J. Cieplak was in 1924 expelled from the USSR. For the character and course of the trial see AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, pp. 418–503 (the part entitled: *Sprawa arcybiskupa Cieplaka (The Case of the Archbishop Cieplak)*; among other works on that subject there are F. Rutkowski, *Arceybiskup Jan Cieplak*; F. Mac Cullagh, *Prześladowanie chrześcijaństwa*, J. Mióduszewski, *Wrażenia z procesu arcybiskupa Cieplaka i 14 księży w Moskwie 20–25 marca 1923 roku (Impressions of the Trial of Archbishop Cieplak and 14 Priests in Moscow on March 20–25, 1923)*, Warszawa 1923; H. Stehle, *Tajna dyplomacja*, pp. 45–47 (part: *Proces Cieplaka i strzał w tył głowy*). For other literature see e.g. F. Rutkowski, *Arceybiskup Jan Cieplak*; see also S. Ostrowski, *Śp. Ks. prelat Konstanty Budkiewicz na tle walki w obronie kościoła katolickiego i wiary świętej (Late Prel. Konstanty Budkiewicz against the Background of the Fight in Defence of the Catholic Church and the Holy Faith)*, Warszawa 1929.

hierarchically uniform leadership, in fact allowing the authorities to liquidate the union at their discretion, since the factors deciding its dissolution were: the decision of the registering organ, arrest of some of its members or an adequate vote of a general meeting of the society, all of whose sessions, at any rate, were to be held in public. In the concrete political situation in the USSR this demand, certainly undermining the cohesion of the society, should be seen as another symptom of discrimination against religion⁴⁰.

From the legal point view the position of the Church was even worse than, for example, that of sports unions which, though they were also subjected to the August 3 decree, still had the right of acquiring property and managing it, signing contracts and transactions, etc.

The status of clergymen clearly declined; according to the resolutions of successive state constitutions, up to 1936 — as the so-called *lishentsy* — they were deprived of any political rights and could not take part in the social life of the country, apart from the life of religious associations. At the same time, however, according to art. 6 of the January 23, 1918, decree, they were obliged to fulfil all citizens' duties. Although the Stalinist constitution of 1936 in legal respects nominally equalized the clergy with other citizens (thus abolishing the category of *lishentsy*), this was of no consequence to the predicament of the Church, the more so as soon after the clergy were granted the right to vote, a violent propaganda campaign was launched against them, in fact precluding them from making use of those rights, which from the very beginning the new regulation was turned into fiction⁴¹.

The extremely repressive penal code issued in 1922 introduced the notion of religious offences. Devoted to them was the whole section III (*On Trespassing the Regulations about the Separation of Church and State*). Severe punishment was envisaged i.a. for “resorting to fraud in order to arouse superstition among the masses of people” (art. 120 — interpretation of this regulation, quite free, generally depended on the local organs), for giving religious instruction to juveniles (art. 121) or performing religious rites in state offices and enterprises as well as placing there any symbols of faith (art. 124). Formulations of other articles, deliberately far from precise, were also of discriminatory character, as they created almost boundless possibilities of interpretation. We find there regulations envisaging drastic sanctions for e.g. “compulsion in exacting contributions for the sake of the

⁴⁰ AAN, Polish Embassy in Moscow, N° 70, pp. 158–159. Report of the Polish Legation in Moscow from June 18, 1923.

⁴¹ A. Wiśniewski, *Stosunek państwa*, pp. 85–96; see also J. Urban, *Religia w konstytucji Stalina (Religion in Stalin's Constitution)*, “Oriens” 1937, fasc. 2, pp. 57–59.

church and religious organizations and groups" (art. 122), "appropriation by religious or church organizations of administrative, juridical or other public-legal functions or rights of a legal unit" (art. 123), or "performing religious rites or ceremonies connected with violating or an attempt to violate the regulations and dispositions of local authorities with regard to traffic regulation" (art. 127). In this way the code, while theoretically protecting the performance of religious rites, in fact gave no guarantee of their free practising⁴².

The exacerbated anti-religious campaign found its expression in the decisions on the intensification of combat against the Church, taken at the end of 1927 at the 15th Congress of the All-Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party; they aimed to strengthen and develop a central, mass antireligious organization and to pay special attention to the atheistic propaganda among the youngest generation⁴³.

The year 1929 was in many respects a breakthrough. The stringent course of anti-Church policy found its expression in the change of respective regulations of the USSR Constitution. If up till then it ensured a freedom of religious and antireligious propaganda, now it only protected the freedom of worship, safeguarding exclusively the freedom of antireligious propaganda⁴⁴. In this propaganda a leading role was played by the League of Militant Atheists, a massive (according to the concept of the authorities) atheist organization⁴⁵. The League conducted a widespread propaganda campaign against religion by all accessible means such as the press (e.g. periodicals with mass circulation, embracing the entire country, such as "Bezbozhnik" ("The Atheist"), "Antireligioznik" ("The Anti-Religious"), magazines such as a weekly "Biazbozhnik Byelarusi" ("The Atheist of Byelorussia"), and also the Moscow-issued monthly "Bezbozhnik Wojujący", ("The Militant Atheist", in Polish). This was an organ of the Anti-Catholic Section at the Central Council of the League of the Militant Atheists which circulated among the Polish agglomerations. Publishing house (State Anti-religious Publishers in Moscow) and radio served also the anti-religious propaganda.

⁴² Cit. after F. Mac Cullagh. *Prześladowanie chrześcijaństwa*, pp. 456-457; there is also a published Polish translation of the whole code: *Kodeks karny republik sowieckich (The Penal Code of the Soviet Republics)*, Warszawa 1927 (trans. R. Lemkin, T. Kochanowicz with co-op. of L. Dworzak and others; foreword by J. Makarewicz.

⁴³ Cf. note in: "Misje katolickie" 1928, N° 543, p. 180.

⁴⁴ The hitherto officially sanctioned right of political asylum in the USSR was also abolished; it no longer concerned those persecuted for religious and political persuasions and was only limited to those who suffered discrimination for "revolutionary-insurrexional" activity (art. XII), after AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N° 10184, p. 105. Report by A. Poniński.

⁴⁵ Its first cells came into being as early as in 1925, the Polish section was organized in 1929; for the movement of unbelievers see an interesting sketch by H. J. Korybut-Woroniecki, *Bezbożnictwo sowieckie (Soviet Godlessness)*, "Przegląd Powszechny", 1938, v. 217, pp. 186-198.

There were organized meetings, lectures, training courses, exhibitions, anti-religious museums (most often in former churches), anti-Church-holiday demonstrations (especially anti-Easter and anti-Christmas ones), theatre performances and films. Especially the teaching of atheism in schools, and even special "atheistic" toys for children ridiculed the faith. A strong effect on the mentality of believers was made by many-thousand strong antireligious processions in which took part the army, *Komsomol* (organization of young communists), trade unions, sports organizations etc., bringing to mind — in retrospect — Nazi marches with torches. They were invariably accompanied by primitive but sinister-sounding slogans and antireligious cries (e.g. "down with the Church — the mainstay of bourgeoisie", "down with the clergy — fascist agents" etc.)⁴⁶. This League which unlike the religious organizations, had a legal status, availed itself of considerable assistance from the state; it could be joined even by eight-year-old children, who were brought up in the spirit of the fight against the Church⁴⁷.

It was envisaged that by 1933 the ranks of the League would include 17 million adults and 12 million members of *Komsomol*, brought up according to the principles that ruled out the notion of God⁴⁸. The accessible data show that as early as in 1929 in the Ukraine there were over 2.5 million "unbelievers", and in Byelorussia in 1932 their number surpassed 300 thousand (wherein almost 100 thousand of the so-called "young atheists")⁴⁹. It is beyond dispute that a considerable part of them (it is impossible to provide even the roughest estimates) decided to join the League of the Militant Atheists against their will, under pressure from the authorities and of a justified fear that refusal would entail serious consequences.

In May 1932 a five-year plan of the fight against religion (the so-called "atheistic five years") was announced, whose aim was to do away with the Church completely. According to the plan "by May 1, 1937, on the territory of the Soviet Union there will be no need for a single house of prayer, and the very notion of God will be dismissed as a relic of the Middle Ages and

⁴⁶ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, № 10182, p. 48. Copy of the report by Polish Consulate General in Minsk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw from January 20, 1930.

⁴⁷ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, № 10184, p. 250. Account of lecture delivered in Berlin on October 21, 1930, by Orthodox Bishop Serafim on the subject of the situation of the Church in the USSR; A. O k o l o - K u l a k. *Kościół w Rosji dawniej, obecnie i w przyszłości* (*The Church in Russia in the Past, at Present and in the Future*). Kraków 1929, p. 29.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ J. N. Marash, E. S. Prokoshina *Katolicheskaya tserkov' v Belorussii v poslerevolutsionnyi period*, in: *Katolitsyzm v Belorussii. Traditsionalizm i prispособlenye*, Minsk 1987, p. 54.

instrument of preventing the progress of the masses"⁵⁰. As a result the authorities started systematically to close the churches. If immediately after the creation of the USSR there were over 500 Catholic churches, in 1937 there were only eleven, and in 1939 merely two — in Moscow and Lenin-grad; they remained under the patronage of the French Embassy and were frequented mainly by foreign diplomats⁵¹.

In the year 1929, which in many respects was a breakthrough, many other acts and laws were issued that openly discriminated against the Church. Of supreme importance was *The Resolution of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars about Religious Congregations* issued on April 8, and complemented by an instruction of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the RFSSR of October 1 that year. That was a *sui generis* codification and above all exacerbation of the hitherto obtaining religious legislation that was to prevail in the USSR virtually over many subsequent decades. The ministry, except holding services, was practically forbidden. Religious congregations were denied the right of developing charitable activity (wherein also material assistance to their members), of establishing mutual aid funds, organizing special meetings and services for children, youth and women, organizing outings and holiday camps for children, opening libraries and reading rooms, running orphanages and alms-houses, organizing medical service etc. The priests were subjected to strict police supervision and allowed to conduct ministry only in the locality where their church was situated⁵². In the USSR, where religious communities were often separated by enormous distances, this was an especially severe blow.

On the strength of the decree commanding the eviction from state houses of unemployed people, clergymen — included in this category — were forced to leave for distant suburbs, far from their churches, which made the performance of their duties extremely difficult, especially for the bishops and administrators of dioceses whose chancelleries were situated outside the city. These practices were officially motivated by the lack of apartments for workers. Trade unions were authorized to exclude from their ranks members suspected of practising a cult⁵³. An extreme move of the authorities con-

⁵⁰ Cit. after P. Li d a , *Zagrożenie Kościoła katolickiego na Białorusi i Litwie (The Threat to the Catholic Church in Byelorussia and Lithuania)* "Kultura" (Paryż) 1989, N° 4/499, p. 79.

⁵¹ It is estimated that about 80% of priests who remained in the USSR after 1921 were murdered or deported to lagers, 10% obtained a consent to return to Poland, and several score went into hiding conducting clandestine religious services, in 1937 merely ten of them officially performed the ministry. B. Cywiński, *Ogniem próbowane*, p. 67; see also W. Li z a k , *Szkic o dziejach Polaków w ZSRR 1917–1939/1947 (An Outline of the History of Poles in the USSR 1917–1939/1947)*, in: *Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1917–1947*, Warszawa 1990, p. 50.

⁵² J. U r b a n , *Prawodawstwo religijne*, pp. 141–143.

sisted in effectively preventing the believers from taking part in services and other religious ceremonies on holidays, since in the Autumn 1929 a five-day week of work was introduced⁵⁴. In order to eradicate any holiday customs, it was forbidden to exhibit Christmas trees and “Christmas gifts” in shop-windows. Even the traditional religious customs in private houses were interfered with⁵⁵. At the same time a violent propaganda campaign directed against religious ceremonies was developed by fair means or foul. Primitive “anti-holiday” slogans placed in the columns of the press and circulated in mass-published posters and agitation prints served the immediate purposes of fighting against religion, and above all of discarding the Church and the priests⁵⁶.

“The demands of the people”, dictated by communists, became the order of the day; the people demanded allegedly to close the churches down and to devote their buildings to “cultural purposes”, i.e. antireligious museums, theatres, cinemas etc. In practice many church buildings were used to house various wares and stores, or were even pulled down to obtain building materials.

Following the inclusion of priests in the group of “professional people”, they were charged with enormous taxes, often four-to-six times surpassing their income. In order to deter the young priests from the dissemination of faith, they were charged with a three-times greater tax. Also the execution of very costly, sometimes unnecessary repairs and other investments was ordered by the administration, which otherwise threatened the priests with severe consequences, including arrests and liquidation of churches⁵⁷. Of blatant discriminatory character were the exorbitant insurance contributions and special taxes on the sale of candles and Eucharist bread. Many religious associations could not afford such high charges and were accordingly liquidated. In sheer mockery of the principles of law and order in this “state of social justice” was a regulation that authorized the local organs of administration to assign the damages that were due to churches insured

⁵³ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N° 10184, p. 128. Report by A. Poniński.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 106 and 129.

⁵⁵ “Misje Katolickie” 1930, N° 566, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁶ “Orka” N° 96 of December 14, 1929, gives for example as many as 22 “anti-holiday slogans”, i.a. “Clergy — the most faithful assistant of counter-revolution”; “Sinks of fraud and hypocrisy — churches and synagogues — to be changed into the hearths of socialist culture”; “Let us fight against the conciliatory attitude to religion”; “Away with Christmas, long live the continual working week”; “Religion and vodka — these two poisons confound the minds of the working masses and weaken their will to fight for socialism”; “Let us make every school a fortress of struggle for the antireligious upbringing of children and youth”.

⁵⁷ AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N° 10184, p. 249. Report from ... Serafim’s lecture ...; AAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, N° 10184, p. 128. Report by A. Poniński.

against fire or other accidents, not for the restoration of the damaged buildings, but for deliberately imprecise “social and cultural purposes”⁵⁸.

The methods of persecuting the Church in the USSR were striking both by their uncompromising character and the scale of the measures applied⁵⁹.

Over the period of a mere twenty years of Bolshevik rule the structures of the Catholic Church in the USSR were almost completely destroyed and religious life was forced underground. The tragedy of this situation was augmented by the fact that the Church was completely vulnerable in face of the acts of extermination. The terror applied by the state can be directly compared with the period of persecution and martyrdom of the first Christians. The Catholic Church remained in the USSR as a denomination that succeeded in preserving its integrity and moral power, which clearly contrasted with many other denominations in that country. Also its believers in a large part exhibited resistance to the processes of sovietization. Virtually condemned to annihilation it nevertheless managed to survive and be revived several decades later.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

⁵⁸ A. Starodworski, *Dzieje Cerkwi Prawosławnej w ZSRR (The History of the Orthodox Church in the USSR)*, Warszawa 1934, pp. 106 and 111.

⁵⁹ See e.g.: M. Iwanow, *Kościół najbardziej prześladowany (The Most Persecuted Church)*, “Więź” 1990, № 2–3, (376–377), pp. 23–37; M. Belina–Podhajecki, *Walka z religią na Białorusi. Wspomnienia naocznego świadka (The Campaign against Religion in Byelorussia. Memoirs of an Eye-Witness)*, “Oriens” 1937, fasc. 6, pp. 179–182; M. Radwan, *Duszpasterstwo katolickie na Białorusi, 1917–1984 (The Catholic Ministry in Byelorussia, 1917–1984)*, in: *Evangelia i kultura. Doświadczenia środkowoeuropejskie. Śladem Trzeciej Pielgrzymki Jana Pawła II*, comp. by M. Radwan and T. Styczeń, Rzym 1988, pp. 189–208; J. Wróbel, *Likwidacja. Polityka ZSRR wobec kościołów i religii w latach dwudziestych (Liquidation. The USSR Policy towards the Churches and Religions in the 1920s)*, “Przegląd Powszechny” 1990, № 3/823, pp. 355–368 and № 4/824, pp. 38–49. An extensive bibliography is provided by R. Dzwonkowski, *Stan badań nad historią Kościoła i życiem religijnym katolików obrządku łacińskiego w ZSRR (1917–1990)* in: *Mniejszości polskie i Polonia w ZSRR*, comp. by H. Kubiak, T. Paleczny, J. Rokicki and M. Wawrykiewicz, Wrocław — Warszawa — Kraków 1992, pp. 103–118. From the recently published works see J. M. Kupczak, *Polacy na Ukrainie w latach 1921–1939 (Poles in the Ukraine in 1921–1939)*, Wrocław 1994; *Za wschodnią granicą 1917–1993. O Polakach i Kościele w dawnym ZSRR (Beyond the Eastern Border 1917–1993. On Poles and Church in the Former USSR)* (Jan Palyga SAC talking to Roman Dzwonkowski SAC), Warszawa 1993; R. Dzwonkowski, *Polacy na dawnym kresach wschodnich. Z problematyki narodowościowej i religijnej (Poles from the Former Eastern Borderland. National and Religious Problems)*, Lublin 1994; T. Małała, *Polscy księża katolicy w więzieniach i łagrach sowieckich od 1918 r. (Polish Catholic Priests in the Soviet Prisons and Lagers since 1918)*, Lublin 1996.

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