



## The Archbishops of the Riga Diocese: 1958–1965

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During the period from 1958 to 1965 attempts were made “to solve” religious matters in the USSR. Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign had devastating consequences for the Russian Orthodox Church. During that period four Bishops served in the Riga Diocese but only one, Nikon (Fomichev), served on a permanent basis, meanwhile three others, John (Alekseev), Alexis (Ridiger) and Filaret (Denysenko), – on a temporary basis. It should be noted that Bishops were strictly controlled by state authority and had very little power.

To better understand the situation, the main stages of the anti-religious campaign should be overviewed. On 4 October 1958 a secret resolution “On shortcomings in scientific atheist propaganda” was passed by the Central Committee of the CPSU which urged to intensify attacks on the Church and limit the rights of the Church and religious associations (*Русская Православная Церковь* 2008, 463). Until that the relations between state authority and the Church were built on the “incorrect tactical line” of Stalinism.

On 16 October 1958 two resolutions were passed by the Council of Ministers of the USSR: “On the taxation of income of diocesan enterprises and revenues of monasteries” – all candle business enterprises were taxed, “On the monasteries in the USSR” – labor hire was banned, property and land rent taxed.

On 28 November 1958 a resolution “On measures to terminate pilgrimages to so-called holy places” was passed by the Central Committee of the CPSU. In September 1959 the magazine “Science and Religion” was launched and started acting as mouthpiece for anti-religious propaganda. After that, in January 1960, one more resolution “Measures to eliminate violations of Soviet legislation on cults by the clergy” was passed by the Central Committee and Khrushchev’s church reform began. In 1961 two more decrees “On strengthening control over obeying legislation on cults” and “On strengthening control over the implementation of legislation on cults” were passed by the Council of Ministers. Some years later

Bishop Nikon (Fomichev) wrote that after the 1961 church reform management of the economic affairs of parishes by priests was banned, the Bishop's powers were reduced, "atheists but not the priest has the right to make decisions in the parish" (Федоров 2009, 34). In spite of all those measures, religious life in the USSR continued.

In May 1958 the Bishop of Tallinn and Estonia Ioann (Alekseyev, 1892–1966) was appointed a temporary administrator of the Riga diocese and served until 1961 (Архиепери 2011, 127–128). He resided in Tallinn and came to Riga only to hold prayer services therefore actually the Diocesan Council and its chairman Archbishop Nikolai Smirnov were in charge of the diocese. Bishop Ioann was described as a gentle, good-looking, talented priest who paid much attention to preaching, demonstrated advanced homiletic skills and attracted a sizable audience to the Cathedral of Christ's Nativity. As the commissioner for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs at the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR A. Sakharov wrote in his reports, the number of believers attending the Cathedral of Christ's Nativity doubled during Bishop Ioann's (Alekseyev) service in the Riga Diocese (Алексей II 1999, 444). The Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Alexy II (Ridiger) wrote in his memoirs that the Bishop Ioann fulfilled his temporary duties diligently.

As it has been mentioned, the main attacks on the Church by state authorities included actions and speeches mainly during the religious festivals and holidays. For example, at Easter time an attempt was made to disrupt services in the Cathedral of Christ's Nativity in Riga: a group of hooligans stormed into the vestibule, one climbed on the roof of the dome, broke some glass which fell onto the heads of the parishioners and priests, police was called, and Bishop Ioann was trying to calm down parishioners. During the sermon he said: "Latvian Orthodox people must not leave the faith. Good people must remain faithful to God" (*LNA LVA* 1452, 1, 66, l. 40).

The Bishop's visits to parishes always inspired believers and mobilized the parish. In 1959 Bishop Ioann visited Liepaja and noted poor liturgical practices in the parish. On 12 October the issue of delivering services was discussed by the Diocesan Council and a decree was issued saying that "sermons must address Biblical, theological, religious, moral topics. The word of God must be preached not for applause or vain glory, it must come from the heart" (*LNA LVA* 1452, 1, 66, l. 18). During his short service in the Riga diocese Bishop Ioann strictly followed the rules of sermon delivery, his sermons usually contained a theological and moral instruction.

In 1960 the Riga diocese faced many difficulties. Authorized commissioners received a secret directive to start closing the cathedrals of the Orthodox Church in the republics of the Soviet Union, and commissioner A. Sakharov, responsible for closing the Cathedral of Christ's Nativity in Riga, said that "it will significantly undermine the influence of the Church and its economic situation". At the

end of November 1960 A. Sakharov informed Bishop Ioann that the Cathedral will be closed. In 1961 Bishop Ioann informed the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy I (Simansky, 1877–1970) that the Cathedral will be closed and asked to have a private audience with him in his letter. However, he, the chairman of the Diocesan Council Archpriest Nikolay Smirnov and the Senior Priest of the Cathedral Archpriest Simeon Varfolomeyev were denied the audience (*LNA LVA* 1452, 1, 66, l. 52). When the Cathedral of Christ's Nativity was closed Bishop Ioann was appointed to the Gorky diocese. It was a sad day when Bishop Ioann left the Riga diocese because he was respected and loved by both, the clergy and believers.

At the end of August 1961 the Bishop of Tallinn Alexy (Ridiger, 1929–2008), the future Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (А р х и е р е и 2011, 129–130) took office. During his short administration of the Riga diocese he visited it twice and held services in the Holy Trinity Cathedral, St. Trinity Sergius Women's Monastery and the Holy Transfiguration Monastery. Later he wrote in his memoirs that “the historical Cathedral of Christ's Nativity was closed when my predecessor served, and the Holy Trinity Cathedral started functioning” (А р х и е р е и 2011, 129–130).

As Patriarch Alexy II wrote in his memoirs, in 1961–1962 the Russian Orthodox Church fought against closing churches and monasteries in Latvia. Bishop Alexy was actively involved in the process. At the beginning of 1962 he resigned from the Riga Diocese at his own request and was appointed to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (А л е х у II 1999, 455).

In 1962 the Bishop of Luga Filaret (Denisenko, 1929– ) was appointed to the Riga diocese, served from 4 February to 27 August 1962 and the only thing his contemporaries could remember about him was his foreign language studies. Later he was appointed to some diocese in Western Europe.

At the beginning of August 1963 Bishop Nikon (Fomichev, 1910–1995) (Б ы ч к о в 2010, 135) was appointed to the Riga diocese and served from 1963 to 1966. Believers remembered him as a very active Bishop who was closely supervised by commissioner A. Sakharov. A. Sakharov reported to Moscow that Bishop Nikon paid regular visits to parishes, was concerned about churches in rural areas, tried to solve spiritual, financial and administrative affairs. Thanks to Bishop Nikon's efforts, deans gained a much more significant role in the Riga Diocese, on his initiative additional funds were found to pay priests for their administrative work in deaneries, he persistently urged to hold more services. Parishes became economically stronger. For example, the incomes from candle sale increased from 144 913 roubles in 1963 to 179 717 roubles in 1965, from fees and donations – from 26 567 roubles in 1963 to 28 288 roubles in 1965 (*LNA LVA* 1452, 1, 66, l. 51).

The authorized commissioner, who studied the financial statements of the diocese, reported to Moscow that many times no true picture of the financial

situation in parishes was provided. It was the Bishop's responsibility and Bishop Nikon, as some priests noted in their memoirs, knew about the commissioner's reports. The commissioner reported that he would have talks with the Bishop but the situation would not change, Bishop Nikon would work for the benefit of the Church and the diocese. The Riga diocese provided small rural parishes with significant support, it was its task number one. At the end of 1963 the Riga diocese asked for funds so that small rural parishes could pay taxes but no grants or loans were provided. State authorities controlled the financial affairs strictly, especially connected with the the administration of the sacraments. Commissioner A. Sakharov noted in his reports to Moscow that priests would conceal data on the actual number of persons taking the sacrament of baptism. According to I. Karpushin's memoirs, baptism was carried out without any registration, at home, by a trusted priest who would not report to Soviet authorities. However, sometimes such information leaked.

For example, it was found out by the commission of Ludzas aprinkis, Latgale novads that priest Vladimir Pankov (1892–1967) of the church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ludza had baptized Nikandrova's from Krasnogorodsk, Pskov oblast' child in his apartment without any paperwork and violated the mandatory requirement to obtain a request for baptism in writing from the parents signed by both of them. Peter Vembris (1886–?) was another priest who had also violated such a requirement. Bishop Nikon would listen to the commissioner's complaints, would have talks with priests but would not forbid them to carry out religious rites at parishioners' request in their houses (*LNA LVA* 1452, 1, 66, l. 60).

Let us return to the report. In 1964, 1 385 baptism services were provided but 6 372 crosses were sold, 927 funeral services were provided but 1 665 wreaths were sold. As you can see, parishes tried to conceal the actual data on the baptism and funeral service. It should be said that many party officials invited a priest to carry out the funeral service at home so as to avoid paperwork and not demonstrate their religious beliefs.

Bishop Nikon was flexible and, as commissioner A. Sakharov noted, tried to strengthen the relations with the representatives of other traditional Christian confessions in Latvia. Close relations were built with Gustav Tours (Türs; 1890–1973), the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, and Julijans Vaivods (Vaivods; 1895–1990), the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church of Latvia. They would meet on the occasion of anniversaries, develop some common actions on religious affairs. Bishop Nikon called such cooperation “the Church unites in the struggle for peace” (*LNA LVA* 1452, 1, 71, l. 10).

In February 1964 the resolution to close the church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Daugavpils was adopted by the Council of Ministers of Latvia. That was the hardest time for Bishop Nikon. Supported by the clergy and believers he spared no effort in fighting against its closure, however, the church

was closed. Fights against the Church intensified. For example, in the summer of the same year there was the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in some rural areas of Latgale novads; that caused danger for cattle but not people. Local authorities immediately cancelled all services and closed the churches in Ludzas apriņķis. The Bishop filed a complaint to higher authorities and finally all restrictions were removed and the churches were opened. Archimandrite Alypy (Voronov, 1914–1975), the governor of the Holy Dormition Pskov-Caves Monastery, said when authorities demanded to cancel services in the monastery: cows do not attend church, Soviet institutions have not stopped working so there is no need to cancel church services.

In 1964 Bishop Nikon, while visiting the parishes of Daugavpils deanery, advised the clergy and parishioners “to immediately inform the diocese about religious freedom violations”. Despite the commissioner’s resistance, Bishop Nikon held services for the renewal of baptism in the St. Trinity Sergius Women’s Monastery in Riga, as a result it was not closed. That irritated Latvian authorities and in 1966 Bishop Nikon (Fomichev) was appointed to Arkhangelsk; believers thought he was sent into exile.

After Khrushchev’s removal from office anti-religious campaigns became milder although party officials continued their fight against religion and the Russian Orthodox Church thus trying to build a new society. The Bishops of the Riga diocese not only resisted and oftentimes provided guidance to other dioceses. But this practice was not conducive to the normal development of religious and spiritual life. In conclusion, the Bishops continued the pastoral ministry of the Apostles, their relationships with official authorities were different, some were more flexible, others - more strict. Nikon (Fomichev), the Bishop of the Riga diocese, consistently strengthened the tradition of the Christian faith in Latvia.

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## Galina Sedova (sesuo Eufrozinja)

### Rygos vyskupijos vyskupai (1958–1965)

#### *S a n t r a u k a*

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** *Chruščiovo persekiojimai, vyskupijos administratorius, vyskupas, Rygos vyskupija, stačiatikių parapija, bažnyčių uždarymas, krikščionys ortodoksai, vyskupas Nikonas (Fomičevas), vienuolyno uždarymas.*

Laikotarpis nuo XX a. penktojo dešimtmečio vidurio iki šeštojo dešimtmečio vidurio į Sovietų Sąjungos istoriją įėjo kaip Chruščiovo „atšilimo“ laikotarpis ir tarybinės visuomenės vilčių metas. Chruščiovo vykdyta destalinizacijos politika pakeitė šalies socialinį ir politinį gyvenimą, bet, kaip parodė tolesni įvykiai, marksizmo ir leninizmo doktrinos negalėjo pakeisti. Tuo metu karingi ateistai atnaujino religijos ir Bažnyčios persekiojimą, o atšilimas virto sąstingiu. Po 1961 m. Bažnyčios reformos ir antireliginių akcijų jos autoritai pasirinko kitą – Bažnyčios griovimo iš vidaus – strategiją. Buvo pradėtos uždarinėti bažnyčios (vien Rygoje uždaryta 17), suaktyvėjo tikinčiųjų persekiojimas. Rusų stačiatikių bažnyčios reikalų įgaliotiniai griežtai kontroliavo dvasininkijos veiklą, vyskupai patyrė didelį spaudimą. Nors Rygos vyskupų galios buvo menkos, tačiau jie gynė bažnyčios ir tikinčiųjų interesus. Nikonas (Fomičevas), Rygos vyskupijos ir Latvijos vyskupas, paliko ryškų pėdsaką tikinčiųjų atmintyje. Bažnyčia yra gyva, kai vyskupų tikėjimas yra tvirtas.

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The period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s entered into the history of the Soviet Union as the period of “Khrushchev’s thaw” and the time of great hopes of Soviet society. Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization changed the social and political life in the country but, as further events showed, not the ideological Marxism-Leninism doctrine. During that period, militant atheists renewed repressions against religion and the Church, and the so-called “thaw” turned into a “fierce freeze”. After the 1961 church reform and anti-religious measures authorities tried to take a new course, which had to undermine the Church from inside, and antireligious propaganda was carried out in a more subtle way. They started closing churches, 17 churches were closed in Riga. Persecution of believers intensified, the clergy were strictly controlled by the commissioners for the Russian Orthodox Church Affairs, Bishops were under strong pressure by party officials. All mentioned above affected

the Riga diocese, although its Bishops had little power many of them firmly defended the interests of the Church and believers. Nikon (Fomichev), the Bishop of Riga diocese and Latvia, was among those, who clearly expressed his opinion, he left a deep imprint in the memory of believers. It was for the deep faith and unwavering firmness of Bishops that the Church has survived.

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