



Anti-religious Campaigns in the Latvian SSR in the 60s: An Example of the Orthodox Church of the Vernicle, Riga

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The anti-religious campaign in Soviet Latvia reached its peak in the 60s of the 20th century, under N. Khrushchev’s rule (1954-1971). On the one hand, the N. Khrushchev thaw allowed some freedom in public life but, on the other hand, it is known as the period of anti-religious campaigns and persecutions of believers in church historiography. According to historians, during this political “thaw” anti-religious campaigns, directed against the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, were launched.

This period started from the end of the 1950s and continued until the mid 1960s. One reason of such policy was a growing return of Soviet citizens to religion thus anti-religious propaganda intensified and the authorities took urgent measures, the so called “individual work”. Not only church services and homilies were under control but also active parishioners. Anti-religious articles were published in newspapers and magazines, usually anonymous, in which priests and the clergy were ridiculed. Moreover, the authorities used ex-priests in their anti-religious campaigns. That happened in the Riga diocese so let us analyze the so-called “individual work” carried out in the parish of the Orthodox Church of the Vernicle in Riga.

In Soviet times, the Church of the Vernicle on the territory of Tornakalns cemetery was known for its Rector Archpriest Nikolay Trubetskoy. Father Nikolay was secretly watched by Communist Party and secret service agents. His biography helps understand attention shown to his personality and activity.

Nikolay Trubetskoy was born on 26 December 1907 in Kraslava, his father Nikanor Trubetskoy (1876-1959) was Archpriest of Latgale (*Дyx* 2007, 4). This big family of nine children was very religious, later three children became priests and were persecuted by the Soviet regime. The family lived like farmers, the priest and his children worked on the church land, raised cattle and thus earned for a living. In 1927 Nikolay Trubetskoy graduated from high school in Dvinsk (now

Daugavpils) and enrolled in the Art Academy in Riga but had to leave it because of money shortage. Later, he enrolled in two year teacher courses but had to leave them for the same reason.

Soon he enrolled in Riga Theological Seminary, graduated in 1930 with excellent grades and was sent to St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. At that time the Institute was the center of theological thought, S. Bulgakov, Prof. B. Vysheslavtsev, A. Kartashov, A. Khomyakov, G. Florovsky, others were teaching. Many of them were expelled from Russia by the Bolsheviks for propaganda of bourgeois ideology.

It should be noted that in 1934 Nikolay Trubetskoy visited the Grand Duchess Xenia Alexandrovna Romanova (1875-1960), sister of the last Russian Emperor Nicholas II, in Windsor, England, with the Institute Student Choir. In 1938 he graduated from the Institute with a degree in Theology defending doctoral dissertation *The relationship between faith and modern atheism in the Soviet Union* (research advisor Prof. B. Zenkovsky). Later Nikolay Trubetskoy wrote: “it was impartial analysis of direct and indirect battle between atheism and faith in the Soviet Union and, referring to the words of the Lord, the conclusion was drawn: “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (*Дух* 2007, 16-17).

In 1935 he returned to Latvia and married Irina, a daughter of Archpriest John Janson (1878-1954). In January of 1936 Trubetskoy was appointed to the Diocese of Estonia by Archbishop Nikolay Pechersky (Leysman; 1862-1947). Later he served in St. Simeon and St. Anna Orthodox Cathedral in Jelgava and in Malinovka village, Dvina district (for 1.5 year), in The Church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God in Riga (for 7 years). At the same time he taught in various schools. His former students remembered him as an excellent teacher and a good pastor, his pupils adored him. During World War II he was appointed to the Pskov Orthodox Mission by Metropolitan Sergius (Voskresensky; 1897-1944), Exarch of the Baltic States, published magazine *Orthodox Christian*, liturgical books.

The literature that Nikolay Trubetskoy published was apolitical, there was nothing anti-Soviet in it, it was purely ecclesiastical (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 100). But the new government was of another opinion and soon after Soviet troops entered Latvia he was arrested for publishing religious literature and for his anti-Soviet homilies in The Church of the Intercession in Riga (*No NKVD līdz KGB* 1999, 789). On 20 October 1944 Nikolay Trubetskoy was arrested in Riga, accused for collaborating with the Nazis and sent to the Kresti prison in Leningrad. During investigation KGB (Committee for State Security – G.S.) made attempts to persuade him to collaborate but documents show that “he was inappropriate to be recruited... during the interrogation he acted as a staunch enemy” (*Кровью убежденные* 1999, 115). Under Article 58 of the Criminal Code (counter-revolutionary activity) he was sentenced to 10 years (5 years in a labour camp in the North and the rest on the railway in Pechersk), was released in early 1954 but stayed in the north, the Komi

Republic, until 1956. As he later wrote in his autobiography, he was “a victim of the Stalin-Beria terror wrongfully accused of violating Soviet laws” (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 100).

Having spent 11 years in exile he returned to the Latvian SSR in 1956 and was appointed the Rector of the Holy Spirit Orthodox Church in Ikskile by the Bishop. At the same time he served as a personal secretary to the Archbishop of Riga and Latvia Filaret (Lebedev; 1887-1958). He served in Petropavlovsk, Kemeru parishes, and from 1960 until 1978 (his death) – in the parish of the Orthodox Church of the Vernicle in Tornakalns, Riga.

His biography shows that Soviet authority persecuted not only priests but also parishioners. All activities outside the church were banned, life in parishes was put under control. Seeking to discredit the clergy and make parishioners turn away from the church and religion the method *strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered* was used. Pressure was put on priests and parishioners, homilies were interpreted looking for anti-Soviet propaganda, etc. Analysis of documents on the parish of the Orthodox Church of the Vernicle reveal how it all worked.

A. Sakharov (1919-2013), Commissioner for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR, coordinated anti-religious campaigns. This former security service officer held this position until 1990 and used every opportunity to achieve results. During Stalin’s regime, all religious affairs were under tight control by KGB, during the Khrushchev’s thaw – by the party apparatus. Thus, in accordance with Order No. 132 of the Communist Party Committee of Riga, secretary O. Dabols was appointed to carry out the surveillance of the Orthodox Church of the Vernicle, record homilies, collect information on priests and parishioners.

On 7 May 1961 O. Dabols wrote in his first report that Father Nickolay spoke how Jesus met a Samaritan woman in a homily but the characters were mixed and the homily was interpreted in an atheist way. Father Nikolay spoke about a Samaritan woman but it was written that he warned women to show interest not in the afterlife but in children education and avoid new sects. On 22 May it was written in another report that there were 4-5 choristers, only 7 believers plus 3 older women and some female students in the Church at 10 a.m. Mass (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 89).

On 24 December 1961 another informer, Sinicin, wrote that a significant number of believers, about 100, attended Mass: “9 men aged 60 years and above and women of approximately the same age“, noting that there were no young people. He wrote that Father Nickolay spoke about children education, Christmas celebration in a homily, “called the believers to fight for the soul of the child, help them explore the out-working of the Christian faith”, emphasized “the transience of all earthly things and praised spirituality and faith in God”, asked to donate “for the needs of the Church” and “for a candle” (common practice in the Orthodox Church). It was concluded that Father Nickolay spoke against Soviet education,

asked parents “to counteract the influence of school on the formation of the new generation” (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 90-90 o.p.).

On 31 December 1961 Eustache Goglya, a member of the CPSU, was appointed by secretary Dabols to continue surveillance. It was written that on the eve of 1962 Father Nikolay engaged in “anti-Soviet propaganda” in a homily (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 88): he spoke about the transience of life, that life is in the hands of the Lord, That everyone has a destiny specifically designed by Him, who is in control of our life. Evidently, there were several informers, some Mikhailov counted “45 believers, 4 men and 6 women from 30 to 40 years of age and several women of over 50” (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 91-91 o.p.) and concluded that Father Nikolay “denied scientifically proven truth” not specifying what namely.

All that affected parish life. Bishop of Luga Filaret (Denisenko; 1929–), who was appointed to manage the Riga diocese, asked Father Nikolay to explain the situation. Father Nikolay provided notes and texts of his homilies saying that 70 regular parishioners would confirm that. He wrote in his explanatory letter that “insidious attempts to distort the meaning of my words or to add something are provocative attacks” directed against him with some specific purpose (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 97-97 o.p.).

A copy of this letter was sent to Commissioner Sakharov and it seemed that the issue should be closed but it was not. The authorities attempted to put the squeeze on the parishioners and started “individual work” with them, the so-called twenty, i.e. 20 active parishioners. Alexandra Nikolaeva and Yulia Edomskaya were made to write detailed explanations of what had happened.

In her explanation, A. Nikolaeva, a worker at Blazma leather factory, wrote that on 15 February 1962 she was called to the personnel department during her lunch break. Among those present there were the head of the personnel department, the chairman of the local committee and an some man called Lacis. The man scolded Nikolaeva for being a parish activist, a member of the twenty and of a gang of fascists lead by Father Nikolay, urged her to stop attending Church, go to movies and theatres instead. But she said that she is a single mother with two children, has no money for movies and goes to church for free. New accusations followed, the man said that “it could be dangerous to go by bus and tram, be a member of a Nazi gang” and that if she does not stop attending Church she will be sent from Riga, warned her that if any misuse of parish funds will be found she will have to take responsibility since Father Nikolay had already wasted a big sum of money serving in Kemer parish. Then the man explained that she has to write a note that she withdraws her signature because she is illiterate and could not read the papers and confirm that she will withdraw from parish activity (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 99-99 o.p.).

In her explanation of 2 March Y. Edomskaya, a worker at a plant in Riga, wrote that on 20 February 1962 she was called to the personnel department during her lunch break. The head of the department said that some man wants to talk

to her. The man said that his name is Lacis and praised her work and activity. Then he asked what organization she belongs to and what papers she has signed. Edomskaya asked the man to explain. The man took out some papers and showed her a list with the names of twenty active parishioners and pointed at her name. She confirmed that she takes part in parish activity since it is not forbidden. The man accused Edomskaya of working on two fronts and covering up Father Nikolay, who had spent 10 years in prison for collaborating with the Nazis. He also accused her of helping financially, that she is engaging in activities incompatible with her duties and demanded to write a note that she withdraws from parish activity. Edomskaya refused. The man got angry, spoke about morality and said that soon she will know more about Father Nikolay but did not say what. He finished: "I do not know you and you do not know me". Edomskaya noted that the head of the personnel department Yakovlev, the head of administration Chalova and some woman were present. Edomskaya wrote that it was an attempt "to shake off her reputation among co-workers and force her to act against her beliefs", that the government officer's behavior was disgraceful (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 98-98 o.p.).

The authorities asked the new Rector Nikolay Trubetskoy to write an explanatory letter which was immediately sent to the Bishop and the Commissioner. The document dated 26 February 1962 consisted of three parts. The first part dealt with the homilies. Father Nikolay's report that in February 1962 10 people from 20 twenty parishioners of the Church of the Vernicle were interrogated by Lacis, clerk of Lenin District party committee, was provided in the second part. He listed all the facts that blacken him and his parishioners and demanded that a fair investigation should be carried out because the insults were public (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 93-94).

The third part of the document sent to the authorities was written by Commissioner Sakharov himself. He discussed Father Nikolay's activity in the light of the Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU of 10 November 1954 signed by N. Khrushchev regarding religious policy that "in the future religious beliefs shall be respected, insults avoided, the administration shall not intervene in the internal life of the Church".

It should be noted that the anti-religious policy of the Communist Party and the State violated the Constitution of the USSR which guaranteed freedom of religion or beliefs and set out that the clergy and believers shall be respected, that a priest, as a Soviet citizen, has the right to apply to the authority to stop illegal actions and attacks by such clerks as Lacis, Lenin district committee member (*LNA LVA* 1419, 2, 22, 95).

Research into the context of N. Khrushchev's anti-religious policy when militant atheism reached its peak should be carried out seeking to understand the tragic events of Khrushchev's persecution of the Church. Provocative actions contributed to undermining the religious foundations of society and were extremely painful to the faithful in Soviet Latvia. But we do not agree with historian A. Plakans who

says that the Baltic nations learned the lessons of survival in a totalitarian system and were ready to make concession to authorities and submit to fate (Плаканс 2016, 371).

Archival documents show the choice of the faithful in Soviet Latvia although N. Khrushchev promised that in 1980 the last priest will be shown on TV. Even those who were loyal to the Soviet regime remained Christians and the confessors of the faith. The activity of Archpriest Nikolay Trubetskoy and courage of such ordinary parishioners of the Church of the Vernicle as A. Nikolaeva and Y. Edomskaya prove that. It is not the only example of how people fought against the Soviet regime in spite of “individual work“, party and state apparatus pressure. Of course, there were conformists and even church renegades but many believers saw their history as part of the history of the church. The life of the Church was an integral part of their lives.

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Antireliģinē kampanija Latvijas SSR: XX a. septinto dešimtmečio Rygos stačiatikių parapijos atvejis

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinēs sąvokos: *įgaliotasis komisaras Sacharovas, šventikas Nikolajus Trubekojus, Verniclės parapija, J. Jedomskaja, A. Nokolajeva.*

Nikitos Chruščiovo valdymo periodas glaudžiai siejasi su Rusijos stačiatikių bažnyčios istorija ir prisimenamas kaip Chruščiovo persekiojimų laikmetis. Karinis ateizmas be gailesčio kovojo su religija, nes dalis sovietinių žmonių vis dar buvo religingi, o tikėjimą jie suvokdavo kaip egzistencinę vertybę. Todėl partija ir ideologinės struktūros, organi-

zuodamos antireligines kampanijas, dėmesį ėmė telkti į individualų darbą su gyventojais. Tokią veiklą gerai iliustruoja dokumentai, saugomi Latvijos valstybiniame archyve. Bylose randami duomenys atskleidžia, kokius valdžios atstovų persekiojimus išgyveno Verniclės parapijos bendruomenė ir parapijos vyriausiasis šventikas Nikolajus Trubeckojus XX a. septintame dešimtmetyje. Tačiau visos pastangos, dideliam valdžios nusivylimui, nedavė taip norimo rezultato – tikintieji neišsižadėjo Dievo.

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N. Khrushchev’s rule known as “Khrushchev’s persecutions“ is an important period in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church. Militant atheism was used to ruthlessly combat religion since part of Soviet citizens still remained faithful Christians and preserved traditional Christian values. Therefore it was not by accident that the party apparatus and ideologists started using “individual work” with citizens in their anti-religious propaganda. Archival documents from the National Archives of Latvia show how it worked in the parish of the Orthodox Church of the Vernicle, Tornakalns. The authority used all means against Archpriest Nikolay Trubetskoy and his parishioners and launched a massive anti-religious attack in the 60s. But the Soviet regime did not succeed, it encountered strong resistance on the part of firm believers in Soviet Latvia.

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