

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN WESTERN BELARUS (1919–1939)

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The article deals with the situation of the Orthodox Church on the territory of Western Belarus in the interwar period. The study examines in detail the legal position of the Orthodox Church and the regulation of relations between the Polish authorities and representatives of the clergy. The promulgation of autocephaly of the Polish Orthodox Church and the dynamics of its functioning are also paid attention to. The author concludes that the rights of the Orthodox Church on the territory of Western Belarus in 1921–1939 were very limited, which was a part of the Polish state ideological work among the population of Western Belarus.

Key words: Orthodoxy; Western Belarus; Polish Orthodox Church; autocephaly; polonisation policy.

After the outbreak of World War I, church life in the Belarusian lands, which had become the arena of military operations, was paralyzed. Immediately after the establishment of Soviet power in 1917 the clergy and diocesan institutions were subjected to persecution and expropriation. The most valuable property (bishops' houses, seminaries, theological schools and some monasteries) was taken from the Church. The Polish authorities in 1919–1921 sought outwardly to limit the lawless and violent takeovers of churches.

On October 12, 1919 the decree of the General Commissioner on the transfer of the Orthodox churches, formerly Catholic and Uniate ones, to the Catholic Church was issued. The transfer was to take place solely according to the decision of the district officer, and people guilty of unauthorized takeovers of sanctuaries were subject to a monetary penalty or a month's arrest [3].

In practice, the decisions were made by the headmen or city commissioners under the pressure of Catholics. The transfer of 497 Orthodox churches was stipulated by the same decree. After the Treaty of Riga had been signed and the Belarusian lands had been separated into parts about 3 million of the Orthodox population became part of the Polish Republic.

According to the Treaty, on the basis of equality of nationalities Poland granted the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians settled in Poland all rights ensuring the development of culture, language and religious practices. The rights and opportunities for the development of national minorities were defined in *the Constitution of 17 March 1921*. According to articles 110–116, all citizens of Poland without distinction of religion, nationality, skin color, or language, were proclaimed to exercise religious practices, have full protection

and equality of civil and political rights. However, Article 114 said that Catholicism stood first among the equals and had the right to govern by its own regulations.

The Polish government and the more so the conservative Catholic circles were in no way going to fulfill either the terms of the Treaty of Riga or those of their constitution concerning the ethno-confessional relations. The process of Polonization and Okatolization was not suspended. The government could not allow the existence of groups of citizens in the state who felt even an invisible spiritual unity with their eastern neighbours. The primary goal was to give the Orthodox Church the status of an autocephalous church, with a view to further subordinate to its political agenda. Temporary Regulations on Government's attitude towards the Orthodox Church in Poland, issued by the Ministry of Confessions in January 1922, gave the administrative authorities a complete right of disposal of the Church. The main point of the document was to preserve the synodal and consistory governance of the Church, that is, to prevent the synodal principle in the Church, which had developed in Soviet Russia and in fact saved the Russian Orthodox Church [3].

According to the Polish Constitutions of 1921 and 1935, the Roman Catholic denomination was not a state religion, and the citizens' right to practice any religion was recognized.

After the conclusion of the Treaty of Riga, three dioceses were established: Vilna, Grodno and Polesie dioceses. As a result of the Soviet–Polish war a new border between the BSSR and the Polish State had been established by the end of 1920: the former Grodno and Vilensk provinces were on the territory of Poland and Lithuania, a considerable part of Polotsk and Minsk provinces were within the borders of Poland and Latvia. In October 1920, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon, Pinsk–Novogrudskaya diocese was established for the areas of Western Belarus that ceded to Poland. Bishop Panteleimon (Roznovsky), former Vicar of Polotsk Eparchy, was assigned to this diocese. He arrived in Novogrudok, where the diocesan administration was located, in August 1921. Under the pressure of the civil authorities, the Episcopate of the Orthodox Church in Poland took the path of breaking its canonical ties with Moscow Patriarchate. In January 1922, Bishop Panteleimon, for his loyalty to St. Patriarch Tikhon, was removed from the administration of the diocese. The idea of autocephaly was not supported by the Orthodox hierarchs [2].

The conditions for the complete subordination of the Orthodox clergy to the political leadership were created. The hierarchs and clergy who disagreed with the measures being taken were suspended from their jobs, arrested, and exiled to the central regions. Many of them were forced to leave the country.

For example, the abbot of Zhirovichy Holy Assumption Monastery, Archimandrite Tikhon (Sharapov) was arrested and exiled to Germany in 1924.

On November 13, 1924, the patriarch of Constantinople gave his blessing for the autocephaly of the Polish Church, and a corresponding tomos was issued in the following year. The autocephaly of the Polish Church was recognized by all Orthodox Churches except the Russian Church. Soon all the bishops' pulpits were occupied by people willing to cooperate with the authorities.

In April 1925 the Synod of the Orthodox Church in Poland proclaimed officially the Polish Church autocephalous within the Constantinople Patriarchate. All parishes, monasteries, theological educational institutions, and diocesan centers within the Polish state borders were in the bosom of the newly proclaimed Orthodox Autocephalous Church in Poland.

The legal position of the Orthodox Church was not regulated by state laws. The only legal document was the Provisional Rules on the Relations of the Government with the Orthodox Church in Poland, signed by the Minister of Religion and Public Education on January 30, 1922. On November 18, 1938 the president of the Polish Republic signed the Internal Statute of the Holy Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which completely subordinated the Orthodox Church to the state [2].

According to the Polish historian E. Mironowicz, there were 2 projects of integration of the Belarusian lands by 1935. The representatives of the nationalist camp proposed to transform the local population into the Poles. The representatives of the PPS had a sanationist view on the solution of the Belarusian issue. Let them remain the Belarusians for the time being, and the policy of the Polish government must arouse sympathy to Poland.

In June 1935, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Poland began to consider new drafts of national policies, which were proposed by the Bureau of National Policy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Regarding the religious question, there was a discussion of what is better - union or orthodoxy [1].

By 1935, Uniatism was strengthening its position on the kresy. And the internal structure of the Orthodox Church contributed to the expansion of Russian, and more precisely, national influence on the population. Therefore it was decided to take advantage of the weak self-consciousness of the Orthodox Belarusians, and polonize the Polish Church through the education of their priests. These projects violated the Constitution of Poland, but it was not done openly. The question about education of officials who would implement this policy even was raised. They would be aware of their violation the Constitution, but would do so for a higher purpose.

The materials of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education and its Fifth Department of Religions are kept in the Archives of New Acts in War-

saw (Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie). Collection of reports on the state of the Orthodox parishes, control of the activities of consistories and diocesan offices, relations with Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchies, subsidy to the Orthodox parishes, Orthodox seminaries and their dormitories, the University of Warsaw (students and teaching staff) were within the competence of this ministry. In accordance with the above mentioned range of issues, it can be noted that the Polish leadership had complete control over the activities of the Orthodox Church, both spiritual and administrative and bureaucratic.

Under the influence of the state, the Orthodox Church began to pursue the polonization policy. In the mid-30s they began to conduct services in Polish. On March 7, 1935 the Commission on the Orthodox Faith was established, it was subordinated to the Committee on National Affairs. It developed special «Theses», which are considered as a program for the subsequent polonization.

The first services in Polish took place on November 11, 1935, in the cathedral in Bialystok and in the Garrison Church in Grodno. On September 17, 1936, the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops approved translations of liturgical texts into Polish and authorized divine services in Polish. The Chief of the Army Orthodox Spirituality issued a circular with orders to conduct services and preach sermons in the army in the Polish language [3].

On September 1, 1939, Hitler's Germany attacked Poland – World War II began. German divisions marched up fast the Polish state and reached Western Belarus and Western Ukraine by mid-September. On September 17, 1939, when the Polish army was defeated and almost all ancestral Polish territories were occupied by German troops, the Red Army crossed the border. Within the borders of the BSSR there were three dioceses (Vilna, Grodno and Polesie dioceses) which had previously been part of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Poland where about 800 churches and 5 monasteries operated. By the decision of His Eminence Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky) of October 17, 1939 Archbishop Panteleimon (Roznovsky) was entrusted with the administration of the reunited territories. The archpastor was bestowed the title «Pinsk-Novogrudski», the right to wear a diamond cross on his cloak, and the title of Exarch of Moscow Patriarchate for the dioceses of the western regions of Belarus and Ukraine. Archbishop Panteleimon sent out messages to the bishops of the dioceses under his jurisdiction, in which he prohibited to mentioning the name of Metropolitan Dionysius (Valedynsky) of Warsaw and All Poland during services and suggested sending declarations recognizing the canonical authority of Metropolitan Sergius. Only Bishop Simon (Ivanovsky) of Ostrog sent a declaration. In response to Bishop Panteleimon's actions, Archbishop Alexander (Inozemtsev) of Pinsk and Polessky and Bishop Alexii (Hromadski) of Volyn and Kremenetsky established an arbitrary Synod,

which had the task to manage church parishes within Western Ukraine and Belarus. Neither Patriarchal Locum Tenens Sergius nor his Exarch, Archbishop Panteleimon, recognized the actions of the Synod [1].

In Western Belarus, the Soviet authorities did not use mass repression against the clergy or to the closure of churches, as they did in the East. However, they nationalized church property, prohibited teaching the Law of God in schools, and closed book publishing. An anti-religious campaign was launched in the official mass media. Although the Belarusian Orthodox communities existed in Poland, they could exist only with permission and under control of the Polish authorities. And the activity of the Orthodox Church as a national spiritual institution in Western Belarus was restricted by the Polish government through strict control of all branches of the Church and polonization.

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