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**THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET UNION AND THE RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH (1943-1964)**

Abstract: Based on Russian documentary and historiographic sources, the article deals with the policy of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of the Soviet Union towards the Russian Orthodox Church, in the period between 1943 and 1964. It highlights the ideological foundations of the Bolshevik policy and also the way the party, in its political moves, paid attention to the historical context and, as a result of some strategic reasons, halted its systematic persecutions against the church.

Keywords: *Russian Orthodox Church, Communist (Bolshevik) Party, persecutions, Stalin, Hruscirov.*

**PARTIDUL COMUNIST AL UNIUNII SOVIETICE ȘI BISERICA ORTODOXĂ RUSĂ
(1943-1964)**

Rezumat: Articolul prezintă politica Partidului Comunist (Bolșevic) din Uniunea Sovietică față de Biserica Ortodoxă Rusă, în perioada 1943-1964, pe baza surselor documentare și istoriografice ruse. Sunt evidențiate fundamentele ideologice ale politicii bolșevice, dar și modul în care politica partidului a ținut seama de contextul istoric, renunțând, din rațiuni tactice, în anumite contexte istorice, la persecuțiile cu caracter sistematic la adresa bisericii.

Cuvinte cheie: *Biserica Ortodoxă Rusă, Partidul Comunist (Bolșevic), persecuție, Stalin, Hrușcirov.*

The politics of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as far as religion and education were concerned was based on the doctrinal and programmatic pillars of the Marxist theory regarding society which underlined the subordination of the religious issue to the fundamental problem of the revolution. In *On the labour*

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party's attitude towards religion, V.I. Lenin wrote: "Religion is the opium of the people: this assertion of Marx is the corner stone of the entire Marxist ideology regarding religion. All modern religions and churches, all religious organisation of any kind are always considered by Marxism as bourgeois reaction bodies, used to protect the exploitation and stultification of the working class"¹.

After grabbing power in Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks did not hesitate in applying Lenin's vision regarding the attitude of the labour party towards religion. "The party's activity towards the final destruction of all religious cults within the masses of workers and peasants, mentioned the resolution of the 12th Congress of the C.P. (b) in Russia, gains, inevitably and before everything else, the nature of a profound and systematic propaganda which unveils clearly and convincingly for any worker and peasant the lie and the contradiction between his interests as related to any religion, denounces the connection between the various religious groups and the interests of the dominating classes and replaces the reminiscences of the religious perceptions with the clear scientific understanding of nature and human society"². Starting from this principle, the Communist Party was aiming at freeing the soviet man from the influence of the religious institutions and outlined the task of liquidating "the connection existing for centuries between the church and the state", so as later to eliminate religion from the conscience of the population.

It is a known fact that the Bolsheviks acknowledged and promoted violence as a universal method of solving the political, economical, social and ideological problems. The Bolsheviks' repressive policy also focused on subordinating the Church to the soviet state. The Russian historians distinguish six phases of this policy. The four phases comprise the 1917 – 1940 period, when the terror against the church becomes an official social policy. The Bolsheviks created an efficient antireligious propaganda system in the entire country, "separated" the church from the state and, in fact, undermined the material basis for the existence of the church. Prominent religious personalities were physically liquidated, the system of camps where many priests were sent started to function. The churches were shut down on a large scale, many of them being destroyed³.

The 5th phase (September 1943 - the 1950's) – was characterised by a relaxation of the retaliations. I.V. Stalin himself communicates with hierarchs of the church: "The Church may count on the full support of the government"⁴. The 6th stage (the 1960's) is characterised by a come-back to the administrative methods of fighting against religion: the reactivation of the atheist propaganda, the

¹ V.I. Lenin, *Ob otnošenii rabochei partii c religii*, <http://libelli.ru/works/17-3.htm>

² Iz rezoluții XII ieșda RKP(b) „Opostanovlenii antireligioznoi aghitații i propagandî”, http://www.apologetics.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159:2011-08-20-20-28-23&catid=49:2011-07-27-12-39-55&Itemid=69

³ V.V. Corneev, *Presledovania Russcoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v 50-60-h godah XX veka*. http://www.orthedu.ru/ch_hist/hi_rpz/10589pre.htm

⁴ *Ibidem*.

closing of churches, parishes, monasteries, including the Pechersky Cathedral in Kiev, lawsuits on religious grounds⁵.

In order to better understand the evolution of the PCUS's attitude in its relationship with the Church during the years of Khrushchev's regime, we shall briefly present this situation in the years preceding the "Khrushchevian un-freezing", years when the Kremlin significantly changed the church-related policy.

The war period (1941-1945) opened a new page in the history of the relations between the soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church. For the first time since the foundation of the soviet state the authorities tried to shift from a policy of repression, which aimed the destruction of the Russian Orthodox Church as a social institution, to a dialogue with it. This situation allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to expand its influence in the country, first of all due to the ample patriotic activity.

The fundamental change in the position of the leadership of the USSR regarding the religious issues took place in September 1943, after I.V. Stalin's meeting with the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. This meeting and, later on, the Bishops Synod, who elected Serghie (Stargorodsky) as metropolitan bishop, marked a new period in the history of the relations between the soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church's and the believers' patriotic position, the revival and the amplification of the religious feelings of the population during the war years but also the need for unity of the USSR citizens in order to push the enemy back, on the one hand, as well as the soviet officials' understanding of the necessity to satisfy the religious needs of the believers, on the other hand, contributed to the change of the state's policy regarding the Church. There were also reasons coming from the foreign policy area which influenced the change of the soviet state's relations with the Church. First and foremost, it was necessary to create the circumstances for the consolidation of the anti-Hitler coalition and for the support of the antifascist movement in Europe. An important role in establishing the dialogue between the state and the Church was played by the ambitious plans of the soviet leadership to use the Russian Orthodox Church's authority in order to intensify the growing influence of the Soviet Union in the Christian countries. Forcing the improvement of the relations between the soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church, especially in 1943, was not accidental. The meeting of the "three giants" in Teheran was about to take place. Of course, the

⁵ *Ibidem*; V.I. Pasat considers that the post-war policy of the Bolshevik party regarding the Church includes the following stages: 1943-1948/49 (from the Stalin-Serghii "concordat" to the first attempt to "tighten the screw"); 1949-1954 (the phase of the relatively stable relations and of the "moderate limitation of the church's activity"); 1955-1957 (the relative improvement of the church's situation within the "un-freezing" context; 1968-1961 and 1961-1964 (the "Khrushchevian" persecutions of the church), V.I. Pasat, *Pravoslavie v Moldavii: vlasti, țercovi, veriușie, 1940-1991, Sobranie documento v 4 tomah*, Tom 1, Moscva, ROSSPÂN, 2009, p. 37.

leadership of the Soviet Union had to show by deeds a real liberalisation of the relations between the Church and the state⁶.

Consequently, there was a revival of thousands of parishes, of the religious education system etc. During the Second World War and the post-war years, the Russian Orthodox Church managed to significantly improve its financial situation, to consolidate its authority and influence in the USSR and abroad. However, in spite of the fact that the soviet government took several measures so as to increase the rights of the religious organizations, the Church did not obtain too much freedom. The Church's activities were placed under the strict control of the state, turning into a docile institution in its relation to the government in Kremlin⁷.

In order to watch the activities of the Church, in October 1943 the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church attached to the Soviet of the People's Commissars of the Soviet Union. Officially, the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church was assigned the role of mediator between the Soviet Government and the Moscow Patriarchate. Actually, the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church was an important political body set up to apply the new policy of the state in relation to the church. The first president of the Committee for the Russian Orthodox Church was G.G. Karpov, who ran the institution till 1960⁸.

But, even in this context, the party manifested an indulgent position towards the Church rather than a hostile one. To illustrate the situation we would like to mention the fact that the resolution of the Central Committee of the CP(b)SU on September 27, 1944, "Referring to the organization of the scientific and enlightenment propaganda" did not assign clear tasks regarding the atheist scientific education⁹. By the end of 1940s, the expressions "antireligious activity" or "atheist activity" had disappeared from the lexicon of the party's and government's documents¹⁰.

⁶ T.I.Ciurilina, *Otnoşenia Sovetskogo gosudarstava i Ruskoj pravoslavnoi tserkvi na Dalnem Vostoke v period 1941-1964 gg.*, <http://disserat.com/content/otnoşenza-sovetskogo-gosudarstva-i-russkoi-pravoslavnoi-tserkvy-na-dalnem-vostoke-v-period#ixzz2HEU2PEUL>

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Carpov Gh. Gr. (1897-1967). He graduated the theological seminar. During the civil war he fought in the Red Army. In the 1920s he attended the classes of Petrograd University but he did not graduate it. Later on he was a party and state official. In 1937-1938 he is the head of the Pscov section of NKVD. Since 1940, within NKVD, he led the department for church problems administration. In 1943, he is a colonel in NKVD. In the period between 09.1943 - 02.1960, he is the president of the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church attached to the USSR government. In 1960 he retires as a major-general.

⁹ See: Postanovlenie RCP(b) *Ob organizatii naucino-prosvetitelisoi propaganda*, Sputnik aghitatora, 1944, № 19-20, cc. 28-29. http://www.apologetics.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159:2011-08-20-20-28-23&catid=49:2011-07-27-12-39-55&Itemid=69.

¹⁰ V.V. Corneev, *Presledovania Ruskoj Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v 50-60-h godah XX veka*. http://www.orthedu.ru/ch_hist/hi_rpz/10589pre.htm.

After the Second World War, a certain part of the state and party leadership intended to push the Church to the outskirts of the public life. However, between 1948 and 1949, the attempts to change the state's policy towards the Church were not coherent, yet they finished the state-Church relations normalization process. At the end of the 1940s – the beginning of the 1950s, the amplitude of the retaliations grew significantly. Under these circumstances, the religious sphere was gradually pushed towards the borders of society. The Council for the Russian Orthodox Church lost its initial importance.

Stalin's death, on March 5, 1953, came at a time when the Church, as we mentioned above, had gained a relatively respectable position among the population of USSR. It is true that in the 1930s Stalin almost destroyed the Church but he also created the basis for the restoration of its image. The humble speech of Patriarch Alexii (Simansky) at Stalin's funeral is, for sure, a heavy document of Stalin's times but it also contains an honest appreciation for the possibility of the Church to exist after 1943.

“The Great leader of our people, said the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (R.O.C.), Iosif Stalin, is dead. A great social and moral force disappeared: the force in which our people felt its own strength, which guided it in its creative works and in the factories; a force which comforted the people along the years. There is not a field where the deep look of the great Leader has not reached. Scientists would wonder at his deep scientific knowledge in various fields, at his brilliant scientific generalizations; militaries would wonder at his military genius; people of different professions would receive his powerful support and his valuable advice. Like a genius, he discovered in any case what was invisible and inaccessible for the common mind His name, as a peace defender in the world, and his glorious deeds will live forever. ... And we, gathered here to pray for him, can not turn a deaf ear to his permanent well-meaning attitude, always ready to help to satisfy the needs of our church. No problem that we presented him with was ever rejected; he met all our requests. And, due to his authority, our government has done a lot of good and useful things for our Church ...”¹¹

It is obvious that it could not be the case of a “free” Church and a religious freedom under Stalin's Bolshevik regime. The Council for the Russian Orthodox Church was holding the Church tight in its hands.

After I.V. Stalin's death, a new guiding line appeared in the history of the Church-state relations. Starting with 1954, the aspects related to the Church-state relations are gradually shifted towards the ideological field. In spite of all these, the period 1953-1958 is generally characterised by a religious enlivenment and relaxation of the political climate. The process of liberalisation, of unveiling Stalinism, made it possible that, in the spring of 1956, many priests were released

¹¹ *Reci moscovscogo patriarha Alexia(Simanscogo) pered panihidoi po I.V. Stalina, scazannaia im v patriaršem sobore v deni ego pohoron 9 marta 1953 g.*, “Jurnal Moscovscoi Patriarhii”, 1953, nr. 4, p. 3. <http://catacomb.org.ua/modules.php?name=Pages&go=page&pid=1182>.

from the prisoner camps, part of them being reenlisted in the clergy. From 1954 to 1956, 25 priests returned from the same camps in the parishes from the Moldavian S.S.R.¹². The aftermaths of their detention were watched by P. N. Romenski, the representative of the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church in the Moldavian S.S.R. “Their majority, stated the Soviet official, behave extremely precociously, leaving the impression that they interested in nothing else but their formal duties as priests. They do not communicate with other priests and keep a certain distance from the parishioners, as if they were not related to any other activities”¹³.

The revival of religiousness worried the authorities. Among N. S. Khrushchev’s collaborators there many supporters of the “harsh” approach as far as the Church was concerned. Little by little, the issue of the “revival of religiousness” becomes a debate topic within the party and governmental structure, at all levels.

The interval since Stalin’s death to 1958 may be considered as a training stage for the frontal attack against religion in general. If Stalin and Molotov, in their policy regarding the Church, needed no approval from the CP(b)SU as, in the relation with the Patriarchy, they represented the soviet state, starting with 1953 the problems of this policy are gradually transferred to the party’s sphere of influence and included among the objectives and tasks of the atheist education¹⁴. Two approaches regarding the problems of the Church distinguished at the top of the CPSU: one – antireligious, another – “official”. The Patriarchy was perceived as a distinct part of the USSR’s system of governance. The 1950s witnessed a bitter fight between the supporters of these approaches. The government, on its turn, distanced itself, further and further, from the problems of the religious field, being willing to execute the directives of that part of the party elite which would have won the political dispute regarding the Church¹⁵.

On the other hand, Stalin’s death generated certain fears among the hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate. The worries of the clergy were not without reason. In 1953, the publishing of the third volume of the *Articles and speeches of Metropolitan Bishop Nicolai* was forbidden, and the article *Together with the people* (*Вместе с народом*), dealing with the meeting between Stalin and the church delegations¹⁶, was withdrawn from the “Журнал Московской Патриархии” magazine (“The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate”). In this context, Gh. Karpov requested some explanations from the Central Committee of

¹² V.I. Pasat, *Pravoslavie v Moldavii: vlasti, țercovi, veruiușie, 1940-1991*, Sbornic documentov, Tom 2, Moscva, ROSSPĀN, 2010, p. 52.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ A.B. Vinnicov, *Ottepeli, (1943-1960)*, Ciasti 2, „Sibirsaia pravoslavnaia gazeta”, nr. 16, 2003, <http://www.ihtus.ru/12003/hi60.shtml>.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

the CPSU as he wanted to find out “what line of actions should be followed”. He did not receive any answer¹⁷.

On March 27th, 1954, the heads of the Propaganda and Science departments of the Central Committee of the CPSU handed N.S. Khrushchev the document “On the major deficiencies from the field of antireligious and scientific propaganda” in which, exaggerating the real situation, they showed a rapid growth of the Church’s influence and the collapse of the atheist education¹⁸. The Central Committee, led by N.S. Khrushchev, reacted immediately. On July 7th, 1954, the CC of the CPSU adopted the decision “On the major deficiencies from the field of atheist and scientific propaganda and the measures to improve it”. In this document, the leadership of the CPUS actually revised and condemned the entire previous policy regarding the Church area. The suggestion was made to go back to the “offensive against the religious reminiscences” employed before the war¹⁹.

The Central Committee pointed out the fact that many party organisations did not manage, in a satisfactory manner, the control over the scientific and atheist propaganda among the population and, as a consequence, this very important field of ideological activity being in a deplorable situation²⁰. At the same time, the document further mentioned, the Church and various religious sects had enlivened their activity, had consolidated their personnel and, having adapted to the circumstances, were strongly propagating the religious ideology within the less evolved strata of the population²¹.

Starting from these observations, the Central Committee of the CPSU forced the party structures “to stop neglecting the antireligious activity, to carry on the atheist scientific propaganda ... It is necessary to remember Lenin’s instructions according to which, from our party’s perspective, we can not consider religion a private issue ...”²² The leadership of the party wanted the antireligious activity to be “systematically promoted, by all means, through persuasion, with explanations, individual attitude and understanding for the believers”²³. In order to consolidate the atheist and scientific propaganda, various forms and methods of ideological and political influence over the masses had to be resorted to in their mother tongue. The ministries of education from the union republics and the Ministry of Higher Education of the USSR were forced to intensify the education work among the pupils and students, in the spirit of the militant materialism, to systematically

¹⁷ Șcarovskii M.V., *Ruscaia Pravoslavnaia Țercovi pri Staline i Hrușceove (Gosudarstvenno-țercovnâe otnoșenia v SSSR v 1939—1964 godax)*, Moscva, Crutițcoe Patriarșee Podvorie, 2000,

http://korolev.msk.ru/books/dc/EUbu_Ya_bu_S_U_Ya_b_S_ya_bU_uYa1649.txt.

¹⁸ *Ruscaia Pravoslavnaia Țercovi v sovetscoe vremea (1917-1991). Glava 12. Predvesnichi novâh gononii na Țercovi.* <http://www.klikovo.ru/db/book/msg/17849>.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem*, doc. 163.

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

organize discussions and conferences on scientific and atheist topics in schools and higher education institutions, to broadcast scientific movies. The teaching of school subjects (history, literature, natural sciences, physics, chemistry, etc), had to be perfused with atheist content, and the university curricula of dialectic and historical materialism had to include topics from the field of scientific atheism...²⁴

The offensive against the Church upset millions of believers and clergymen of various denominations in the Soviet Union. A certain tension had been created in the relations between the state and the Church and it manifested both in the internal activity of the soviet state, and in the external one. Not all soviet leaders supported this policy which had generated negative reactions from other states as well²⁵.

Under these circumstances and due to the subsequent negative reaction of the clergy, N.S. Khrushchev and his supporters were forced to step back, refraining, momentarily, from attacks against the Church. On November 10th, 1954, the Central Committee of the CPSU adopts the decision "On the errors of the developing of the scientific and atheist propaganda among the population"²⁶. This time, the Central Committee forced the regional committees of the CPSU, the Central Committees of the communist parties from the union republics and all party organisations to firmly eliminate the errors in the atheist propaganda and accept no offences, under any circumstances, against the believers or the Church servants. Moreover, the party structures were asked to avoid the administrative inferences in the activities of the Church, being reminded that the offending actions against the Church, clergy and religious citizens were incompatible with the party and state policy regarding the implementation of the scientific atheism and that they were against the USSR Constitution which offered soviet citizens the freedom of conscience²⁷.

The Central Committee made it clear that "all kinds of administrative measures and offending attacks against the believers and the clergy may generate only damage and contribute to the consolidation of their religious prejudices"²⁸.

On the other hand though, it was mentioned that "the correction of errors committed in the antireligious activity should not lead to a diminution of the propaganda of the scientific atheism which is part of the communist education and its purpose is to spread the scientific, materialist knowledge within the masses, to free the believers from the religious influence"²⁹.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Nicolai Mitrohin, *Sovetscaia vlasti, țercovi și veruiușcie v poslevoinnți period*, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/3/mil10.html>.

²⁶ Postanovlenie ŢK KPSS ot 10 noiabrea 1954 g. "Ob oșibcah v provedenii naucino-ateisticescoi propagandı sredi naselenia". . <http://www.klikovo.ru/db/book/msg/17849>.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

In many ways this document was the opposite of the decision in July and it generated a wave of telegrams of gratitude from the clergy and the believers from various eparchies. Nectarii, the bishop of Chişinău, labelled the decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU on November 10, 1954 as “remarkable”. “It stirred the interest of the clergy and we are glad ... Now the priest will no longer be mocked, a phenomenon which has taken place quite often lately, especially after the papers published materials against the believers. It is right that atheism be propagated scientifically and culturally”³⁰.

The party leadership in the Republic of Moldova reacted to the decision on November 10, 1954 with a set of “magic” actions: it would report on various working meetings, identify and correct the errors, explain, get the press involved, intensify the control, programme activities, etc. But, if atheist activities had represented in fact a bluff that far in order to report “higher”, or an inadequate behaviour in the relations with the believers³¹, now, when the situation was unclear, discouraging, the party structures in SSRM accepted to boycott them. They approved the list of lecturers but the lessons were either badly organized, or not organized at all ...³² At Basarabiasca railway station, the party committee recorded the scripts of the atheist lecturers and, each and every time the workers were summoned to the planning meetings, they would listen to a recorded text on atheist topics. The atheist lecturers who were asked to speak “live” with the public felt extremely insecure. In Cimişlia region the lecturer who had delivered the lesson from a piece of paper was asked “Did Adam and Eve really exist? Did Jesus exist?” and he, embarrassed, answered that he had to consult with the regional party committee³³.

The offensive against the Church weakened in the following years and that is why the 1955-1957 period constituted, in D.V.Pospelovski’s opinion, the most “liberal” period for the believers, after 1947³⁴. The number of church servants went up along with a rejuvenation of the priests corps, the number of persons under 40 was, in 1957, 11.2%³⁵. Starting with 1955, the participation of the representatives of the Patriarchy of Moscow in the receptions held by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and by foreign embassies became a regular one. This offered the hierarchs the possibility to communicate directly with the state leaders in order to present the latter with the Church’s activities and requests. The Church had also obtained certain concessions. In 1955, the Council of Ministers adopted the decision “On the modification of the opening procedure of praying establishments” which allowed

³⁰ V.I. Pasat, *Pravoslavie v Moldavii: vlasti, țercovi, veruiușie, 1940-1991*, Sbornic documentov, Tom 2, Moscva, ROSSPĀN, 2010, p. 227.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 288.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

³⁴ Pospelovskii D.V., *Russcaia pravoslavnaia țercovi v XX veche, Moscva, Respublica*, 1995, http://www.odinblago.ru/istoriya_rpc/pospelovskiy/10_2/.

³⁵ A.B. Vinnicov, *Ottepeli, (1943-1960)*, Ciasti 2, „Sibirscaia pravoslavnaia gazeta”, nr. 16, 2003, <http://www.ihtus.ru/12003/hi60.shtml>.

for the registration of those religious communities that were active without having received an official approval. As a result, the number of holy establishments in USSR increased. Moreover, it was for the first time in the USSR that the Church was allowed to print the Bible and the Gospel. In 1956, these were printed in a total number of 50 thousand copies³⁶.

Under the circumstances of the “unfreezing”, the monasteries in the Moldavian SSR improved their economic situation. On July 1st, 1954, the 15 monasteries active in MSSR had in their possession 636.66 hectares of arable land, 45 hectares of orchards and 45 hectares of vineyard³⁷. A monastery owned an average of 42.5 hectares of agricultural land. In P. Romenski’s opinion, the economic consolidation of the monasteries was the result of changing the law regarding the agricultural tax applied to the monasteries’ income. According to the law adopted in 1953, rubbles per hectare. Afterwards, the taxation was differentiated, the taxes being paid for orchards, vineyards and gardens³⁸.

In the first stage of the unfreezing, the religious celebrations in the MSSR enjoyed the large participation of the population. The Secretary of the CC of the MCP, E. S. Postovoi, considered the religious celebrations as a “permanent calamity” of the republic. “There is no secret, comrades, said the top communist of the party, that during the religious holidays many kolkhoz front rankers – team leaders, brigadiers, farm leaders, deputies of the village soviets, communists, comsomolists and even leaders of the party and comsomolist organizations – are wearing their smartest clothes. On these days, the villages are adorned, the festive atmosphere is present everywhere, which, we have to admit, does not happen on revolutionary holydays”³⁹.

After the 20th congress and Plenary of the CC of the CPSU in June 1957, where N.S. Khrushchev had obtained an important victory against his opponents, the fight against religion restarted with an ever growing intensity. This political course was influenced by economic factors as well. During that time, the leadership of the U.S.S.R. was looking for sources of re-establishing the financial potency of the soviet state, significantly diminished as a result of the “Khrushchevian experiments”. The eyes were fixed on the Church’s resources as well⁴⁰.

In 1957 the annual of the History, Religion and Atheism Museum in Leningrad is published. The fact is worth mentioning that the pages of the first issue of this magazine still used the phrase *atheist education* and not *atheist propaganda*. It was precisely due to this that they stopped editing the “Science and religion” magazine, dedicated entirely to the propaganda of atheism within the

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ V.I. Pasat, *Pravoslavie v Moldavii: vlasti, țercovi, veruișie, 1940-1991*, Sbornic documentov, Tom 2, Moscva, ROSSPĀN, 2010, p. 227.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 400.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 873-874.

⁴⁰ A.B. Vinnicov, *Ottepeli, (1943-1960)*, Ciasti 2, „Sibirsaia pravoslavnaia gazeta”, nr. 16, 2003, <http://www.ihtus.ru/12003/hi60.shtml>.

masses and which had been announced as early as 1954, but was published in 1959, appearing, in 1978, in 400 thousand copies⁴¹.

The first wide actions against religion were initiated in October 1958 and were focused mainly on the assets owned by the Church. The most important document from this point of view was the secret decision made by the CC of the CPSU on October 4th, 1958 “On the written statement of the propaganda and agitation department of the CC of the CPSU for the unional republics regarding the deficiencies of the scientific and atheist propaganda”. This written statement mentioned the fact that the clergy had recently intensified their activity... The income of the Church grew larger. In 1956, as compared to 1955, the income of the Ukrainian eparchy had grown with 130 million rubbles, the income of the Moldavian eparchy – with 13,521 thousand rubbles...⁴². The clergy, by means of the believers, asked the state structures to open new churches. The numbers and the activity of the sectarians were growing. It was said in this memorandum that a series of religious centers resorted to those priests who had been released from prison, hostile to the soviet power, and that was why they were so active⁴³. The fervent activity of priests and sectarians was explained by the fact that the party organizations underrated the antireligious work⁴⁴. The memorandum was delivered to all party and state field structures, forcing them “to carry on the offensive against the religious remnants in the conscience and daily life of the soviet people”⁴⁵. The unsigned article *Let's intensify the scientific and atheist propaganda* in “The Communist” magazine mentioned that “now, when the soviet people is mobilising all its efforts to achieve the great goals of building the communism, the fight against religion, as well as against other remnants of the past, has a significant present interest”⁴⁶. On October 16th, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union adopted the first decisions against the Church: “On the monasteries in the USSR” and “On the taxation of the income obtained by the enterprises of the eparchial departments and the income of monasteries”. According to the first decision, monasteries were forbidden to hire employees and the number of the establishments and of their lands were to be reduced three times. The tax on constructions and the ground rent, which had been cancelled in March 1945, were reintroduced; the taxes of church lands, including the local cemeteries, were

⁴¹ Pospelovskii D.V., *Russcaia pravoslavnaia țercovi v XX veche, Moscva, Respublica*, 1995, http://www.odinblago.ru/istoriya_rpc/pospelovskiy/10_2/.

⁴² *Zapiska Otdela propagandî i aghitații ȚK KPSS po soiuznâm respublicam „O nedostatcah naucino-ateisticescoi propagandî”*, g. Moscva, 12 sentiabrea 1958 g., <http://www.rusoir.ru/03print/02/239/>.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Informația Otdela propagandî i aghitații ȚK KPSS po soiuznâm respublicam v ȚK KPSS o meropriatiâh po usileniu naucino-ateisticescoi propagandî.*, g. Moscva, 29 noiabrea 1958 g., <http://www.rusoir.ru/03print/02/241/>.

⁴⁶ “The Communist”, 1958, nr.17, p. 91-98. <http://www.klikovo.ru/db/book/msg/17849>.

increased⁴⁷. The tax on the income of the candle-producing workshops was doubled⁴⁸. Shortly after, the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church's business approved the plan of closing down a large number of churches and monasteries in 1959-1960.

The offensive against the Church generated deep resentments among millions of believers and the clergy. An acute crisis began in the Church-state relations. Some political leaders in Moscow did not support this course of actions which had generated a negative state of mind abroad as well. Under these circumstances, the USSR leadership was forced to act so as to purge this state of mind.

In spite of all these, after the 20th Congress of the CPSU and especially after the Plenary of the Central Committee in June 1957, where Khrushchev annihilated his opponents, the pressure against religion was exerted in an even higher degree. As a result of some decisions of the Central Committee of the CPSU, adopted in 1958-1962, the governmental structures, including the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Prosecutor's Office took some measures regarding the administrative closing of many churches, religious communities, parishes, monasteries and religious schools. For instance, the number of Orthodox parishes in 1963 was reduced by more than half as compared to 1953. In 1959-1963, more than half of the churches in the bishopry of Moscow were closed⁴⁹. Five seminaries were closed. In 1959, the Russian Church owned 47 monasteries but at the middle of the 1960s they were only 16. The number of monks was reduced from 3,000 to 1,500. In 1961, the Russian Orthodox Church had 8,252 priests and 809 deacons. Six years later, in 1967 there were 6,694 priests and 653 deacons. In 1963, the Kiev-Pechersk cathedral was closed⁵⁰.

At the same time, the number of believers remained almost the same. The number of religious ceremonies was growing. Even the leadership of the Communist Party had to admit that, in spite of the measures taken, the process of "liberating" the population from religious prejudices "was unfolding very slowly"⁵¹. On its turn, the weak impact of the offensive against religion generated the discontent of some officials from the soviet political leadership, especially Khrushchev's, encouraging them to move to the direct confrontation with the leaders of the religious institutions. The situation reached the point where, starting with the beginning of the 1960s, prisoners taken from within the believers and the clergy reappeared in the USSR, being arrested for their religious convictions. In the period 1961-1964, 1,234 persons were convicted on religious grounds in the USSR. Many of them were sent to prisons, camps or exiled⁵².

⁴⁷ Alexei Leonov, *Hruščiovskii udar po pravoslaviiu. Ob antițercovnoi campanii 1958-1964 gg.* http://www.stoletie.ru/territoriya_istorii/hrushevskiy_udar_po_pravoslaviju_2008-10-17.htm.

⁴⁸ Yapisca zamestitelia predsedatelia Soveta po delam RPT P.G. Ceredniaca v TK KPSS ot 4 octiabria 1958 g., Mossca, 18 noiabria 1958 g. http://www.rusoir.ru/index_print.php?url=/03print/02/240/.

⁴⁹ V.V. Corneev, *Presledovania Russcoi Pravoslavnoi Tercvi v 50-60-h godah XX veka.* http://www.orthedu.ru/ch_hist/hi_rpz/10589pre.htm.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁵¹ *Ibidem.*

⁵² *Ibidem.*

In August 1970, V. Furov, the deputy president of the Committee for Cults of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, sent the Department for Propaganda of the Central Committee of the CPSU the note "On the results of the restructuring of the Church administration and of the amplification of control over the activity of religious organizations", in which he presented the actions taken during the previous 10 years in order to limit the activity of the Church. The soviet official noted that the Council of Ministers of the USSR had adopted a special resolution on January 16th, 1961 "On the amplification of control over the activities of the Church" based on which "a number of laws, adopted during the Second World War and the first years after the war which made some concessions to the clergy, were cancelled". The Leninist legislation regarding the cults was entirely reinstated, said Furov. The lower rank state official from the USSR government noticed that the activities of the state authorities in the last years included: "Firstly, a radical restructuring of the Church administration, the removal of the clergy from the administrative, financial and economic sectors, from the religious associations, facts which took their power away and undermined the clergy's authority in the eyes of the believers; secondly, the reinstatement in leading positions of the religious associations of those persons elected from within the believers, which corresponds entirely to the requirements of the soviet legislation regarding the cults; thirdly, the interdiction of all charitable actions of the church used in order to attract new groups of believers and to consolidate the parishes; fourthly, the elimination of redemptions for the clergy as far as the income tax is concerned, taxing them as small individual producers, the dissolving and liquidation of the syndical organizations from the religious organizations involved, under the priests' guidance, in a competition for the best services delivered to the parishioners; fifthly, the protection of children against the influence of religion, which completely stopped the attraction of the youth to the church choirs and service of the clergy; sixthly, the remuneration of the clergy with a fix salary, irrespective of the number of ceremonies and services delivered, the limitation of the clergy's material incentives, fact which led to a reduction of their activity. This is the content of the reform of the church which permitted an amplified control over the clergy and its activity so as to limit the influence of the church" – concluded Furov⁵³.

The note contained a cynical acknowledgement of the fact that many activities had been promoted by means of the "church's hands". I even gave some examples. The removal of the clergy from the financial and economic activity was the result of the decision of the Russian Orthodox Church Synod on the recommendation of the Council for cults. The closing of monasteries and seminars was done on the relevant recommendations of the Council of the Patriarchy⁵⁴. In doing so, the document ascertained the complete subordination of the Russian Church in its relation with the soviet state.

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁴ *Ibidem.*