

Soviet Religious Policy in Transcarpathia (Western Ukraine), 1944-1989

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This article examines Soviet religious policy in Transcarpathia from the establishment of Soviet rule in 1944-1946 to the restoration of the legal rights of the Greek Catholic Church in 1989. Drawing on archival documents from the Transcarpathian Regional State Archives (TRSA), the Archives of the Transcarpathian Reformed Diocese (ATRD), the Central State Archive of the Highest Authorities and Administration of Ukraine (CSAHAAU), and the István Bendász Greek Catholic Library and Archives (BIGKKL), the study analyzes the legal, administrative, ideological, and coercive instruments used to restrict religious life. It traces the separation of church and state, the nationalization of ecclesiastical property and denominational schools, restrictions on religious education, anti-religious propaganda, surveillance of clergy and believers, and the bureaucratic control of congregations. Particular attention is devoted to the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo, the policy of “reunification” with the Russian Orthodox Church, the arrests and deportations of clergy, the liquidation of the eparchy in 1949, and the subsequent underground existence of the church. The evidence shows that Soviet policy combined institutional exclusion, material dispossession, ideological pressure, surveillance, and repression, while religious communities continued to preserve confessional practice under increasingly restricted and, in the Greek Catholic case, clandestine conditions.

Keywords: Transcarpathia, Soviet religious policy, Greek Catholic Church, atheism, church-state relations

Introduction

Religious institutions occupied an important place in the social and cultural life of Transcarpathia. Under Soviet rule, however, organized religion was treated as incompatible with the ideological objectives of the communist state. Soviet policy sought to reduce the social influence of churches, restrict their activity to narrowly defined religious functions, and separate religious institutions from education and public life (Bohán, 2007, pp. 113-142). Transcarpathia came under Soviet control between September 26 and October 28, 1944 (Botlik, 1997, p. 274), after which religious holidays, church institutions, and denominational education were progressively subjected to political and administrative intervention.

Previous scholarship has examined individual dimensions of this process. The history and persecution of the Greek Catholic Church have been addressed by S. Bendas and D. Bendas, I. Bendász and D. Bendász, J. Botlik, A. Gőnczi, L. Puskás, M. Riskó, G. Szabó and others; the Reformed Church by G. Fodor and L. Gulácsy; the Roman Catholic Church by A. Majnek; and the broader political, educational, and regional context by L. Brenzovics, Cs. Fedinec, R. Oficinskij, J. Penckőfer, T. Stark, G. Dupka, E. Pilipkó and I. Marosi. These studies

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provide the historiographical framework for the present analysis (S. Bendas & D. Bendas, 1999; Bendász, 1999; 2012; 2016; I. Bendász & D. Bendász, 1994; Bohán, 2007; Botlik, 1997; 2000; Brenzovics, 2009; Dupka, 1993; 2017; Fedinec, 1999; Fodor, 2016; Gönczi, 2016; Gulácsy, 2009; Majnek, 1998; Marosi, 2020; Oficinskij, Penckófer, & Stark, 2010; Ortutay, 1990; Pekar, 2003; Pilipkó, 2004; Puskás, 1998; 2000; Riskó, 1995; Szabó, 1999; Szantner, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to identify the principal features of religious life and Soviet religious policy in Transcarpathia, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which the authorities limited church activity and to the responses of local religious communities.

Sources and Method

The study is based on the analysis of archival documents and relevant historical literature, following the principle of historicism and contextual source criticism. The principal archival materials are held in the Transcarpathian Regional State Archives (TRSA), the Archives of the Transcarpathian Reformed Diocese (ATRD), the Central State Archive of the Highest Authorities and Administration of Ukraine (CSAHAAU), and the István Bendász Greek Catholic Library and Archives (BIGKKL). Archival references retain the fonds/opis/file and folio or page notation used by the respective repositories.

The contribution of the study lies in bringing materials from these different archival collections into a single analysis of Soviet religious policy in Transcarpathia. The sources make it possible to examine not only formal decrees but also the everyday administrative mechanisms of surveillance, reporting, taxation, property control, restrictions on religious instruction, and pressure on clergy and believers.

Administrative Control, Secularization, and Anti-Religious Policy

On January 24, 1946, a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR brought Soviet legislation into force in the Transcarpathian region. Restrictions on religious communities were subsequently tightened. State support previously paid to clergy was withdrawn, while the loss of congregational property and the impoverishment of church members placed additional burdens on local communities (Fodor, 2016, p. 181).

On December 5, 1944, the authorities introduced measures separating church and state and church and school. During the 1944-1945 school year, only one religious-instruction class per week was permitted (Botlik, 1997, p. 276).

In March 1945, responsibility for registering births, marriages, and deaths was transferred from churches to state bodies. The People's Council's Decree on Family and Marriage made civil marriage legally sufficient; a church wedding could take place only after the civil ceremony (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 288).

Decree No. 58, issued in Uzhhorod on April 20, 1945, declared that the upbringing and education of young people in Transcarpathian Ukraine were a state responsibility and concentrated executive authority in this sphere in the office of the Public Education Commissioner of the People's Council (Fedinec, 1999, p. 38). Denominational schools were nationalized (TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, od. zb. 1, a), and religious education was prohibited. F. M. Rasput'ko, the regional commissioner for religious cults, demanded that "persons in the service of the cult who organized children into groups for the purpose of studying theology" be punished "with the full rigor of Soviet laws" (CSAHAAU, f. 4648, op. 4, od. zb. 214, ark. 74-77). Nevertheless, religious instruction continued in a number of localities and was subject to punitive measures. A district party report dated August 20,

1957 complained that Roman Catholic, Reformed, and other religious communities were attracting young people, cited Sunday-school activity in Perekhrestia and private religious instruction in Vylok, and called for intensified anti-church propaganda (TRSA, f. 454, op. 7, od. zb. 4, ark. 114).

Churches were not recognized as legal entities. In 1945-1946, ecclesiastical, parochial, and denominational school property was nationalized. Congregations were required to rent from the state the church buildings that had formerly belonged to them and were also subject to taxation. Failure to pay could result in closure (Botlik, 1997, p. 279). Residents of church schools, convents, and parish buildings were evicted, and in several localities priests and pastors had to find rented accommodation. Communities that sought to retain their churches faced substantial financial burdens (Bohán, 2007, pp. 113-142; Dupka, 1993, p. 39). Some church buildings were converted into atheist museums, gymnasiums, clubs, warehouses, or workshops (Majnek, 1998, p. 55).

Anti-religious education also included individual ideological work with schoolchildren from families regarded as strongly religious. Teachers were expected to present churches as anti-progressive and anti-scientific (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 288). Church attendance was incompatible with the public expectations placed on teachers, uniformed personnel, and persons in senior positions.

Resistance to church closures was reported in several villages. In response, the Transcarpathian regional leadership of the Communist Party of Ukraine demanded stronger action from local Soviet officials. One instruction stated that “the local party organization must be strengthened and the opposers must be held accountable, the church must be closed and transformed into a cultural space” (TRSA, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 3485, pp. 97-99).

A substantial number of priests and pastors were imprisoned or deported to the Gulag. Clergy who remained often had to serve three or four villages and traveled between congregations on foot or by bicycle in both winter and summer, frequently under materially difficult conditions.

Religious ceremonies outside church buildings—including pilgrimages and processions—were restricted or prohibited. Religious gatherings were permitted only on Sundays and public holidays as part of church services (ATRD, Supreme Authority Circulars, f. I, 10 C, February 4, 1957).

Under later regulations, if a village community approved the arrangement, each church member over the age of 18 could donate the equivalent of one day’s *kolkhoz* earnings to the pastor. The amount was small, and economic hardship meant that even this form of support was not available in every settlement (ATRD, Circulars, f. I, 10 C, December 4, 1961).

The Transcarpathian Investigation Department of the State Security organs of the Ukrainian SSR monitored priests and pastors, collected information about them, and sent reports to the Council for Religious Cults. Active church members were also subject to surveillance (Gulácsy, 2009, p. 61). Informants reported on parishioners, church activists, and the content of sermons and worship services (Dupka, 1993, p. 99). Archival material also records efforts to compromise clergy and disrupt religious communities (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 1, pp. 6-8). Arrests, agitation, propaganda, and covert measures were used together to strengthen political control (Botlik, 2000, p. 286).

Churches were required to submit regular reports, usually every six months and sometimes more frequently. These reports included data on Easter attendance, ordinary Sunday attendance, the number of communicants, the presence of an organ or harmonium, and the amount of government bonds held by the congregation (ATRD, Administrative Documents, f. I, 10 C, February 4, 1957).

Separate reports were required for consecration ceremonies, including a written account of the event (ATRD, Administrative Documents, f. I, 10 C, February 2, 1956), and for church renovations, with precise statements of costs and expenditures (ATRD, Supreme Authority Circulars, f. I, 10 C, January 29, 1957). State funding was not provided, and necessary permits could be withheld. Local pastors therefore had to finance repairs from donations. At the same time, failure to maintain a building could be used as grounds for closure on safety grounds (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 12, p. 6).

The Commissioner for Religious Affairs also required church book inventories and other official documents to be translated into Russian by an authorized Russian-speaking specialist. The translation cost 15 rubles per church. Documents submitted in Hungarian could be returned and, in some cases, followed by a financial penalty (ATRD, Administrative Documents, f. I, 10 C, February 14, 1957).

Party secretaries were required to organize atheist-propaganda lectures in settlements throughout the region (TRSA, f. 454, op. 7, od. zb. 6, p. 63).

The Greek Catholic Church and the Policy of “Reunification”

At the end of the Second World War, Greek Catholics formed the largest confessional community in Transcarpathia (TRSA, f. 151, op. 24, spr. 802, p. 8). The sources cited in this study give a total of 461,555 Greek Catholic believers, most of them Ruthenians, alongside approximately 28,000 Hungarians, 16,000 Romanians, and 3,000 Slovaks (Botlik, 1997, p. 275). The Orthodox population numbered between 109,000 and 121,000; approximately 81,000 people were Roman Catholic and 78,000 were Reformed (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 288). Soviet policy altered this confessional balance by strengthening the institutional position of the Orthodox Church while restricting other denominations.

The restoration of the Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate under Stalin in 1943 formed an important institutional background to subsequent Soviet policy toward the Greek Catholic Church (Botlik, 1997, p. 277).

From 1944 onward, Soviet authorities began a systematic campaign against the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia. Bishop Theodore Romzha resisted pressure to renounce his church and refused to participate in its liquidation. The cited literature links this conflict with the assassination attempt against him and his death at the Mukachevo hospital on November 1, 1947 (Botlik, 1997, pp. 278-282; Puskás, 1998, pp. 89-283).

Soviet forces occupied Uzhhorod on October 28, 1944. On November 7, Soviet military and pro-Soviet local authorities held a celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution in the Rákóczi Cinema opposite the Roman Catholic Church. The leadership of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo was ordered to attend (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 289). Bishop Theodore Romzha was expected to deliver a ceremonial speech requesting, in the name of the population, the separation of Transcarpathia from Czechoslovakia. According to Sándor Chira's memoirs, Romzha initially wished Chira to speak in his place, but military political officers insisted that the bishop appear personally and even offered to prepare his speech. Romzha refused the prepared text and instead gave a short address thanking God for limiting wartime destruction and expressing gratitude to Stalin for liberation and hopes for peace (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs; Bulecza, 2000, p. 27).

Sergei Stasev, recently appointed mayor of Uzhhorod, chaired the meeting and read a telegram addressed to the President of the Czechoslovak Republic stating that “the people of Transcarpathia are asking you, Mr. President, to be released from the Republic” (I. Bendász & D. Bendász, 1994, p. 132; BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 2). The following day, Zakarpatska Pravda published a report signed in Romzha's name announcing the voluntary accession and reunification of Transcarpathia with Soviet Ukraine; the text was also reproduced in

Kyiv newspapers. Romzha denied having made such a statement. According to the cited sources, officials responded that the published text represented what he was expected to have said (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 2; Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 289). After this episode, the bishop decided not to participate in similar political events or speak to the press.

When military political officers warned that refusal to sign the manifesto would be interpreted as opposition to Soviet power, Romzha replied: “The Manifesto is a political document and a bishop must not deal with politics” (Bulecza, 2000, p. 27).

The Soviet campaign against the Greek Catholic Church was first implemented in Galicia (Gönczi, 2016, pp. 41-48). Botlik (1997, p. 277) links the authorities’ hostility to the concentration of Greek Catholic believers in western Ukraine and to the church’s perceived association with Ukrainian national aspirations. Shortly after the arrival of the Red Army, Havryl Kostelnik, an advocate of union with Orthodoxy, organized an initiative group whose task was to promote the “reunification” of the Greek Catholic Church in Galicia with the Russian Orthodox Church (Puskás, 2000, p. 130).

On November 18, 1944, representatives of the Mukachevo-Prešov Orthodox Eparchy—including deputy bishop and abbot Feofan Szabó, archabbot Oleksiy Kabaljuk, Ivan Kopolovych, dean Dmitry Belyakov, and teacher Petro Lintur—prepared a letter to the Soviet leadership requesting the incorporation of Transcarpathian Ukraine into the USSR as a “Carpathian Soviet Republic”. They also requested the transfer of the Mukachevo-Prešov Orthodox Eparchy to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate and the transfer of Greek Catholic churches, land, and other ecclesiastical property to the Orthodox Church. The letter was signed by 23 priests, and an Orthodox delegation carried it to Moscow on December 7, 1944, with the support of the political department of the 4th Ukrainian Front (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 290). By the end of 1944, the Orthodox eparchy had been placed under the Moscow Patriarchate, and property was transferred from the Greek Catholic Church to the Orthodox Church (Botlik, 1997, p. 277; TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 666, pp. 1-123). Brenzovics (2009, p. 100) characterizes “reunification” as the principal mechanism used to eliminate the Greek Catholic Church.

In March 1946, a church assembly was held in Lviv within a process directed by the security authorities. Havryl Kostelnik spoke in favor of “reunification” with the Russian Orthodox Church. Greek Catholic bishops were absent because they had been imprisoned beginning in April 1945 on charges of collaboration with the German occupation authorities. The resolutions adopted at the Lviv Council of March 8-10, 1946, annulled the Union of Brest of 1596 and declared union with the Russian Orthodox Church (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 294; Riskó 1995, p. 14; Gönczi, 2016, p. 41). The Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo consequently remained the only functioning Greek Catholic eparchy in the Soviet Union, making it the next target of the policy.

The cited literature argues that the authorities intended to apply a similar model in Transcarpathia but proceeded more gradually because of the region’s border position and its close ecclesiastical and family ties with neighboring countries. Gönczi (2016, p. 42) therefore describes the liquidation of the Mukachevo Eparchy as a staged process. Measures included searches for material that could support anti-Soviet accusations, intensified psychological pressure on the bishop and clergy, and broader coercive measures (Bulecza, 2000, p. 35).

The sources portray Bishop Romzha as a church leader without an established role in political life, which made it difficult for Soviet authorities to substantiate political charges against him. Pressure was nevertheless applied in an effort to induce him to initiate union with the Moscow Patriarchate. Romzha consistently resisted this demand (Bendász, 2016, p. 199).

When Soviet forces entered Transcarpathia in October 1944, Romzha selected Sándor Chira as his vicar. Chira's experience, advice, and diplomatic ability made him one of the bishop's closest collaborators in the eparchy's resistance to state pressure.

The exact date of Sándor Chira's episcopal consecration remains uncertain in the literature. One account places it on September 14, 1944, when Bishop Miklós Dudás, administrator of the Mukachevo Eparchy, with the assistance of István Madarász, Roman Catholic bishop of Košice, allegedly consecrated Chira at the same time as Theodore Romzha; Bendász (2016, p. 283) questions this version because the consecration would not then have been secret. Other accounts state that Romzha secretly consecrated Chira in 1944 with authorization from the Holy See (I. Bendász & D. Bendász, 1994, p. 124), on December 30, 1945 (Riskó 1995, p. 170), or in 1947 after Romzha's death (I. Bendász & D. Bendász, 1994, pp. 128-129). The conflicting dates are therefore retained as an unresolved point in the source tradition.

In the second half of January 1945, Colonel Tiulpanov ordered Bishop Romzha to meet General Ivan Petrov, commander of the 4th Ukrainian Front, at the Michalovce headquarters. Petrov and General Lev Mehlis received Romzha and Chira together. The principal issue was the proposed incorporation of Transcarpathia into Soviet Ukraine. Both churchmen maintained that the question of territorial accession should be decided by the governments of Czechoslovakia and the USSR (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, pp. 3-4). Chira's memoirs describe the meeting as highly intimidating and record his efforts to reduce tension by using public expressions of appreciation toward the Soviet leadership (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 4).

In February 1945, Father Péter Demjanovics, Greek Catholic parish priest of Rakhiv and a former member of the Upper House of the Hungarian Parliament representing Transcarpathia, was arrested. He was charged with espionage and betrayal of the "Soviet people", sentenced to death by an extraordinary court, and, according to Botlik, executed while hospitalized in Uzhhorod on Good Friday, April 21, 1945 (Botlik, 1997, p. 284).

Archival documents indicate that the campaign against the Greek Catholic Church was planned in stages. On January 16, 1947, S. N. Liamshin-Agafonov, the Soviet commissioner for religious affairs in Transcarpathia, requested guidance from Moscow concerning the next steps (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 2, p. 3). Other instructions called for continuous surveillance of Romzha and Chira because of their influence on clergy and believers and for stronger measures aimed at severing institutional ties with the Vatican. Contacts between local parishioners and Greek Catholics abroad, particularly in Prešov and Romania, were also to be restricted (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 2, p. 2).

On March 24, 1945, the People's Council issued a decree "On the Free Choice of Religion", which formally granted adult citizens the right to change their religion or declare themselves non-denominational; minors could change religion with the consent of parents or guardians (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 2, pp. 1-2; TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 660, pp. 1-5).

On the same date, the People's Council of Transcarpathian Ukraine prohibited the term "Greek-Eastern" and prescribed the designation "Pravoslavnyi" (Orthodox) (TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 661, pp. 1-4).

On April 20, 1945, the Greek-Eastern Eparchy of Mukachevo-Prešov was incorporated into the Moscow Patriarchate. The Orthodox Church subsequently expanded its institutional position, and financial support withdrawn from the Greek Catholic Church was redirected to Orthodox structures (TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 665, pp. 1-22). Oficinskij et al. (2010, p. 296) note the terminological distinction between the Russian designation "Русская" (Russkaya) and the Ukrainian form "Руська" (Rus'ka) and interpret the latter as a means of making the institutional transition more acceptable to local believers.

At the same time, Greek Catholic priests were arrested on accusations of cooperation with the “Hungarian fascist system” (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 291). Anti-church publications presented the abolition of the denomination as historically and politically justified, attacked the authority of the clergy, and associated church leaders with former occupying regimes. Official discourse used labels such as “enemies of the people”, “counter-revolutionaries”, “fascists”, and “anti-Soviet” to characterize clerical opposition.

Security organs opened an agent file on the leaders of the eparchy under the designation “cross-bearers”, maintained continuous records on them, collected compromising material, and submitted reports on their activities (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 289).

By a decision of the People’s Council dated August 29, 1945, the episcopal archives and libraries of the Mukachevo Eparchy were inspected (TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 667, p. 1). Documents deemed hostile to the new political system were destroyed, while the remainder were transferred to the Central State Historical Archives, which had its headquarters in Uzhhorod and a branch in Berehove (TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 702, pp. 1-9).

Soviet authorities increasingly pressured Greek Catholic parishes to enter the Orthodox Church (Bendász, 2012, p. 4; Dupka, 1999; Szabó 1999, p. 73). Some communities or believers did so; others became Roman Catholic (Dupka, 1999; Szabó 1999, p. 73). A further group continued Greek Catholic religious practice clandestinely between 1949 and 1989, forming what the literature describes as a “catacomb church” (Bendász, 2016, p. 202).

On August 21, 1946, the Transcarpathian Regional Council of People’s Deputies initiated the formal nationalization of church and monastery lands (Vehes et al., 2011, p. 138). Romzha continued to oppose incorporation into the Moscow Patriarchate and repeatedly petitioned Soviet authorities to clarify the legal basis for measures directed against the Greek Catholic Church. In one appeal, he asked the authorities to identify the relevant laws and legal codes:

We want to know these laws on which you act so that we can study them and learn as much as possible to meet their expectations. Therefore, with great respect, please help us obtain these codes, decrees, or give us advice on where to obtain them. (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 17, p. 7)

Romzha also requested freedom of religious practice in accordance with the Soviet Constitution and defended the operation of the Theological Academy (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 3, pp. 1, 8; spr. 16, p. 6). He refused to provide a report classifying Greek Catholic priests by ethnicity, stating, “We do not keep a register of ethnicity” (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 17, p. 3). He protested the transfer of Greek Catholic churches to Orthodox communities, the eviction of priests, and the seizure or desecration of cemeteries (TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 17, pp. 8-12; spr. 24, p. 6). These actions led to travel restrictions: Romzha could not leave Uzhhorod without special permission. Soviet authorities regarded his resistance and influence over parishioners as a major obstacle to the liquidation of the eparchy (Botlik, 1997, p. 283).

Greek Catholic clergy also encouraged believers to resist the merger. When detected, such activity was classified as agitation (Pekar, 2003, pp. 13-16). Archival files include reports on “the dangers of Greek Catholic agitation” and the role of clergy during the Hungarian period, as well as reports on “anti-people speeches” made during the transfer of Greek Catholic churches to Orthodox control (TRSA, f. P-14, op. 1, spr. 662, pp. 1-11; spr. 663, pp. 1-2).

In August 1946, according to Chira’s memoirs, an armed escort forced him into a military vehicle at his apartment on Káptalan Street and took him to the SMERSH headquarters on Ajvazov Street. He was questioned

for several hours about contacts between the episcopal office, the Vatican, and Rome and was instructed to enter the security service as an informant. He did not report for the required follow-up meeting (I. Bendász & D. Bendász, 1994, p. 134; BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, pp. 4-5).

The seminary building, described by Chira as the historic Alma Mater of the eparchy, was then taken over by Soviet authorities for military use. Students from the Alumneum and convent were ordered to relocate to the Episcopal Palace. Chira was also ordered to move but remained in his apartment with his mother until his arrest (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 6).

In the spring of 1946, I. Turianytsia, president of the People's Council of Transcarpathian Ukraine, summoned Chira for a meeting concerning conversion to Orthodoxy. Chira's memoir records his refusal in explicitly confessional terms:

Nothing can lure me away from the Holiness of the Pope, from my Catholic faith, from my fidelity to my church, neither prison of any kind, nor torture, not even death [...]. I will not descend from horseback to donkey back and I will not accept your offer under any circumstances. (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 7)

In May 1947, the Uzhhorod Theological Academy was deprived of its educational equipment (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs; Bendász, 2016, p. 202). The cathedral, Episcopal Palace, Theological Academy, priestly and teacher-training institutions, girls' schools and boarding schools, orphanages, the Basilian monastery on Chernecha Mountain, the printing house, and other Greek Catholic property were subsequently transferred to Orthodox control (Bendász, 2016, p. 199; TRSA, f. P-1490, op. 1, spr. 16, pp. 2-3; BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 7). This transfer eliminated the institutional educational infrastructure of the eparchy.

Publications defending the Greek Catholic Church were prohibited, and Greek Catholic advocacy, charitable, and scholarly organizations were liquidated.

The authorities continued to pressure Chira, one of the leading figures of the eparchy. On August 27, a day before the traditional Assumption feast, Havryl Kostelnik—formerly Greek Catholic and by then a prominent advocate of transition to Orthodoxy—visited him as a representative of the authorities and attempted to persuade him to accept conversion. The effort failed. Neither Romzha nor Chira was able to participate in the traditional August 28 service, while Vilkhovyi traveled to Mukachevo and Kostelnik preached against Rome in the presence of clergy who had already entered the Orthodox Church (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 8).

In March 1947, the Transcarpathian Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine established a “group for the reunification of the Greek Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church”, following the model previously used in Galicia (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 294).

In December 1948, Rasput'ko, head of the Uzhhorod branch responsible for religious affairs, summoned vicar Miklós Murányi, canon Sándor Chira, and priest János Szemedi. Vilkhovyi informed them that Greek Catholic clergy in Galicia had entered the Orthodox Church and stated that the Greek Catholic eparchy would not be registered. The three replied that they would rather support themselves through manual labor than accept the demanded transition. Later that month, Vilkhovyi summoned the Greek Catholic clergy and reiterated that the church would not receive registration (BIGKKL, Chira Memoirs, p. 18; Botlik, 1997, p. 285).

By the end of 1948, 35 Greek Catholic priests had been subjected to prosecution and sentences of five, 10, or 25 years of forced labor together with confiscation of property; the cited literature characterizes the charges as fabricated. Another 33 parish priests had left Transcarpathia without authorization (Botlik, 1997, pp. 284-285).

On January 26, 1949, the pressure on the clergy produced the first recorded case in this account of a Greek Catholic priest renouncing his affiliation under Soviet pressure (Dupka, 1993, p. 48).

On the same date, five urban Greek Catholic priests were arrested and immediately instructed to convert: László Puskás, chaplain of the Uzhhorod Cathedral; Eumen Dumiskovics from Mukachevo; József Kampo from Berehove; Miklós Ruzinko; and Dr. Demeter Popovics from Khust (Bendász, 2012, p. 50). Pál Karcub, parish priest of Vynohradiv (Nagyszőlős), was not arrested despite his refusal to renounce the church; Bendász attributes this exception to his large family and to his wife's repeated recognition by the state as a "hero mother" (Bendász, 2012, p. 51).

On February 12, 1949, the Ministry of State Security of the Ukrainian SSR instructed local authorities to proceed with the immediate liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia.

On February 16, 1949, local authorities and the MGB (Ministry of State Security) entered the eparchial building. Sergei Stasev, chairman of the regional executive committee, and the board secretary Nazarenko ordered Miklós Murányi, head of the Mukachevo Eparchy's administration, to surrender the cathedral and other buildings to the Orthodox Church. Murányi was also compelled to prepare a dissolution decree that was circulated to Greek Catholic priests (Botlik, 1997, p. 286). On February 17, members of the Uzhhorod executive authorities returned with a military escort and took over the cathedral, episcopal residence, library, archives, offices, and other property, placing them under the supervision of the Orthodox bishop (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 295; Ortutay, 1990). The Soviet authorities thereby ended the public legal operation of the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia (Botlik, 1997, pp. 286-287; Ortutay, 1990).

On February 18, 1949, Greek Catholic parishes throughout Transcarpathia were notified of the liquidation of the Mukachevo Eparchy. The notice was issued on episcopal letterhead under Murányi's signature and announced his resignation as deputy bishop. After receiving the notice, some priests entered the Orthodox Church.

The "reunifications" implemented in Galicia in 1946 and Transcarpathia in 1949 were presented as a return to Orthodoxy and, in institutional terms, nullified the effects of the Union of Brest of 1596 and the Union of Uzhhorod of 1646 (Puskás, 2000, p. 142; Szantner, 2008, p. 10; Bendász, 1999, p. 118).

Murányi refused to renounce the Greek Catholic Church. He was arrested on June 24, 1949, imprisoned on Korolenko Street in Kyiv, and later transported to the Gulag on September 29, 1951 (Botlik, 1997, p. 287).

The numerical consequences for the clergy are reported differently in the literature. S. Bendas and D. Bendas (1999, pp. 397-402) state that 132 priests—approximately 40% of the eparchy's clergy—signed declarations of accession to the Orthodox Church; Botlik (1997, pp. 275-276) gives 128 priests, or 47%. The sources cited here record 175 priests who refused apostasy and state that 128 or 129 of them were sent to Gulag camps after trial, including camps in the Komi region, Kazakhstan, Mordovia, Omsk, and Vorkuta (Oficinskij et al., 2010, p. 295; Botlik, 1997, p. 286). Botlik reports that 30 died in the Gulag and that another 50 elderly or retired priests—about 18% of the clergy—were prohibited from religious activity (Botlik, 1997, pp. 275-276, 286).

The liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia was completed by the summer of 1952. According to Bendász (2016, p. 202), the last priest detained was László Pochil on July 5, 1952, while Father Vladimir Stripsky was the last to enter the Orthodox Church, on June 27, 1952. Sándor Chira had already been arrested on February 10, 1949 (TRSA, f. 2558, op. 1, od. zb. 5392, p. 5).

Post-Stalin Developments and the Underground Church

After Stalin's death in 1953, religious policy became relatively less severe for a limited period, although the principal mechanisms of state control remained in place. Petro Vilkhovyi, a senior official of the Council for Religious Cults, arrived in Uzhhorod on June 24, 1953, and emphasized closer attention to religious life and direct discussions with the leaders of Transcarpathian denominations (CSAHAAU, f. 4648, op. 4, od. zb. 114, p. 22).

In 1955-1956, priests and pastors were released under amnesty and returned to Transcarpathia (CSAHAAU, f. 4648, op. 4, od. zb. 214, pp. 27-36). Amnesty did not amount to rehabilitation: Those returning remained under supervision, many no longer had access to their former parish residences, and settlement or resumption of ministry could require state or police approval. Illness, age, and the consequences of imprisonment also prevented some clergy from returning to active service.

After Stalin's death, clergy who survived the camps returned in poor physical condition, while Greek Catholic priests remained prohibited from openly practicing their vocation. They were monitored, summoned for questioning, and subjected to searches (Brenzovics, 2009, p. 100). The dissolution of Kamishlag on October 4, 1954, formed part of the wider post-Stalin change in the camp system, but it did not restore the legal status of the Greek Catholic Church.

Miklós Murányi, apostolic vicar of the Mukachevo Greek Catholic Eparchy, was released from the Gulag under amnesty on May 24, 1956 (Marosi, 2020, p. 22; Bendász, 2016, p. 204).

Local authorities and KGB personnel continued to monitor Greek Catholic priests who returned from Gulag camps.

From 1949 onward, the Greek Catholic Church therefore functioned illegally. Masses, baptisms, weddings, and funerals were conducted in private homes, and priests carried out clandestine pastoral work in what the literature describes as a "catacomb" form of church life (Pilipkó, 2004, p. 277). This situation continued until December 13, 1989, when the Soviet government adopted a decision restoring the legal rights of the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia.

The restoration of legality did not immediately resolve the consequences of four decades of institutional change. The strengthening of Orthodox structures during the Soviet period meant that Greek Catholic communities had to seek the return of former churches and properties. In 1991, the seminary in Uzhhorod reopened and the training of religion teachers resumed (Dupka, 2017, p. 65).

Conclusion

Soviet religious policy in Transcarpathia combined legal restructuring, economic pressure, ideological education, surveillance, and direct repression. The separation of church and state was accompanied by the nationalization of denominational schools and ecclesiastical property, restrictions on religious education and public ceremonies, taxation and administrative reporting, and systematic atheist propaganda. These measures affected the region's major denominations and sought to remove religious institutions from education, public administration, and organized social life.

The Greek Catholic Church was subjected to an especially far-reaching campaign. Soviet authorities strengthened the institutional position of the Orthodox Church, pressed Greek Catholic clergy to accept "reunification", transferred church property, arrested and deported priests, restricted the activities of Bishop

Theodore Romzha and his collaborators, and formally liquidated the Mukachevo Eparchy in 1949. The differing statistical estimates in the literature nevertheless converge on the scale of the disruption: A substantial proportion of the clergy entered the Orthodox Church, while many others were imprisoned, deported, prohibited from ministry, or forced into clandestine pastoral work.

At the same time, the archival record demonstrates the limits of state policy. Religious communities continued to maintain worship, instruction, confessional identity, and local networks despite restrictions. The post-Stalin amnesties reduced some forms of repression but did not restore legal religious pluralism. For Greek Catholics, clandestine church life continued until legalization in 1989. The Transcarpathian case thus illustrates how Soviet religious policy operated through a combination of central ideological objectives and locally implemented administrative practices in a multi-confessional borderland.

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