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AN INCOMPLETE SYNTHESIS

Book review: Marek Šmíd, *Vatikán a sovětský komunismus, 1917–1945*, Praha: Tryton, 2020, 280 pp.

The role of the Holy See in twentieth-century history has long been a subject of interest, resulting in the publication of both primary literature and academic texts. The opening of the collection of the Vatican Secret Archive from the time of the pontificate of Pius XI allowed researchers to examine new documents concerning these issues and to test various hypotheses present in world historiography. These researchers were particularly interested in the Holy See's relationship with the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century: German Nazism, Italian fascism, and Soviet communism. In this context, the Czech scholar Marek Šmíd's monograph on the Vatican's relations with Soviet communism is worthy of note. Šmíd works at the Department of Ecclesiastical History and Literary History in the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague. He has been researching the Vatican archives, mainly from the time of Pius XI's pontificate, for many years. This work has led him to write two monographs on the Holy See's interwar relations with fascist Italy and the Third Reich. Šmíd is among the leading Czech experts on these issues, also publishing extensively in Italian and German. His latest book, *The Vatican and Soviet Communism 1917–1945*, attempts to describe this important period from the perspective of the latest research as well as previously unknown archival sources.¹ It is undoubtedly an important event in Czech historiography, in which only books written from a Marxist point of view – without a broader familiarity with the source base – have previously been published.

¹ Marek Šmíd, *Vatikán a sovětský komunismus, 1917–1945* (Praha: Tryton, 2020).

His book also contributes several interesting findings and reflections to the international historiography of this subject.

It would, however, make more sense for this book to cover a time frame until 1939 because the final part – the chapters about the situation after 1941 – clearly stands out from the rest. In the introduction, the author admits that his archival research only went up to the end of Pius XI's pontificate. He had not yet been able to study Pius XII's archives, as the decision to open them was made only two years ago (in 2020). Consequently, the final section of the book, which concerns the Second World War period, is not an academic analysis but a popular journalistic essay that is somewhat lacking in documentation. The chapter about the Holy See's relations with Spain and Mexico during the Spanish Civil War in 1936–1938 is also misplaced. It is obvious that these events were entirely different for the Holy See than relations with the Soviet Union, while communism in Spain and Mexico was also different in nature from the Soviet variety. The decision to add these two chapters, largely borrowed from the author's other books, was an artificial move without substantive justification.

The book's foreword was written by Archbishop Cyril Vasil SJ, the former secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and currently apostolic administrator *sede plena* of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Košice. Part One is an introduction, in which the author justifies the concept of the book. Part Two is entitled "The Holy See and Soviet communism in the era of Leninist repressions" and encompasses the years 1917–1926. It begins with a description of the situation of Catholics in Tsarist Russia and Russia's relations with the Holy See before 1917. It concludes with a description of the mission of Bishop Michel d'Hebigny, which was an attempt to create a clandestine Catholic Church structure under Bolshevik rule. Part Three, "The Holy See and Soviet communism in the era of Stalinist repressions", encompasses the period until the end of the Second World War.

Šmíd's main sources are subject literature published in Italian, English and German, supplemented by documents found in the archive of the Secretariat of State of the Holy See, the Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, the Commission for Russia, as well as the published documents *Actes et documents du Saint-Siège relatifs à la période de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*. The author also uses publications from *L'Osservatore Romano* and *Acta Apostolicae Sedes*. Unfortunately, his failure to refer to any primary literature or academic publications in Russian weakens the book's value and has major methodological consequences in every part

of it.² He is also unfamiliar with any of the numerous works on the subject in Polish,³ only citing four brief articles by Roman Dzwonkowski that were published in Italian in monographs edited by Jan Mikrut.⁴ Yet he is not aware of Dzwonkowski's essential works on the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the Soviet Union, in which, based on Russian sources, he describes in detail both the fate of Catholics and relations between the Soviet authorities and the Holy See.⁵

It escapes Šmíd's attention that the largest group of Catholics in this area held Polish nationality. Admittedly, he does note in one sentence that the biggest groups were Lithuanians, Poles and Germans, but this statement is imprecise. In Tsarist Russia, Lithuanians never formed major Catholic communities. Germans dominated in two areas: in the Volga region, the site of the Saratov diocese with its capital in Tiraspol, and in Crimea and the southern governorates of Tsarist Russia. The nucleus of Catholicism in Russia, and later in the Soviet Union, was formed by the Polish faithful, who were dominant not only in the lands that belonged to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth until the First Partition of Poland, but also in Russia – in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Siberia. They formed the most important Catholic organizations in the region and dominated the clergy and Catholic hierarchy. They comprised 75% to 80% of all Catholics in the country, and more than 90% in Soviet Ukraine and Belarus.⁶ In total, according to the calculations of Mikołaj Iwanow, there were around 950,000 Poles living in the Soviet Union in 1921, the vast majority of them Catholic.⁷ It is worth adding that the Polish state, on the basis of article VII of the Treaty of Riga, was at least formally entitled to defend the rights of Polish Catholics.

² There is in fact a lot of primary literature and research published in Russian. It suffices to mention such publications as: *Russkaja pravoslavnaja cerkov' i kommunističeskoe gosudarstvo 1917–1941. Dokumenty i fotomaterialy*, ed. by Olga Vasil'eva (Moskva: BBI, 1997); *Vlast' i cerkov' v Vostočnoj Evrope. 1944–1953. Dokumenty rossijskich arhivov. 1944–1948*, ed. by Tat'jana Volokitina, and others, 2 vols (Moskva: ROSSPĖN, 2000), I; *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR* (Moskva: Meždunarodnye otnošenija, 1992); *Rossija i Vatikan v konce XIX – pervoj tretej XX veka. Materialy kollokviuma, sostojavšegosja v Moskve 23–24 tjunja 1998 goda*, ed. by Evgenija Tokareva, and Aleksej Judin (Moskva: Alletejja, 2003); Aleksej Judin, 'Papstvo i Rossija: istorija diplomatičeskich otnošenij', *PostNauka*, 25 March 2013 <<https://postnauka.ru/longreads/10520>> [accessed 12 October 2022]; *Mogil'evskaja Rimsko-katoličeskaja archieparchija: svjdetel'stva živoj pamjati. 1783–1939, Meždunarodnaja konferencija v Sankt-Peterburge 6–9.12.2018 g.*, ed. by Christofor Pożarskij, and others (Gatčina: RasCvet, 2019); Antoine Wenger, *Rome et Moscou. 1900–1950* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1987);

Olga Liczenberger, *Rimsko-katoličeskaja Cerkov' v Rossii: istorija i pravovoe položenie* (Saratov: Povolžskaja Akademija gosudarstvennoj služby, 2001). Šmíd's book also fails to refer to an important work published in German: Wim Rood, *Rom und Moskau. Der Heilige Stuhl und Russland bzw. die Sowjetunion von der Oktoberrevolution 1917 bis zum 1 Dezember 1989* (Altenberge, 1993).

³ In this context we can mention, for example, the memoirs of Walter Ciszek, *Z Bogiem w Rosji* (1939–1963) (London, 1988), or Bohdan Cywiński's still-relevant study *Ogniem próbowane. Z dziejów najnowszych Kościoła katolickiego w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej, ("... i was prześladować będą")* (Lublin–Rzym, 1990).

⁴ Jan Mikrut, *La Chiesa cattolica in Unione Sovietica. Dalla Rivoluzione del 1917 alla Perestrojka* (Verona: Gabrielli, 2017).

⁵ Roman Dzwonkowski, *Kościół katolicki w ZSRS 1917–1939. Zarys historii* (Lublin: Prace Wydziału Teologii, 1997); id., *Religia i Kościół katolicki w ZSRS oraz w krajach i na ziemiach okupowanych 1917–1991. Kronika* (Lublin, 2010); id., *Leksykon duchowieństwa polskiego represjonowanego w ZSRS 1939–1988* (Lublin: KUL, 2003).

⁶ Roman Dzwonkowski SAC, and Andrzej Szabaciuk, *Bolszewicy w walce z religią. Kościół rzymskokatolicki w Związku Sowieckim w polskich dokumentach dyplomatycznych 1922–1938* (Warszawa: Centrum Polsko-Rosyjskiego Dialogu i Porozumienia, 2021), Introduction, p. X.

⁷ Mikołaj Iwanow, *Pierwszy naród ukarany. Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921–1939* (Warszawa–Wrocław: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1991), pp. 72–87.

The author's failure to appreciate nationality as a factor in the Catholic Church's position in the Soviet Union also prevents him from noting that it was in fact ethnic and political considerations that motivated the largest repressions experienced by Catholics in the interwar period, in the years of the Great Terror.⁸ The Polish Catholics who were repressed and murdered in the years 1937–1939 were victims of the NKVD's so-called Polish operation, when they were classified as spies and a potential threat to the security of the Soviet Union. Šmíd does not mention this at all, although the Holy See was aware of the political context of the persecution of Catholics, receiving detailed information from, among others, Polish diplomats.

The book also contains simple factual and interpretational errors. Discussing the journey of Archbishop Achille Ratti (later Pope Pius XI), then apostolic nuncio, from Warsaw to Kaunas in March 1920, the author writes that Vilnius was at this time under Polish occupation (p. 104). This is an ahistorical assessment. In April 1919, Vilnius (Wilno) was liberated by the Polish army from Bolshevik rule. The city's status was unresolved, with Polish leader Józef Piłsudski seeking a *modus vivendi* with the Lithuanian side on the matter. The decision to incorporate Vilnius and Central Lithuania was only made in 1922. It is worth adding that the entire international community recognized Vilnius as belonging to the Polish, not the Lithuanian, state. The description of the events in Ukraine (p. 105) contains no mention of the fact that when Ukrainians declared the formation of the West Ukrainian People's Republic in Lviv (Lwów) on 1 November 1918, it contained disputed territories largely inhabited by Polish populations. The response to these actions was Polish self-defence in Lviv, which allowed the city to remain in Polish hands. Yet the capture of Eastern Galicia by the Polish army resulted not from the Polish-Russian war but from the Polish-Ukrainian war in 1918–1919. On 15 March 1923, the Conference of Ambassadors recognized this territory as belonging to Poland. There is also a mention of the Kiev Offensive, undertaken in April 1920 on Piłsudski's orders (p. 106). In this context, it appears that the Polish side was interested in territorial acquisitions in Ukraine. Šmíd does not mention that the objective of this military expedition was for a sovereign Ukrainian government to regain control over Ukraine and oust the Bolsheviks from Kyiv, as shown by the agreement concluded in April 1920

⁸ Krzysztof Pożarski, 'Historia prześladowań Kościoła katolickiego w Rosji i w ZSRS', in *Z Chrystusem do końca. Męczeństwo Sług Bożych w Związku Sowieckim*, ed. by Krzysztof Pożarski (Kraków: AA, 2019), pp. 474–525; Rostislav Kolupaev, 'Russkaja katoličeskaja cerkov' vizantijskogo obrjada, in *Katoličeskaja enciklopedija*, ed. by Vitalij Zadornyj, and others, 5 vols (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo franciskancev, 2002–2013), IV (2011). Many references to relations with the Vatican can also be found in M.V. Shkarovskij's study: Michail Škarovskij, *Russkaja Pravoslavnaja Cerkov' pri Staline i Chruščeve (Gosudarstvenno-cerkovnyje otnošenija v SSSR v 1939–1964 godach)* (Moskva, 1999).

between Piłsudski and Symon Petliura, ataman of the Ukrainian army. In addition to Polish units, Ukrainian forces also participated, parading in Kyiv on 9 May 1920. There is also no academic justification for the author's reference to the lands of Western Belarus and Ukraine, which were incorporated into Poland following the Treaty of Riga (p. 106). Western Belarus and Western Ukraine are political terms that were introduced into international circulation by the USSR in the interwar period as propaganda tools to justify anti-Polish policy and secure the support of a section of the Ukrainian and Belarusian population in interwar Poland. These efforts were manifested in 1923 in the formation of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus. The correct terms to use for Ukrainian territories that fell to Poland are therefore Eastern Galicia and Volhynia, while for Belarus one should speak of the southeastern part of the Vilnius Region, the Navahrudak region, and part of Polesia.

When discussing the situation of the Church under Bolshevik rule, the author makes no mention of the Council of People's Commissars' decree dividing the Orthodox Church from the state and schools from the Church – a fundamental legal act determining an entirely new situation for all religious communities in Soviet Russia. This meant adopting a model not so much of hostile separation as total domination of the communist authorities over all spheres of spiritual life. The decree's most important points were written personally by the Bolshevik leader, Lenin. Šmíd does not mention that the struggle against religion was one of the Bolsheviks' main ideological goals. This was demonstrated by the activity of the League of Militant Atheists, founded in 1923 by Yemelyan Yaroslavsky (born Minei Izrailevich Gubelman). Thanks to state subsidies, the league soon grew from being a voluntary civic organization into one of the USSR's most important educational institutions.

In my view, the most interesting section of the book describes the Holy See's attempt to set up a hierarchy in the Soviet Union in 1926 through the Jesuit Michel d'Herbigny, who was secretly consecrated as a bishop. D'Herbigny, we recall, arrived in Moscow in 1926 on a French diplomatic passport. His official objective was to visit the four French pastoral institutions founded in Tsarist Russia in Moscow, Leningrad, Odessa, and Makiivka, the last of which is in Eastern Ukraine, near Yuzivka (today Donetsk). However, the true goal of the expedition was different. In Moscow, on 26 April 1926, d'Herbigny, using papal powers, secretly consecrated the French assumptionist Father Eugène Joseph Neveu, who had been parish priest in Makiivka since 1907. d'Herbigny also made Father Eugène Joseph Neveu apostolic administrator of Moscow. He then made further clandestine nominations, the most important of which was the consecration

of the rector of the clerical seminary in Saratov, the German priest Alexander Frison. He became the bishop responsible for the southern part of the Tiraspol diocese, which also included Odessa and Crimea. Most of the Catholics there were German. Least significant was the consecration of the Latvian priest Boļeslavs Sloškāns, the vicar of Saint Catherine parish in Leningrad, who became apostolic administrator of the Mohilev and Minsk diocese. D'Herbigny left Russia on 15 May 1926, convinced that his clandestine mission had been a success. At the Vatican he met Pius XI, giving a detailed account of his stay and receiving a placet for further actions. He returned to Moscow on 3 August 1926 and again visited Mohilev and Leningrad, where he secretly consecrated another bishop during his mission.

The Polish priest Antoni Malecki of Saint Catherine parish in Leningrad, the organizer of the local clandestine seminary, became apostolic administrator, to be permanently based in the former Russian capital. The feast of the Assumption of Mary on 15 August 1926 was d'Herbigny's first public appearance in the role of bishop. This was undoubtedly an attempt to legalize the earlier clandestine consecrations of bishops. During the liturgy in Saint Louis church, the French hierarch informed the congregation that, as papal delegate, he would permanently look after Catholics in the country. The next day, in the nearby Saints Peter and Paul church, he administered confirmation to many parishioners, mainly Poles. His mission was interrupted on the night of 3–4 September 1926, when militia entered the hotel where he was staying. He was informed that his visa had expired on 2 September and he had to leave the Soviet Union immediately. During his stay in the Soviet Union, Bishop d'Herbigny not only consecrated clandestine bishops but also reorganized church life in Russia and appointed apostolic administrators, although he did not precisely designate the territorial division of the units under their jurisdiction. Šmíd provides a detailed account of these events, using hitherto unknown documents from the Vatican archive. He also gained access to d'Herbigny's reports and his correspondence with the Secretary of State. He makes the interesting statement, deserving wider discussion, that d'Herbigny's mission was not so much an attempt to build a clandestine Church hierarchy in the Soviet Union as it was a form of communication of the Holy See with the Soviet authorities and Catholics in the country (p. 169). Also intriguing is the observation that, during d'Herbigny's travels to Moscow, the apostolic nuncio in Berlin, Archbishop Eugenio Pacelli (the later Pope Pius XII), was holding informal talks with representatives of Soviet diplomacy (p. 169). While Pacelli knew about d'Herbigny's mission, the French Jesuit had no idea that other discussions with the Soviet authorities were taking place at the same time.

However, this chapter also contains errors resulting from the author's lack of detailed knowledge about the Soviet realities of the period. He writes, for example, that d'Herbigny's interlocutor in Moscow was the Soviet justice minister, Pyotr Smidovich (p. 156). No such position existed at the time: there was only a People's Commissariat of Justice. This was headed by the people's commissar, Dmitry Kursky, later Soviet ambassador to Italy. Smidovich was in fact a senior official in the commissariat, and at the same time head of the religious affairs department in the Central Executive Committee, the supreme body of the Soviet government. The Soviets did not want the talks with the Holy See's envoy to be official, but they appointed a competent person with knowledge of the realities of Soviet religious policy to represent them. I also disagree with the assertion that d'Herbigny's mission had three stages and lasted from October 1925 to September 1926 (p. 153). His first stay in 1925 was more of a reconnaissance, with no expectations of consequences for the Church in Russia. At this time, he was not a bishop and had no special powers. In my view, we should speak of d'Herbigny's two missions, completed from April to September 1926, and a preparatory visit. Šmíd's claim that d'Herbigny's downfall in 1933 took place as a result of the Polish Church milieu, and particularly the Jesuit superior-general Włodimir Ledóchowski SJ, is also not supported by evidence. Bishop d'Herbigny was compromised not only by the fact that his personal secretary, the Greek Catholic priest Alexander Deubner, proved to be an agent of the Soviet Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU), but also by a scandal that supposedly took place in Moscow. This was probably a provocation by the Soviet secret services. The fact is that Ledóchowski and the Polish Church and diplomatic community were concerned by the concept of Russification of the Church in Russia that was represented by d'Herbigny. They regarded it as false and did not take into account the fact that Poles constituted the vast majority of the faithful in Russia. The Polish lobby also did not believe in the extraordinary potential of the Russian Greek Catholic Church. According to the Vatican's intentions, meanwhile, Greek Catholics were to be a bridge to the Russian Orthodox Church. This notion had been conceived before the First World War by the metropolitan bishop of Lviv and Halych, Andrey Sheptytsky, OSBM. In the conditions of Soviet Russia, however, it had no chance of success. While the Bolsheviks were willing to tolerate some forms of presence of Roman Catholic communities in their territory, they never agreed to attempts to create a Russian Greek Catholic Church. D'Herbigny was an advocate of these Uniate plans, but in practice they all came to nothing. His mission from the outset was under the OGPU's operational control. This French Jesuit was permitted to familiarize himself with the personal

details of individuals designated for leadership roles in the Church in the Soviet Union. After some time, they were all arrested, effectively breaking up the clandestine Church structure d'Herbigny had set up. This experience paralyzed the Holy See's activity in relation to the Soviet Union until the end of the interwar period. It also resulted in numerous deaths among clergy who were most active and faithful in the region.

Despite the deficiencies, errors, and evident gaps in the author's knowledge of the subject literature that I have highlighted, his book is still an important event. It demonstrates that exploration of the Vatican's archives can not only enrich our knowledge with new facts, but also contribute to revisiting views and judgements previously entrenched in historiography.