

## The Christian Churches and the Persecution of Jews in the Occupied Territories of the U.S.S.R

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There were a number of Christian Churches active in the territories of the USSR occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II despite the anti-religious campaign and policy of the Soviet Government. The Churches and the majority of the clergy in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union gladly received the invading Germans. The German troops who entered Lvov, the capital of western Ukraine, were welcomed by the head of the Uniate Church (an Orthodox Church which recognized the Vatican and the Pope), Metropolitan Szeptyckyj. He issued a proclamation expressing the gratitude of the Ukrainian people to the German army for liberating them and calling for collaboration with them. The heads of the Autocephalous Church (a Ukrainian nationalist church that had declared its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1919), Polykarp and Ilarion called for "the mobilization of the energy of the Ukrainian people to extend real help to the German army." In Lithuania, the Catholic metropolitan, Archbishop Juosapas Skvireckas, and Bishop Vincentas Brizgys came out with pro-German pronouncements, expressions of gratitude to Hitler, and promises to fight together with the Germans against the Bolsheviks.

The Russian Orthodox Church in the occupied territories found itself in a peculiar position. On the eve of the Nazi invasion, Metropolitan Seraphim of Berlin, the head of a pro-German Eastern Orthodox Church that consisted mainly of anti-Soviet Russian emigrés, appealed to "all faithful sons of Russia, to join in the crusade under the great leader of the German people who has raised the sword against the foes of the Lord." On the other hand, on the first day of the invasion, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, Patriarch Sergius, issued a proclamation "to the whole Church" damning the "Fascists bandits" who had invaded Russia and blessing "with heavenly grace the people for their heroic battle." This call from the Moscow Patriarch formally

obliged the Russian Orthodox Church in the occupied territories, which recognized his position, to resist the Nazi invasion.

During the first months of the German occupation there was a definite revival of religious life which had been suppressed during the Soviet times. Many churches were reopened, and the number of people who attended services increased. Most of them were peasants and women, but even in the cities there was an upsurge of religiousness.

There was no mention of the Jews in the pro-Nazi proclamations issued by the heads of the Autocephalous and Uniate Churches in the Ukraine and by the heads of the Church in Lithuania and other places in the occupied territories. Moreover, in the large number of documents relating to all the Churches in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and their activities, there is almost no direct or indirect reference to Jews and the atrocities perpetrated against them. In fact, the first days after the German occupation, while the Churches extended warm greetings to the German army as the liberators from Bolshevik rule in the Ukraine and in the Baltic States, were the beginning of the nightmare for the Jews. Even before the Einsatzgruppen, the special units of the SS, began the mass killing of the Jews with the help of local auxiliaries, pogroms were carried out by the native population, killing thousands of Jews in Lvov, Kovno and many other localities in the Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia. The heads of the Churches in those areas were silent when their followers carried out these atrocities. Furthermore, their pro-German proclamations and their blessings for the liberation from Bolshevism could be and were understood by the faithful adherents as an encouragement to kill the Jews. Large parts of the local population identified the Jews with the unpopular Bolshevik rule. Therefore, a combination of basic antisemitism and hatred of Bolshevism instigated these pogroms. It is to be stressed that this was not the intention of either Szeptyckyj in Lvov, who was known as a friend of Jews, or of Brisgys in Kovno, who had friendly connections with Jews. Nevertheless, this was the outcome. Undoubtedly, their pro-German proclamations contributed to the extent of the pogroms in which tens of thousands of Jews were massacred.

In Kovno on July 9, 1941, two days after thousands of Jews were rounded up by the Lithuanian police and shot, the Jews of the city were ordered by the Germans into a ghetto. The Germans claimed this was a response to a demand that had been made by the Lithuanians. A Jewish delegation, headed by Rabbi S. Snaig, went to meet Bishop Brizgys, the acting head of the Church of Lithuania, to implore him to intervene with the German commander. Brizgys replied: "With all my regrets, I cannot do it. [For] this may endanger the position of the Catholic Church in Lithuania. Such a responsibility I cannot take upon myself."

Unlike in other countries of Europe, in the Soviet territories the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis was a known fact and was witnessed by the local population. The expulsions and extermination actions were carried out by the German authorities with the active participation of tens of thousands of Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and Ukrainians, who were organised in special police battalions, and the local police forces, which consisted of local population who had enlisted in the German service. Most of these people were presumably faithful members of the Christian Churches. Hence, condemnation by the Church of the massacres of the Jews would undoubtedly have worked to lessen the extent of the active participation of its members in the killing operations. Furthermore, the Church could have influenced the majority of the population, who were for the most part indifferent bystanders, to extend help to the Jews. It should be stressed that by remaining passive the population actually helped the Germans, because at that time the rescue of Jews demanded active help.

There is no information or documentation that indicates any relation between the Russian Orthodox Church in the German occupied territories and the Jewish tragedy. As far as we know this church ignored the fate of the Jews and did not come out in their defence. To be sure, the Russian Orthodox Church was in an unfavourable position under Nazi rule. Its leader, Metropolitan Voskresenskii Sergeii, was killed by the Nazis in April 1944. Yet, his Church's silence on the Jewish tragedy leaves a big question mark as to its spiritual and moral behaviour.

The Catholic Church in Lithuania was also in an influential position, which could have been used to help the Jews in view of the large-scale participation of Lithuanian police battalions in the anti-Jewish actions, even outside Lithuania. A further indication of Church's involvement was that Lithuanian chaplains served in some of these "units of death". The Lutheran Church in Latvia and Estonia assumed a similar attitude. In these Baltic countries the ruling Churches remained silent. Toward the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944 however, there was some change. Disappointed with the Germans, some small groups of Catholics in Kovno, Lithuania began hiding a limited number of Jewish children. L. Garfunkel, a Jewish leader in the Kovno ghetto wrote that Bishop Brizgys preached in his church against the atrocities being perpetrated against the Jews.

The Ukrainian Autocephalous Church was, according to existing testimonies the most anti-Jewish Church in the occupied Soviet territories. Sermons were delivered in its churches calling on the parishioners to kill the Jews. In the city of Kowel in Wolyn, on June 2, 1942, the Ukrainian police unit entered the church with its commander and received the blessing of the chief priest, Iwan Guba, before beginning an extermination action, in which thousands of Jews were shot on the outskirts of the city.

There is no documentation relating to the attitude of the Ukrainian Autonomous Church or its leaders with regard to the Jews and their extermination. In Lvov, the head of the Uniate Church, Metropolitan A. Szeptyckyj, published a pastoral letter in November 1942, entitled "Thou shalt not kill." It mentioned the basic Christian duties of love, the sanctity of human life and refraining from killing. Szeptyckyj did not mention Jews.

There were many cases in which individual priests gave assistance to Jews, provided them with hiding-places, forged identity cards for them, and also influenced some of their congregants to help them. Certain priest baptised Jews and Jewish children. Some of them did so for humanitarian reasons, others for missionary purposes. Some of these priests were executed by the Nazis for their aid to Jews, or were sent to prison and concentration camps. Such individual cases were to be found in all the Churches, although to a lesser extent in the Ukrainian Autocephalous and Ukrainian Churches. The

small Baptist Church in the Ukraine was active in saving Jews, so was the Church of Old Believers in Latvia.

In the occupied territories of the Soviet Union the attitude of the Churches toward Nazi Germany and the Jews was affected more by their people's nationalistic inclination and aims than by a general Church policy. The Churches in the Baltic states and in the Ukraine were part of the nationalistic upheaval there. They cannot be whitewashed of the guilt of their people in the large-scale collaboration and participation in killing the Jews, even beyond their natural boundaries (In the death camps, the Warsaw ghetto, etc).

The Nazi policy with regard to the depolitization and atomization of the Churches restricted the scope of possible Church intervention there - in some cases even terror was used against them, but this does not diminish their spiritual responsibility.

The silence of the Churches, except in the case of the pastoral letter of Szeptyckyj, their blindness to the Jewish tragedy and the annihilation of the Jewish people, which was carried out openly, leaves a stain on Church activity in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, and a question-mark with regard to their moral and spiritual fortitude.

**Source: *The Holocaust and the Christian World – Reflections on the Past Challenges for the Future*, eds. C. Rittner, S. D. Smith & I. Steinfeldt, Kuperard Publication, London, 2000, pp. 108-111.**