

THE KREMLIN AND THE POPE

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The substantial evidence of a direct Bulgarian involvement in the attempt on the Pope's life unearthed by the Italian investigative organs, has given rise to speculations of tacit Soviet approval, if not outright complicity, in what has already been called the "crime of the century." The implications of such Soviet involvement, if substantiated, are so profound and disturbing, that many in the West have questioned presumed Soviet motivations. Most Western analysts searching for the likely rationale of Kremlin complicity have focused on the alleged determination of the Pontiff to fly to his homeland and galvanize resistance to the Soviets were they to invade Poland prior to the establishment of martial law in December of 1981. Such a possibility must have been a serious and perhaps in itself sufficient reason for Moscow to wish that a Polish Pope did not exist at the time. It should be recalled that from the Soviet perspective the situation in Poland at the time could not have been considered anything but grim. With the Polish communist party in a state of near collapse and regime authority floundering in the spring of 1981, a direct Soviet suppression of Solidarity may have increasingly looked as the only alternative to Moscow. While this is a plausible motivation, focusing on it alone obscures the much broader impact John Paul II's election and policies have had on the Soviet bloc and contributes but little to our understanding of the determinants and evolution of Soviet attitudes towards him. A more detailed examination of these is thus likely to

* A condensed version of this paper appeared in the Wall Street Journal, March 30, 1983.

provide us with additional clues on why the Bishop of Rome, whose political relevance Stalin once dismissed derisively with "how many divisions does the Pope have," may have come to be perceived as a major threat by the mighty Soviet Union.

THE POPE'S CHALLENGE

From the very first day of the election of Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II it was clear to Moscow that it had to deal with a formidable opponent. During the tenure of his predecessors Paul VI and John XXIII the Vatican had pursued an Ostpolitik which was characterized by willingness to compromise and a seeming desire to accommodate the Soviets. Indeed, it appeared at times that the Vatican was more interested in avoiding antagonizing Moscow than in a vigorous defense of the rights of believers living under communist rule. In the person of Wojtyla though, the Kremlin rulers found themselves faced with a convinced and outspoken opponent of communist totalitarianism and a man with a proven record of standing up to the regime in defense of the human rights and dignity of his people. Soon after his appointment the Pope also left no doubt that the plight of believers in the Soviet bloc was a special and lasting concern of his. Among his early policies he acted to considerably increase the broadcasting time of Radio Vatican in several Eastern European and Soviet languages and appointed a number of representatives of these countries to important positions. More consequential from a Soviet point of view was undoubtedly the Pope's bold and unprecedented venture into the political realm where he openly took issue not only with the communist social system, but with Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe as well. This was most dramatically demonstrated during his triumphant visit to Poland in June of 1979,

which Moscow now believes gave rise to Solidarity. Speaking before collective Polish audiences numbering some six million the Pope made it clear that he considered himself responsible for the other peoples of Eastern Europe also, which he called "the brother peoples and the neighboring peoples" and added emphatically that he had come "to speak before the whole Church, before Europe and the world, of those often forgotten nations and peoples...to cry with a loud voice and to embrace all these peoples together with his own nation." [1] Without mincing words he categorized the Christian worldview as diametrically opposed to the Marxist one, criticized the communist system for allowing "evident privileges for some and discrimination against others" and castigated regime control of the media and censorship by telling a half a million strong audience at Gniezno that it is "sad to believe that each Pole and Slav in any part of the world is unable to hear the words of the Pope, this Slav." [2] Peace and social harmony, the Pope said could be achieved only on the basis of "respect for the objective rights of the nation, such as the right to existence, the right to freedom....," [3] and, in the presence of the Polish Party boss Gierek, declared that the task of the Church is "to make people more confident, more courageous, conscious of their rights and duties...." [4]

In what could only be interpreted by Moscow as a blatant attack on Soviet domination in Eastern Europe, John Paul II further asserted that "no country should ever develop at the cost of another, at the cost of enslavement.... conquest, outrage, exploitation and death" [5] and, on

[1] New York Times, June 4, 1979.

[2] Washington Post, June 4, 1979.

[3] Washington Post, June 3, 1979.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Soviet Analyst, Vol. 8, #13, June 28, 1979.

another occasion, implicitly rejected the Soviet controlled Warsaw Pact alliance by saying that the validity of alliances depended on whether they led to more well-being and prosperity for the member states. The Pontiff's remarks in front of millions of people without question represented an unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of the communist system and Soviet interests in Eastern Europe and could not have been perceived other than as a grave provocation by the rulers in the Kremlin.

THE CHURCH DEFIANT

While the Pope's influence on the events in Poland following his visit and up until the imposition of martial law is fairly well documented, the revitalizing effect of his activist policies on the Church in other Eastern European countries, though not so well known, has also been considerable and has led to an increasingly assertive attitudes by the Catholic clergy and believers vis-a-vis the regime authorities. In Czechoslovakia, for example, despite successive waves of religious repression, the Catholic Church is experiencing a remarkable revival which has included widespread underground religious life with tens of thousands of participants and a samizdat press.

The Pope has been accused by the authorities of actively supporting and encouraging these illegal activities even to the point of consecrating three secret bishops for the underground Church.[6] In a bold effort to help the Church regain some control over its affairs the Vatican has issued a decree in March of 1982 prohibiting any political activities by ordained priests, which was seen by most as a direct

[6] Neue Zuercher Zeitung, October 1, 1982.

attack on pro-regime Catholic organizations through which the authorities often controlled the Church. This has been particularly true about the regime-subservient Czechoslovak organization Pacem in Terris in which close to a third of all priests had been coopted or forced to participate. As a result of the Vatican edict only some five percent reportedly continue as members; an eloquent testimony to the Pontiff's authority.[7] The Church leadership in Czechoslovakia has stood firmly behind the Pope on this issue which has subjected it to a campaign of intimidation and invective. Even the normally timid East German Catholic Church following a meeting of its bishops with John Paul II, in which he admonished them to take a firmer stand, has recently unequivocally condemned the progressive militarization of their society and some aspects of Soviet military doctrine.

Apart from Eastern Europe, Moscow has had plenty of reasons to worry about the nefarious influence of the Polish Pope on its own territory. This influence has been felt most acutely, but not exclusively, in the Catholic areas along the Soviet western border. In Lithuania, a homogeneously Catholic nation with a long record of historical and cultural ties with Poland, the election of Wojtyla was greeted with elation as that of one of their own. The Pope, who speaks Lithuanian, on his part has never missed an occasion to emphasize his special concern for Lithuania where, he has said, half of his heart resides. The Church there, which has been experiencing a dramatic revival since the early 1970s, has become even more active in its struggle for survival with the Soviet regime and has emerged without a question as the most militant and determined Church in the Soviet Union.

[7] Die Presse, Vienna, January 19, 1983.

Within weeks of Wojtyla's election, Lithuanian priests organized a "Catholic Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Believers" with the expressed objective of assisting the Church hierarchy in publicizing and resisting the violation of the constitutionally recognized rights of the believers. As its first official act the Committee sent a letter to the Pope declaring their unconditional loyalty to him and asking for his blessing of their noble cause. Faced with increasing repression and harassment by the regime and the KGB, the Lithuanian Church has organized many of its traditional activities in the underground. There are now a secret seminary, clandestine nuns orders, a secret lay Catholic society and a flourishing samizdat press consisting of half a dozen publications operating in what has become known as the Church of the Catacombs. Moreover, as the Church has become increasingly uncompromising toward the regime and willing to stand its ground, its influence among the population has increased.[8]

Open defiance of the regime through unauthorized religious processions, demonstrations and mass petitions of all kinds has become commonplace in Lithuania. In one example, a 1979 petition demanding the return of a church in the city of Klaipeda confiscated by the authorities and submitted to Brezhnev and the United Nations was signed by 149,000 believers, an unprecedented figure given a total Lithuanian population of some three million. In another, 59 out of 60 official Church representatives in all six dioceses supported by the overwhelming

[8] It is worth noting here that in the Soviet Union as a whole the fastest growing religious communities such as Catholics, Baptists and other Evangelicals and the secret Moslem brotherhoods are also the ones which have by and large opted out for a policy of non-cooperation with the regime, and have not shied away from open confrontation.

majority of Lithuanian priests signed a statement in May of 1981 declaring their determination to defy Soviet regulations harmful to the Church and arguing that the Church is responsible only to the Pope and in effect does not recognize the state's jurisdiction over its ecclesiastical affairs.[9] The Pope has firmly, if quietly, supported the Lithuanians' struggle. He has, for example, refused to appoint regime-approved church officials, considered collaborators by most believers. It is also widely rumored that in 1979 the Pope bestowed the cardinal's hat in pectore to Bishop Stepanovicius, a man recognized by most Lithuanians as the head of their church, even though he has been prevented from carrying out his pastoral duties and has lived in internal exile for over twenty years because of his opposition to the regime's policies. Last summer he was able to push through the reinstatement of another bishop who, like Stepanovicius, had been exiled internally for twenty years.

No less troublesome for the Kremlin has been John Paul II's perceived impact on the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Eastern Rite. The Uniate Church, as it is also known, has for centuries commanded the allegiance of the people in the Western Ukraine which was incorporated into the Soviet Union following the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. The Western Ukraine has always been a traditional hotbed of Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Sovietism, with the Church playing a major role as a national symbol. As a result, it became an obvious target of the relentless Soviet drive to extirpate Ukrainian nationalism and was the only Church in the Soviet Union to be outlawed outright. Its churches were closed, its priests jailed or deported, and its members forced to

[9] Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, #48, June 29, 1981.

recognize the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church. Ever since that time, the Ukrainian Catholics, forbidden the practice of their faith, have been persecuted and victimized like no other religious community in the Soviet Union. Their tragic lot was compounded by the seeming lack of interest on the part of John Paul II's predecessors, who appeared to have completely abandoned them in the interest of good relations with Moscow. This situation has changed under Wojtyla's leadership. Having expressed his concern for the Ukrainian Catholics from the very beginning of his tenure, the Pontiff convoked the first synod of Uniate bishops in the spring of 1980 which openly called for the restoration of the Church, prompting a bitter riposte from the sycophantic patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church and a charge of interference in internal Soviet affairs from the regime. The Pope's sympathetic attitudes and moral support have contributed to the resurgence of a new spirit of hope and defiance permeating the Ukrainian Catholic community. Just as the Lithuanians before them, last September the Ukrainian Catholics organized an "Initiative Group for the Defense of the Rights of the Church" and boldly petitioned the government to allow the reopening of Uniate churches and monasteries. Despite particularly brutal KGB suppression, an underground church with as many as 500 priests and 3 bishops is reported to be flourishing in the Ukraine. John Paul II appears to be firmly in support of the Ukrainians' uphill struggle. As recently as February 1983 he convened yet another synod of the Uniate bishops dedicated to an examination of the state of the underground Church and urged them to intensify their efforts in connection with the upcoming 1000th anniversary of Christianity in the Ukraine in 1988.[10]

[10] Reuter, Vatican City, February 13, 1983.

There is also evidence of a revival of the Catholic Church in other areas of the Soviet Union. Last year the Cathedral of Aglona, a holy place of pilgrimage for Latvian Catholics every August 15, which attracted an average of 20,000 pilgrims in the 1970s was jammed with some 70,000 faithful, while in Byelorussia the authorities have alleged that illegal services and bible schools for children were being conducted by "extremist" priests "carrying out instructions from foreign bosses." [11]

It has now become clear that in the person of the Polish Pope the long-suffering Soviet Catholics have found a determined champion and what Pope Pius XII used to call the "church of silence" is no longer. There is also little doubt that John Paul II has approved of and perhaps even encouraged the increasingly militant attitudes of Soviet Catholics. "The faithful will have only as much freedom as they manage to win for themselves," he is reported to have openly told the Lithuanian clergy, according to the underground organ of the Church. [12]

While the Pope's influence has undoubtedly been strongest among the Catholics in the Soviet bloc it has had much broader ramifications. One aspect of John Paul II's worldview that must be particularly disconcerting to Moscow in its political implications is his implicit rejection of the political division of Europe and Soviet domination of its eastern half. By emphasizing its common Christian roots he has consistently stressed the spiritual unity of Europe--East and West--and has gone beyond that to argue for the opening not only of state borders,

[11] Reuter, September 22, 1982.

[12] Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, #44, July 30, 1980.

but also those of the (political) "systems." In a highly significant gesture, the Pope has declared the Slavic apostles Cyril and Methodius, who were instrumental in the spread of Christianity among the orthodox Slavs, co-patron saints of Europe along with St. Benedict, thus symbolically overcoming the centuries old division of European Christianity. While this papal action has been largely ignored in the West, it has been bitterly attacked in the East as a "factor in the activization of clerical anti-communism, and the growing ideological claims of the Church." [13]

The Pope's expressed vision of a Europe united on the basis of Christian ideals, however unrealistic, given existing political realities is the logical antithesis of Soviet totalitarian ideology and thus an ideological challenge to its very legitimacy. Moreover, the Pope sees the communist system and its atheistic philosophy as an implacable enemy of the human spirit and a cause of suffering and insecurity for individuals and nations alike. What has distinguished him from his predecessors is that he has not been satisfied to merely identify the problem, but has called on his followers to stand up to it. In a succinct exposition of this aspect of his philosophy he wrote in an address to the United Nations session on disarmament in June of 1982:

The spirit has prime and inalienable rights. It justly claims them in countries where room is lacking for one to live in tranquility according to one's convictions. I call upon all fighters for peace to enter into this struggle to eliminate the real causes of men's insecurity.

It is this determination to act forcefully in accordance with his convictions, armed with the moral authority of his position and his

[13] Cited in Neue Zuercher Zeitung, June 16, 1979, p. 7.

tremendous personal charisma, that has made John Paul II a dangerous ideological opponent for the men in the Kremlin.

MOSCOW LASHES OUT

Soviet media reaction to the Pope has faithfully reflected Moscow's increasing apprehension over the Pontiff's policies and influence. In the initial period between Wojtyla's election in the Fall of 1978 and his visit to Poland in June of 1979, Soviet reporting on John Paul II was scant and generally restrained. Though Soviet readers were occasionally reminded that the Vatican occupied an important place among "religious centers and organizations abroad that actively participate in the struggle of world imperialism against socialism and communism," criticisms of the Pope himself were rather subdued and dealt mostly with his conservative theological views and his alleged failure to attack the evils of capitalism on his various travels in the Third World. This kid glove approach was promptly discarded in the wake of John Paul II's visit to his homeland. On the very first day of the visit Moscow television informed the viewers that the event was being used by "certain Church leaders" for "anti-state purposes,"[14] while foreign minister Gromyko was reported to have feared that the Pope's pilgrimage to Poland would "have the same effect on the masses as the Ayatollah Khomeini had in Iran." [15] In the aftermath of the visit an ever more strident campaign was orchestrated by professional agitators and in the media attacking the Catholic Church and castigating the Pope as an inveterate opponent of socialism.

[14] New York Times, June 4, 1979.

[15] Soviet Analyst, Vol. 8, No. 13, June 28, 1979, p. 7.

This campaign took particularly virulent forms in the areas inhabited by Soviet Catholics. Moscow has been particularly worried about religious dissent in areas such as Lithuania and the Ukraine because of the traditional symbiotic relationship between the Church and nationalism there. Unlike the Russian dissident movement which is almost exclusively centered in the intelligentsia and has very little popular support, religious dissent is broadly based with strong nationalist overtones and therefore the potential to become a mass opposition movement. In Lithuania the authorities have accused the Church of attempting to transform itself into a nationalist political force and have assailed unnamed "fanatical agents of the Pope." In the words of a top KGB official these religious fanatics under the influence of the Vatican's "vile fantasies" become conductors of the hostile strivings of the anti-communists."^[16] Simultaneously, a campaign of physical intimidation and assaults on priests, and desecration, looting and burning of churches has taken place. Most ominously three activist priests have been murdered, following vicious media attacks against them, in circumstances which suggest KGB involvement. In the Ukraine the Pope has been personally attacked for his support of believers and for allegedly trying to divide and set against each other the Ukrainian and Russian people.^[17] The Vatican has also been accused of "malicious anti-Soviet and anti-communist propaganda," conducted by "dyed-in-the-wool anti-Soviets and Nazi remnants..."^[18] The vilification campaign of

[16] Komunist, Vilnius, #11, November 1981.

[17] Nauka i Religiya, #11, 1982.

[18] Radyanska Ukraina, March 26, 1981.

the Pontiff reached an early peak with the publication of a particularly inflammatory attack on him in the literary political journal Polimya in March of 1981. In it, Wojtyla, characterized as a "militant anti-communist" and a "cunning and dangerous ideological enemy" stands accused of having both known of and acquiesced to an alleged Nazi-Vatican plan to exterminate the Polish people, including the clergy, during World War II. This "malicious, lowly, perfidious and backward" "toady of the American militarists," the author further informs us, struggles against socialism in the interest of his "overseas accomplices" and his "new boss in the White House."

The attempt on the Pope's life in May of 1981 marked another watershed in Moscow's campaign against him. Immediately following the event Soviet propagandists were mainly concerned with steering any suspicion of complicity away from the Soviet bloc and launched a typical disinformation campaign, aiming to show that reactionary imperialist circles and the CIA in particular were behind this ghastly deed. In at least one case Soviet propaganda ingenuity went as far as claiming that the CIA had wanted to eliminate the Pope because of his friendliness towards the Soviet Union.[19]

The media offensive against the Pontiff, however, was resumed again once it became evident that he would survive the attack, and has continued unabated with mounting shrillness to the present. The renewed

[19] APN (in Russian), May 27, 1981. Soviet efforts to link the CIA to the assassination attempt have been intensified since the arrest in Italy of the Bulgarian Sergei Antonov in late November. See, for instance, Radio Moscow programs of January 11, February 8 and 9 and TASS, December 16, 1982 and January 10, 1983. The CIA has also been accused of sponsoring the Red Brigades and organizing the murder of Aldo Moro. Mezhdunarodniy terorizm i TsRU (International Terrorism and the CIA), Moscow, 1982, pp. 252-262.

propaganda effort has focused on the attempt to present John Paul II as the organizer and actual driving force behind the Solidarity movement in Poland and a massive drive to destabilize the socialist bloc and to portray him as a puppet, if not an actual agent, of U.S.

imperialism.[20] "The anti-socialist activity of the reactionary forces of the Catholic Church is attested to by the developments of recent years in People's Poland," opined a recent Soviet commentary and continued bluntly, "the notorious anti-socialist force Solidarity, which came to symbolize the crisis provoked by the anti-socialist forces on instructions from overseas, was born not in the wave of disorders that swept the country in the summer of 1980, but in the Catholic Church." [21] The theme of American manipulation of the Pope was sounded time and again as, for instance, in a hard-hitting article in the Czech journal Tvorba, widely reprinted in the Soviet media. "It is known," the article stated, "that the American president, during his June sojourn in Rome, enjoined John Paul II to assume a more resolute posture in connection with the situation in Poland, to interfere more into the internal affairs of that country. As a reward, Ronald Reagan has shown his readiness to raise financial support, which the Roman Catholic Church would distribute among the opposition in Poland." [22]

The frantic efforts by the Soviet and Eastern European media to prove a link between the Vatican and assorted American reactionary circles bears a disturbing resemblance to the anti-religious campaigns

[20] In its propaganda effort Moscow has often resorted to the practice of having particularly slanderous attacks published first in the press of its Eastern European clients and then widely reprinted and disseminated by the Soviet propaganda machine.

[21] TASS, December 29, 1982.

[22] Tvorba, No. 32, August 11, 1982.

of the early 1950s in Eastern Europe when hundreds of priests were carted off to the labor camps and jails after being convicted as American spies in show trials.

"The subversive activities of the Vatican," however, are not limited to Poland but directed "against all socialist countries and first and foremost against the Soviet people," argues one Soviet author who then proceeds to document the "ideological sabotage" carried out by the Vatican. Among other things the Vatican is accused of organizing special anti-Soviet centers which are said to "train and send propaganda specialists" and smuggle "subversive literature" in the socialist countries.[23] The Pope's advocacy of European unity is also attacked as part of the "anti-communist campaign for the defense of human rights" and an attempt by the "anti-communist forces of Polish clericalism to activate destabilizing forces in the other socialist countries." [24] Alongside the massive media campaign against the Pope, there are disturbing signs that the Soviet regime under Andropov is stepping up the direct repression of the Catholic Church. Last January the KGB arrested the most prominent Lithuanian religious dissident and a founding member of the "Catholic Committee," Father Svarinskas, a man who has already spent twenty-four years in Soviet camps, and the organizer of the Ukrainian "Initiative Committee," Yosif Terelya. There is evidence that for the first time in many years the Soviets are again preparing show trials in an effort to silence dissent. A further disquieting note has been added by an acrimonious article in the

[23] V. Makhin, "Religiya v ideinom arsenale antikomunizma" (Religion in the Conceptual Arsenal of Anticommunism), Politicheskoye Samoobrazovanie, No. 12, December 1982, pp. 117-118.

[24] Cited in Neue Zuercher Zeitung, June 16, 1982.

Lithuanian party organ accusing the clergy of "criminal connections" with the Nazi occupiers and the Gestapo during World War II.[25]

Yet neither the attempt on his life in May of 1981 nor the seditious propaganda campaign against him preceding and following it appear to have intimidated the Pope or to have forced him to retreat from his determined struggle on behalf of the believers under communism. In yet another move likely to be seen as a provocation by Moscow he recently appointed three new cardinals from the Soviet bloc. One of them, the Latvian bishop Vaivods, a veteran of the Soviet Gulag, is the first cardinal in the Soviet Union. Moscow, evidently, was neither consulted nor informed ahead of time of the Pope's choice. The Pope is also determined to go ahead with his return visit to Poland this coming June which is causing increasing concern in the Eastern bloc. The Hungarian party organ, Nepzabadsag, has openly voiced the fear that John Paul II's visit may steer the Church on a course of confrontation in an attempt to bring the regime to its knees.[26]

It should come as no surprise then that the Kremlin's attitudes towards the Pope some four years after his election and close to two years after the attempt on his life continue to be unremittingly hostile and increasingly confrontational. The fact that the successful repression of Solidarity by the Polish military dictatorship in December of 1981, apparently did not alleviate Soviet concerns, as the preceding pages illustrate, testifies eloquently that for Moscow John Paul II was and continues to be much more than a narrow Polish problem. The Pope on his part realized clearly what a serious challenge he presented for the

[25] Sovetskaya Litva, February 8, 1983.

[26] Cited in Die Welt, December 27, 1982.

Kremlin. As early as 1979 during his visit to Poland he told an audience: "I'm sure there are people out there who are already having a hard time taking this Slavic Pope." Hard enough, it seems, to prompt an exasperated Kremlin to cry out, as Henry II once did regarding the Archbishop of Canterbury: "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

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