

Secret Activity of Graduates of the Pope Russian College (Pontificium Collegium Russicum) in the USSR

Pavel Petrovich Krasnov

Orenburg State University, st. Victory Avenue, 13, 460018, Orenburg, Russia

Abstract: The article is devoted to the issue of non-official diplomatic relations between the USSR and Vatican in the context of activity of the Pope Russian College (Russicum) at occupied territories of the USSR during WORLD WAR II. The importance of secret mission of catholic priests is emphasized. The fact of control of NKVD over the activity of graduates of the Pope Russian College not only at the territory of the USSR but in Rome also is revealed. The everyday life of students is considered. Destiny of most graduates who were acting at the USSR territory while fulfilling their mission is shown.

Key words: WORLD WAR II • Russicum • Pope Pius XI • priest

INTRODUCTION

One of the most enigmatic and secret episodes of XX century history linking the USSR and Holy See is work undertaken by Pontificium Collegium Russicum and the activity of its graduates at the territory of the USSR. Today this page of history is significant for many experts because it reflects the relationship between Vatican and Russian Orthodox Church and between Vatican and the whole Soviet state.

Life of Catholic Church in Russia both during Tsarist and Soviet times was very difficult. Significant changes in the policy of Russian monarchy in regard to Catholicism took place after adoption of the Decree about religious tolerance by Nikolai II in 1905. When this document was ratified the life of Old Belief and Catholicism was improved greatly. But the gift of the Tsarist power lasted for a short time: after Bolsheviks' coming into power the situation has changed and it deteriorated greatly some time later [1].

Catholic historians believe that it was catastrophic conditions of Christianity in Russia in 20s which urged Pius XI to found Russicum college in order to support Russian Orthodox church [2].

The aim of foundation of national educational facilities (such as Russicum College) was preparation of loyal attitude of clergy to Catholic church in the countries where "church was in critical situation" [2]. This practice

was not invented in XX century. Holy See used this tactics in XVI century in England and then in Germany and Hungary. In XVII century Creek collegium was founded and since that time active involvement of missionary priests into study of Slavic languages and Eastern spiritual practice (liturgy, theology, ceremonies) began.

Pope Pius XI adopted the document *Quam curam* in August 15, 1929 about foundation of Pontificio Collegio Russo di S. Teresa del Bambin Gesù. [3]. Pontific emphasized that this college was intended for Russians and Russia.

The building of Russicum consisted of 65 rooms; 10 candidates were accepted at the first year of studies (1929-1930), mostly they were Russians. In future the proportion of Russian candidates was constantly reducing and in 1950 there were no Russians in Russicum.

Studies in Russicum started at 5 o'clock in the morning. The life of students was very secret: they could not leave the college to visit their homes or parents, students spent their vacations by together, in the village residence of Russicum. The students were allowed to go into the city only once a month and they could do that only in pairs or in groups. They were supposed to come back not later than 18.00. It was prohibited to spend night outside of the Seminary. Students could not keep money in the room and they had to give it to their mentors. If a

student was caught while his visiting a cinema, cafe or non-catholic church, he was excommunicated from the church. After first year of studies in Russicum all students had to solemnly promise that they would only work with Russians. The text of the oath was written by Ledukhovsky, the General of Jesus Society, it was based on the oath given by the students of Greek collegium. Russian candidates were accepted free of charge, students of other nationalities were to pay for education and living [4].

One of the first and prominent rectors of the college was Jesuit Phillip de Rezhis. He wore a beard, knew Synodical ceremony very well and spoke Russian without an accent. He introduced big changes and declared the Russicum more Russian. The service in the Russicum was not on Russian but on traditional old-Slavic language. The Belief symbol was always, not only in selected days, read without filioque. The Maslenitsa festival is still celebrated all over the country-they bake pancakes and paint eggs for Easter.

In 1950 there were 172 students in Russicum and 81 of them became priests; only 22 were Russians. "Russian" graduates performed clerical duties in Western and South-West regions of USSR and were Ukrainians or Belarusians by nationality.

On the 1st of September of 1939 WORLD WAR II broke out and the Russicum graduates under blessing of the Pope intensified their work, in particular, in Poland. Two Russicum graduates, Novikov and Chishek were at controlled by the Red Army territory and did their best to move into central part of the USSR [5]. But their work was stopped soon, they were arrested by NKVD officers who were watching the activity of Russicum agents since their arrival in the USSR. Archives showed that NKVD had the list of Russicum graduates. The priests were sentenced a long time in prison. Philip de Rezhis who lived in Poland for a long time was not a specialist in inter-ethnic relations. A good example of this is the following fact: the graduates of Russicum were sent by him to refugees from Galicia and Philip de Rezhis did not understand why Greek Catholics did not accept Russian ceremony priests and told them to get away.

Since the very beginning of Russicum activity this college was watched by intelligence department of NKVD. There were 32 surnames in NKVD documents: the list of college graduates. The counter-espionage service of the USSR has caught 11 persons from this list: Grigory Syroida, Dorophey Beschastny, Alexander Ilnitsky, Petr Leoni, Ioann Kelner, Victor Novikov, Vladimir Chishek, Foma Podzyava, Pavel Shalei, Pavel Portnyagin (on the photo) and Kuzma Nailovitch. The priests were

brought into court and were punished in accordance with the Article 58 of Criminal Code of the USSR - "anti-Soviet activity"[6]. Ioann Kelner was shot in 1941, the rest were put in prison for different time but all of them died there. The only survivor was Pietro Leoni arrested in Odessa in 1944. He was dismissed and let out from the USSR in 10 years [6]. The problem of activity of Russicum graduates was shown in documentary film shot by Italian film-makers; it was shown on federal channel of NTV in December 21, 2004. The authors of the film emphasized clerical act of honour of 2 priests graduated from Russicum-Italian priest Jesuit Pietro Leoni [7, 8] and Greek catholic bishop of Mukachev-village (Zakarpacie), father Theodor Romzh [9], who was beautified by Pope Joann Paul II in 2001. However, in general the film opposes the graduates' targets to Christian morality.

Thus, Pope's policy of "catholicizing" of Russian population during difficult War times went down in flames [10].

Pope Joann XXIII in 1959 wrote: "We shall not try to make out who was right and who was wrong. We say only this: Let us unite and finish the discord" [2]. Some time later new contacts between Catholic Church and Moscow were established, priests from the USSR went to study in Russicum thanks to activity of metropolitan Nikodim Rotov. This became new mile stone in Eastern policy of Holy See. Patriarch Kirill visited Russicum also, he was in a rank of deacon then and accompanied metropolitan Nikodim Rotov.

Today the college continues to train students but there are no Russian-speaking persons among them. The targets for which it was founded were not fulfilled. Today Russicum does not prepare missionaries for catholicizing of CIS-countries any more: they quit this idea.

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