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## **Between East and West: Communism against the Romanian Orthodox Church**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the hardships the Orthodox Church in Romania had to go through during Communism. There were several actions taken by the atheist regime against the Church: removal or persecution of the clergy members seen as untrustworthy, dissolution of some dioceses and theological schools, limitation of the Church involvement in society.

### **Keywords**

Romanian Orthodox Church, Communism, persecution, resistance

The Orthodox Church in our country has gone through many trials and sufferings over centuries, but one of the toughest periods was when Communism took control of a part of Europe, including Romania.

Socialism, Communism was introduced in our country via Russia (Soviet Russia), with the support of some people dissatisfied with the Rom

urch servants, so even in 1945 they unleashed actions to persecute the hierarchs and clergy.

For the hierarchs it was issued the decree no 166/1947, which provided the removal of those who were not trustworthy for the communist regime.

Among the inconvenient hierarchs that were replaced we remember: Metropolitans Irineu of Moldova and Nifon Criveanul of Oltenia, Bishops Lucian Triteanu of Roman, Grigorie of Huși, Cosma Petrovici of Lower Danube, Veniamin Nistor of Caransebeș, Nicolae Popovici of Oradea, Partenie Ciopron, the Army bishop, Valeriu Moglan, Vicar Bishop of Moldova, et.al<sup>1</sup>.

There were 30 hierarchs who have suffered communist persecution from the beginning till 1989, and they are the victims of communist dictatorship.

Bishops Eugen Laiu, Partenie Ciopron, Emilian Antal, Pavel Șarpe and Atanasie Dincă were removed from their eparchies by the Atheist regime, being sent to Neamț Monastery as professors at the monastic Seminary.

Several dioceses were abolished: Diocese of Maramureș and of Suceava (September 18, 1948), Diocese of Huși, which was divided between the dioceses of Roman and Galați (1949), Diocese of Caransebeș was merged with the Archdiocese of Timisoara on February 5, 1949, and other eparchies.

As is known, the communist persecution did not miss the hierarchs from the Metropolia of Moldova and Suceava.

Metropolitan Irineu Mihălcescu (1939 – 1947), was forced to withdraw from the leadership of the Metropolia of Moldova and Suceava on August 16, 1947, because he wrote and preached against the communist (Soviet) regime. He was sent to Agapia Monastery where he died under mysterious circumstances on April 3, 1948. He was accused of supporting a legionary syndicate.

Officially, Metropolitan Irineu withdrew because of illness, but others say he was forced to give up the leadership of the diocese<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan Dură, *Ierarhi ai Bisericii Ortodoxe Române îndepărtați din scaun și trimiși în recluziune monastică de către autoritățile comuniste în anii 1944-1981*, in "Memoria", no. 55-56 (2-3/2006), editată de Fundația Culturală Memoria, București, pp. 158-177, see also Paul Caravia, Virgiliu Constantinescu, Flori Stănescu, *Biserica întemnițată – România 1944-1989*, Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, București, 1998, pp. 20-28.

<sup>2</sup> Ioan Dură, *Ierarhi ai Bisericii...*, p. 166, see also Cristian Vasile, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română în primul deceniu comunist*, Edit. Curtea Veche, București, 2005, pp. 119-129.

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After Metropolitan Irineu, another bishop from Iasi had to withdraw, namely the Vicar Bishop Valerie Moglan Botoșăneanul, former Archbishopal Vicar of Moldova (June-December 1939) and Vicar Bishop of Buzău (September 5, 1942 - January 1944), being forced to retire to Neamț Monastery in 1949, passing to the Lord on August 14, the same year<sup>3</sup>.

The former Metropolitan of Moldova and Abbot of Neamț, Patriarch Nicodim (1939 – 1948) was another victim of the communist regime<sup>4</sup>, which forced him to withdraw from the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox Church on several occasions. In fact, he was secluded for a short period in 1947 at Neamț Monastery, fact that was recorded by the foreign media that mentioned “serious disagreement” between the Patriarch and the communist government<sup>5</sup>.

The Orthodox priesthood began to be constantly monitored and controlled by the so-called “cult inspectors” and officers of the Securitate, infiltrated in all institutions.

Among the priests from the Diocese of Iași who suffered the communist persecution we recall: Rev. Anton D. Alexandru (born October 4, 1915) from Gropnița village, Iași county, arrested on June 1945 and detained three months in the Galata camp without being tried<sup>6</sup>. Rev. Cezar Gh. Andronic (born July 20, 1902) parish priest at Galu and Vânători, Neamț county, was arrested in 1948 and convicted by the Military Tribunal of Iasi at 12 years of hard labour, being imprisoned at Aiud, and after release in 1955 he was put to forced residence<sup>7</sup>. Rev. Ioan D. Arbore (born March 1889) from Dimăcheni village, Dorohoi (today Corlățeni, Botoșani county), was a political prisoner between 1947 – 1948 and 1952 - 1953<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Ioan Dură, *Ierarhi ai Bisericii...*, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> Arhim. Emilian Nica, *Patriarhul Nicodim și poziția lui față de instaurarea regimului comunist în România*, in “Analele Științifice ale Universității Al. I. Cuza Iași” (serie nouă), Teologie Ortodoxă, tom. XIII, 2008, pp. 161-170.

<sup>5</sup> Ioan Dură, *Ierarhi ai Bisericii...* pp. 167-168, see also Dudu Velicu, *Biserica Ortodoxă în perioada sovietizării României*, însemnări zilnice, I, 1945-1947, Ediție îngrijită de Alina Tudor-Pavelescu, București, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Vasile Manea, *Preoți ortodocși în închisorile comuniste*, ediția a II-a, revăzută și adăugită, Edit. Patmos, 2001, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Vasile Manea, *Preoți ortodocși în închisorile comuniste*, p. 29

<sup>8</sup> Vasile Manea, *Preoți ortodocși în închisorile comuniste*, p. 30

Rev. Mihai Acatrinei (born 1910) from Movileni, Iași county, priest at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Iași, was convicted in 1947 for “conspiracy against U.S.S.R” and for antidemocratic attitude, being imprisoned at Aiud, Gherla and Poarta Albă<sup>9</sup>; hieromonk Hrisostom Asavei from Durău Monastery<sup>10</sup>, and many other clergymen were arrested before and especially after 1948, when the Communist Party consolidated its power and expanded in our country.

The number of Romanian Orthodox clergymen who disappeared in communist prisons (about 150 priests) or died after release from prison until the Revolution of December 1989 rises to over 1,600 priests (according to the information in the books that were published so far)<sup>11</sup>.

Numerous monks and nuns from the monasteries of the diocese were arrested, investigated and sentenced to many years of imprisonment, being accused of legionnairism and plot against the “new social order”.

Not only the hierarchs, clergy and believers were affected by the establishment of the new communist regime, but also the theological institutions, Church publications and eparchial units.

Under the cover of respecting the conditions of the armistice with Moscow, many of the publications that contravened the socialist doctrine were banned, and those who published them were removed from public life.

In the journal “Mitropolia Moldovei” several lists of prohibited publications were published in the June-July 1945 issue, including the works of men of culture in Iasi, priests and laymen.

In 1940 after Bessarabia was taken by the Russians, the Faculty of Theology from the University of Iasi, based in Chisinau, had to move its headquarters in the capital of Moldova.

After the Second World War, the Faculty of Theology of Iasi was forced by the communist regime to change its headquarters in Suceava, merging with that of Cernăuți (1945-1948), and after 1948 it was forced to close, leaving only the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest and Sibiu, under the name of Institute of Theology.

“Veniamin” Seminary from Iași was also affected by the political and ideological changes in the country since the summer of 1944. Headmaster

<sup>9</sup> Vasile Manea, *Preoți ortodocși în închisorile comuniste*, p. 23

<sup>10</sup> Vasile Manea, *Preoți ortodocși în închisorile comuniste*, p. 5

<sup>11</sup> Archives of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova and Bukovina, *Dosar nr. 30/1944*.

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Ilie Gheorghiță (the one who fought for the survival of the Seminary during the war retreating to Banat), was replaced by Nicolae Oniceanu and then by Gheorghe Petrovanu.

Returning from war refuge, the Seminary had to be reorganized, because the building was occupied by the Soviet army. Metropolitan Irineu Mihălcescu supported the reintegration of the Seminary among the theological schools. Moreover, in 1944 he demanded the state authorities to re-establish the Seminary of Dorohoi, but the Ministry did not approve the request<sup>12</sup>.

In 1948 “Veniamin” Seminary from Iași was closed “with the support of the communist regime” and moved to Neamț Monastery. Not even the School of Church Singers in Iasi had a better fate. After war it faces the lack of adequate space, the lack of teachers (the majority were Seminary teachers), although the number of candidates was steadily increasing.

With the help of Metropolitan Irineu, the School of Singers moved its headquarters from “St. John the Baptist” Church to Frumoasa Monastery in Iasi, requesting funds from the Minister of Education for teachers’ payment and school maintenance.

The attitude of the (communist) state towards the School of Singers from Iasi was not a benevolent one, and therefore at the beginning of 1947 it appeared the issue of closing the school for not paying the wages of the teachers<sup>13</sup>.

Since 1948, the religious education in schools was eliminated, the religious services were forbidden in hospital, hostels, and military barracks, Church periodicals of the suppressed eparchies, Theological Academies of Transylvania and Banat, as well as many Theological Seminaries in Moldova and Muntenia were abolished.

The (communist) state leadership did not only consider the dissolution of some theological schools, the interference in the religious and cultural institutions, but it also went as far as the dissolution of the Romanian Academy and its re-establishment under the name of Academy of the Romanian People’s Republic led by collaborators of the new regime<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Archives of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova and Bukovina, *Dosar nr. 31/1947*.

<sup>13</sup> Petru Popescu-Gogan, Claudia Ilie Voiculescu, *Desființarea Academiei Române și reînființarea Academiei R.P. Române*, in “Analele Sighet”, 6, Fundația Academică Civică, București, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Caravia, Virgiliu Constantinescu, Flori Stănescu, *Biserica întemnițată...*, p. 7.

On August 4, 1948, the *Law for the General Regime of the Cults* was adopted. 14 cults were recognized: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, old-style Armenian-Gregorian (Lipovan), Reformed (Calvin), Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostal and Christian after the Gospel. They all had their specific organization and places of worship.

“Communism has proved and proves yet another fact that is hard to challenge, namely: in principle, the prolongation of the revolutionary atheist «fundamentalism» has led to the same negative policy towards religion in two different plans.

The plan of faith is the first they acted as atheists, seeking to destroy the presence of God in the people’s soul and mind, and to destroy the image of **homo religiosus**. In this sense, the communists went on the road to decide, through the ideological **demolition** of faith, but also by the physical elimination or isolation of believers and their shepherds from society.

A second plan was that of the church institution, respectively the legality of confessions, their recognition irrespective of the degree of autonomy or extreme subordination accepted by treaties, concordats or other means that do not contradict the constitutional order (denominations that are not accepted by law)”<sup>15</sup>.

Many clergymen have fought the communist ideology. Valeriu Iordăchescu, former professor at the Faculty of Theology from Chisinau said: “For Christians, an anti-communist attitude is a religious duty”<sup>16</sup>. Communism is considered the regime or ideology that caused the greatest overthrow of values in history.

In this context, the Romanian Orthodox Church sought to adapt to the new social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual realities, preserving her faith and tradition. After the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the People’s Republic, the new regime abolished the old Constitutions (from 1923 and 1938) and promulgated a new one (1948) where “it was stipulated that «freedom of conscience and religious

<sup>15</sup> Valeriu Iordăchescu, *Comunism și creștinism*, Institutul de Arte grafice Alexandru Te-rek, Iași, 1938, p. IV.

<sup>16</sup> Oliver Gillet, *Religie și naționalism, Ideologia Bisericii Ortodoxe Române sub regi-mul comunism*, traducere de Mariana Petrișor, Edit. «AltFel» - Compania, București, 2001, p. 49, apud V. Popescu, *La liberté des cultes dans la République Populaire Ro-umaine*, București, 1953.

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freedom are guaranteed by the state, and all denominations are free and equal before the law»<sup>17</sup>.

In spite of all these rights, with its secularist spirit, the communist ideology limited the activity of the Church of Christ in the Romanian society. Christian values were no longer the landmark for the whole society. The Communist Party banned its members from engaging in church activities, but if it was still interested in the Church, it only acted to control and to limit her actions.

If the interwar period represented a spiritual rebirth of the united Romanians from all regions of the country (after the *Great Union of 1918*), the period after 1944 and especially after 1948 represented a destabilization and weakening of the ancestral Church through the persecution of her servants and believers.

Finally, it has been proven once again in history that the Church was founded by our Saviour Jesus Christ for the salvation of men, and no worldly power will overcome it.

The confessors of the Orthodox faith during the communist regime in our country were highlighted and honoured by the Romanian Orthodox Church especially in 2017 and they remain in the conscience of the people as heroes of the righteous faith and of the Romanian nation.

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<sup>17</sup> V. Popescu. *Biserica și viața. Libertatea cultelor religioase în Republica Populară Română*, in "Ortodoxia", V, 1953, pp. 159-168.