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THE CHURCH IN BESSARABIA IN THE 20TH CENTURY[541]

One of the consequences of the Russian Revolution was that Russian Moldavia (Bessarabia), 60% of whose population was Romanian, was united to the Romanian State. Before the revolution, writes Barbara Jelavich, "Romanians as such did not face prejudice, and there were large Romanian and Russian landowners. The widespread discontent was economic and social, more than national. The position of the peasants was regulated by the Russian emancipation laws of the 1860s and subsequent reform measures, but, as in other parts of Russia, these had not solved the basic agrarian problems. Since conditions were roughly the same in the Regat, independent Romania did not hold a great attraction for the peasant majority. The main demand of all peasants was a breakup of the large estates and a distribution of their lands…

"Because of these conditions, the Russian revolutions in March and November 1917 were bound to have a great effect. They influenced not only the disaffected peasants, but also the many soldiers in the province who had deserted the rapidly disintegrating Russian army… As early as July 1917, the peasants began to seize the land; by the end of the year, they had appropriated about two-thirds.

"In October 1917 a provisional government for Bessarabia was organized, with its center at Kishinev… This government remained in control of the province from November 1917 to November 1918. In December 1917, it declared itself the Democratic Moldavian Republic and expressed the desire to join a Soviet federative republic…"[542]

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[542] Jelavich, History of the Balkans, Cambridge University Press, 1983, volume 2, pp. 158-159.

However, in view of the discussions that had begun between the Soviet and German governments, this decision disturbed the Allied Powers, and with France's approval, the Romanian army invaded the province. On March 27, the Moldavian parliament, surrounded by Romanian soldiers, voted for the union of Bessarabia with Romania. It was suggested to Archbishop Anastasy (Gribanovsky) of Kishinev that he join the Romanian Church; but he refused.

In May, he left the province, and the Kishinev archiepiscopate fell under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Church.[543] On June 14, the Romanian Synod appointed Bishop Nicodemus (Muntianu) of Khush as deputy locum tenens of the see of Kishinev (he later became Patriarch of Romania). He began to "Romanize" the Bessarabian Church, introduced the Romanian language into the Kishinev seminary, and replaced Russian and Ukrainian superiors with Romanian ones in some monasteries.

In October, 1918 Patriarch Tikhon wrote to Metropolitan Pimen of Moldavia and Suceava, the president of the Synod of the Romanian Church, protesting strongly at the anticanonical seizure of the Kishinev diocese by the Romanian Church, "which by her unilateral decision taken without the agreement of the Russian Church did not have the right to determine the destiny of the Kishinev diocese by submitting it to her power after Orthodox Bessarabia had constituted an indivisible part of the Russian ecclesiastical body for the last one hundred years. This way of acting on the part of the Romanian Holy Synod contradicts at the same time the spirit of Christian love, the age-old canonical decrees and the sacred customs of the Orthodox Church.

Pointing to the supposed fact that political union always brings with it a union of the Churches cannot in the given case serve as a justification for the Romanian ecclesiastical authority, first, because it is not itself justified by history, and secondly, because such a point of view rests on a confusion of the nature of ecclesiastical and political life, which are different by their very essence… Moreover, the act of joining Bessarabia to the Romanian kingdom, as we said before, is far from generally recognised from the international point of view and can be subject to review at the final tally of the results of the world war."

[543] Monk Benjamin (Gomarteli), Letopis' Tserkovnoj Istorii (1961-1971) (A Chronicle of Church History (1961-1971), http://www.zlatoust.ws/letopis5.htm, pp. 17, 18.

The Patriarch's Epistle ended with a warning: "If the Romanian Church, in spite of the objections we have raised, tries by force to strengthen the position in its favour, we will be forced to break all fraternal and canonical communion with the Romanian Synod and bring the present matter before the judgement of the other Orthodox Churches."[544]

The Romanians paid no attention to this admonition, and in 1919 placed in the see of Kishinev Archimandrite Gurias (Grossu), a Russian priest of Moldavian extraction, and a graduate of the Kiev Academy.[545]

Thus, as K.V. Glazkov writes, "while with one hand the Romanian authorities mercilessly destroyed the communist opposition (for example, mass punitive operations were undertaken against Bolsheviks in the army, and Romanian units took part in the suppression of the red revolution in 1918 in Hungary), with the other hand they suppressed every kind of dissidence. A number of deputies of the Popular Assembly who were opponents of the union of Bessarabia and Romania were shot, after which the National Assembly itself was dissolved, while on the same day, the pro-Romanian deputies triumphantly overthrew the monuments to Tsars Alexander I and Alexander II in the capital. In January 1920, the White armies of General Bredov…, in whose carts were fugitives, women and children, were shot from Romanian machine-guns as they approached the Dniester. In this way, the new authorities in Bessarabia spoiled for good their relations with the Russians.

"We should note that from the very beginning, the Russian hierarchy and clergy, as if foreseeing the possibility of church-political disturbances, adopted quite a cold attitude to the inclusion of Bessarabia into Romania. This act was even condemned by Archbishop Anastasy (Gribanovsky) of Kishinev and Khotyn (the latter, first-hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad). Hoping for the speedy victory of the White movement, the representatives of the Bessarabian Church, together with the zemstvo, took part in the creation of a Committee for the liberation of Bessarabia.

Therefore, the Romanian Synod began the canonical submission of the Bessarabian diocese by demanding that Vladykas Anastasy, Gabriel and Dionysius separate from the Russian Orthodox Church in spite of the protests of Patriarch Tikhon. When the hierarchs refused to do this, the

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[544] Gubonin, Akty Sviateishego Patriarkha Tikhona (The Acts of His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon), Moscow: St. Tikhon's Theological Institute, 1994. p. 155.
Monk Benjamin (Gomarteli), Letopis' Tserkovnoj Istorii (1961-1971)… pp. 24-25.

[545] Monk Benjamin (Gomarteli), Letopis' Tserkovnoj Istorii (1961-1971)… p. 41.

Romanian military units arrested them and exiled them from the country. But the believers were told that the hierarchs had left their diocese voluntarily. In the place of Metropolitan Anastasy, there arrived from Bucharest the Romanian Archbishop Nicodemus; he was met by the clergy and laity by no means in a friendly manner. The ecclesiastical authorities [of the Russian Church] Abroad did not recognise the lawfulness of the union of the Kishinev diocese to the Romanian Church. It was violence, deceit and transgression of the Church canons, and not at all the commandments of God, that were laid at the foundation of their actions on the territory of Bessarabia by the Romanian civil and ecclesiastical authorities. How could the coming events unfold except in conditions of further imposition of terror?

"In the Kishinev spiritual seminary and spiritual schools, the Romanian authorities removed the teaching of Russian and Church Slavonic languages, clearly intending to create a situation in which in Bessarabia as a whole there would remain no priests able to serve in Church Slavonic. Also, Church Slavonic service books were removed from the churches, and the priests were banned from delivering sermons in Russian.

Direct physical persecution began against the zealots for the language of Saints Cyril and Methodius. In the village of Rechul, the nuns of the local monastery were beaten with birch rods by Romanian gendarmes for taking part in services in Church Slavonic, while an old priest of the village of Goreshte, who was suspected of sympathizing with the opposition, was tortured with wet lashes until he lost consciousness, after which he went mad. It may be that the whole guilt of the priest consisted in the fact that he, like many true patriots, did not want to commemorate the Romanian king, his family and the Synod at the liturgy.

"The majority of the zealots for Church Slavonic as the liturgical language were Russians, but many Moldavian priests and laypeople fought steadfastly against forcible Romanianization. 'The Moldavians,' reported the Romanian counterintelligence of Beltsky uyezd, 'are hostile to the Romanian administration, they avoid the Romanian clergy…, they threaten the priests when they commemorate the name of the king in church.'…

"In July 1922, a multi-national 'Union of Orthodox Christians' was formed in Kishinev. Soon, Bessarabian patriots came to lead the Union. They were closely linked with the Russian communion in Kishinev. According to certain information, Russian monarchists led by General E. Leontovich took part in the organization of the Union. In 1924, the re-registration of another organisation took place – the Orthodox Brotherhood

of Alexander Nevsky, which was led by activists of Moldavian, Gagauz and Russian nationalities – Protopriest Michael Chakir, Priest Nicholas Lashku and K.K. Malanetsky, etc. All these were branded by the secret police as 'ardent pan-Russists', while the brotherhood was called the centre for the preservation and propaganda of Russian monarchist ideas…"[546]

[546] Glazkov, "Istoricheskie prichiny niekotorykh sobitij v istorii Rumynskoj Pravoslavnoj Tserkvi do II Mirovoj vojny" (The Historical Reasons for some Events in the History of the Romanian Orthodox Church before the Second World War), Tserkovnaia Zhizn' (Church Life), №№ 3-4, May-August, 2000. pp. 46-48.