

ANDREI SÕTŠOV

Tartu universitetas

THE PROCESS AND THE REASONS OF CLOSING THE ORTHODOX PARISHES IN ESTONIA (1944-1953)

I am going to give a presentation about the process and the reasons that are characteristic of closing the Orthodox parishes in Estonia under the totalitarian regime of Stalin in 1945-1953. During the second half of the 20th century the history of the Orthodox Church has been very little studied in Estonia as well as abroad. After the Second World War the published historical sources are missing, just some events are mentioned in the local brochures of one or other parish. The Estonian Episcopal journal gives only the dates of the elimination of certain parishes. The main historical sources are kept in the Estonian State Archive and in Russia, in the Archive of the Federation of Russia in the section of the affairs of the Orthodox Church. These documents enable to study the actual situation of the parishes after the World War II and examine the attitude and the politics of the apparatus of the state concerning the Church; there has also been given the data about the repression of the clergy and the members of the Church. Another source to learn more about the religious life in the Orthodox episcopacy comes to be the correspondence between the representative of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church in the SSR of Estonia and I.Karpov, the chairman of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church, the latter also exchanged letters with the local clergy. The doctoral thesis „The History of Orthodoxy in Estonia“ by patriarch Aleksii (Ridiger) addresses very little to this period and basically limits itself to the biographies of archbishop Pavel (Dmitrovski), and bishops Isidor (Bogojavlenski) and Roman (Tang)¹.

After the Second World War the existence and activities of the Orthodox Church were conditioned by the dictatorial regime of Stalin, who wanted to control the Church as he controlled the State. Already in 1940 the annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union subjugated the Estonian Orthodox Church to the constitution of the USSR and to the Soviet law of religious cults. The mentioned law was based on the edict named

¹ Patriarch Aleksy, *Pravoslavie v Estonii*, Moskva, 1999, p. 430-437.

„The separation of the Church from the State and School“; it was passed on the 23th of January 1918. The Estonian Orthodox Church lost its autonomy on the 9th March 1945; Grigory, the metropolitan of Leningrad, lead this action personally.

In 1940 the Estonian Orthodox Church could count 156 parishes, but after the Second World War with regard to some changes concerning the border between Estonia and Russia – namely the Federation of Russia widened towards west and doing so incorporated arbitrarily the frontier territory of Estonia – so that on the „new“ territory of Estonia there were left 138 parishes. Also the number of churches that have been completely destroyed is considerable: 18 church buildings, that make 12% of all in 1940, were demolished. Most of the destroyed churches were located in Virumaa (5) and in Narva (3) ².

The main questions of the present report are the following: why does the number of the parishes in the Orthodox episcopacy of the patriarchate of Moscow in Estonia diminish in the course of the years and what were the reasons that lead to elimination of the parishes that were already closed? Why was the situation of the Orthodox episcopacy in the SSR of Estonia considered to be different comparing to that of the Russian Orthodox Church in the SSFR of Russia, where the churches were restituted to the parishes, and where the members of the Church wanted the churches to be opened again, while in Estonia the main tendency was to close the churches?

Many parishes in the Estonian episcopacy were deprived from their churches, because the buildings and the outhouses were burnt down (e.g. Uduvere, Kikivere, Sillamäe, Aruküla, Jaamaküla). The other churches (e.g. Kaarepere, Tiirimetsa, Torgu, Uue-Virtsu, Uhmardu-Saare, Vask-Narva, Kriivasoo, Nizõ, Mõnnuse, Pärnu Katariina, Helme-Tõrva) were damaged to such an extent that it was impossible to celebrate a liturgy there. As a result of damages many parishes were in need of money to renovate the church buildings, yet unfortunately the local episcopacy was unable to help them. The only possibility to get some financial help was to turn to the holy synod of the patriarchate of Moscow with this problem; and in July 1947 Issidor, bishop of Tallinn and of all Estonia made a request for getting 50 thousand roubles every month. On the 10th of July 1947 the synod carried a resolution to deliver 30 thousand roubles every month until the 1st of January 1948 considering the high level of poverty in the parishes (over 53.8%) of the episcopacy. Also the synod decided to exempt the Estonian episcopacy from the „Episcopal tribu-

² Государственный архив российской федерации (GARF), f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 717, p. 144.

te”³. The patriarchate of Moscow subsidized the Estonian episcopacy later, after the year 1948, as well, but it was not enough to ameliorate the economical situation in the whole episcopacy, as it was not enough for the reparation of the churches. Regardless of the fact that all the churches with their movables and immovable belonged to the state, neither the state nor the ministry of culture of the SSR of Estonia subsidized them.

On the 7th of October 1943 with an edict (n^o 1095) of the Counsel of commissioners of the people of the USSR there were created two counsels for the religious matters: one counsel dealt with the Russian Orthodox Church and the other counsel was meant for the other religious minorities. The Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church was responsible for: 1) executing the decisions of the government of the USSR that concerned the Russian Orthodox Church also in the other republics, 2) report to the Counsel of ministers what is going on in the Orthodox Church, 3) keeping the governments of the republics of the USSR and the locale autonomous administrations informed of the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church, 4) making statistics about the parishes, chapels and monasteries on the local level⁴.

On the 14th of March 1945 all the parishes of the SSR of Estonia were asked to sign up at once. According to the law of the USSR the parishes had right to have a church with its movables and immovable freely and without term in the disposition of the church servants. The parishes had to conclude the contracts in accordance with this law and for this purpose the Estonian episcopacy ordered that the members of the Church should form parish a counsel for each parish, consisting of 20 persons at least (in Russian *dvatsadka*). These counsels had to be recorded in the register of the Estonian episcopacy, that of the executive committee of the SSR of Estonia and by the representative of the SSR of Estonia of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church⁵.

After the Second World War the closing process of the orthodox parishes in the USSR was complicated and not necessarily elaborated, since the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church was more interested in opening the churches. The questions concerning the parishes in the point of view of closing their churches was hardly considered to be important in the instruction of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church which was ratified on the 8th of March 1951 by the Counsel of the Ministers of the USSR, because this document paid more attention to how to register

³ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 2, d. 73a, S.38; GARF, f. R-6991, o. 2, d. 85a, p. 21.

⁴ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 776. p. 1; R.Altnurme, *Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik ja Nõukogude riik 1944–1949*, Tartu, 2001, l. 23.

⁵ *Eesti Õigeusu Piiskopkonna Teataja*, Nr. 1, p. 2, 15. 08. 1947.

parishes, conclude the contracts and regulate the relationship with the clergy. Point V in § 6 of the chapter 3 of this instruction asserts clearly: „The representative has to keep in the register the churches that do not function (that have been closed by the apparatus of the Soviet State or by any other reason). In order to obtain a permission to close a church one had to make sure the following points: 1) the bishop or the concerned parish presents a demand to close the church and remove it from the register of the functioning churches, 2) the representative of Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church personally studies the reasons, why the bishop or a parish wants to close the church, 3) the representative has to be convinced that the demand has a legitimate ground; he confirms the demand and passes it to the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church for a final decision, 4) the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church assents the decision to close the church ⁶.

Between 1945 and 1953 17 Orthodox parishes were closed in SSR of Estonia: the parish of St. Andreas in Tallinn was closed in 1947, Mõnnuste and Kikivere in 1950, Vormsi, Aruküla, Kohila-Angerja, Harju-Risti, Vändra and Helme-Tõrva in 1951, Uhmardu-Saare, Prangli-Maaritsa, Rõngu-Tilga and Tuhalaane, Tiirimetsa, Pühalepa-Kuri, Kõrgesaare-Puski and Kõpu in 1952. However, in 1951 the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church expressed its displeasure with regard to closing the Orthodox churches in Estonia. In a letter of 17th of July 1951 the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church asks the representative, how are satisfied the religious needs of the Church members and whether there has occurred any transition between the Churches (whether some people have been converted into Catholicism or Lutheranism) ⁷. The representative Tarasov answered that in 1948-1949 there were seven parishes, that had finished their activities and twelve parishes had been removed from the list of the active parishes by 1st of July 1951 with the following reasons: a) inactivity of the parish – 6, b) absence of the active Church members, absence of the counsel of the local Church and that the liturgy was no more celebrated there – 2, c) the parish had no more a usable church building (the local church building having been destroyed during the Second World War) – 2 ⁸. On the 14th of June in 1948 the archpriest Georgi Aleksejev, the chairman of the Counsel of the episcopacy of Estonia, in his letter to the representative of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church gives for the first time a list of the parishes, where the liturgy had not been celebrated any more or it was celebrated seldom. This list contains six

⁶ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 776, p. 1-7.

⁷ State archive of Estonia (ERA), f. R-1961, o. 1, d. 45, l. 6.

⁸ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 835, p. 54-55.

churches: Kõpu, Uhmardu-Saare, Piirisaare, Prangli-Maaritsa, Võnnu-Kärsa, Tiirimetsa. The main reasons were the following: too small number of the Church members in three parishes (Piirisaare, Prangli-Maaritsa, Võnnu-Kärsa) and the destructions of the church buildings in the war (Tiirimetsa) ⁹.

The first parish that was closed in 1947 in the Estonian episcopacy was St. Andreas. This parish gathered together in a cave of the cathedral of St. Alexander. The Russian clergy of this cathedral wanted in 1947 that the Estonian parish of St. Andreas would go to the Church of Transfiguration in Tallinn, claiming as a main reason that the types of the current calendars were different (!) and that the new calendar that was used by the Estonian parish would not be appropriate to use under the same roof with the old calendar, that was used by the Russian parish. The second reason was more serious – they needed more space. The document of closing declares that the parish was closed for the economic reasons and that there existed already an Estonian parish in Tallinn, so there was no need for another. However, the main reason was the problem of limited space, as henceforth the parish of Alexander Nevski used the cave in winter to celebrate their liturgy there¹⁰.

The parish of Mõnnuste (closed in 1950) was very small (40 members) and a liturgy was celebrated irregularly there. The main problem was the location of the church, which was just by the military airport and the church tower disturbed the circulation of military airplanes ¹¹. In Kikivere the church had been damaged by fire, but it was reopened in 1947, and closed three years later when a kolkhoz was created there ¹². The church of the Helme-Tõrva parish was destructed in the bombardment in 1944. Due to the fact that this parish had a priest, it was signed up in 1947, and the liturgy was celebrated in the priest's apartment. As the parish had not got enough subsidies to rebuild the church, it was closed in 1950¹³.

These three cases of closing gave an idea to the representative of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church in the SSR of Estonia, how to guide the process of closing the parishes and how to influence the bishop to take the desired decision. The process of closing a parish was proceeded in like that:

1) The parishes could be removed from the register only with the permission of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church and the rep-

⁹ ERA, f. R-1966, o. 1, p. 21, l. 37–38.

¹⁰ SMA, EAÕK Tallinna Andrease koguduse toimik 4a, l. 18–22.

¹¹ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 717, p. 50–51.

¹² GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 717, p. 155.

¹³ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 717, p. 154–155; SMA, EAÕK Helme-Tõrva koguduse toimik, Nr. 109.

representative of that Counsel had to present to the counsel a short overview well justified;

2) When the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church has given its permission, the representative transfers the liquidated parish into the register of closed parishes. In order to avoid an increase of religious activities after the parish is closed, the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church does not oblige the representative to prevent neither the concerned parish nor the bishop of the decision of suppression, nor ask them to return the certificate of recording and annul the standard contracts except in the following cases:

a) The local authorities of the apparatus of state or of kolkhozes have real need for using the church building with a „cultural or agricultural“ aim.

b) Bishop wants to register a parish that already has been closed or wants to indicate a priest there¹⁴.

However, in spite of this ambiguous confidence, the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church obliged all the representatives to prevent the bishop or his vice-bishop of the suppression of a parish.

CONCLUSION

Observing the changes in the Estonian Orthodox Episcopacy in 1945–1947 and in 1948–1953 the following conclusions could be drawn:

1. The soviet totalitarian regime in the SSR of Estonia has influenced a great deal the attitude of people towards Church, diverging them from Church and clergy. The first signs of decrease in active Christian spirituality appear mainly in the course of closing the churches and chapels in the country.

2. In the country the activity of parishes' decreases since 1949, because the clergy starts moving into towns, as soon as the economical and legal states of affairs undergo a change for the worse.

3. The historical peculiarities of the Orthodox Church in Estonia and the absence of the missionary work here and also as the legislative action of the Orthodox Church was limited by the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church – all this factors decreased the active engagement of the Church members.

4. The attitude by the local authorities of the apparatus of state, by the kolkhozes (collective farms) and by the society in general affected the Church badly.

¹⁴ GARF, f. R-6991, o. 1, d. 603, p. 63–64.

All these factors together have diminished the activity of the Church members. E.g. in 1947 the Orthodox Church could count 100 000 Church members, but by 1950 there was left only 40 000. The Lutheran Church could count far more members and was richer, she hold her positions fast, as one can assert when observing the statistics: in 1945-1953 hundreds of Orthodox changed the Church, whereas among the Lutherans only some people had entered the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox parishes got less material support in 1949-1953, particularly in the country, where the priest could not live on his revenues from the parish only. This was one reason, why the priests decided to change their profession - it was more reasonable to work in the secular world in order to nourish a family¹⁵. The collectivisation gave a bad blow to the Church, so that the years 1945-1953 witness a great decrease of the activities of the Church members in their parishes and this tendency becomes a normal phenomenon, that later leads towards closing many parishes during the rule of Khrushchtshev. As the Orthodox Church had no roots in the Estonian mentality, this was also one reason to close the churches, whereas the Lutheran parishes could maintain their positions thanks to their stronger tradition. Considering all the aspects the main reasons, why to close the Orthodox churches, were: a continuous decrease of the number of the Church members; the parishes being imposed very high taxes by the state; and the loss of ecclesiastical mentality little by little in course of introducing the collectivism. The difference with Orthodox Church of the SSFR of Russia laid in the fact that the Estonian episcopacy was just a poor territorial unit in the periphery of the Russian Orthodox Church, that wanted to maintain its positions under the conditions of the new regime; there was no place left for the small Estonian parishes, that got their income from their Church property and small parcel of land, that was alienated by the apparatus of the Soviet state, resulting that the parish had to pay high taxes to the state in order to use their own land. E.g. 4 parishes of 17 (23,5% of the total number of the closed Orthodox parishes) - Kikivere, Helme-Tõrva, Aruküla, Tiirimetsa - were closed because there was no church building, where to celebrate the liturgy. 7 parishes: Vändra, Angerja-Kohila, Vormsi, Harju-Risti, Uhmardu-Saare, Rõngu-Tilga, Tuhalaane (41,1% of all) were closed because of the very small number of the Church members, and thus the parish was very poor: they had no means to invite a priest, to pay the taxes imposed by the state and repair the buildings. Remaining 6 parishes: St. Andreas in Tallinn, Mõnnuste, Kõpu, Kõrgesaare-Puski, Pühalepa-Kuri and Agusalu (35,2% of all) were forced to end their activities because of the hard external conditions: the

¹⁵ GARF, f. R - 6991, o. 1, d. 835, p. 60-64, 73.

increase of the state taxes (in 3 parishes) and because of the representative of the Counsel of the Russian Orthodox Church and the local administration of the apparatus of the state did not want to allow an opening of a new parish (1), and one parish in town that asked for more space (1) and one parish that was situated nearby the military troops (1).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Archives

- GARF – Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federaciy (The Archive of the Federation of Russia)
 ERA – Eesti Rahvusaarhiiv (The State's Archive of Estonia)
 SMA – Siseministeeriumi Arhiiv (The Archive of the Ministry for Internal Affairs)

II. Literature and press

- ALTNURME, Riho. Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik ja Nõukogude riik 1944–1949. Tartu, Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus, 2001.
 Eesti Õigeusu Piiskopkonna Teataja (Messenger of the Orthodox Episcopacy of Estonia)
 PATRIARKH ALEKSY. Pravoslaviye v Estonii. Moskva, cerkovno-nauchnyi centr „Pravoslavnaya enciklopediya“, 1999.

STAČIATIKIŲ PARAPIJŲ LIKVIDAVIMO ESTIJOJE (1944–1953) PROCESAS IR JO PRIEŽASTYS

Andrei Sötšov

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas stačiatikių parapijų likimas Estijoje, kai ji tapo sovietinės imperijos dalimi. Skirtingai nei kituose Sovietų Sąjungos regionuose, kur po karo stačiatikiams buvo grąžinta nemažai anksčiau uždarytų cerkvių ir registruojamos jų bendruomenės, Estijoje 1944–1953 m. nustojo egzistuoti 17 stačiatikių parapijų. Beveik visos buvo uždarytos 1950–1953 m. Autoriaus nuomone, pagrindinė stačiatikių parapijų nykimo Estijoje priežastis buvo aktyvių tikinčiųjų skaičiaus mažėjimas, ypač kaimo vietovėse. Būdama svetima estų tautiniam mentalitetui, kuris pirmiausia rėmėsi liuteroniška tradicija, stačiatikybė nesugebėjo išlaikyti anksčiau turėtų pozicijų nepalankiomis religiniam gyvenimui sovietinio režimo sąlygomis.