

8-2012

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Momchil Metodiev

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Recommended Citation

Metodiev, Momchil (2012) "The Ecumenical Activities of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church: Reasons, Motivations, Consequences," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 3 , Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol32/iss3/3>

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THE ECUMENICAL ACTIVITIES OF THE BULGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: REASONS, MOTIVATIONS, CONSEQUENCES

by Momchil Metodiev

Momchil Metodiev, Dr. hab, is an Orthodox Christian historian, whose research is focused on the communist period and especially on church-state relations. He is Editor-in-Chief of the Bulgarian monthly journal *Christianity and Culture* and is a research fellow in the Institute for Studies of the Recent Past in Sofia. He authored the books *Between the Cross and Compromise. The Orthodox Church and the Communist Regime in Bulgaria* (Sofia, 2010), and *Legitimacy Machine. State Security in the Power Strategy of the Bulgarian Communist Party* (Sofia, 2007). In 2002-2003 he was research assistant to the Cold War International History Project in Washington, DC.

In 1998 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church officially announced its decision to withdraw from the ecumenical movement and organizations. This decision was more significant than it seemed. Actually the Bulgarian Orthodox Church withdrew not only from the Ecumenical Movement but also from the Orthodox World. Today the Bulgarian Orthodox Church lacks any foreign policy, since it abstains not only from participation in the ecumenical dialogue but also from important common activities of the Orthodox Churches, as for example the Joint Commission for Dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. What are the reasons for that sad development? Can we trace its origins back to the communist era? Is it somehow related to the vigorous ecumenical activities pursued by the Bulgarian church in the times of communism?

Based on documents from the Archives of the State Committee for Church Affairs and the State Security Service, this paper argues that the ecumenical activity of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has been initiated, pursued, and controlled respectively by the Communist State and its State Security Service. The argument that ideological motivation lies behind the ecumenical activities of the churches from the communist countries during the Cold War is not a new one. Such suspicions existed even during the Cold War years, based on the positions defended by the ecumenical representatives from the communist countries. But they were impossible to prove until the archives of the communist State Security Services were declassified. This happened only recently in Bulgaria, and documents there have confirmed the suspicions in specific and personal ways that have been painful not only for the persons involved in the ecumenical organizations but also for the whole Orthodox Church. The State Security Archives reveal that most influential Bulgarian ecumenical workers during the communist period were agents of the secret services. Their election to important posts in the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organizations was secured by the coordinated efforts of State Security Services of the communist world. Once elected they regularly reported on the internal life of those organizations, contributing to efforts to influence their decision-making processes in a direction favorable to the communist world.

During the communist era in Bulgaria there were two, often competing state institutions responsible for implementation of the state policy with regard to the church. The Committee for Church Affairs was the official state institution responsible for state policy on the churches and other religious bodies, whose main goal was to promote the communist state atheist propaganda.

It was part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs up to 1985 when it was made a Directorate within Council of Ministers. The archives of the Committee for Church Affairs reveal how official contacts between the state and the Church were conducted. This archive is extremely important but it tells only part of the truth about Church-state relations and the ecumenical activity, because even the Committee for Church Affairs was not fully informed about the other, even more secret, institution working with the Church and its representatives, the State Security. Throughout the Communist period, State Security and especially its Sixth Department – the political police responsible for “ideological diversion” – were responsible for establishing firm control over the clergy, including the recruitment of promising clerics and lay theologians.

In the early communist period, State Security was an institution of only secondary importance, responsible only for the surveillance of the clergy. Its influence grew significantly in the early 1970s, however, when it challenged the authority of the Committee of Church Affairs, leading to a bureaucratic war between the two. State Security won out, and subsequently the chairmen of the Committee were mere figureheads, while the strongman in the Committee in the late 1970s was Hristo Marinchev, who worked under cover as chief of division in the Committee for Church Affairs, while at the same time he was a Colonel and Deputy Head of the Cultural-Historical Division of the Intelligence Department of State Security.

The Isolation of the Bulgarian Church (1944-1960)

The Bulgarian Exarchate had a long history of active participation of the inter-church dialogue in the first half of the 20 century. Before the Second World War it sought to establish strong ecumenical ties to compensate for its unstable position within the Orthodox world resulting from the schism imposed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1872. Most Bulgarian bishops from that period graduated from Western universities and kept strong ties with the ecumenical structures. Most important among them were the Professor Stefan Tsankov of the Faculty of Theology and Metropolitan Stephen of Sofia, who was the last Bulgarian Exarch, elected on January 21, 1945.

When the communist party seized power in Bulgaria in 1944, it was quick to assert control over the foreign contacts of the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. Initially the communist authorities supported the church leadership in its attempts to resolve its problems with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. On February 22, 1945, the Ecumenical Patriarch granted autocephalous status to the Bulgarian Exarchate, thus officially lifting the schism between them. In a meeting in Moscow in 1948, the Bulgarian church followed the lead of the Moscow Patriarchate in refusing the World Council of Churches invitation to participate in its constituting Assembly in Amsterdam. That decision was inevitable after the failure of the 1948 Moscow meeting of the Orthodox Churches to establish the so-called “Orthodox Vatican” – an anti-Western alliance of the Orthodox Churches led by the Moscow Patriarchate – after the traditional Greek cathedras led by the Ecumenical Patriarchate refused to join.

The communist state, in line with its policy towards all religions, effectively pursued its policy of marginalization of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church reducing it to an insignificant institution that did little more than perform a few “rituals”. The Orthodox Church was allowed to exist as a local, “national” institution, isolated from other churches in the world, but it was relegated to a “monument of culture” and remnant of the past. In the early period of communist rule the state actively repressed the Church, but in the early 1970s the ideologists of the system began to demand active cooperation from the Church in two main areas: the spreading of “patriotic propaganda” among Bulgarian expatriates; and the promotion of propaganda for the communist system in general, which was the real reason behind its decision to push the Bulgarian Church back

into active participation in the ecumenical movement.

The Orthodox clergy endured the most severe repression in the period from 1948 to 1953, when at least 10% of Bulgarian clerics were arrested and sentenced to serve various terms in prison and labor camps. On November 8, 1948, one of the members of the Synod – Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop, famous for his anti-communist convictions, was murdered by an unfrocked priest after he celebrated the liturgy. The state sought to destroy the unity of the Synod by trying to win the loyalty of some of its key members. Metropolitan Cyril of Plovdiv, who was selected in 1953 as the first Patriarch of the modern autocephalous Bulgarian Orthodox Church after carefully orchestrated elections, became the favorite of the state. This choice was not accepted by all members of the Synod, and although the opposition was not able to divert the overall direction of church-state relations it was influential enough to limit the Patriarch's authority in some crucial areas. A certain model of church-state relationship arose out of this unstable situation, one personified by the relationship of Patriarch Cyril and Michail Kyuchukov, the chairman of the Committee for Church Affairs. The essence of this model was a commitment of the state to maintain and raise the prestige of the Patriarch, allowing him to present himself abroad as a champion of inter-church and inter-Orthodox dialogue, while the state continued its active atheist propaganda and imposed administrative restrictions on the local clergy at home. One of the most traumatic experiences of the Bulgarian church during the late communist period was the establishment of the civil rituals in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Civil marriage ceremonies, "baptisms" and funerals were set up as substitutes for the respective religious rituals. Simultaneously the authorities sought to limit the public celebrations of Easter and Christmas, the main religious holidays.

Despite its diminished authority and public visibility within the country, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was encouraged to pursue actively international and ecumenical activities. The Bulgarian Patriarch made regular trips abroad, meeting regularly with the Russian Patriarch and other Orthodox leaders around the world and also leaders of other churches. In 1978 he visited the United States, where he met not only Bulgarian emigrants but also United Nations officials. He visited Great Britain in 1973 and the Archbishop of Canterbury paid return visits to Bulgaria in 1972 and 1982. All those activities, however, were rarely reported in the state-controlled Bulgarian media. They and the apparent contradiction between the active foreign policy of the Church and the lack of religious freedom in the country remained virtually unknown to the Bulgarian public.

World Council of Churches: "Object of Penetration"

Paradoxically, the Bulgarian Patriarchate, newly established in 1953, became increasingly provincial and isolated. The elevation of the Patriarchate was done without the consent of Constantinople, which once again soured relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate that remained tense though they were officially "resolved" in 1961. The Bulgarian Patriarchate became wholly dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate and the Bulgarian communist state. This isolationism was an important factor in the most crucial period of church-state relations, when the strong opposition in the Synod was cut off from foreign support.

By the end of the 1950s, old ecumenical figures were completely forgotten and isolated. Exarch Stephen resigned in 1948 and was sent into exile in an isolated Bulgarian village, where he died in 1957. Professor Stephan Tsankov was fired from the Theological Academy and died in solitude in 1965. The faculty of the Theological Academy was filled with new, young lecturers loyal to the state. By 1961 the Communist government had taken firm control over the foreign and ecumenical policy of the Church and thus felt able to allow the return of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to the ecumenical movement without fear that some of its representatives would raise the

question of the lack of religious liberty in Bulgaria.

In the meantime the Committee for Church Affairs was trying to stay well-informed on the situation in the World Council of Churches. A document from 1959 stated that of the WCC departments the most interesting “for us” were the Commission [of the Churches] on International Affairs (active in the UN General Assemblies), followed by the Division for Inter-Church Aid, which worked actively and assisted financially the “young churches” in Asia and Africa. The report also said that those WCC structures had large financial resources at their disposal – in 1952 they had distributed US\$ 8,500,000.¹

When the WCC was established in 1948 it was viewed negatively as a “political and undemocratic organization whose aim is to exert political and social influence favorable to the imperialistic countries”.² Ten years later, on February 22, 1961, the Bulgarian intelligence service sent a telegram to its main station offices abroad (Istanbul, Athens, Rome, Vienna, Bern, Paris, Berlin, Washington, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Damascus and Buenos Aires), ordering them to start collecting information about the World Council of Churches, now seen as an “object of penetration”.³ The telegram was sent just before the third WCC Assembly at New Delhi in 1961 where churches from the socialist countries joined as members. That same year the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was among the founding members of the Christian Peace Conference, established in Prague after the Second Christian Peace Conference. Then in 1975 it also joined the Conference of European Churches founded in 1959.

This new ecumenical involvement provided justification for administrative measures aimed at the further marginalization of the Church. At the end of 1968 the Synod implemented a calendar reform, abandoning the traditional Julian calendar and adopting the so-called “neo-Julian calendar” (in fact, the Gregorian calendar), already in use in civil practice. According to an official note of the Committee for Church Affairs,

the decision of the Synod has been taken after consultations and with the consent of the Russian Church. Russian church is due also to take a similar decision soon.... Doubtless, this decision will open new opportunities for the Orthodox Church to take part in the fight for peace, together with the Protestant and the Catholic churches.⁴

While the new calendar was clearly much more convenient, this reform did not affect the dates on which a number of church holidays – also observed as state holidays – were celebrated (e.g. St. Cyril and St. Methodius Day, celebrated as the Day of the Slavonic Alphabet). Nonetheless, the calendar reform, practically kept secret from the public, caused a schism within the Bulgarian church and a small group of dissidents separated in a small monastery near Sofia and organized something rather like an underground church.

“A Great Success of the Socialist Countries”

Once admitted as members, the churches in the socialist countries tried to create a unified bloc within the ecumenical organizations, based on political and ideological rather than on religious affiliations. One of the main tasks of this bloc was to avoid criticism of the communist countries for their lack of religious liberty. It was only at the Fifth WCC Assembly in Nairobi in

¹ AMFA (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Fund 10, List 9, File 1182.

² AMFA Fund 10, List 9, File 1182.

³ ACDDAABCSSISBNA – I (Archive of the Committee for Disclosing the Documents and Announcing Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Armed Forces – Intelligence Department Archive), Fund 4, List 8, File 21.

⁴ AMFA, Fund 10, List 10, File 648.

1975 that an attempt was made to criticize the violation of religious freedoms in the Soviet Union. It took the representatives of the churches from the communist countries so much by surprise that initially they did not know how to react. It was more than a year later in March 1976 that they had a special meeting in Budapest to discuss the Nairobi Assembly and to prepare a joint letter to the WCC Secretary General Philip Potter, in which they stated that at the Nairobi assembly "the attitude to the churches from the socialist countries was not in the fraternal spirit."⁵ The matter was resolved at a meeting in Budapest a year later in March 1977 between Philip Potter and representatives of the churches from the socialist countries. There the Bulgarian church was represented at the highest possible level by Metropolitan Pankratii and Prof. Todor Sabev. According to the official report of the Bulgarian representatives Philip Potter told the following to the Bulgarian representatives in informal meeting:

He said that in the WCC they have on their disposal a lot of documents for limitation of the religious rights in Bulgaria (especially with a view of the new rituals). Although the information sent to Geneva concerned mainly the minority churches in Bulgaria, it is already clear that the Orthodox Church is more strongly affected by the anti-religious propaganda and other measures in comparison with non-Orthodox religious communities.⁶

The churches from the communist countries actually threatened to leave the WCC in reaction to the Nairobi Assembly, a threat apparently so effective that in the later years there were no further hints of the problem of religious freedom in the communist world.

Another important task of the Bulgarian ecumenical representatives was to support communist propaganda with regard to the so-called Third World. Bulgarian prelates used various international forums to defend religious freedom in different parts of the world: "defense of the peace" by promoting resolutions against the War in Vietnam, against racism and all forms of inequality. They regularly criticized the policies of the US and Western European countries regarding the Third World. Numerous documents in the Bulgarian archives show that Bulgarian ecumenical representatives were interested more in the ideological and political dimension of those organizations than in the theological aspects of their work. They were supposed to support the social and "horizontal" dimensions and activities of the World Council of Churches, rather than its "vertical" dimensions of deepening the inter-confessional dialogue.

The communist countries established a well-organized and coordinated approach to action in ecumenical organizations. At state level, this policy was coordinated by the Committees for Church Affairs and the relevant State Security divisions; at church level, the coordination was done by the participating churches' Departments of Ecumenical and Peacemaking Affairs. At the top of this pyramid was the Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (in the early 1970s that was Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad, identified in the *The Mitrokhin Archive* as a KGB agent codenamed ADAMANT). After his sudden death in 1978, he was replaced by other also influential, although less well-known prelates.

This ecumenical involvement led to the creation of small but influential elite of prelates and lay theologians within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, who gradually became an alternative centre of power. The creation of this elite became one of the important reasons for a serious division within the church hierarchy in the 1970s and 1980s that became public in the post-communist period. The ecumenical representatives were able to communicate directly with the state institutions and, when necessary, to manipulate the decisions of the Synod. That elite consisted of

⁵ AMFA, Fund 10, List 13, File 166.

⁶ AMFA, Fund 10, List 13, File 327.

two main subgroups: the first was the group of the so-called “young” and “progressive” prelates, the other a group of lay theologians mainly from the Theological Academy, who were allowed to travel abroad and participate in ecumenical organizations.

The leaders of the first group were the Metropolitan Pankratii of Stara Zagora, and the Metropolitan Kalinik of Vratsa. Their work was recognized and rewarded. The first became the well-known “Foreign Minister” and the second the “Interior Minister” of the Church. Pankratii was elected metropolitan in 1967 and was one of the first Bulgarian churchmen to benefit from the Church’s membership in the World Council of Churches. In the early 1960s he spent several years in an “ecumenical training course” in Switzerland. In 1972 he was elected Chairman of the Bulgarian Patriarchate’s newly-organized Division for Ecumenical and Peacemaking Affairs and remained in that post to the end of the communist period. This Department served as the Foreign Ministry of the Church with the right to communicate directly with the state and to recruit young and promising clerics or lay intellectuals, who were able to assist the work of the Department of Ecumenical Affairs. In 1977 the state Committee for Church Affairs even discussed the possibility of giving the Ecumenical Department of the Church a new, “representative building,” separate from the building of the Synod of the Church⁷. In 1975 Metropolitan Pankratii was elected to the Central Committee of the World Council Churches. He also served as a member of the WCC Commission for Inter-Church Aid and as a member of the Executive Committee of the Christian Peace Conference. The State Security Archives indicate that Metropolitan Pankratii was a State Security agent recruited by the Sixth Department on June 24, 1971, with the code-name BOIKO.⁸ In the 1970s and 1980s Pankratii was already so powerful that he was able to influence some of the personal promotions in the Synod of the Church and even to criticize the Patriarch.

Another important person with respect to the ecumenical movement was Metropolitan Kalinik of Vratsa elected in 1974 after the most serious clash between church and state in the communist period. Despite opposition of the Synod and local parishioners, the state imposed him as the new metropolitan – a “loyal and progressive cleric... who is far more suitable than other clerics ... for those specific tasks which Orthodox prelates have to fulfill in internal and international Church life.”⁹ Later Kalinik also became one of the leading ecumenical participants, representing the Bulgarian church in important international meetings. A third prelate, more active internally, Metropolitan Filaret of Vidin, completed “the junta,” as this powerful trio of metropolitans within the Synod came to be known.

State Security continued the same policy through the end of the communist period, recruiting young clerics suitable for ecumenical work, like Zagora Galaktion, the current Metropolitan of Stara, recruited as State Security informer in 1981 under the codename MISHO,¹⁰ weeks before the beginning of his ecumenical training in Regensburg, Germany.

The second group was the church intelligentsia, recruited mainly from the Theological Academy. Although the personal State Security files of the public intellectuals in Bulgarian have not been yet declassified, there is already enough evidence to show the level of penetration of the State Security in the Theological Academy. According to one analysis of the work among the clergy, prepared by the State Security Sixth Department, in 1980 the Department had on its disposal 12 agents in the Theological Academy, while in the Synod of the Church it had “only” 8 informers.¹¹

⁷ AMFA, Fund 10, List 13, File 256.

⁸ J. Dimov, *Sketches of Bulgarian Clerics*. (Vratsa, 1992), p. 187.

⁹ AMFA, Fund 10, List 13, File 660A.

¹⁰ CDDAABCSISBNA, Decision # 14/14.09.2007. <http://www.comdos.bg/media/stories/reshenia/14.pdf>

¹¹ ACDDAABCSISBNA – M (Ministry of Interior Archive), Fund 22, List 1, File 113.

Most famous among those lay ecumenical workers was Todor Sabev. Born on August 10, 1928 in the Bulgarian village of Ostrets, he graduated from the Orthodox Seminary in 1947, and from the Theological Academy in 1952. In 1954 he obtained a doctoral degree and started his career in the Theological Academy, where he worked as assistant, assistant-professor, and professor. In 1963 he was among the first Bulgarians to take part in an ecumenical training course in Switzerland, followed by another training course in England (1972-1973). He was elected member of the WCC Central and Executive Committees for the term 1968 to 1975, and was also a member of the Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development. Simultaneously he became an influential figure in the internal life of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church – alongside his professorship in the Theological Academy – as Deputy-Chairman of the church's Division for Ecumenical and Peacemaking Affairs. He was also a founder of the Historical and Archival Institute of the Orthodox Church, which gave him the opportunity to travel abroad and visit foreign libraries in search of documents related to the history of the Bulgarian church. He was decorated in 1978 with one of the highest Bulgarian orders, the Red Workers' Banner. After the fall of communism he divided his time between Switzerland and Bulgaria until his death in 2008.

State Security files list him as the most important and effective Bulgarian agent in the ecumenical movement with the codename DAMYANOV. A State Security document from 1963 indicates an agent with that codename was recruited on October 30, 1952, when he was lecturer in the Theological Academy. His reports for that period were judged "informative" but connections with him were cut off in 1954 when in the Academy he became suspected as State Security agent. Contact with him was renewed in 1955 and in the following years he successfully won the trust of the clerics. In the early 1960s it was thought that Patriarch Cyril had a favorable opinion of the agent and encouraged his development as an ecumenical worker. Records show that his loyalty to the State security had been checked several times and he was judged a loyal agent. It is this document that reveals the identity of DAMYANOV as Todor Sabev.¹²

This State Security document was prepared just before Todor Sabev's trip to Switzerland on the ecumenical training course and contains important details on how he should deliver his reports to the station office in Switzerland and even what "line of behavior" he should keep. He was supposed to present himself as a "religious person devoted to the Church, who, however, is not a mystic, concentrated on his personal connection with god but a person who has an opinion and understanding of the worldly life."¹³ The main task of the agent during the training course was to study French language and to report on the structure, activities and leadership of the World Council of Churches. State Security Archives contain several reports by DAMYANOV delivered during his training course in Switzerland, where he explains the structure and mode of functioning of the World Council of Churches. He reports also some personal impressions about WCC officials, in one case even claiming to be positive that one of them was an agent of a foreign intelligence service.

When Todor Sabev was elected member of the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches in 1969 he explained in an official report to Patriarch Cyril:

I was very surprised and confused, when I saw my name in the list of candidates for that important WCC body. Following advices of some of our friends I decided that I would not withdraw my name from the list. ... Moreover, I was told that if I decline to take part in the elections, the position would have been filled by "not

¹² ACDDAABCSSISBNA – I, Fund 4, List 8, File 22, also in: ACDDAABCSSISBNA – I, Fund 4, List 5, File 38.

¹³ In the State Security vocabulary "a mystic" is among the most derogative qualifications about the Church people. As usual, in the document God is written without capital letter.

sosuitable person". Therefore, our church interest compelled metokeepmy name in the list of candidates.¹⁴

Ten years later, in 1979, Sabev was elected Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. Both the official and State Security documents prove how that election became possible. In an official report addressed to the Party Leader Todor Zhivkov, Sabev's election is classified as "a great success of the socialist countries and of the work of our Party with the Church"¹⁵. More details are given in another official report, signed by the Chairman of the Committee for Church Affairs, where the following comment was made: "Russian Orthodox Church representatives played an important role in the election of prof. Sabev and have been preparing that election for a long time. Prof. Sabev's election was coordinated with the competent authorities."¹⁶

The election was also praised as a great success by State Security. Several days after the election, on February 5, 1979, Colonel Hristo Marinchev (in his capacity as Intelligence officer), proposed that the future work with agent DAMYANOV¹⁷ should be closely coordinated with the Soviet KGB. All later reports on DAMYANOV's activities start with the formula that they are implemented "according to the joint working plan with KGB Fifth Department".

The representatives of the churches from the socialist countries also tried to manipulate the WCC decision making process. An example is given in a State Security report from August 1984 regarding the elections of the new WCC Secretary General. The report specifies that it was based on information delivered by agents DAMYANOV, BOIKO, and LILYANA and coordinated with the KGB Fifth Department. According to that report, the first session of the "Election Committee" defined three main competitors for the post of Secretary General: Arie "Brauer" (USA), Emilio Castro (Uruguay), and John Bluck (New Zealand). Then Archbishop Kyril from the Russian Orthodox Church "held meetings with representatives from Eastern Europe in order to unify our forces in favor of the most suitable candidate." Archbishop Kyril defined as the most suitable candidate Arie Brouwer, then Emilio Castro, and least suitable – John Bluck. In the initial discussion many members of the Nominations Committee supported John Bluck, which caused Archbishop Kyril to change his mind and to advise other representatives of the socialist countries to support Emilio Castro, who had better chances against John Bluck. Although secret, other representatives became aware of those discussions, causing great unrest in the Nominations Committee. Arie Brouwer was indignant and accused the representatives of the socialist countries of duplicity. Finally Emilio Castro was elected new General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. The report lists positive qualities of the new secretary, who is expected:

"to keep Philip Potter's line;
to uphold the position of Latin American countries, which is traditionally anti-American;
His worldview was strongly influenced by the fact that he raised in a very poor family;
He is sympathetic to the Eastern European Countries;
He is favorable to the wider participation of the Orthodox Churches in the WCC."¹⁸

Indicative of the strong position of the Bulgarian Church in the ecumenical movement, Emilio Castro paid a visit to Bulgaria in May 1985, only five months after he took office in January

¹⁴ AMFA, Fund 10, List 10, File 945.

¹⁵ AMFA, Fund 10, List 13, File 644.

¹⁶ AMFA, Fund 10, List 13, File 652.

¹⁷ ACDDAABCSISBNA – I, Fund 4, List 8, File 22.

¹⁸ ACDDAABCSISBNA – M, Fund 22, List 1, File 237.

1985. His host in Bulgaria was Metropolitan Pankratii, who later delivered an official report indicating that Castro had been decorated with the “Sts. Cyril and Methodius” order by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.¹⁹

The report on Emilio Castro’s election as WCC Secretary General is one of the many documents in the Bulgarian archives showing the coordinated action of the representatives of the churches from the communist world. It does not conclude that those representatives had “taken over” the World Council of Churches, but it does show how they sought to influence the decision-making process of the organization. It is clear from the report that was motivated by political rather than religious interests, and pursued by State Security services and their agents.

DAMYANOV continued to work for State Security in the following year. A report from 1986 says that agent DAMYANOV had “recently” (without specifying the period) obtained 54 documents, the most important ones regarding:

A draft for structural transformations of the WCC;

Information about the workers in the WCC;

Materials directed against socialist countries, concerning the so-called issue of “religious rights and human rights” and an appeal for support of Christians in the Soviet Union.

To the report were attached four volumes of information by the agent.²⁰

“Ecumenism is an Empty Word”

Some influential representatives of the “old school” of ecumenical workers remained, though isolated during the communist period among the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. They opposed the current trends in the ecumenical activity of the Bulgarian Church that they saw as part of the wider process of secularization and a form of collaboration with the oppressive state. The most notable among them was Metropolitan Joseph of Varna, elected in 1937 and regarded by the state as the main “reactionary” voice within the Synod, who was well acquainted with the ecumenical activities of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church before 1944. Although he was not tolerated by the communist authorities, Joseph remained one of the most authoritative members of the Synod of the Church till his death in 1988.

Some details on his views are given in an anonymous report concerning the meeting in 1974 between the Bulgarian and Russian Patriarchs in Sofia. At the meeting were present most of the members of the Synod of the Bulgarian Church, while the Russian Patriarch was accompanied only by the Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad. This report indicates that the meeting did not follow the draft agenda prepared beforehand because it was “sabotaged” by the “reactionary metropolitan of Varna Joseph”, who took the floor and started to speak on the mystical tradition of the Russian Church, presenting his opposition to the ecumenical movement, pointing out “dangerous secular tendencies of our epoch” and insisting on the necessity for our churches to understand their missions in our countries, going so far as calling the Orthodox Community “a broken team”.²¹

Joseph was rebuked by the Metropolitan of Leningrad, who explained that the current ecumenical movement “is a place for calm and equal dialogue between the churches” because “the defense of peace and social justice is desired by everyone.” He agreed that there were some negative tendencies in the ecumenical movement but “the Bulgarian Orthodox Church that was previously much more active than the Russian Church was much more to blame” for them. The

¹⁹ AMFA, Fund 10, List 14, File 1387.

²⁰ ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, Fund 22, List 1, File 170.

²¹ AMFA, Fund 10, List 12, File 1089 A.

report also criticizes Bulgarian Patriarch Maxim who did not rebuke his own metropolitan, limiting himself to the remark that “we were glad to hear Metropolitan Nikodim’s answer to the statement of Metropolitan Joseph.”

That discussion became a real scandal among Bulgarian clerics the next day. At a closed meeting among them Metropolitan Joseph said that “ecumenism is an empty word, it goes in line with the secularism and its fruits are seen in the parishes. The Church is pressed to the end and it cannot even take a breath, while ecumenists are staying silent collaborating with these secularists and even praising those people who are guilty for that situation.” Finally he was so exasperated that he added: “I am a real prisoner and you are telling me that everything is all right. Only the gallows is harder, that’s the only thing that is left.”²² This exchange is the most notable illustration of the deep split among the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Ecumenical activity was not the cause for that split; rather it was caused by the collaboration of certain Bulgarian clerics with the communist authorities. Ecumenical activities, however, were among the main symptoms of that collaboration. Participation in the ecumenical organizations became something like a “social elevator” for church prelates, playing important role for the selection of leaders of the Bulgarian church.

Consequences in the Post-communist Period

If, as in the popular perception, State Security is “a state within the state”, then ecumenical activity during the communism might be classified as a “Church within the Church.” Ecumenical activity led to the schism within the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the early 1990s that was initiated by metropolitans who were the most loyal to the communist party and who tried to establish themselves as the leaders of the renewal of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Although it was never stated clearly, it was this schism that lay behind the decision of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to withdraw from the ecumenical movements in 1998 because the Church did not trust those of its representatives who were active in the international arena in the previous period.

This withdrawal from the ecumenist movement has had several negative consequences. It led to the further isolation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church not only from the ecumenical dialogue but also from its own Orthodox world. It is also indirectly a reason for the isolation of the Orthodox Church from Bulgarian society. Traumatized by its communist experience, the Church is full of distrust of lay theologians and is still today unable to create an authentic Christian intellectual leadership that could transmit the Church’s messages to the broader public. And finally, the whole attitude of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to its participation in the WCC and other ecumenical organizations during the communist period is part of its general inability to face the problems arising from its communist past.

²² Ibid .