

“Please Open Our Church... in the Name of Historical and Human Value of Socialism”. Orthodox Believers’ *Letters to Power*, 1960s–Early 1970s

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ABSTRACT

The article is intended as an introduction into the study of a particular source on the Soviet-period history of the Church. It demonstrates potential for the interdisciplinary survey of “letters to power” as an *action* and a *source* within broader contexts of the Orthodox Church’s integration into a Soviet society and its defensive strategies. Soviet believers’ letters, written in defense of their Church and their religious rights, became the most widespread form of their protest against discriminatory policy pursued by the state.

In the first part the author provides a general overview of believers’ petitioning (as the *text* and the *action*) focusing on their reasons for writing letters, their self-representation and the view of the authorities. The author also examines discursive techniques and rhetorical conventions used in the letter. In the second part of the article the author examines a revealing case: the petitioning campaign of Orthodox believers from Chernihiv in defense of St. Trinity Church as it is presented in their letters written between 1962 and 1972.

KEY WORDS: *Letters to Power*, Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox believers, Soviet Ukraine Chernihiv, Soviet authorities, Soviet society, survival strategies, adaptability

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *Listy do władz*, Rosyjski Kościół Prawosławny, wyznawcy prawosławia, Ukraińska Socjalistyczna Republika Radziecka, Czernichów, strategie przetrwania, zdolność adaptacji

Introduction

In 1969 Keston College was established in Oxford, UK with an aim to “respond to the needs of millions of suffering Christians” behind the Iron Curtain.¹ As revealed by its founder Michael Bourdeaux, the major impetus was given by a letter of two Ukrainian Orthodox women in defense of the Pochaiv Laura, which delivered “the true voices of the persecuted Church.”² Intended for the “Eastern Patriarchs and the UN,” the letter was written in 1964 and published by the Russian émigré “Пoces” next year. This appeal is one of many similar letters pleading various international institutions in “the West” to intercede on behalf of Soviet citizens’ religious rights before Soviet authorities. It stands out because of its apocalyptic-like depiction of the life of the “persecuted Church:”

Godless communists launched a terrible persecution of the Orthodox Church, true pastors, monks, and believers, and they want to build their communism on the graves of believers... We [i.e., believers] are spiritual orphans who have no pastors. In their majority, our pastors submitted themselves to godless communists and carry out their will but not Apostolic tradition and the Ecumenical Councils’ [decrees].³

¹ M. Bourdeaux, *Risen Indeed: Lessons in Faith from the USSR*, New York 1983, p. 9.

² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

³ Samizdat Archive of Keston Institute [hereinafter: SAKI], SU/Ort 7/14.1 *Pochaev Appeal “Orthodox Christians of all Russia”*, p. 1, 16.

4 See: J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven–London 1985.

5 For more details see: S. Fitzpatrick, *Supplicants and citizens: public letter-writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, “Slavic Review” 1996, 55, issue 1, p. 78–105.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 78.

7 For detailed statistics see: Н. Шлікхтa, *Церква тих, хто вижив. Радянська Україна, середина 1940-х – початок 1970-х рр.*, Харків 2011, p. 402.

8 For detailed statistics see: *ibidem*, p. 57.

9 For detailed statistics see: *ibidem*, p. 402.

10 A.B. Stone, “Overcoming Peasant Backwardness”: *The Khrushchev Antireligious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union*, “Russian Review” 2008, 67, issue 2, p. 297.

In the course of my research into the life of the Church in the postwar Soviet Ukraine, I have come across a few hundreds of “letters to power” (*письма во власть*) composed by Orthodox believers through the 1960s–early 1970s, of which those transgressing the boundaries of “permissible dissent” (as defined by James C. Scott⁴) and asking for international help are but a tiny portion. Written mainly in defense of churches, monasteries, and convents closed during Khrushchev’s antireligious campaign and belonging to diverse genres (complains, appeals for help, suggestions, etc.) these letters constitute a source for Soviet public letter-writing practices (according to Sheila Fitzpatrick⁵) much ignored by scholars.

These “mountains of letters” (trope is by Nadezhda Mandelshtam⁶) were written in response to “considerable achievements” of the campaign of building *socialist – a-religious (anti-religious) – society* launched by Khrushchev. The number of *visible* “remnants of the past” decreased then considerably. In the Ukrainian Republic, for instance, over the peak years of Khrushchev’s antireligious campaign (1960–1962) the number of Orthodox churches diminished from 8,207 to 6,418,⁷ of monasteries from 7 to 2, of convents from 21 to 11,⁸ number of registered clergy from 5,166 (including 17 bishops) to 4,114 (14 bishops).⁹ Economic pressure exerted upon the Church, administrative and criminal persecutions of practicing Christians, and severe restrictions imposed upon religious feasts, celebrations, and essential Christian rituals (baptism, marriage, and funeral) complete this remarkable account. Andrew Stone sees the antireligious campaign as “part of a larger effort to modernize the (rural) Soviet Union,”¹⁰ to overcome “backwardness” of the population, which instead of sharing “progressive scientific materialist outlook” (*прогрессивное научно-материалистическое мировоззрение*) believed in the “supernatural.”

Khrushchev’s struggle against the Church, seen by Michael Bourdeaux as persecutions of a scale compared

to those by Nero and Diocletian,¹¹ necessarily evoked reaction on the part of the Church.¹² Orthodox believers reacted in the way they were used to react as Soviet citizens (even though the “honor” of calling themselves “Soviet citizens” was persistently denied to them¹³): they wrote “letters to power.” Sheila Fitzpatrick sees “writing letters to the authorities” “a form of popular (Soviet) culture” ever since the 1930s and believes that “what Soviet letter-writers wanted all along was to get... their opinion into the public sphere.”¹⁴ Soviet believers’ letters in defense of their Church and their religious rights became the most widespread form of their protest against discriminatory policies by the state; one of few instruments in their disposal to convince the authorities that “Soviet socialism and religion [...] were not mutually exclusive [and] could coexist.”¹⁵

My article consists of two major parts. In the first part I provide a general overview of believers’ petitioning (as the *text* and the *action*) focusing on reasons for letter writing, authors’ self-representation, their view of the authorities, and their use of discursive techniques and rhetorical conventions. In the second part I examine a revealing case: the petitioning campaign of Orthodox believers from Chernihiv in defense of St. Trinity Church as presented by their letters from 1962–1972. This collection of letters is a unique source allowing for general inferences regarding Orthodox believers’ letter-writing under communism.

Believers’ Letters: General Characteristics

Petitioning to local plenipotentiaries of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CROCA) and since 1966 to the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), to the CROCA/CRA headquarters in Kyiv and Moscow, local authorities, republican and all-union party and governmental organs, in few cases to Exarchal and Patriarchal authorities, and still in fewer cases to the

¹¹ M. Bourdeaux, *op.cit.*, p. 13–14.

¹² For more details on the Orthodox Church’s defensive strategies see: Н. Шліхта, *op.cit.*

¹³ For more details on the authorities’ attitude see: *ibidem*, p. 37–79, 107–119.

¹⁴ S. Fitzpatrick, *op.cit.*, p. 93, 94.

¹⁵ A.B. Stone, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

¹⁶ Центральний державний архів вищих органів влади і управління України [hereinafter: ЦДАВО], ф. 4648, оп. 7, спр. 89, арк. 11; *ibidem*, спр. 114, арк. 150.

international audience was a common form of believers' protest against discriminatory policies by the state and attempt to defend their religious rights. I reviewed a few hundreds of such letters by the faithful, which is still an insignificant part of all those held in the archive of the Republican Plenipotentiary of the CROCA/CRA in Kyiv (*Центральний державний архів вищих органів влади і управління України (ЦДАВО), Fond 4648*). This allows me to argue that the closure of virtually every church gave rise to believers' petitioning. The scale was different in each particular case: from a couple of letters written by lay activists to large-scale "petitioning campaigns" that continued for years and even decades. In the course of such petitioning campaigns, dozens of letters containing signatures of up to a few hundred people (often entire rural parishes) were written and local executive authorities, local plenipotentiaries, and the CROCA/CRA headquarters were not once visited by lay activists.

The Republican Branch of the CROCA/CRA was mainly concerned with those lengthy large-scale petitioning campaigns whose resonance was felt outside the republican borders. In his regular reports on "Examination of Letters, Complains, and Appeals of Believers" (alternative title was "Work with Letters and Personal Audiences with Visitors in the CROCA/CRA"), the Republican Plenipotentiary always expanded on repeat petitions and petitions addressed to central party and governmental organs. Ever since mass closures of churches in the early 1960s, the Republican Plenipotentiary annually reported that the number of such petitions was constantly growing, amounting up to one-half of all those written by the faithful over particular periods under consideration.¹⁶ This was interpreted as a telling sign of believers' adherence to the Church and, importantly enough, as an unfortunate result of a "hasty approach" by local executive authorities to churches' closures and their subsequent utilization.

In a report on believers' letters from 1969, Republican Plenipotentiary Kostiantyn Lytvyn acknowledged that

many of believers' petitions for the opening of churches and re-registration (of priests and religious communities) were "sound." Their number was growing because "they are examined merely *pro forma* by local authorities. This forces the faithful to petition to central republican and all-union organs regarding those issues that might be resolved on the local level."¹⁷ Commenting on the situation in the early 1970s, Republican Plenipotentiary Mykola Kolesnyk concluded, "groundless refusals [by local authorities] to thoroughly examine petitions... as a rule, generate repeat letters."¹⁸

The archive of the Republican Plenipotentiary in Kyiv contains a unique collection of letters written by the Orthodox faithful from Chernihiv in defense of St. Trinity Church. They started writing "letters to power" when the church was closed in 1962 and campaigned for it until the church was returned to them in 1988. This believers' attempt to reclaim their church is at once typical and exceptional. Being typical, this body of evidence allows for drawing general inferences regarding the path of believers' petitioning, relations between all those involved, and discursive techniques and rhetorical conventions used by the authors to argue in favor of their rights.

It is unique because of particularly severe circumstances under which this "petitioning campaign" evolved, created by the resolve of local authorities in Chernihiv to attain an ideal of a completely secularized society as soon as possible. If measured by external qualities the Chernihiv authorities made the list of top winners in a "socialist competition for a-religious regions" (Volodymyr Pashchenko's definition¹⁹), which characterized Khrushchev's antireligious campaign. Over the years after World War II the number of churches in the diocesan center was reduced from 15 to one (small Resurrection Church). The situation in Chernihiv was extraordinary and gained attention of the growing dissident movement. Levko Lukianenko, prominent Ukrainian dissenter and native of the Chernihivska Oblast, paid

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, оп. 5, спр. 128, арк. 67.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, оп. 7, спр. 89, арк. 111.

¹⁹ В.О. Пащенко, *Православ'я в новітній історії України*, Ч. 2, Полтава 2001, р. 150.

20 Л. Лук'яненко, *Різдвяне звернення до атеїстів українського правозахисника (лютий 1977)* [in:] *Мартирологія Українських Церков: У 4-х т., т. 1, Українська Православна Церква: Документи, матеріали, християнський самвидав України*, Торонто–Балтимор 1987, р. 817.

21 Д. Константинов, *Итоги гонений на Православную Церковь в С.С.С.Р.*, “Вестник русского студенческого христианского движения” 1965, 3 (77), р. 19–20.

22 ЦДАВО, ф. 4648, оп. 5, спр. 277, арк. 175.

23 *Ibidem*, спр. 218, арк. 50.

24 *Ibidem*, спр. 313, арк. 75.

special attention to this in his widely known “Christmas Appeal of a Ukrainian Dissenter to Atheists” written in 1977. He described the situation in Chernihiv, “an ancient town with strong religious traditions,” as “abnormal,” since “only one small church (*церковка*) is left for the town with 200,000 inhabitants.” Lukianenko compared local authorities to “religious fanatics” of the age of “medieval obscurantism” who persecuted any manifestation of what they considered “dissent and heresy.”²⁰ The scale of antireligious persecutions was even exaggerated in dissent writings. Relying on the samizdat data, Dimitry Konstantinow mentions Chernihiv as a “provincial town” with the most energetic “antireligious reaction” where all churches were closed till the mid-1960s.²¹

The scale of petitioning is as well exceptional. I traced only the first decade of the campaign. The petitioners summed it up in a letter of September 22, 1971 (308 signatures), “During the last nine years, we have sent to You, the bodies of Our High Power more than 200 (two hundred) letters and appeals signed by the number of the faithful that exceeds a few thousand.”²² Unfortunately, the archive of the Republican Plenipotentiary does not contain an entire collection of their letters (only thirty eight letters were found), and therefore the exact number cannot be given. The approximate number mentioned by the authors admits of no doubts however especially because the CRA data from a later period confirms such a high intensity of their petitioning. According to Lytvyn, over the first half of 1971 (between January 12th and June 12th), he received eleven petitions from Chernihiv, that is one petition every two weeks, and was visited by four delegations, each composed of three to four lay activists.²³ The tempo remained high through 1971: during the next nine months (between July 7, 1971 and April 24, 1972), Lytvyn examined fifteen petitions and was visited by nine delegations from Chernihiv.²⁴

Orthodox believers’ letters in defense of their religious rights bear all necessary characteristics of Soviet citizens’

“letters to power”: from a traditionalist paternalistic (still prerevolutionary) image of the “High Power” constructed and appealed to by authors to the use of all necessary discursive techniques to present themselves as “truly ours” (*наши*), loyal Soviet citizens. As “these individuals existed in a discursive and social climate defined... by Soviet ideology and Soviet language,”²⁵ they quickly learned on the necessity to “speak Bolshevik” (Stephen Kotkin’s metaphor), or master modern Soviet language, to be able to argue in defense of “backward” religion and the “remnant” Church.

The reference to Soviet legislation on cults, and primarily to the 1918 Decree on the Separation of the Church and State and Article 124 (on the freedom of religious belief) of the Soviet Constitution, is a key element in believers’ letters. Petitions that did not contain such references were but a rare exception.

The petitioners claimed they knew that “according to the Constitution, religious faith is allowed.”²⁶ They were aware that Lenin’s Decree on the Separation allowed them “to demand a church to exist in every village.”²⁷ The next step was to emphasize, “The Church and State are officially different [separated] between themselves.”²⁸ They concluded that local authorities had no legal right to infringe on the life of the Church, while their interference “is lawlessness and the offence of the Soviet Constitution and Democracy.”²⁹

The questioning, reconsideration, and, in some cases, even repudiation of the Soviet identification expressed on the paper was an extreme (and rare) expression of believers’ defiance. Their resolve to defend the Pochaiv Lavra (1961–through the 1980s) clearly revealed limits of possible compartmentalization of religious and Soviet identities. Already the decision to address pleads for help to the international audience (the main addressees were the UN and religious organizations abroad) was officially evaluated and regarded by themselves as “anti-Soviet.” These letters had little chance

25 A.B. Stone, *op.cit.*, p. 314.

26 ЦДАВО, ф. 4648, оп. 1, сир. 365, арк. 199.

27 *Ibidem*, сир. 219, арк. 34.

28 *Ibidem*, сир. 365, арк. 204.

29 *Ibidem*, сир. 411, арк. 97.

30 See a selection of these letters in a comprehensive publication of the Ukrainian religious samizdat: *Мартирологія Українських Церков*, vol. 1, p. 813–857.

31 SAKI, SU/Ort 7/14.1 *Pochaev Appeal* “Orthodox Christians of all Russia”, p. 1.

32 SAKI, 720, Ф. Варрава, *Прошение*, 1964, p. 5.

33 ЦДАВО, ф. 4648, оп. 1, спр. 304, арк. 175.

to cross the Soviet borders but many of them did reach the West and gained wide publicity thanks to samizdat publications.³⁰ Because of this publicity in the West, the defense of the Pochaiv Lavra (unlike the above mentioned campaign of *chernihivtsi*) is a single best-known act of resistance to antireligious persecutions on the part of the Orthodox faithful in the postwar Soviet Ukraine. Largely because of its resonance, this defensive campaign was successful and the Lavra was not closed.

The appeal of 1964, introduced at the beginning of this article, and other letters written by one of its authors, Feodosiia Varavva, suggest that in extreme cases the faithful were compelled to refuse their identification as “loyal Soviet citizens.” “Godless communists... want to build their communism on the graves of believers.” “These godless communists... with the help of brute force and repression strive to kill our souls and our children.” “These godless communists only talk of peace, while indeed they have waged a terrible war against the Orthodox faithful. They resort to violence with much success.”³¹ “I will not allow [my children] to join the Pioneer Organization. This is a godless organization. I, as a religious mother [*верующая мать*], cannot allow my [children] to join a godless organization.”³²

Not only did the faithful admit the failure of their attempt to reconcile Christian and Soviet loyalties, but also they were ready to openly manifest their civil and political disobedience. At the very beginning of campaigning (1961, letter to the CROCA Chairman Vladimir Kuroiedov), a group of believers discussed the use of brute force by the militia and criminal persecutions of monks and pilgrims. They “cautioned” the authorities, “How cannot you see that this is the lynching of Christian souls? You should be aware that such an attitude towards citizens, especially in Western Ukraine, does not promise anything good. It disintegrates us politically and embitters.”³³

Surprisingly at first glance, such critical statements and demonstration of civil disobedience were justified by the authors in a common manner – with references to the 1918 Decree on the Separation and generally to the Soviet law – even though emphases were different. Instead of evoking provisions allowing for the observance of religion, the petitioners described the violations of the Soviet law by Soviet authorities themselves. As a last resort, they called the international community to compel Soviet power to observe its own laws. An appeal of Feodosia Varavva mentioned before (it was addressed to the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs and the UN) closes with a desperate plead:

[Please] do come to defend my children and me and to compel godless communists to act within the framework of Soviet law, the Constitution, the Decree [on the Separation]... These laws do not exist for them. The laws exist only on paper, while indeed they have [long ago] rejected them.³⁴

To stress again, such rhetoric, open accusations of Soviet authorities of “persecuting for the faith” and the rejection of the Soviet identification by Orthodox believers were but a rare exception.

Much more frequently, even when compelled for symbolic manifestations of defiance because of a lack of alternative means to defend their rights the authors undertook every effort to preserve their identification as “Soviet citizens.” The common approach was to justify their actions by the unlawful policies of local authorities, which apparently acted without the approval (and even knowledge) of central power. A telling illustration would be a letter to the Soviet government written in 1962 by the “united in the faith people” of the village of Avdiivka in the Chernihivska Oblast. The letter aimed to justify their civil disobedience. They left *kolkhoz* fields in the period

34 SAKI, 720, Ф. Варрава, *Прошение*, 1964, p. 13.

35 ЦДАВО, ф. 4648, оп. 1, спр. 365, арк. 150.

36 *Ibidem*.

37 For more details on the conditions and consequences of the campaign see: Н. Шліхта, *Чернігівські віруючі на захист своїх прав: один епізод з життя Православної Церкви в повоєнній Радянській Україні (спроба мікроісторичного дослідження)*, “Сіверянський літопис” 2003, issue 5–6, p. 117–130; Н. Шліхта, *Церква тих, хто вижив*. p. 224–250.

38 *Ibidem*, оп. 5, спр. 67, p. 183.

39 *Ibidem*, арк. 183.

of agricultural rehabilitation, in August, gathered around their church and refused to hand in the keys to the representatives of the *raiiispolkom* to prevent its closure.

At first glance, the language of this letter bears a strong resemblance to the appeals written in defense of the Po-chaiiv Lavra. “Taras Bulba defended his Church from the Polish gentry (*пани*). We are compelled to defend Our Church from the insolence of Soviet power.”³⁵ A more careful reading however discloses the authors’ strong desire to prevent the interpretation of their actions in terms of “anti-Soviet.” They declared at the very beginning, “We will defend Our Church against the insolence of local rulers.” Later in the text they appealed for the intercession of their “High Addressee,” “We unanimously plead you to forbid our local rulers [to act in such a way that] to cause popular hatred of the High Power and its laws.”³⁶

Case: Petitioning Campaign of Orthodox Believers from Chernihiv³⁷

The petitioning campaign of the Orthodox faithful from Chernihiv began soon after the closure of St. Trinity Church (useful space 620 sq.m) in October 1962. The reason impelling believers to petition for yet another church for services was obvious. The capacity of a small Resurrection Church (175 sq.m) was insufficient for a large diocesan center. This church was located in the middle of the market square that additionally complicated the conduct of services, and especially of processions of the cross and icons around the church.³⁸ *Chernihivtsi* particularly emphasized the inappropriateness of the Resurrection Church for Sunday and festive liturgies.

In a letter of July 19, 1967 addressed to the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian Republic, the authors stated that liturgies in the Resurrection Church were usually accompanied with numerous “cases of fainting and stuffiness... many noisy conversations, a pronounced dissatisfaction and irritability from crowded conditions.”³⁹

A letter of January 27, 1972 (305 signatures) is the earliest found that mentions a particular accident – the death of Illia Marchenko during Sunday liturgy – with his address as well as the names and addresses of the eye-witnesses provided.⁴⁰ Its authors stated that this was not the first accident but previously they attempted to “somehow veil them in order to avoid embarrassment amongst people.”⁴¹ When deaths became more frequent, believers decided to inform of each particular accident in detail. The following argument would soon become customary, “These casualties tellingly testify that there is the urgent need to return St. Trinity Church to the faithful... Where is the observance of human rights?”⁴²

The reason compelling the faithful to petition for a larger church is apparent. The question of why they petitioned specifically for St. Trinity Church is less obvious. The only explanation found in their letters concerned a substantial capacity of St. Trinity Church, the largest of all the churches in Chernihiv. If the capacity was the only reason however, believers’ refusal to consider the Transfiguration Cathedral as an alternative is hard to explain. The cathedral was the second largest church in Chernihiv (500 sq.m), traditional see of the Chernihiv bishops, and was preserved in a comparatively good condition.

The refusal by the faithful to consider any alternative suggests that an additional important reason for them to wish to reclaim exactly St. Trinity Church was that the holy relics of St. Feodosii of Chernihiv were kept in the basement of this church. St. Feodosii was one of the most popular saints of the Ukrainian lands and also was highly honored by the official church.

This assumption is surprisingly not supported by direct evidence in believers’ letters. None of them contains a single mention of the holy relics “walled up” (Patriarch Alexei’s [Simanski’s] words⁴³) in the basement of St. Trinity Church. This silence becomes understandable when their style and arguments are closely examined. As I show, these letters provide an insightful example of

40 *Ibidem*, спп. 313, арк. 15.

41 *Ibidem*, арк. 16.

42 *Ibidem*, арк. 103 (letter of May 13, 1972, 774 signatures).

43 *Ibidem*, спп. 16, арк. 461.

44 Центральний державний архів громадських об'єднань України [hereinafter: ЦДАГО], ф. 1, оп. 31, спр. 3833, арк. 84.

45 ЦДАВО, ф. 4648, оп. 5, спр. 218, арк. 22.

46 A. Yurchak, *Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, "Comparative Studies in Society and History" 2003, 45, issue 3, p. 481, 504.

47 A.B. Stone, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

the assimilation of official Soviet rhetoric and the use of bargaining techniques by the authors to advance their interests. It is quite probable that when demonstrating that they were "ours" / Soviet, believers considered it inappropriate to display their concern with the relics, the most "harmful objects" of popular religion in the official view.

The information provided by the CRA and the Chernihiv authorities, on the other hand, justifies such an assumption. In a report to the Party Central Committee of August 13, 1969, Lytvyn referred to numerous oral requests from *chernihivtsi* to return the holy relics of St. Feodosii and repeat "categorical refusals" by local authorities to do this.⁴⁴ In a response to implicit critique in Lytvyn's report, the secretary of the Chernihiv *oblispolkom* (letter of February 12, 1970) made it clear that the re-opening of St. Trinity Church was out of the question because "The relics of St. Feodosii are kept in the basement of the church. If religious services are resumed in the church, they will be exploited by the clergy to stimulate pilgrimages."⁴⁵

Letters of *chernihivtsi* are a revealing sample for the study of believers' integration into Soviet society through the appropriation of Soviet identity, their practical adaptability within the contemporary circumstances, their masterly assimilation of official Soviet rhetoric and skilful bargaining in defense of their rights. If we agree with Alexei Yurchak, they followed a customary (for Soviet citizens in the postwar context) model of relations with the power: they "copied the precise *forms* of ideological representations" simultaneously reinterpreting their meanings, in their own interests.⁴⁶ Thereby, as Andrew Stone develops, they "could create a discursive space where Soviet socialism and religion could coexist."⁴⁷

Upon a systematic reading of these letters, frequent references to Soviet political history, clichés from official Soviet rhetoric, and borrowings from official Soviet documents turn to be taken for granted. For instance, an

analysis of letters from 1970 and 1971 suggests a chronicle of main events in the Soviet political life: preparation and actions of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Communist Party, elections to the Supreme Council of the USSR and the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian Republic, nation-wide celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War, the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the USSR, the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth, etc. The timing of petitions on the greatest events in the history and life of the Socialist Motherland, not to mention "red dates" of the Soviet calendar, was regarded by the petitioners as necessary and as a strong claim for their membership in Soviet society and "correct" political stance.

The application of clichés from official Soviet rhetoric and references to the "founding fathers" of Marxism-Leninism and Soviet legislation served two closely linked (in the view of petitioners) objectives. One was to confirm their belonging to Soviet society and another was to force their addressees to listen to and satisfy their request. The petitioners reminded Soviet authorities that back in 1874 Engels argued that any attempt to fight religion was "foolishness" and could only "revive interest in religion."⁴⁸ Lenin's struggle against bureaucracy and his requirements to "listen attentively to all the applicants" were continuously repeated to Soviet bureaucrats.⁴⁹

The petitioners claimed to believe in the justice of Soviet legal system (references to Article 124 of the Constitution and the 1918 Decree on the Separation were mandatory) and in the official promise to attain "true democracy" in the socialist state. Apparently the strongest rhetorical tool was through juxtaposing themselves with the discriminated population of "capitalist states where any law and right remain only on paper."⁵⁰ "We are not Negroes [i.e., slaves]. Not only are we members, but also patriots of Our Beloved Motherland."⁵¹ Drawing from this crucial distinction and expressing their pride to be citizens of the Socialist Motherland, they maintained,

48 ЦДАВО, ф. 4648, оп. 5, спр. 277, арк. 21 (letter of March 10, 1971 [291 signatures]).

49 *Ibidem*, арк. 183, 198 (January 19, 1971 [416], October 20, 1971 [367]).

50 *Ibidem*, спр. 218, арк. 54 (May 6, 1970 [96]).

51 *Ibidem*, спр. 67, арк. 139 (January 28, 1967).

⁵² *Ibidem*, спп. 218, арк. 106 (June 20, 1970 [74]).

⁵³ *Ibidem*, спп. 277, арк. 45 (April 21, 1971 [252]).

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, спп. 313, арк. 33.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, арк. 78 (March 3, 1972 [300]).

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

“The faithful also have the right to take advantage of living in the democratic state and require [just] punishment for those who violate it [i.e., this right].”⁵² They saw no inherent inconsistency, when requested respect for their religious rights “in the name of a historical and human value of socialism.”⁵³

The authors exploited major authorities’ concerns for their own sake: the aim was to persuade their addressees that the re-opening of St. Trinity Church served state interests, just as this was in the interests of the Church. The reference to the so-called “Uniate threat” was one of the most powerful bargaining arguments used by the Orthodox Church in its relations with state authorities. This was not overlooked by the petitioners. When the struggle against the “remnants of the Unia” intensified in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were quick to remind their addressees, “St. Trinity Church is a monument for the struggle of Orthodoxy against the Unia, against foreigners who strove to enslave our people and Our Motherland.”⁵⁴

Curiously enough, the petitioners attempted to persuade the authorities that the fulfillment of their request would help to counter religious propaganda in Chernihiv. They stated that the location of the Resurrection Church in the city center made it visible to their secularized compatriots. Those often “asked why people are so eager to go to the church. When they have some free time, they enter the church. If they like the liturgy, they begin to attend the church regularly.”⁵⁵ Thereby, they concluded, the faithful “unwillingly” propagated the faith. In contrast, St. Trinity Church was situated on the suburbs, “hidden inside the monastic walls,” and remained completely invisible to outsiders.⁵⁶

A bargaining tool equally effective to the “Uniate threat” was to mention visits by foreigners and international delegations to Chernihiv. The petitioners explained that when attending the Resurrection Church, foreigners were “surprised” by its crowded conditions and the

faithful had to “blush” and look for various plausible explanations.⁵⁷ They immediately promised that when receiving St. Trinity Church back, “Believers would repair it. Foreigners will be able to visit it,” and get “correct” impression on the freedom of religion in the Soviet state.⁵⁸

The dissatisfaction of believers became more pronounced and the style of their letters much sharper over time, as their “sound request” was continually ignored. Nonetheless, one can hardly find overt criticism of state authorities or official religious policy in their letters. They did not address the policy of central authorities, for this would run counter to their particularism (distinctive feature of popular protest) and could create serious identity problems. They definitely knew the boundaries of “permissible dissent” and observed the “rules of the game,” known to all Soviet subjects. Therefore they accused republican authorities of misinterpreting Moscow’s official line. They contrasted the position of the Orthodox community in Ukraine and Russia and a rhetorical question – “Why there is no such a hostile attitude towards the Church and the faithful in Russia, as it is in our unfortunate Ukraine?” – often appeared in their pages.⁵⁹

The petitioners considered executive authorities in Chernihiv and CRA local plenipotentiary Ivan Kotenko to be the primary culprits of their tragic situation. They believed that the authorities in Kyiv and Moscow were “misinformed” regarding the situation in Chernihiv. They did not cease to repeat that only because their “just request” was ignored by local rulers, did they dare to petition to all-union and republican party and governmental organs. They found it appalling that “even when central power in the Ukr. SSR and the USSR issues instructions and requires [local authorities] to satisfy our petition... local rulers refuse [to fulfill this].”⁶⁰ They were forced to admit, “It turns out that our local power is not subordinate [to state authorities]. They are free to act as they wish. They do not observe any law.”⁶¹ This

57 *Ibidem*, арк. 22 (February 19, 1972 [369]).

58 *Ibidem*, спп. 277, арк. 161 (November 2, 1971 [473]).

59 *Ibidem*, спп. 313, арк. 78.

60 *Ibidem*, спп. 67, арк. 130 (February 1967).

61 *Ibidem*, спп. 277, арк. 206 (December 9, 1971 [415]).

62 *Ibidem*, спр. 67, арк. 132; *ibidem*, спр. 313, арк. 27.

63 *Ibidem*, спр. 67, арк. 184 (July 19, 1967).

64 *Ibidem*, спр. 313, арк. 136 (June 25, 1972 [560]).

65 *Ibidem*, спр. 67, арк. 140 (January 28, 1967); *ibidem*, оп. 1, спр. 458, арк. 370 (August 1965).

66 *Ibidem*, оп. 5, спр. 67, арк. 140.

comprehension gave an additional impetus to their petitioning to Moscow and Kyiv.

Being well aware of the role played by the local plenipotentiary in supplying the authorities with the information, which was carefully selected and heavily edited, the petitioners used every opportunity to disclose his misinterpretation of facts and events. They painstakingly depicted the portrait of plenipotentiary Kotenko as “bureaucrat,” “bribe taker,” and state official who failed to properly fulfill his duties. Instead of presenting the interests of the Church in front of local authorities – as was their understanding of his responsibilities – he openly manifested his attitude towards Christians as “enemies.”⁶² The petitioners often cited Kotenko’s categorical refusals to consider their request, “We will not return the church to you! We will not open it! Do not even hope for this.”⁶³ “As long as I am alive, they will not receive St. Trinity Church back.”⁶⁴

Orthodox believers from Chernihiv did not simply find the main cause of their misfortunes in the personal stance of Kotenko. They considered it abnormal that “an atheist-communist [i.e., plenipotentiary] appoints priests” and “the bishop does not have any right because everything is at the disposal of the plenipotentiary.”⁶⁵ They drew a conclusion that bears strong resemblance to the assessments of religious dissenters and the church opposition, “It turns out that the bishop is a dummy for the fakery of the faithful,” while the plenipotentiary was a true master of the diocese.⁶⁶ That the issue was openly raised by the petitioners testifies to their radicalization over time. Thereby one observes a slow moderate evolution of believers’ immediate concerns to more general considerations regarding the position of the Church in the Soviet state. Because circumstances were so severe, Orthodox believers were compelled to review their customary particularism.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, *chernihivtsi* reconsidered their petition strategy. If an earlier request was to

re-open St. Trinity Church in addition to the Resurrection Church, they later petitioned for the opening of St. Trinity Church instead of the Resurrection Church. Simultaneously the authors were forced – and they repeatedly stressed this ran against their will – to reconsider their self-identification as full and loyal members of Soviet society; they sincerely regretted to realize they *were not* “ours” in the Soviet state. At early stages they juxtaposed their position to that of the discriminated population in other countries and their ancestors who lived prior to the 1917 October Revolution. After a decade of futile petitioning, they drew opposite parallels, “Against their own will, older people recall the times of the Unia when churches were confiscated from Orthodox and given to Jews.”⁶⁷

Since the late 1960s the petitioners frequently stressed that by ignoring their sound request, responsible officials nourished their disillusionment in a “just” Soviet system. They stated that they were compelled to undertake “anti-Soviet deeds.” “We do not wish to admit that this violation of Soviet laws and the harassment of the faithful are purposeful and aim to evoke indignation. Still, we have no choice but to believe this... Do we have to lose our patience?”⁶⁸ The authors did not confine themselves to such rhetorical questions but explained which exactly “anti-Soviet deeds” they were compelled for. For instance, they were ready to go to Moscow during the actions of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Communist Party to tell their story in front of the representatives of the people from all the union republics.⁶⁹ Furthermore, they were forced to commit a “civil crime” and refuse to participate in the elections to the Supreme Council and local soviets, “How can we cast our votes, if [the organs of power] ignore a many-year-long petitioning of hundreds and thousands of believers, ignore our legitimate sound request?”⁷⁰

In similar terms of a “civil crime” the letter-writers estimated their decision to appeal to various international

67 *Ibidem*, стр. 313, арк. 78.

68 *Ibidem*, стр. 277, арк. 6 (January 12, 1971 [219]).

69 *Ibidem*, арк. 11 (February 19, 1971 [195]).

70 *Ibidem*, стр. 218, арк. 80, 54.

71 *Ibidem*, спр. 218, арк. 107 (June 20, 1970 [74]).

72 *Ibidem*, арк. 107–108.

73 *Ibidem*, спр. 313, арк. 45.

legal and religious organizations. In 1970 they only mentioned this option, immediately stressing their unwillingness to undertake such a step after which, “The whole world will know of our situation, unheard-of in the history of the Soviet state and in the history of the Church, having no parallels in any other city, any other region of Our Motherland.”⁷¹ They indicated steps necessary to publicize their case, “Do we have to appeal to the UN and the World Council of Churches? We have enough reasons for this... but we would still prefer not do this.”⁷² Since this warning was not heard, both the UN and the World Council of Churches became regular addressees of all their letters the following year. The list of addressees was further expanded to include human rights organizations, amongst which the Committee on Human Rights headed by Andrei Sakharov and the Committee on Women’s Rights were mentioned most frequently.

To publicize their case inside the country, the petitioners began to address their letters to republican and all-union periodicals (mainly, “Правда”, “Известия”, and “Правда України”) and magazines (mainly, “Советский Союз” and “Радянська Україна”). The Republican Plenipotentiary could not overlook this desire of the faithful to publicize their case as widely as possible. Mentioning that in 1971 each petition was intended for twenty-five to twenty-eight addressees, Lytvyn regarded this as strong evidence for the growing scale and intensity of the petitioning campaign.⁷³

This article is intended as an introduction into the study of a particular source on the Soviet-period history of the Church. It demonstrates potential for the interdisciplinary survey of “letters to power” as an *action* and a *source* within the broader contexts of the Orthodox Church’s integration into Soviet society and of its defensive strategies.

The preliminary conclusion concerns the evolution of letters' genre in the course of lengthy public-writing campaigns (from *complaint* to *demand* and *protest*) as well as rhetorical and petitioning techniques accompanying and documenting this change.

Orthodox believers – as loyal Soviet subjects – were convinced that only when the “High Power” obtained “correct information” regarding their situation, they could finally succeed in their endeavor. Similarly to all Soviet letter-writers they considered “to let the power know” to be the primary objective of their petitioning and the major prerequisite for improving their situation. With flow of time, as they got no positive response from the above, they were forced to reconsider their defensive strategy. First, authors started to question their belonging to Soviet society. Second, to publicize their cases as widely as possible (and thereby indirectly force the authorities to finally listen to them), petitioners began to address their letters to Soviet media and – in extreme rare cases – also to the international audience “in the West.”

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