

How cardinals survived communism

The Russian Revolution unleashed a century of persecution. Church leaders faced tough questions about resistance and collaboration

JONATHAN LUXMOORE

When the centenary of the Russian Revolution is marked on November 7, Eastern Europe's Catholic communities will recall the terrible hardships it unleashed on them. But with Christians still suffering worldwide, it will also be an opportunity to reflect on which survival strategies work best against persecution.

Communist rule was imposed gradually, making clear responses difficult. And while its ultimate goal was unchanged, its methods evolved – as did the kinds of Christian testimony needed to withstand the pressures.

Even in 1917, the anti-Church programme was far from new. There had been parallels in the bloody mistreatment of *réfractaire* Catholic clergy during the French Revolution, as well as with Garibaldi's *mangiapreti*, or "priest-eaters", and the 1871 Paris Commune.

Marx and Engels had lauded the Commune as the first dictatorship of the proletariat. It had put revolution back on the agenda after the suppressed uprisings of 1848. It had also broken the "parson-power" of the Church, exposing its part in a hostile front against "the people". But the Communards had been defeated, Marx concluded, by shrinking back from the required ruthlessness.

Lenin, Russia's revolutionary mastermind, agreed that the Commune had been hampered by naïve idealism. But he fully concurred with its contempt for the Church, with its "deep roots" in capitalist domination.

"Every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness," Lenin told the writer Maxim Gorky.

This was the kind of enemy Russia's small, vulnerable Catholic community was up against. Yet even as Bolshevik death squads scoured the country, summarily executing priests and seizing Church valuables, there were hopes that the initial fervour might give way to something calmer.

The revolution had swept away the traditional privileges of Russia's Orthodox church, creating opportunities for other confessions. Even in the Vatican, some saw signs of a "positive evolution".

But hopes of a more just future were quickly dispelled.

Lacking political legitimacy, Lenin's regime had to find ways of subduing the population. Within a year of the revolution, while a 40,000-strong paramilitary police, the



An anti-clerical poster titled 'Comrade Lenin cleanses the world of filth'

Cheka, operated from Moscow's Lubyanka, and people's courts dispensed sentences according to "the dictates of revolutionary conscience". A "Decree on Red Terror" sanctioned the killing of anyone suspected of opposition.

"You must make an example of these people," Lenin telegraphed one local committee. "Hang (I mean hang publicly, so people will see it) at least 100 kulaks, rich bastards and known bloodsuckers ... Do all this so that for miles around people see it, understand it [and] tremble."

The only valid moral values and spiritual loyalties, Lenin made clear, were those which served the revolution. Even if some clergy claimed to support it, they would merely corrupt the cause from within. "We must execute not only the guilty," said Nikolai Krylenko, president of the Soviet Supreme Court. "Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more."

As the regime concentrated its onslaught initially on the Orthodox Church, Catholics were spared the worst. But by the early 1920s Catholic priests had received life terms for resisting Soviet rule, and all Catholic churches had been closed in Moscow and Petrograd (St Petersburg).

In March 1923, the Catholic Church's

leader in Russia, Archbishop Jan Cieplak, and his vicar-general, Mgr Konstantin Budkiewicz, were declared guilty with 21 other clergy for setting up a "counter-revolutionary organisation".

Cieplak and Budkiewicz were condemned to be shot, while others received prison terms. And on Easter Saturday five days later, despite international appeals, Budkiewicz was executed at the Lubyanka.

Cieplak's sentence was commuted to 10 years in prison, on the grounds that "the punishment he really deserves might be interpreted as directed primarily against their creed by backward elements of the Roman Catholic population". He remained in prison until April 1924, when he was suddenly put on a train to Riga and expelled.

By the end of the 1930s, it was clear that nothing could have saved the Soviet Union's churches.

Stalin had followed up Lenin's call for "revolutionary boldness", taking it far beyond what even Lenin had anticipated. The campaign against the kulaks, or rich peasants, had cost 6.5 million lives, while "terror famines", notoriously in Ukraine, had taken eight million more, and Stalin's 1937-8 Great Purge a further seven million.

While 45,000 Orthodox churches lay in ruins, some 110,000 Orthodox clergy were shot, hanged, burned alive, drowned in ditches or crucified on church doors.

As for Russia's Catholics, 422 priests had perished, along with 962 monks, nuns and lay people, while all but two of the Church's 1,240 places of worship had been closed or turned into shops, warehouses, farm buildings and public toilets.

Why had the Church encountered such hostility? How well had it understood the communist challenge?

Such questions would be faced by Church leaders in Eastern Europe, as communist rule arrived in the 1940s on the bayonets of the victorious Red Army. And they would be answered differently.

While Greek Catholic communities combining the eastern liturgy with loyalty to Rome were savagely suppressed in Ukraine and Romania, Catholic cardinals elsewhere – Stefan Wyszyński in Poland, Josef Beran in Czechoslovakia, József Mindszenty in Hungary, Alojzije Stepinac in Yugoslavia – all tried to rally Catholics to the Church's defence, drawing on their understanding of local conditions. In time, all were brought

down, proving that co-operative or confrontational Church stances ultimately had little impact on communist hostility.

But leadership skills played their part. Whereas Mindszenty and Stepinac had rejected the communist programme outright, Wyszyński had been ready to go along with it, believing communists, like anyone else, were open to persuasion, and that intelligent flexibility, rather than unbending rigour, stood a better chance of saving the Church.

Wyszyński was ready to take the regime at its word, study its decisions and reach agreements with it, while avoiding being pushed into committed opposition or provoked into over-reacting with rhetorical condemnations.

Not even this saved Wyszyński from being jailed in 1953 when Bolesław Bierut's regime launched a clampdown. But even at the height of Stalinist rule, the Polish Church was too well supported for the regime to risk a head-on collision.

Writing in the 1970s, Mindszenty defended his more confrontational stance, claiming to have recognised the dangers when other Church leaders had fallen for propaganda claims that communism was becoming more tolerant.

The pattern had been clear, Mindszenty argued. The regimes were determined to crush the faith, and they would do so even if Christians proved accommodating, as the Russian Orthodox Church's fate had shown. In the "decisive contest" between Christianity and communism, there could be no illusions of neutrality and appeasement.

"I was convinced we had been called to bear witness", Mindszenty concluded. "Historical studies had taught me that compromise with this enemy will almost always play into his hands".

Ironically, this was the opposite of what Wyszyński had concluded, after also studying the Russian Orthodox example. He knew the Church would have its martyrs, and that silence and timidity would merely embolden its enemies. But he also sensed that, sooner or later, the regime would overreach itself and have to recognise that, even under communism, a strong Church would be a permanent feature.

Sure enough, within three years Wyszyński had been restored to office when Bierut's successor, Władysław Gomułka, needed Church support for a reformist "Polish road to socialism". Although decades of conflict still lay ahead, the Polish Church would ultimately prosper.

What lessons can be learned from this today? One is from the adage attributed to Thomas Jefferson: that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. The Church should always be aware of what may threaten it, and think out its responses in advance.

Another lesson is the need for non-violence. While quiet diplomacy may achieve short-term gains, it cannot be relied on. And when things go wrong, the best response will always be loud but peaceful protests.

Some of the Church's moral conditions for armed resistance against "prolonged and



A statue of the confrontational Hungarian Cardinal József Mindszenty

obvious tyrannies" could well have applied under communist rule. But the resort to violence – from the post-war partisan groups to the 1956 Hungarian Uprising – had strengthened rather than weakened the regimes. Peaceful resistance, as Pope John Paul II quickly concluded, offered better possibilities.

Another conclusion we can draw is that the Church must always be independent of the state – not in aggressive or negative separation, but maintaining its autonomy and internal structure.

Totalitarian regimes since the French Revolution had attempted to create an alternative Catholic Church, independent of Rome; and when they failed, the reactions were violent. Yet harassment and persecution, however fearsome, were less dangerous to the faith than accommodation and apathy. The Church has survived brutality. But it might not survive the compromising of its values and the corruption of its canonical order.

However enlightened and reasonable it is the Church will always have its enemies. So, it must be adept and judicious in how it handles them, taking a long view, which finds the right balance between testimony and diplomacy, and avoids compromising the Church's spiritual and moral independence for the sake of institutional protection and material advantage.

The system of rule established by Lenin a century ago made it hard to live honestly, and even harder to achieve goodness. That many did, by conscious choice and effort of will, was an important mark of redemption. The courage and strength of the few compensated for the fear and weakness of the many, atoning for their sins and failures, and contributing to the liberation and salvation of whole communities.

Jonathan Luxmoore writes from Oxford and Warsaw. His two-volume study of communist-era martyrs, The God of the Gulag, is published by Gracewing

A Circle

A good leader will not exercise authority from 'the top'. The diagram for community is not a pyramid but a circle. A community leader leads with others. The pyramid is the diagram for an army or for industry.

Jean Vanier, Community & Growth, p.228

Old Age

Old age is the most precious time of life, the one nearest eternity. There are two ways of growing old. There are old people who are anxious and bitter, living in the past and illusion, who criticize everything that goes on around them. But there are old people with a child's heart, who have used their freedom from function and responsibility to find a new youth. They have the wonder of a child but the wisdom of maturity as well.

Jean Vanier, Community & Growth, p.140

A State of Growth

Many tensions in community come from the fact that some people refuse to grow; yet the growth of community depends on the growth of each of its members. There are always people who resist change; they refuse to evolve; they want things to be maintained as they always were. Community is always in a state of growth.

Jean Vanier, Community & Growth, p.106

Faith Without Works?

Some communities start with prayer. But gradually they discover they need to serve the poor and to develop real commitment to them. Opening to God in adoration and opening to the poor in welcome and service are the two poles of a community's growth, and signs of its health.

Jean Vanier, Community & Growth, p.141

Our Gifts

Envy is one of the plagues that destroys community. It comes from people's ignorance of, or lack of belief in, their own gifts. If we were confident in our own gift we would not envy that of others.

Jean Vanier, Community & Growth, p.51