

RELIGIOUS POLICY OF KONSTANTIN CHERNENKO (1984-1985)

ETER BOKELAVADZE

PhD in History

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

E-Mail: eter.bokelavadze@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-5497-7915

Abstract: The article examines the religious policy of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Konstantin Chernenko, its main goals, characteristic features and the results. The influence of the Soviet system of the first half of the 80s on the lives of religious organizations and believers. The attitude of the authorities towards religious organizations that did not obey the atheistic policy and the measures taken against them. Based on the materials of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Samizdat Archive, press materials and other historical sources and scientific literature, the repressive nature of the Soviet leader's shortest reign, the forms of relations with the Christian Church and the methods of implementing religious policy have been studied.

Key words: The Soviet Union, Konstantin Chernenko, religion, politics, church

* * *

Introduction: The religious policy of the Soviet government attracts interest of many researchers in today's scientific circles of Georgia, Russia and Europe. The urgency of the issue is facilitated by the discovery of historical sources that were not available and accessible for researchers during the existence of the Soviet Union. It is noteworthy that the majority of published works are mainly devoted to the study of the policies of I. Stalin, N. Khrushchev, L. Brezhnev, I. Andropov and M. Gorbachev. Relatively less attention has been paid to K. Chernenko's relations with religious organizations. We believe that this is due to the short period of his rule, since it is considered that no significant changes took place in the life of the Soviet state during his tenure in a leading position. However, as a result of the analysis of historical documents, we believe that K. Chernenko's policy in the field of the religion, although it represented a practical continuation of the course of his predecessors, still was of individual character.

We have already dedicated works to the study of the religious policy of L. Brezhnev, I. Andropov and M. Gorbachev. The purpose of the present article is to discuss the decisions made by the state apparatus under K. Chernenko in the field of religion, the measures taken, and the state of the Christian Church and the believers.

Methods: The work is based on historical-cognitive, content analysis, biographical and comparative research methods.

Discussion: On February 18, 1984, the Extraordinary Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union elected Konstantin Chernenko as the General Secretary of the Committee. Chernenko's candidacy. The first half of the 1980s, according to the party's estimations, was probably the most acceptable, due to two main factors:

His political principles totally met the party's ideology and requirements. Faithful adherence to Leninist ideology and the principles of building „developed socialism“ was the main credo of his life and work.

His career, from the late 1920s and early 1930s, was connected with ideological work and propaganda/agitation (in 1929-1930 he was the head of the propaganda and agitation department of the Novoselov district committee of Krasnoyarsk region; since 1948, the head of propaganda and agitation department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova). He was good in how to use mechanisms necessary for the implementation of party ideology.

Chernenko's leadership was supposed to guarantee the preservation of the chosen principles and political course of the previous leaders for the party, at the same time hoping to strengthen the ideological sphere. At the plenum of February 18, 1984, Chernenko declared: „To build a new world means tirelessly to attend to the moulding of the people of the new world, to their ideological and moral advancement. the Party will seek to bring this work fully into line with the nature of the big and complex tasks of perfecting developed socialism“ (Speech of Comrade K. U. Chernenko... 1984:2).

Thus, by 1984, the Soviet government still saw the construction of socialism as precondition for the successful future of the state. However, it was also well aware of the need to overcome the existing crises and for this of outmost importance was formation of a new Soviet person, whose world outlook and consciousness would completely correspond to communist ideas, expressed in practical actions – selfless work and dedication for the development of the Soviet state.

Chernenko's government soon began working to implement the program ideas. In July 1984, his decree on the work of the Komsomol was issued, which required the Komsomol not only to strengthen its role in educational processes in schools, but also to „close all channels serving for the lack of ideology...“. „Develop and implement a system of measures... so that all forms of leisure contribute to the development of... atheistic tastes“ – he urged (Gorshkova, 2001: 44). It is clear from the decree that Komsomol members were to personally take care not only of the atheistic education of young people, but also of managing their leisure. This is nothing else than the manifestation of an ideological crisis; the ruling forces were catching a straw in order to save an outdated ideology.

The main opposition to the government's ideology still were religious organizations and communities. The increased interest of the society in religion was one of the main obstacles, which by this time had already become irreversible. Despite the measures taken by L. Brezhnev and I. Andropov in the field of religion, the influence of religion in Soviet society did not weaken, but on the contrary, faith of people became even stronger. Even people who were neutral towards religion began to show interest and desire for religion. Citizens began to go to churches, attend services, and the number of clergymen gradually increased, and all this under conditions when a person's open confession of faith often became the basis for serious problems. The government was especially concerned about the seeing of members of the Communist Party in churches and monasteries. Of course, such cases did not go unnoticed, however, the fact that members of the Communist Party themselves showed interest in religion, and this interest stemmed not from party duties, but from personal attitudes, clearly demonstrated the collapse of the Soviet system.

According to Russian researcher A.I. Gorshkova, the short-term regime of K. Chernenko (compared to his predecessor) turned out to be stricter in relation to the religion (Горшкова, 2001:44). As one example, she cites the incident at the Danilov Monastery.

Danilov Monastery, also known as the St. Daniel Monastery, was the most important religious center in Russia, which was built in the 13th century by the Moscow prince, St. Daniel (the youngest son of Alexander Nevsky), in the name of the *Saint Daniel the Stylite*. This was the first monastery in Moscow, where, according to legend, a prince of Moscow took monastic vows before his death and was later buried in the monastery he built. According to one version, it was in the Danilov Monastery where the first eparchy of the Moscow principality was founded. Due to its geographical location and the relics preserved within it, the monastery has always played a major role in the history of both the Russian Orthodox Church and the state (Moscow Danilov Monastery).

In 1918, the monastery was officially closed, however, the monks, under the leadership of their superior, Archbishop Theodore (Pozdeevsky), managed to maintain monastic life. It is noteworthy that Archbishop Theodore was an opponent of any compromise with the so-called Obnovlensky movement, who

refused to come to an agreement with them. Due to his irreconcilable positions towards the policy of the Soviet government, he was repeatedly imprisoned. Congregation of the Danilov Monastery used to create serious problems for the Bolshevik government. Therefore, in 1929, the government issued a decree on the closure of the monastery. In 1930, a detention facility for the children of dissidents was opened on its territory. In 1932, the monastery's Church of Resurrection was also closed. One of the main relics of the monastery, the body of Saint Daniel, was also lost as a result. In 1937, Archbishop Theodore and most of the brothers were shot (Moscow Danilov Monastery).

In 1982, during the Brezhnev rule, when attitude towards the church was „favored“, a decision was made to return the ruined St. Daniel Monastery to Russian Church, although the official transfer of the monastery buildings took place in 1983. The authorities did everything to prevent the creation of a monastic community there and insisted that the monastery be transferred exclusively for administrative needs (Kostrukov, 2018). One fact is noteworthy about the Danilov Monastery, which is directly related to the name of K. Chernenko. His government attempted to cancel the decision to rebuild the monastery from the ruins. The church received an order not to open the monastery, and only after the promise that there would not be a monastery there, but only an administrative center of the church with the headquarters of the Department for External Church Relations (whose activities were profitable for the Soviet government), the ban on restoration work was lifted. The monastery was actually restored only in 1989, on the 1000th anniversary of the Christianization of Russia (Gorshkova, 2001: 44).

According to the history of the monastery and Chernenko's political views, it is obvious that he was against restoration of such a powerful, anti-communist center in Moscow such as the Danilov Monastery was. Under the growing interest to the church, the revival of the monastic community in the Danilov Monastery would be a prerequisite for a significant weakening of State's influence on the Russian Church and the population; not to mention the collapse of atheistic policy. Accordingly, K. Chernenko's administration did its best to prevent the monastery from returning to its old role and function.

Another monastery -the Pochaiv Lavra, located in Western Ukraine, distinguished by its history and position, appeared under special attention of the authorities.

The Pochaiv Monastery, like Danilov, was founded in the 13th century. According to the most common version, it was built by monks from the Kiev-Pechor Monastery, who left their abode during the Mongol invasions in 1237-1240 and fled to the Volyn. (Khoynatsky, Kryzhanovsky, 1897: 34) The expansion and strengthening of the monastery is associated with the 16th-18th centuries. In the 18th century, the main church of the monastery of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (1771-1791), the refectory and the cells were built. Since 1730, the Pochaiv printing house has also existed. Over time, the monastery has acquired an important role in the history of the Eastern Slavs and has become the subject of serious disputes between the Orthodox and Catholic Slavs.

Even during the existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), the Roman Catholic Church was actively trying to spread Catholicism in the Slavic lands, in which the Jesuits used to play a big role. As a result, in 1596, with the „Union of Brest“, the bishops of the Orthodox dioceses, including those from the territory of Ukraine, passed under the jurisdiction of the Pope. Thus, was laid the foundation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which was called the Uniate Church. The Uniate also spread to the Volyn region, although the Pochaiv Lavra firmly adhered to the Eastern Orthodox faith (Khoynatsky, Kryzhanovsky, 1897:55). Since 1713, the leadership of the monastery passed into the hands of the Uniates, which in itself meant the victory of the Pope in these territories. The monastery was Uniate until 1831 and was one of the centers of the Basilian Order.

It is known that during the Polish uprising against Russia in 1830-1831, the Basilian monks of the monastery used to take part in the uprising. After the defeat of the uprising, in 1831, by order of Emperor Nicholas I, the monastery was transferred to the Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Russian Holy Synod. The Basilian monks were forced to leave the monastery (Bushuev & Loyko, 2008). In the second half of September 1939, Pochaiv, which during the interwar period was located in the Volyn Voivodeship of the Polish Republic, was occupied by the Red Army. After the annexation of Western Ukraine to the

USSR in November of the same year, the Orthodox dioceses in this territory were transferred to the jurisdiction of Moscow Patriarchate. On June 30, 1941, Pochaiv was occupied by German troops. On August 18, 1941, the bishops, who nominally remained under the jurisdiction of Moscow Patriarchate, gathered at the Lavra and, relying on the decree of the Local Council of 1917-1918 and decree of September 1918 on recognizing the autonomous status of the Ukrainian Church (confirmed in 1922 by Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow and All Russia), proclaimed the creation of the Autonomous Orthodox Church of Ukraine. On November 25, 1941, the new Council of Bishops of the Pochaiv Lavra elected Metropolitan Alexy (Hromadsky) as Exarch of Ukraine.

Thus, by the 1940s, Russian Church had managed to preserve the Pochaiv Lavra anyhow. However, its influence on the monastery was not strong and still contained threats. Under the rule of the Bolshevik government, when the Ukrainian autocephalists were accused of nationalism and anti-Soviet activities, the Pochaiv Lavra was of course also of interest to the authorities, but the most difficult years for the monastery were the 1960s and the Khrushchev regime. The authorities began to exert direct pressure on everyone connected with the Lavra: monks, novices, pilgrims. The police used brutal methods against the monks (regardless of their rank and age), medical commissions were created – physically and mentally healthy monks were often forcibly transferred to psychiatric hospitals; Monks who were unfit for military service could be forcibly drafted into the armed forces; physical punishment, trials, arrests became of a common character. Repressions also touched the Lavra parish and pilgrims; a „Museum of Atheism“ was established in a building near the ascent of the Holy Gates (now the Theological Seminary). The pilgrims' hotel was converted into a psychiatric hospital (Rodzianko, 2015).

The persecution of the monastery continued during our research period. Of particular interest to us is the work of the German historian Gerd Stryker, „The Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Period (1917-1991),“ which is a collection of documents reflecting the history of relations between the Soviet state and the Church. The author cites in the work a document dated May 1984, preserved in the „Samizdat“ archive in Munich – a report on the repressions carried out by the local authorities against monks and pilgrims in the Pochaiv Lavra in the Ternopil region. The document describes the situation of the monastery in 1984 through the eyes of an eyewitness: „We learned from the stories of the local population that since the end of 1983 the Lavra had been under pressure from the authorities. This attack was manifested not only in relation to the monks, but also in relation to the pilgrims, as we ourselves soon became convinced of. On May 20, 1984, on the feast of St. Nicholas, during the evening service, police officers dressed in civilian clothes entered the monastery's Assumption Cathedral and began checking the documents of the pilgrims. Some of the police officers were drunk. Lieutenant Ivan Stepanovich Morozovsky, who was appointed head of the passport department of the Pochaevsk Department of Internal Affairs at the end of 1983, was especially active. He asked not only young people but also old women for their documents, and at the end of the service, he kicked people out from the church.“ The author of the document also mentions the facts of pilgrims being arrested and sent to a psychiatric hospital (Shtricker, 1995:278).

As we can see, the way of behavior of the ruling power has not changed much compared to its predecessors. Only the degree of repression has changed, taking into account the general and religious situation prevailing at that time. We believe that there was another reason for the special control and strict attitude of the Soviet authorities towards the Pochaiv Monastery. Namely, the active efforts of the Catholic Church and its Polish Pope John Paul II to revive Catholicism among the Eastern Slavs, which had a serious impact on the religious policy of the USSR authorities.

During the reign of K. Chernenko, the rigid and repressive policy towards the religion brought about corresponding results. In this regard, the information note of the Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, K.M. Kharchev, to the Central Committee of the CPSU, dated February 28, 1985, is of interest to us, which concerns the religious situation in the country and the issues of compliance with the legislation on cults (1980–1984). The document is a kind of report on behalf of the CPSU Central Committee and describes the difficult situation in the field of religion in the USSR in 1980-1984. K.M. Kharchev writes: „In a number of places, believers are not able to peacefully satisfy their

religious needs. They are not legally allowed to have the necessary conditions for this and are prohibited from registering their communities and purchasing religious buildings. In thousands of settlements, groups of believers of various confessions hold services illegally. Many of them have been requesting registration of their organizations for years, but their requests are usually rejected without grounds (Moldavian, Tajik, Turkmen, Uzbekistan, Georgian, Azerbaijani SSR, Ukrainian SSR and a number of regions of the RSFSR). Legitimately operating religious communities are often prohibited from repairing places of worship, using power supply or inviting a priest. There are cases of dismissal from work or expulsion from educational institutions on religious grounds; believers are being deprived of incentives for good work; other cases of abuse also take place. Some officials do not learn the lesson from the past, when gross violations of the law in relation to the Church and believers, resulted in negative consequences for a long time“ (Kharchev, 2010:167).

The author of the document names specific places (in Lithuania, Moldova, Belarus, etc.) and cases where believers were not given the opportunity to return confiscated churches (including burned ones) and notes that the Council (meaning the Council for Religious Affairs – E.B.) has repeatedly taken measures to prevent actions committed by local officials, but the local authorities ignore the Council's recommendations and decisions (Kharchev, 2010:170). K.M. Kharchev sees serious dangers in the situation he describes and tries to draw the Central Committee's attention to the following: „The unjustified closure of churches, monasteries and houses of prayer, the violation of the rights of believers have strengthened the activities of extremist elements in religious associations, especially in sectarianism and Catholicism. The most reactionary elements of Baptistism have created an underground religious center – the so-called „Council of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches“, which was supported by more than 550 different associations, counting more than 25 thousand believers“. Also, such an undesirable phenomenon as the transition of Orthodox believers (representatives of the most peaceful religion) to sectarian positions (Belarus, Ukraine, RSFSR) has occurred“ (Kharchev, 2010: 168).

The greatest danger, according to Kharchev, is that the USSR's foreign opponents were well informed about the current situation. „All this is in the hands of the ideological enemy, who tries its best to strengthen religious life, restore religious-nationalist sentiments in certain regions of our country, and complicate the normal relations established between the church and the state. Recently, the enemy, in his radio propaganda against the Soviet Union, has been particularly emphasizing the falsehood that the rights of believers and the guarantees of freedom of conscience provided for by the USSR Constitution are being violated in the USSR“ (Kharchev, 2010:170).

The fact is that the representatives of the Council for Religious Affairs and its Chairman were well aware of the acuteness of relations with religion, its causes and expected consequences, and tried their best to draw the attention of the central government to the necessary measures. Kharchev names the mistakes of local authorities as the main reason for the current situation and reminds the Central Committee of K. Chernenko's instructions that violent measures against believers are harmful and that „atheism can be spread not as a result of the ban on religion, but by consistent persuading of believers and involving them in active public life“ (Kharchev, 2010:170). The Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs sees the solution to the current situation in correct approaches of the leaders of all party and Soviet bodies towards religion and the church issues (Kharchev, 2010: 170).

The document cited gives the impression that the acute situation in the sphere of religion is due to the arbitrary actions of local authorities and that the central government finds it difficult to manage the processes in the Union republics. It is not excluded that in the case of individual incidents, the center, for various reasons, lost control of the reins of government, however, it is less conceivable that in 1980-1984 and especially in 1982-1984, when the leader of the KGB of the USSR I. Andropov was in power, the center was not aware of the situation in the republics and did not allow any local authorities to act against state policy, or in the case of a similar precedent, did not respond appropriately. We believe that the local rulers were strictly following the directives of the central government, and presenting them as „scapegoats“ in the document cited above is simply a tactic of Kharchev to show diplomatically the Central Committee the outcomes of religious policy and the ways of its correction.

Conclusion: Based on all the above, we can say that the religious policy of the Soviet government, during the reign of Konstantin Chernenko, is the same as of the policy of L. Brezhnev and I. Andropov, however, much more rigid, what made the relations between the church and the state to reach a deadlock. From the cited sources it can be seen that the party did not intend to abandon the anti-religious policy. At a certain period, it was trying to develop reasonable strategies, but totalitarian principles still outweighed the compromise. Ultimately, in the first half of the 80s, the situation of religion in the Soviet Union became similar to the one of the 60s, with the difference that now religious communities and organizations were much more actively resisting the ruling forces and had more supporters outside the country. The escalation of the conflict and the collapse of the system would probably have been inevitable if not for the death of the General Secretary in March 1985 and personnel changes. Since 1985, the Central Committee of the CPSU has been headed by Mikhail Gorbachev, under whose rule a new stage in the history of the Soviet Union began.

Bibliography:

- Communist., (1984). „*the Path of Communist Reconstruction and Peace*“, the newspaper „*Communist*“, 1984, February 15, N40, p. 4, Tbilisi
- Chernenko., (1984). *Speech of Comrade K. U. Chernenko at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU on February 14, 1984*, the newspaper „*Communist*“, 1984, February 14, N39, p. 2, Tbilisi
- Gorshkova A. I., (2001). *State and Russian Orthodox Church in the 1940--1990s (Based on the materials of the „Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate“)*, A. I. Gorshkova // Document. Archive. History. Modernity: collection of scientific papers – Issue 1. – Ekaterinburg, 2001. – P. 32 – 51.
- Kharchev., (1985). 1985, February 28. – Information note of the Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers K. M. Kharchev to the Central Committee of the CPSU. – The Religious Situation in the Country and Issues of Compliance with Legislation on Cults (1980–1984) (extract), K. Kharchev, GARF. F. R.-6991. Op. 5. D. 3263. L. 52–58; History of State-Confessional Relations in Russia (10th – Early 21st Century): a reader in 2 parts / compiled by Yu. P. Zuev; under the general editorship of Yu. P. Zuev, V. V. Schmidt. Part II: 20th – early 21st centuries. – Moscow: RAGS Publishing House; ID „MediaProm“, 2010. – 288 p.
- file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/Eto/1—1.pdf
- Khoinetsky A. O., (1897). Krizhanovsky G. Ya., Pochaiv Assumption Lavra. Historical Description, Pochaiv,
<https://msdm.ru/istoriya-monastyrya>
 Moscow Danilov Monastery, History of the Monastery
<https://msdm.ru/istoriya-monastyrya>
- Rodzianko Bishop Vasily (2015). Bishop Vasily, My Destiny (memories), compiled by D.V. Glivinsky. – M.: Publishing House of the Sretensky Stavropegic Monastery, 2015. – 416 p
<https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Vasilij-Rodzyanko/moja-sudba-vospominanija/№sel=1156:9,1156:9>
- Chisty M. B. (2024). On the 40th Anniversary of the Election of K.U. Chernenko General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU
<https://kprf.ru/history/party/227358.html>
- Shtrikker G., (1995). Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet times (1917-1991). Materials and documents on the history of relations between the state and the Church, 400 p. 245. M.: „Propylaea“, <http://www.krotov.info/acts/20/1920/shtric-00.htm>