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BELARUS: KGB pressure Orthodox not to venerate Soviet-era martyrs

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarus discourages the commemoration of Orthodox Christians killed for their faith by the Soviet Union, Forum 18 News Service has found. Today's KGB secret police have sought to have icons of the New Martyrs, as they are known by the Orthodox Church, removed from Grodno Cathedral. Russian Orthodox Deacon Andrei Kurayev told Forum 18 that "Some comrades from the local KGB asked local clergy why they were inciting the people in such a way." While there was no official order to remove the icons – "it was on the level of a chat" - Kurayev reported that Bishop Artemi (Kishchenko) of Grodno and Volkovysk refused to take them down. "He told the KGB that he couldn't rewrite history." KGB officers also often monitor visitors to Kuropaty, where New Martyrs are probably among mass graves of Stalinist repression victims, a local Orthodox source told Forum 18. The act of going there – even to light candles - is "fraught with tension" with the current Belarusian regime, according to the source. An Orthodox chapel planned for the site has never been built.

A generation after the Soviet Union's demise, Belarusian state representatives continue to discourage commemoration of Orthodox Christians killed for their faith by the Soviet regime, Forum 18 News Service has found. The KGB secret police have sought to have icons of the New Martyrs, as they are known by the Orthodox Church, removed from at least one cathedral. Belarusian Orthodox Church representatives appear to be nervous about publicly acknowledging New Martyrs believed to be among the many victims of the Stalin-era secret police at the mass killing grounds of Kuropaty (Kurapaty) on the northern edge of the capital Minsk.

The Moscow-based St Tikhon Orthodox University estimates that approximately 90,000 Orthodox were killed for their faith by the Soviet state. Over 1,000 New Martyrs were formally canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in August 2000.

In the western city of Grodno [Hrodna], however, the KGB have advised local Orthodox clergy to remove New Martyr icons depicting Red Army executioners with rifles from the city's cathedral, leading Russian Orthodox missionary Deacon Andrei Kurayev told Forum 18 on 5 May. Visiting Grodno in late 2006, Kurayev learnt that, "Some comrades from the local KGB asked local clergy why they were inciting the people in such a way." While there was no official order to remove the icons from the Cathedral of the Protection of the Holy Veil – "it was on the level of a chat" - Kurayev also reported that Bishop Artemi (Kishchenko) of Grodno and Volkovysk refused to take them down. "He told the KGB that he couldn't rewrite history."

A spokesperson at Grodno's KGB Department refused to provide information to Forum 18 by telephone on 8 May.

The ten icons in Grodno cathedral depict one-time bishops in Belarus killed by the Soviet regime elsewhere before the Second World War. Grodno was at this time in Poland.

"There is a certain circle of people who don't like these icons," dean of Grodno Fr Aleksandr Veliseichik would only comment on 5 May. "Similar to Christ in the Gospel," he told Forum 18, "let those who can read, understand."

Fr Aleksandr did point out to Forum 18 that icons may be removed only if they are not Orthodox, "but these were painted entirely according to church canons." He said some of the ten icons were copied from one in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour painted for the August 2000 canonisation of the New Martyrs and blessed by Patriarch Aleksii II (<http://days.pravoslavie.ru/Images/im609.htm>).

Others – such as that of St Pavlin, Bishop of Mogilev (1879-1937) – are new depictions produced at St Elizabeth Women's Monastery outside Minsk (http://orthos.org/grodno/gev/june2006/images/5_st_pavl_b.jpg).

Aleksandr Shursky, editor of Grodno's Orthodox diocesan newspaper, stated to Forum 18 only that there was "no official appeal from KGB representatives" on 22 April. He acknowledged, however, that "many Party workers of the old formation could not possibly like such icons."

The Belarusian KGB – which has not changed its name since Soviet times - has made no attempt to distance itself from its Soviet past. It proudly traces its history back to the first Soviet secret police, the Cheka, which was founded by Felix Dzerzhinsky. In the 1920s "Chekists stood shoulder to shoulder with the entire Belarusian people in resolving the most difficult and pressing economic and social tasks before them," its official website maintains, before claiming that the organisation was actually a victim of Stalin's purges in the 1930s: "23,000 Chekists were repressed - the very best professionals, moreover, Dzerzhinsky's comrades, outstanding people with rich and sensitive souls, selflessly serving the Motherland and fighting for a bright future for their country."

KGB officers also often monitor visitors to Kuropaty, a wooded area on the northern outskirts of Minsk, a local Orthodox source told Forum 18 on 5 May. Possibly 100,000 victims of Stalin's purges are thought to have been shot and buried at Kuropaty in 1937-41, but no archaeological research has been conducted at the site since the 1990s. The act of going there – even to light candles - is "fraught with tension" with the current regime, according to the source.

During the 1920s-30s over 20 clergy - including 3 bishops - were shot in Minsk for their faith, states research by local church historian Fr Feodor Krivonos cited in a 2001 Minsk Orthodox parish directory. Contacted by Forum 18 on 8 May, Fr Feodor described the question of whether Kuropaty could be considered a New Martyr burial site as "very difficult". Other than to confirm that Belarusian New Martyrs were killed in Belarus as well as Russia, he preferred not to discuss the subject by telephone.

Andrei Petrashkevich, Minsk Orthodox diocesan press secretary, told Forum 18 on 8 May that, "We have no information on whether there are New Martyrs canonised by the Church at Kuropaty."

Local Orthodox parishioner Anatoli Kuznetsov believes Kuropaty to be a New Martyr burial site. Icons painted on a number of rocks there include five Belarusian priests martyred in Minsk in 1937-8, he told Forum 18 on 8 May. "And Kuropaty is where people were shot."

Several icon rocks feature in footage of restoration work at Kuropaty following vandalism, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MunN2dCqoN0>.

Visiting Minsk in June 2001, Patriarch Aleksii gave his blessing for the nearby Orthodox parish of the Resurrection to build a chapel at Kuropaty. A 2001 directory of Minsk Orthodox churches describes the parish's affiliate chapel of Our Saviour Not Made by Human Hands as "being built at the mass burial site of repression victims (Kuropaty)."

No Orthodox chapel has been built to date, however. An open-air "chapel" area contains the icon rocks and two high crosses erected by Anatoli Kuznetsov in February 2006 and May 2007, he told Forum 18. As Resurrection Orthodox parish's custodian of the site, Kuznetsov has visited Kuropaty daily for nearly five years.

Plans for a chapel as blessed by the patriarch were altered because Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhromeyev) of Minsk and Slutsk, who heads the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), gave a further blessing for it to be built instead at Resurrection Church - approximately 1km (half a mile) away in Minsk city - Kuznetsov told Forum 18. "There was no explanation why – only that it should be moved."

The initiative of Resurrection parish, the Kuropaty chapel plans have not been realised because parishioners have been concentrating on finishing their own church building, the Orthodox Church's press secretary Petrashkevich told Forum 18. "The question remains open – although it hasn't been discussed recently," he remarked. "That's all I can say."

The situation surrounding Kuropaty is in sharp contrast to that at another site of mass executions at Butovo on the outskirts of Moscow. Of at least 20,000 Soviet repression victims shot and buried there, almost 1,000 have so far been verified as martyrs by the Russian Orthodox Church. Visiting the site in October 2007, then President Vladimir Putin attended a memorial service led by Patriarch Aleksii at a church dedicated to the Butovo New Martyrs and Confessors. Hundreds of clergy attend the annual commemoration of their feast day.

To Forum 18's knowledge, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has never mentioned Kuropaty publicly.

The 2001 Minsk Orthodox parish directory also states that Resurrection Church holds services alongside Kuropaty at 2pm on particular days in the Orthodox calendar set aside for prayer for the dead. On one of these, Radonitsa (the ninth day after Easter), the memorial service this year was held at Resurrection Church itself, however, Forum 18 was told by a female parishioner on 6 May. Kuropaty custodian Kuznetsov told Forum 18 that services are not held at the site because "the question hasn't arisen."

Orthodox memorial services are usually held in church buildings, Belarusian Orthodox Church press secretary Petrashkevich maintained to Forum 18. While acknowledging that Radonitsa services are normally held at cemeteries or burial sites, "I have no information as to whether they are held at Kuropaty," he added.

Separated from the Moscow Patriarchate and outside the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) was free to canonise the New Martyrs in November 1981. The ROCA took the Moscow Patriarchate's continued failure to venerate the New

Martyrs as a sign of compliance with Soviet ideology. It formed one of the main obstacles to reconciliation, finally overcome in a formal Act of Canonical Communion signed in Moscow on 17 May 2007.

The influence of Soviet-style militant atheism also remains strong among state officials in Belarus (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186).

Although President Lukashenko publicly stresses the role of Orthodoxy, Forum 18 has found little evidence of state support for the Belarusian Orthodox Church (see F18News 10 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=826). The Church's leadership publicly supported the harsh 2002 Religion Law, under which home worship by its own adherents has been targeted by the Belarusian state for the first time since the Soviet period (see F18News 6 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=971).

Even during the recent reconciliation process between the churches, Belarusian Orthodox Church representatives have sought to restrict worship by local ROCA parishioners (see most recently F18News 22 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=862). The Belarusian Orthodox Church hierarchy has backed the Religion Law's denial of religious freedom, and sought to stop Orthodox Christians campaigning for religious freedom for all (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>.

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