Shifting images of a harmful sect: Operations against Inochentism in Soviet Ukraine, 1920-23

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Abstract

This chapter concerns anti-sectarian policies designed by local Soviet authorities in the early 1920's. The case under analysis exemplifies how a set of contrasting archival images of a religious group were constructed at different hierarchical levels of the Soviet administration. The archival image produced at the micro-level went on to form the centre of propaganda narratives and repressive policies against this religious group throughout the Soviet period right down to the end of the regime. This study aims to contribute to the already existing scholarship on early Soviet repressive mechanisms, which although impressively detailed, does not explore the role of functionaries and police officials at the micro-level in shaping the regime's perception and understanding of specific cohorts of population, especially of religious sectarians, targeted by repressive policies. The chapter is centred on the case of Inochentism, a religious movement that emerged amongst Romanian-speaking peasants at the beginning of the 20th century in the northern part of today's Odessa Oblast of Ukraine.

This chapter concerns anti-sectarian policies designed by local Soviet authorities in the early 1920's. The case that I analyse in the following pages exemplifies how a set of local events, perceptions and relations could produce an image of an allegedly-harmful sect. This image went on to form the centre of propaganda narratives and repressive policies against this religious group throughout the Soviet period right down to the end of the regime. The case examined here shows how a set of contrasting archival images of a religious group were constructed at different hierarchical levels of the Soviet administration. This study aims to contribute to the already existing scholarship on early Soviet engagement with religion, which although impressively detailed with regard to the formation and evolution of the policing system and repressive mechanisms, does not explore the role of functionaries and police officials at the micro-level in shaping the regime's perception and understanding of specific cohorts of population targeted by

repressive policies. My study is centred on the case of Inochentism, a religious movement that emerged amongst Romanian-speaking peasants at the beginning of the 20th century in the northern part of today's Odessa Oblast of Ukraine. I identified a series of documents which shed light on the first encounters of the Soviet regime with this minority religion and contribute to our understanding of how at the local level the Inochentists came to be regarded as a hindrance to the Bolshevik project. In this study, I use the term "local" to refer to all levels of administration hierarchically lower than governorate/region centres, namely the village, *volost*, district, county, and *okrug*. [1]

Inochentism is a religious movement that emerged from within Orthodox Christianity in the territories of the Russian Empire that had a Moldovan population. Numerous ethnic Romanian[2] peasants from the territories of today's Republic of Moldova and from Odessa oblast in Ukraine, beginning in 1909, began to follow the teachings of the charismatic monk Inochentie of Balta, from whom the movement took its name. Thousands of pilgrims gathered at the monastery of Balta, located in the northern part of today's Odessa oblast, where father Inochentie Levizor preached a message of repentance, extreme fasting and celibacy in preparation for the impending End of Days. He also performed mass confession and exorcisms (on early Inochentist practice see Kapaló 2019, 74-106). In 1912, the Russian authorities exiled Inochentie, giving rise to an intensification of apocalyptic expectation and narratives amongst his followers, which resulted in many of them selling their properties, adopting celibacy and moving to Lipețcoe (Ukrainian *Lipetske*) near Balta, where they built an underground monastery and established an utopian communal society called "Gradina Raiului", the Garden of Paradise, often abbreviated in contemporary sources to "Rai". Inochentie was freed by the amnesty that followed the February Revolution of 1917 but died shortly after his liberation in December 1917 (see Kapaló 2019, 47-49).

The events described in this chapter unfolded in one of the Western peripheries of former Russian Empire, which was conquered by the Reds at the end of the Russian Civil War. The counties of

Ananiev and Balta, located in the northern part of Odessa Governorate, were controlled by Denikin's forces until the first weeks of 1920, when the Red Army occupied these overwhelmingly rural territories. After the county of Ananiev was dissolved in 1921, Ananiev city and the surrounding villages were included in Balta county. A specific feature of the area where the city of Ananiev is located was that in the early 1920's the majority of its rural population was Moldovan (DAOO, fond. P-12068-1-171, 140).[3] According to archival documents, Moldovan peasants were considered more religious and less literate than their Ukrainian and Russian neighbours (AOSPRM, fond. 49-1-205, 21). The traditions, institutions and the way of life, or "the social space" (Viola 1996, 38) of Moldovan rural communities had been less impacted than other communities by the processes of modernization that penetrated the countryside during the first decades of the 20th century. As a consequence, they were less involved in the new forms of economic production and in local political life. For example, according to a report from 1924, there were more Ukrainians than Moldovans among the *kolkhozniki* of the collective farms located in Moldovan villages from MASSR[4] (AOSPRM fond. 49-1-235, 6). In 1925, only 6.5 % of the communists in MASSR were Moldovans (AOSPRM fond. 49-1-84, 59). Significantly, Rai, the Inochentist spiritual centre, was located on the territory of Ananiev county. In 1921, after an anti-Inochentist operation in September 1920, which resulted in the flight of a part of the Inochentists from Rai, the population of the Inochentist settlement was approximately 800 persons (ASBUOO 27146, 237). The followers of Inochentie of Balta also lived in other villages and they had a significant influence among the local peasantry. Additionally, numerous Inochentist communities existed in other counties from the south-western part of Soviet Ukraine and in Bessarabia, which was part of Romania at that time.

Anti-religious policy and Soviet countryside in the early 1920s

One of the most ambitious projects of the Bolshevik party was to transform Russia into an atheist country and to root out religion from its society. The law of the 21st January 1918 on the separation of church and state had a special significance in this regard. Citizens were granted freedom of conscience and the right to not follow any religion, and any kind of discrimination based on confessional affiliation or atheism was outlawed. Churches and religious organizations were no longer to have the status of legal persons nor the right to property and as a consequence the buildings and religious items of all confessions in Russia were declared public property and they

could only be used for religious purposes with the permission of authorities (Pospielovsky 1987, 133-134). In this first period of church-state relations between 1917 and 1920, the Soviet state attempted to seize the Russian Orthodox Church's proprieties and to destroy its institutional structures. Other religious groups were targeted only as part of a general policy of terror but the Orthodox Church, its clergy and churchgoing in general were under permanent coordinated pressure that aimed at eliminating its influence altogether (Walters 1993, 5-7).

During this period the Bolsheviks' policies of War Communism, which attempted to restructure Russian society and its economy through such measures as the ban on private trade and the nationalization of economic assets, caused extreme damage to the economy. The peasantry hoarded their agricultural products in response to low prices offered by the state and to the devaluation of the currency. In May 1918 the Bolsheviks began the forced requisitioning conducted by armed civilians and Red Army soldiers, who entered villages and deprived farmers of all their produce. In response, the countryside resisted in different ways including open rebellion (Pipes 1996, 195; 200; 205-206).

The violent policies of the Bolsheviks were not only driven by the shortages, but also by their ideology according to which the food crisis was caused by the resistance of socially hostile kulaks, imagined as the most reactionary part of the peasantry who exploited the poor farmers. In the post-revolutionary years, the food crisis in the Bolshevik-held territories worsened as a consequence of a number of additional factors among which was the ongoing civil war which ended in 1921. The main food producing areas, such as Ukraine, Caucasus, Siberia and Volga, were under the control of White forces, leaving Bolshevik-held central regions of European Russia without needed supplies. After the winter of 1919-1920, when the Red Army captured from the Whites large areas including important agricultural bases, the pressure on the peasantry did not decrease. Nevertheless, numerous peasant rebellions and the Kronstadt uprising forced the Bolsheviks to abandon the policy of War Communism and to implement the New Economic Policy (NEP) beginning from 1921 (Mawdsley 1987, 71-72; 242-243). The Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 decided to replace the forced seizure of agricultural produce with a limited marked exchange in order to mitigate the tensions in the regime's relations with the peasantry. Although this new policy aimed at stabilizing the situation in the country, harsh repressive operations were conducted by the

Cheka (political police)[5] 18 months after the abovementioned party congress. In 1921, with the Politburo's approval the Cheka conducted numerous repressive operations against striking workers and political opponents. Up until mid 1922, peasants that resisted were subjected to the most brutal measures including punitive executions of members of rebels' families and hostage taking as well as tens of thousands of arrests and executions (Hagenloh 2009, 30-33).

In terms of antireligious policy the years of NEP can be considered as the second period of church-state relations (Walters 1993, 7-13), which is characterised by a partial decrease in state violence. A circular of the Central Committee from February 1922 and the Party Congress from April 1923 stressed the need to conduct strong anti-religious propaganda avoiding aggressive methods that would provoke the strengthening of religious feelings (Peris 1998, 32). Nevertheless, in 1921-1922, the Orthodox Church faced aggressive assaults from the Bolshevik regime, which attempted to use the context of the famine in its anti-religious project. Although the Orthodox Church was involved in collecting relief and donated its own resources to support the peasants affected by the famine, Soviet authorities launched a campaign of seizing church valuables to help the starving. Numerous priest and believers resisted the seizure of sacramental items and were arrested or executed (Peris 1998, 26-27).

In contrast to the experience of the Orthodox Church, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, an influential Bolshevik leader, obtained the opportunity to prove his argument that so-called sectarians were a religious expression of social and political protest (Coleman 2005, 158). One of the first privileges granted by the Bolshevik state to sectarians was the decree in 1919 that freed the former religious dissenters of the obligation to serve in the army. On November 5 1921, the People's Commissariat of Agriculture[6] made an appeal to sectarians and Old Believers from Russia and abroad, to settle on the lands confiscated by the Bolsheviks in 1917-1921 and to create agricultural communes. According to the text of the appeal, the sectarians had a communist way of life long before the Revolution of 1917 and they had been persecuted by the tsarist authorities (Etkind 2013, 604-606). Through the granting of privileges to sectarian agricultural communes, and through successful work, they hoped to convince the peasantry that work in collectives was the best means of agricultural production. In April 1925, approximately 100 Evangelical Christian Communist communities and 20 Baptist ones were in existence. In these communities, the members worked

the common land with common tools, and in some cases even lived in the same buildings and kept all their money in a common budget (Coleman 2005, 174-175). By the end of the 1920's the party had rejected the idea that communism had any connections with sectarian beliefs. As a result, during the collectivization of agriculture the campaign for the creation of kolkhozes was applied to sectarian agricultural communes in the same way as other peasant settlements (Etkind 2013, 626).

Local institutions of power in the early 1920's

The Reds took Ananiev under their control at the beginning of 1920. An essential part of the consolidation of Bolshevik control at a local level was the formation of a set of incipient institutions in order to prepare the ground and to administer the newly occupied territories under the extreme circumstances of ongoing military confrontations. The common way of establishing Soviet control in a territory after its occupation by the Red Army was to form a revolutionary committee (*revkom*). These committees had extraordinary powers and imposed martial law in the occupied territorial units. Among their duties was to unify and direct available revolutionary forces and to govern the territory, to initiate the formation of a local party committee, and to eliminate hostile elements (Easter 2000, 32). In the case of Ananiev county, the party committee was created on 12 February 1920 and it appointed a party member to the revolutionary committees of each *volost* and to the *revkom* of the county (DAOO fond. P-12233-1-2, 1-3).

After this initial stage in the organisational process at the local level, a large degree of decision making power was concentrated in the committee of the party organisation of the administrative units with its meetings attended by the heads of the most influential institutions and organisations, many of whom were part of its membership. The primary party organizations were the smallest party units which were attached to villages, institutions or collective farms, and which played multiple roles in the countryside. Their members were usually the heads of the village soviets, of the collective farms, and of other institutions and organisations. At the same time, they observed the mood of the villagers, the activity of the bureaucrats of non-worker social origins, and were empowered to arrest the regime's enemies. In numerous penal cases against religious minorities from the countryside, local communists were both informers and witnesses for the secret police. As A. Berelovich and V. Danilov mention, institutional reports of village soviets and *volost*

executive committees to higher authorities were the main source of information for the Soviet secret police regarding the state of affairs in the countryside because the secret police had not yet developed an efficient network of informers in rural areas in 1920-30's (2000, 10).

Other important local institutions were the executive committees[7] that took on the duties of local government, although their activity was under the tight control of the party. The majority of the specialists who in the early 1920's worked in the state bureaucracy were of "hostile social origins" or even fought against the Reds during the Civil War. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks could not govern the country without the expertise of these bureaucrats who were placed under the permanent supervision of party members appointed to key positions in the administration (Heinzen 1997, 87).

The All-Russian Extraordinary Committee, or the Cheka, was established on 7th of December 1917 based on the decision of the Soviet Government, headed by Lenin. The main task of this agency was to struggle against counterrevolutionary activity and acts of sabotage and to take punitive measures, including extrajudicial execution, against those who engaged in such actions. (Jakovlev 2003, 14-15). One of the objectives of the Secret Department of the Cheka, established on 24 February 1919, was to struggle against the "hostile activity of churchman and sectarians" (Jakovlev 2003, 17). On June 11 1918, the Conference of All-Russian Extraordinary Committee decided to expand its presence at the local level by establishing Cheka departments in each oblast, governorate and county (Kokurin 1997; 9). The earliest available documentary evidence I have identified mentions the existence of a Cheka department in Ananiev county from September 15, 1920 (DAOO, fond. P-12233-1-4, 13). Before the creation of secret police departments at the level of counties, the repressive policies of the regime were applied by the County Departments of Secret Informers.[8] On April 3 1920, the Headquarters of the Red Army units that operated in the region together with the Odessa department of the Cheka ordered the formation of the County Departments of Secret Informers in the governorate. They were subordinated to the Odessa Cheka and to the local *revkomy*. They were to establish a network of informers in each village, collect data regarding criminality in the county and about the mood of the population, prevent peasant rebellions and struggle against any armed bands of insurgents. These departments were obliged to inform the Cheka about the situation in the county, and they had military detachments under their

command. The only difference between the prerogatives of the local Cheka agencies and of these departments was that unlike the former, the County Secret Informer Departments could not sentence arrested citizens (DAOO, fond. R-2106-4-1, 1- 4).

On 23rd of February 1922, the Politburo decided to abolish the Cheka and to replace it with the GPU, or the State Political Directorate, which had a similar structure and prerogatives (Jakovlev 2003; 24-25). This change was advocated by some Bolshevik leaders who wanted to limit the powers of the Soviet civil and political police. Unlike the Cheka, the GPU was subordinated to the NKVD[9] which had formally been accountable to the government, and the extrajudicial prerogatives of civil and political police were abolished. Nevertheless, political police was technically subordinated to the Politburo and Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chief and the founder of the Cheka, continued to head the NKVD. The legal framework imposed on the activity of police in 1922, however, was frequently ignored by officers. Although the police had its extrajudicial powers partially restored, it did not continue to enjoy the same freedom to conduct its struggle against real or perceived enemies as during the Civil War (Hagenloh 2009, 32-33; 35; 40).

In the realm of state repression, an important role was also played by civil police. After the Bolsheviks seized power, the decentralised and self-governed police forces were moved under the authority of the NKVD, created on 10 November 1917. In the context of the ongoing civil war, in March 1919, Felix Dzerzhinsky was appointed as head of NKVD, and the activity of the civil police (*Militsiia*) was subordinated to the Cheka (Hagenloh 2009, 25-26). In the NEP era, the civil and political police were separated in a few stages. In 1923, Dzerzhinsky was replaced by Beloborodov as the head of NKVD, and in March 1924 the OGPU was created as a separate political police structure with its Special Board authorised to conduct administrative sentences. In the following years the two police forces competed over the control of different domains of policing and over the exclusive right to conduct extrajudicial repression. Both *Militsia* and OGPU faced a shortage of staff and funding, and their presence outside of cites was scarce (Hagenloh 2009, 34-40; 42). The presence of militia forces in the northern part of Odessa province, as elsewhere, was also thin and varied from one teritorial unit to another. For example, in Tiraspol county in 1921 there was a total number of 387 pedestrian militiamen and 23 mounted (TsDAVOV, fond. 5-1-618, 18.) which is not many for a territorial unit of its size.

The institutions introduced above constituted the main state and party organisations that operated at the local level. As we shall see, on the territory of the Ananiev county they played a major role in both shaping the regime's perception of Inochentism and in designing a set of local repressive policies against this religious group. The prejudices and perceptions produced by the various local authorities of Ananiev shaped the regime's understanding of Inochentism right up until the collapse of the USSR.

Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Ananiev county and the "problem of Rai"

The first repressive operation against the Inochentists conducted by the authorities of Ananiev county is a good example of how in the context of civil war and peasant rebellions, local functionaries constructed the image of an enemy, projecting onto the Inochentist community their fears and misunderstanding of the religious practices of this minority group. The monastery of Rai was besieged and liquidated by party workers and Cheka troops in September 1920. A number of accounts of this operation survived including a few archival documents and a number of propaganda articles.

As with the rest of Ukraine, Ananiev county was part of the battleground of the Russian Civil War. The county and the city of Ananiev were re-conquered by the Red Army from the Whites in the first weeks of 1920 after the Reds retreated from the area in 1919 (DAOO fond. P-12233-1-2, 1). Military confrontations, however, continued in the county of Ananiev after its occupation by the Red Army. The highest point of the anti-Bolshevik military resistance in the region following the defeat of the Whites came in April 1920. The forces of Zabolotnyi, a military commander of the Ukrainian Republic who operated in the area, took under their control the Bîrzula-Jerebkovo railway and occupied Ananiev. According to Bolshevik party reports many villages from the vicinity of Ananiev formed armed detachments and sent them to support Zabolotnyi's forces. By the end of April, Zabolotnyi had been defeated (DAOO, fond P-3-1-13, 6) but he and his detachments continued to wage an insurgent war moving from one village to another and attacking the Soviet forces and officials.

In the northern territories of Odessa governorate, numerous insurgent groups continued their fight for the rights of the peasantry or for Ukrainian national cause against the Bolsheviks. According to numerous reports, anti-Bolshevik detachments were spread throughout the countryside where they enjoyed the support of the peasantry and they waged a partisan war against the regime. These detachments were very active, numerous and well-armed. For example, in March 1921 alone the insurgents conducted 52 raids in Balta county. As a consequence, the Soviet authorities lost 40 men, 20 horses and a significant quantity of grain (DAOO, fond. P-1-1-37, 3-5). Additionally, in the early 1920's in many villages peasants rose up against the Soviet authorities. The best hiding place in the region for the rebels were the forests. Around Balta, Sovransk and Kruty, where there were large areas with forest cover, the insurgency was stronger than in other parts of the northern territory of Odessa governorate. According to party reports, the roots of the insurgency were in the peasantry's discontent with the grain requisition campaigns and with the abuses committed by Soviet officials (DAOO, fond. P-1-1-37, 3-7; 10-11).

Possibly because the authorities were so busy dealing with armed resistance in the countryside, party reports from 1920-21 contain less data on religious affairs than the documents from the following years. Nevertheless, from the first days after the re-occupation of Ananiev by the Reds, Soviet officials were very attentive to Rai. Numerous reports from the 1920s issued in Ananiev, Balta and Odessa, mention the existence of Inochentist communities such as this report by a party worker who visited a number of villages from the vicinity of Ananiev during the first months of 1920.

> By coincidence I was near the "Monastery Rai", which is located near Gandrabura. It was a holiday and approximately 2000 peasants gathered there. After the service, the priest made a speech saying "you are not humans but pigs and you do not need an authority. Now the country is ruled by pigs. We need a tsar." In the caves, *petliurovtsy* [fighters for the Ukrainian Republic] and weapons are possibly hidden. The caves shelter saints, and everywhere there is lying and thieves (DAOO, fond. P-12233-1-22, 11).

Besides the reported sedition, the attention of the party worker was attracted to the underground monastic complex. The network of underground spaces built by Inochentists appeared to be a

perfect hiding place that was beyond the control of the authorities. The perception that the Inochentist underground was a hideout for anti-Soviet elements took an official form in September 1920 when the party bureau of Ananiev county decided to take measures against Rai monastery and liquidated it because "…in "Raiskij Sad" [...] counterrevolutionaries are hiding, [and] there is anti-Soviet preaching …" (DAOO, fond. P-12233-1-4, 12; 18).

Eliminating any possibility of hiding was one of the main aims of the measures taken by the authorities in their struggle against the insurgency. For example, in order to make the forests from the region less suitable for sheltering anti-Bolshevik insurgents, by 1923 the authorities had replaced the forest guards with Red Army veterans (DAOO, fond. P-12068-1-18, 1). The colonization of strategic and border areas with veterans was a measure used by the regime to create social support in territories where it was most needed (Viola 2014, 56). For the local Soviet authorities in Ananiev, the elimination of the underground network of tunnels that were controlled by a monarchist sect (ASBUOO 27146, 12) was to prove of equal importance to the appointment of veterans to guard the forests.

The Inochentist underground was still a source of concern for local authorities in 1921, one year after the initial liquidation of the monastery. One of the most frequent questions asked by the secret police officers during the interrogation of the Inochentists arrested in 1921 was if they have a secret entrance to underground except the known ones that had been sealed by the authorities one year earlier (ASBUOO 27146, 62-224). The monastery of Rai and its preachers were the focus of the Soviet authorities, however, not only because of their underground monastery and anti-Soviet preaching. On 6 September 1920, a decision of the county party committee explains the need to take measures against the monks of Rai:

> About "Raiskij Sad", the Inochentist monastery where [unintelligible word] counterrevolutionaries are hiding, anti-Soviet preaching takes place, where because of [unintelligible word] against the kulaks, the wealthy elements of the countryside transport grain, clothing, money and valuables during the night.
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> Resolution: It is necessary for Special Troika[10] to pay attention, especially to village Tocilovo, through which the kulaks of the surrounding villages like Lipetskoe,

> Baital, Gandrabura, Perelioty, transport their property during the night (DAOO fond. P-12233-1-4, 12).

The text of this decision reveals that the economic activity of the Inochentist monastery whose active members were travelling through villages, preaching and collecting donations, was interpreted by local authorities in a manner that linked the Inochentist problem to the official narrative about the struggle against the kulaks. The Soviet regime imagined the kulaks as an "avaricious, bloated, and bestial" enemy from the countryside and it kulakized all peasants who opposed its policies (Viola 1996, 16) especially the requisition of grains, which was one of the main tasks of the local authorities. The gathering of economically significant donations by the network of Inochentist preachers gave rise to suspicions that the Inochentists constituted an organised kulak conspiracy and that the community held large quantities of agricultural produce and valuables in the underground monastery. Significantly therefore, in the early 1920s, in the period in which the central Soviet authorities were promoting a set of policies favourable to religious sectarians who they were encouraged to establish agricultural communes on the land provided to them by the state (Coleman 2005, 174-175), the Inochentist commune, on the other hand, was nevertheless perceived and labelled in the local context as an enemy.

One of the earliest propaganda accounts of the closing of the Inochentist monastery that I have identified is an article published in 1927 in the newspaper of the Central Committee of Party Organisation of MASSR, *Plugarul Roș* (The Red Ploughman). The article describes the liquidation of Rai in the following terms:

> […] immediately after the counterrevolution was identified in Rai, and after the "holy fathers" began their fight against the Soviet authorities, Cheka undertook appropriate measures to drive them away, and indeed it forced them to leave. [...] The liquidation of Rai did not take place without casualties, without bloodshed. The first victim was the head of the Revolutionary Committee from Nanile [Moldovan name of Ananiev], comrade Anosov. Anosov was killed by Ionko, the brother of the most beloved women (nun) of Inochentie [...] who was the commander of the Bîrzu Railway Station [...] He took a group of Red Army soldiers and attacked Anosov [and his troops that besieged the monastery] (Lesi Gomin 1927, part 2-3)

According to the article in *Plugarul Roş*, during the liquidation of Rai two separate Soviet military detachments clashed with each other. We can make sense of this based on two contextual factors. Firstly, there were ongoing clashes locally between the authorities and bands of insurgents and secondly, a breakdown of communication between the detachments sent by Bîrzula railway administration and by the county administration might easily have happened as a consequence of the poor state of communication infrastructure.

An important figure in the propaganda history of the closure of Rai is Anosov, the secretary of Ananiev Party Committee. His death during the violent closing of Rai is confirmed by the fact that according to archival documents on the location of Rai monastery an orphanage was established which was named after the dead secretary Anosov (DAOO, fond. R-2106-1-151, p. 5).

In a recent unpublished interview with the son of one of the Inochentists who took part in the events, the details of whose account correspond in numerous ways with the archival data, Anosov died as a consequence of an accident.

> In 1920, Anosov came from Ananiev with his troops, surrounded the [Rai] Garden and opened fire on people. The people got scared and hid in the caves. Approximately 200 people entered the caves. […] I do not know who informed the authorities in Kotovsk [the new name of Bîrzula/Bârzu] that a group of bandits killed people in the Garden [of Rai]. From Kotovsk, Alexandru was sent with his troops. He came to the hill and opened fire. Anosov got scared and started to run toward the forest and he was killed… (Interview by J. Kapaló with Damian Pavlovich Obrejenko 2014)

This oral history states that the Inochentists were not involved in the killing of Anosov. According to the interview, Anosov and other Soviet officials died as a result of an accidental exchange of fire between two separate armed groups of Bolsheviks and soldiers.

The political police criminal case file created during the repressive operation against the Inochentists in 1921 confirms some of the events described in the article from *Plugarul Roş* and

in oral history. A document mentions that Aleksandr Ionko was a former tsarist officer who served as the vice commandant in Bârzula and who was arrested in 1920 but succeeded in escaping from the Cheka (ASBUOO 27146, 287). According to the documents from the same file, during the operation from September 1920 the authorities of Bârzula were misinformed by the Inochentists that the monastery had been attacked by a group of bandits who opened fire on civilians (ASBUOO 27146, 104). Accordingly, any statement that Aleksandr Ionko had connections with the Inochentists can be dismissed. In order to diminish the responsibility of local authorities for the incident which resulted in Anosov's death, propaganda accused the Inochentists of invovlement in the killing of the secretary of Ananiev Party Committee.

A few weeks after the closure of "Rai", the Party Bureau of Ananiev county discussed some possible abuses committed by Podzakhodnikov, the military commander of the Cheka unit that had assaulted the underground monastery after Anosov's unsuccessful attempt to close the monastery. On 15 October 1920, at the session of the party bureau the events were described in the following terms:

> [...] Comrade Podzahodnikov reports: The long attempts to convince them [the Inochentists] to leave the underground were unsuccessful. A secret water pipe was discovered and destroyed. This spread panic among the monks who proposed to leave the cave during the night time after the soldiers would withdraw. It was proposed that they should to do so within two days, otherwise harsher repressive measures would be taken. When leaving Rai, I ordered that weapons should be used in case of any excesses. […] During the night they undertook an attack on comrade Bondarshiuk, who threw the bomb.
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> [Later,] comrade Podzahodnikov mentions the inefficiency of the commission and expresses his belief that harsher measures should be taken against workers [of Rai] who do not want to work. Regarding the permanent drunkenness of Bondarshiuk, Podzahotnikov mentions that the work in Cheka is very hard, and he himself uses to drink quite often and he allows his subordinates to do the same. (DAOO fond. P-12233-1-4, 18).

In this report, Podzakhodnikov, who was the superior of Bondarshiuk, defended his subordinate, who committed a number of abuses. Nevertheless, in its resolution, the Party Bureau of Ananiev county disapproved the permanent drunkenness of Bondarshuk and ordered the launch of an investigation regarding his conduct during the liquidation of Rai:

> Resolution: The causes of the closure of Rai should be made public. It is unacceptable that a party member is a drunkard. An investigation regarding the conduct of comrade Bondarshiuk should be made, and in case he is found guilty, he should be expelled from the party. Remove comrade Bondarshiuk from Rai. […] Make an official request to Odessa Governorate Party Committee to replace comrade Podzahodnikov because of his overwork (DAOO fond. P-12233-1-4, 18).

The decision of the bureau to launch an investigation and to fire Podzahodnikov reveals that his explanations did not correspond with reality or were perceived as doubtful. With regard to the population of the county, the bureau decided to start explaining the causes of the closure of the monastery to local citizens before the investigations into Bondarshiuk's conduct were complete. The repressive operation of 1920 appears to fit very well the context of War Communism. The so-called liquidation of Rai was characterised by chaotic, indiscriminate violence, by confusion and accidents which resulted in casualties amongst both civilians and officials.

The representation of the underground Inochentist monastery as a hideout for anti-Bolshevik fighters, which was never substantiated, became a central myth of propaganda narratives about this religious community. It was produced under the extreme circumstances of Civil War and peasant resistance to the Bolshevik regime with the local authorities projecting onto the Inochentists a set of fears related to their concerns for the regime's survival in the region. These associations produced a distorted image of Inochentists and triggered the repressive operation of 1920 in precisely the period in which numerous other sectarian communities enjoyed privileged treatment by the Soviet regime.

The contradictory policies of provincial and local authorities: The repressive operation from 1921

A second major anti-Inochentist operation was conducted in October 1921 when approximately 55 leading Inochentists from Rai were arrested and imprisoned, exiled or condemned to death (ASBUOO 27146, 4). The first operation against Rai had been conducted in mid-September 1920, approximately eight months after the occupation of Ananiev county by the Red Army and under the conditions of an ongoing struggle with peasant insurgency. In these extreme circumstances, the local authorities had more freedom to apply their own initiative than normal and indeed were even expected to do so. In this way, we can explain the local character of the first repressive policies against the Inochentists. Following this, as I will demonstrate below, during the next anti-Inochentist operation starting from the autumn of 1921, the initiatives of local authorities continued to play an unexpectedly important role. Under the extreme circumstances of anti-Bolshevik insurgency, permanent shortages and poor infrastructure, in both 1920 and 1921, local authorities were able to obtain a change in the decisions made by the provincial centre and succeeded in influencing to a large degree perceptions at the provincial level. Likewise, as the case of the operation from 1921 reveals, party members from rural areas collaborated closely with the police and in the case of the Inochentists produced an understanding of this religious group on which secret police officers would base their investigations.

The start of the secret police investigation was triggered by two main factors. The first one was an undated request by the commander of the border Cheka to the Balta county department of secret police to examine the situation in Rai because a number of Inochentists had been arrested transgressing the border with Romania (ASBUOO 27146, 279). The second, and main cause of arrests, was a series of requests and complains written by local functionaries. The discontent of the local authorities was caused by the return of leading Inochentists who had left the monastery of Rai in September 1920. In order to limit their influence on the rest of the population of Rai, the authorities established a state farm and Inochentists leaders were denied the possibility of becoming members (ASBUOO 27146, 11). The Inochentist leadership, in response, wrote a petition directly to the Odessa Governorate Department of Lands[11] in which they requested permission to create instead an Inochentist agricultural commune (ASBUOO 27146, 258-260; 305) of the type that other sectarian groups were being encourage to form elsewhere (Coleman 2005, 174-175). The Inochentists obtained the approval of the provincial centre and at the general

meeting of the inhabitants of Rai, the Inochentists elected the administrative bodies of the newly established collective farm with no communists among its membership (ASBUOO 27146, 29).

Following this, the head of the already functioning state farm, the communist Dicul, then went to Balta and informed the authorities about the difficulties faced by the administration of the state farm in Rai (ASBUOO 27146, 29). As a result, the county Cheka department made a request to Odessa to cancel the authorisation to establish the Inochentist agricultural commune in Rai (ASBUOO 27146, 258). As a consequence of the request by the Cheka, the newly established Inochentist collective farm was liquidated and the leadership was arrested.

The main accusation against those arrested was inspired by Dicul's report about incidents that occurred at Rai according to which two distinct groups of Inochentists existed. The first one was described as the so-called Zinovievists, or the followers of Zinovie Gâștemulte, who were poor peasants believing that they could redeem their souls through work. Zinovie had the status of a prophet amongst this group. Zinovie's good relations with the administration of the local state farm are revealed by the fact that he was in charge of organizing, deploying and supervising the workers of the state farm. Nevertheless, as a religious leader Zinovie had only around 50 followers and the absolute majority of the inhabitants of Rai did not consider him a prophet. The second group, according to Dicul, comprised the Inochentists who were kulaks and the leaders of the liquidated monastery, who believed that they should not work but pray and opposed the state farm (ASBUOO 27146, 11; 93; 179). On Dicul's suggestion, therefore, it seems that the police officers invented a category of hostile inhabitants of Rai, who were labelled as kulaks and named "Inochentists." During the police interrogation of arrested believers, one of the main questions asked was to declare belonging to one of the abovementioned groups (ASBUOO, 27146, 109). This question reveals that the police officers and Dicul were aware of the various beliefs and practices of Inochentist community and how this manifested as resistance and attempted to impose on them a certain form of religious identity. Additionally, Dicul exploited the religious capital of Zinovie Gâștemulte in order to mobilize and control a part of the population of Rai. Dicul's account of the categories of inhabitants of Rai provided the secret police with a set of tools that allowed them to re-impose his authority on the collective farm. At the same time, Dicul's categorisation was part

of a codified request to not exile the entire population of Rai but just to reinforce order because the Inochentist settlement was important for the local economy.

The cancelation of the permission to create the Inochentist collective farm reveals a few very important features of centre-periphery relations in state and party apparatuses from Odessa governorate in 1921. Firstly, local authorities were capable of advocating for changes to decisions made in Odessa. Secondly, the leaders from Odessa did not yet have a good knowledge of the situation at local level and of the events that had occurred in the northern part of the governorate since the occupation of this territory by the Red Army. The insufficient coordination of actions between local and provincial administrations was another problem. In certain matters the provincial centre relied on the knowledge and on the experience of local functionaries, which enhanced the capacity of local authorities to influence the perceptions and decisions of the provincial centre. The difficulties faced by local and provincial authorities in establishing their control in the northern part of the governorate after its occupation, the ongoing activity of anti-Bolshevik insurgency and shortages of resources and poor infrastructure are all part of the explanation of these phenomena of centre-periphery relations.

From a local problem to a cross-border threat: a view on Rai from Odessa

In the previous sections I have shown that in 1920 and in 1921 the initiatives and the perceptions of county authorities played a central role in the repressive operations launched against the Inochentists. The operations to deport the Inochentists (including the so-called Zinovievists) in 1923, was monitored by the authorities of Balta *okrug*[12] and by Odessa provincial centre. The deportation of the Inochentists in 1923 was part of a wider effort of provincial authorities to consolidate the state border and to cleanse the border area of dangerous elements. The argument of this section is that the analysis of the history and of the nature of Inochentism by *okrug* and provincial authorities from the perspective of a new set of policies and objectives and with more resources at their disposal added new elements to the image of this religious minority.

The OGPU, which succeeded the Cheka in 1922 as the Soviet secret police force, launched an operation against the Inochentists in 1923 that was a more top-down initiative than the earlier ones. It was constituted by a set of complex actions to identify and register Inochentist preachers and to

then arrest and deport them (ASBUOO 5247). By 1923, the authorities perceived the Inochentists as a threat because of the cross-border character of this religious community. The majority of its members were, as already stated above, ethnic Romanians, a significant part of whom where Bessarabians who frequently transgressed the state border in order to maintain ties between their home communities and Rai. From the perspective of the regime, this created favourable conditions for the infiltration of foreign spies into the Soviet Union (ASBUOO 5247, 15; 22). Additionally, according to the ideas of "social danger" with which the police operated, the Inochentists posed a threat to the stability of the regime. As Paul Hagenloh observes, although in theory Soviet criminology associated the idea of social danger with class origin, in the early post-revolutionary years in its operations in urban areas the police linked this notion to recidivism and the lack of a defined place of residence (2009, 27-28). Although Inochentists were a rural religious community, they lived in a border territory, which like Soviet cities, was regarded by the regime as an area that needed to be cleared of dangerous elements. Therefore, because the police had conducted repressive operations against this religious minority in 1920 and in 1921 that had not resulted in the elimination of the movement, and because many of its members had a semi-itinerant way of life, the Inochentists closely fitted the category of socially dangerous.

The Provincial Party Committee from Odessa ordered the beginning of a new anti-Inochentist operation in the summer of 1923 (DAOO, fond. P-3-1-584, 8-9) and it sent reports about the activity of religious minorities to Kharkov, which was the capital of Soviet Ukraine at the time. According to the reports, Inochentism and other sects were spreading steadily because of the weakening of the Orthodox Church (DAOO, fond. P-3-1-584, 13). Surprisingly, the influence of the Inochentist leaders was also reported to be increasing because of the repressive operations from 1920-21, which had forced a part of them to leave Rai. As a party report from April 1923 mentions, in 1921 numerous Inochentist monasteries were established in the villages of Balta county by the believers who had left Rai. Another report shows that in the entire northern part of Odessa governorate Inochentist preachers-travellers had a significant influence on local peasants (ASBUOO 5247, 10; 13). The authorities decided to exile all Inochentists from the governorate and on July 10th 1923 the Executive Committee of Balta *Okrug* ordered the preparations for the anti-Inochentist operation to begin. The heads of the executive committees of the districts were in charge of registering the Inochentists from their districts (ASBUOO 5247, 22-23).

The anti-Inochentist operations started in the summer of 1923 (DAOO, fond. P-3-1-584, 8-9; 22), several months before the session of the Antireligious Commission of the CC of CP(b)[13] from 26th November in Moscow that ordered Ukraine's authorities to launch a campaign against miracles and to identify through police operations the cross-border ties between the organisers of the miracles and foreign anti-Soviet organisations (Stenograph №40 of the session of Antireligious Commission from 26 November 1923). Nevertheless, the accusations against the Inochentists of transgressing the state borders and the perception of the Party Committee of Balta okrug that Rai was at the centre of the phenomenon of the renewal of Orthodox icons[14] in Balta okrug (ASBUOO 5247, 163) fitted the patterns of the operation ordered by the Antireligious Commission in Moscow on 26th November 1923. Possibly, the deportations of Inochentists was one of the cases which prompted the decision of Antireligious Commission to take measures against the miracles in Ukraine. The anti-Ionochentist operations from 1923 continued long after 26th of November and probably some of its latter stages were adapted to the decisions of the abovementioned session of Antireligious Commission.

As already mentioned, the operation from 1923 was part of a number of measures aimed at securing the state border. These efforts were going on at the same time as a set of policies directed at the consolidation of the control by central authorities of the peripheries. For example, in 1923 with the authorisation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Ukraine, the Balta Party Organisation was purged. According to the report, because of the proximity of the state border numerous unreliable elements had succeeded in entering the party (DAOO fond. P-3-1-584, 15). The purging of the elites and the cadre shuffling consolidated the control by the provincial centre of Balta. Among other policies that were aimed at the centralization of power was the administrative reform applied in Odessa governorate in 1923 (DAOO fond. P-12068, Inventory no. 1). As Gerald Easter mentions, regionalisation, or the replacement of the old tsarist system of territorial division (governorate, county, *volost*) by geographically larger units (*oblast*, *okrug* and *raion*/district) was a strategy employed by Moscow to limit the influence of local cliques of functionaries and to impose over them the authority of elite factions that could control the distribution of resources at local level (2000, 76-79). This general consolidation of the control of

the provincial centre over the local level explains the much greater knowledge of the "Inochentist problem" and of the general situation in the territory in 1923 than in 1920-21.

As a consequence of the increasing involvement of the authorities in Odessa in anti-Inochentist campaigns the representation of Inochentism in archival documents became more complex. In 1920, the monastery of Rai was imagined as a place of kulak conspiracy and as a shelter for monarchists and for counterrevolutionary bandits. In 1921, as mentioned above, a part of the Inochentists were declared kulaks and arrested as part of a police operation at county level. In 1923, when the investigations were conducted by the Department of Border GPU of Balta *okrug*, and based on the orders and instructions of the provincial authorities, the allegations formulated by police officers reflect their preoccupation with broader problems relating to security and stability of the Soviet regime and the border. If in 1920, the local authorities perceived the Inochentist underground as a hideout of the fighters for Ukrainian Republic (DAOO fond. P-12233-1-22, 11), who were very active around Balta and Ananiev, then some of the police reports from 1923 reveal the concern instead with Romanian ethnic origin of Inochentists and the proximity of the state frontier with Romania, which was being frequently transgressed (ASBUOO 5247, 15; 22). At each level of administration, the officials associated the idea of enmity with a set of obstacles which hindered policies they were in charge of implementing. The result of these associations was the formation of different images of the same religious group at different levels of administration.

In 1923, the Border Department of GPU had access to more sources of documentary information in its investigations than the county department of the political police in 1920-21. Being interested in the cross-border nature of the movement, the Border Department of GPU could use sources from Romania in order to analyse the nature of the Inochentist movement. For example, an article from the Romanian newspaper *Glasul*, published on 14th of June 1923, which refers to an underground church built by Inochentists in the village of Piatra, Orhei county, in Bessarabia, was quoted by the officers in their reports. According to the article, after the Romanian Gendarmerie conducted a series of arrests and searches of members of the Piatra community, they identified a group of 13-14 years old children suffering of sexually transmitted diseases (ASBUOO 5247, 121). Soviet authorities took very seriously the accusations printed in the Romanian newspapers and in

1923 they ordered a medical check up of arrested Inochentists. The medics concluded that none of 67 Inochentists they checked had sexually transmitted diseases (ASBUOO 5247, 349). Articles such as the one in *Glasul* about the Inochentist community from Piatra containing accusations of murder, abuse and rape of teenage women were published in numerous Romanian newspapers from 1923 onwards. Contemporary *Siguranța* (the Romanian state security service) reports, however, dismissed these accusations in the media (see Kapaló 2019, 156-159). The Soviet political police, nevertheless, subsumed these narratives into their reports (ASBUOO, 5247, 122) and portrayed the Inochentist underground as a place where numerous crimes were perpetrated.

David Shearer suggests that in the 1930s the category of "socially dangerous element" began to have a broader understanding than in the 1920's (2009, 57-58) with cohorts of the population associated with it being regarded not only as a source of ideological contamination but also as the cause of the spread of diseases (Shearer 2009, 60). Although the accusations from 1923 against the Inochentists are not the result of an already existing association of socially dangerous element and epidemics, the case of the Inochentists nevertheless reveals the existence in the 1920s of a tendency by the regime to regard marginal and semi-itinerant populations as potential bearers of infection.

In the case of all three operations discussed above, from 1920, 1921 and 1923, the functionaries who produced the allegations against the Inochentists projected onto them their own preoccupations regarding possible challenges to their authority and stability of the regime, and their concerns about eventual obstacles to state policies that they were in charge of. Because of the differences between the attributions of the functionaries from Odessa and those of the local bureaucrats in Ananiev and Balta, the accusations from 1923 are different from those from 1920-21. Nevertheless, the secret police investigation file from 1923 subsumed an important part of the accusations formulated by the county authorities during the earlier operations from 1920 and 1921.

Conclusions

Local Soviet authorities and their superiors imagined the regime's enemies differently. Soviet functionaries constructed the enemy through the lens of the policies they implemented and from

the perspective of the difficulties they were dealing with in their administrative processes. At the local and central levels, authorities dealt with different sets of problems and obstacles, and as a result they associated the idea of enmity with a different set of features. These variations can be observed more easily in the first years after the revolution because of the poor communication infrastructure between county administrations and provincial centres. Additionally, at the provincial level Soviet officials were concerned with broader problems of security and stability of the regime, and they had at their disposal more sources of information, which made their understanding of real or imagined enemies different from the accounts produced by local authorities.

In the case of Inochentists, the local authorities from Ananiev county produced an understanding of this religious group that remained at the centre of anti-Inochentist repressive policies and propaganda campaigns until the collapse of the Communist regime. The earliest archival accounts of the Inochentists, which present them as a hindrance to the Bolshevik project and as a counterrevolutionary group allied with anti-Bolshevik forces of Petliura, were the product of the preventive policies of counterinsurgency conducted by the authorities of Ananiev in 1920. Likewise, the production of the negative propaganda image of Inochentists as a group of armed counterrevolutionaries was a strategy of local authorities to gloss over a number of incidents they were responsible for and which resulted in the death of a number of local officials and Red Army soldiers.

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Notes

[1] V*olost* was an administrative unit subordinated to a county, which existed in Imperial Russia and in early post-revolutionary years. The district (in Russian *район*) is an administrative unit geographically larger than the volost which it replaced after the Soviet administrative reform. O*krug* was a territorial unit geographically larger than a district and a county but smaller than oblast or governorate. The old administrative unit of county was replaced by the *okrug*.

[2] The majority of the ethnically Romanian population from the territory of present-day Republic of Moldova, from eastern parts of Romania, and from Ukraine, refer to themselves by the ethnonym Moldovans or Moldavians (in Romanian: *Moldovean or Moldovan*). A significant part of Moldovans from the territory of present-day Ukraine (Moldovans living around Ananiev and Balta included) do not consider themselves belonging to the Romanian ethno-linguistic group.

[3] The majority of the population of the district of Ananiev, created in 1923, was Moldovan.

[4] Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Republic was established in October 1924 as part of Soviet Ukraine, and it included parts of the territory of Ananiev and Balta counties, and a series of other territories.

[5] The All-Russian Extraordinary Committee abbreviated as VChK, and commonly referred as Cheka, was the name of the Soviet secret police, which was created in 1917. The Soviet secret police was later known under a succession of different names, including OGPU, NKVD, MGB, and KGB.

[6] Narodnyj Komissariat Zemledelija RSFSR.

[7] Upravkomy.

[8] Uezdnye Sekretno-Agenturnye Otdelenija.

[9] People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs.

[10] During the mass repressive campaigns "Troika" was the name of the extrajudicial boards which had the right to mete out sentences based on simplified procedures.

[11] Gubzemotdel.

[12] Balta Okrug included the northern part of today's Odessa Oblast and approximately two thirds of the territory of the Republic of Moldova from the left bank of Dniester (commonly referred to as Transnistria). Balta *okrug* was created in 1923 (DAOO Fond P-12068, Inventory no. 1).

[13] The Antireligious Commission of the Central Committee of CP(b) was created in 1922, and it formulated the antireligious policy in USSR.

[14] The renewing (obnovlenie) of Orthodox Icons was a widely-spread phenomenon in Soviet countryside during periods of crisis. The Eastern Orthodox peasants perceived the renewing of icons, or when in a miraculous way the icons became new and clean, as an intervention of the divine power in their lives (Viola 1996, 53).