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Chapter 1

Novice Sania: The Life of Underground Orthodox Communities through the Testimony of a Witness for the Prosecution

Anna Samsonova and Tatiana Vagramenko

On 19 January 1918, Patriarch Tikhon (born Vasilii Ivanovich Bellavin) issued a message to the faithful, urging all Orthodox believers to establish spiritual unions, "which will oppose the strength of their holy inspiration to the external force."[1] This call was prompted by the onset of widespread persecution of believers in the newly formed Soviet state on the territory of the former Russian Empire. Initially, Orthodox unions and communities, often referred to as brotherhoods and sisterhoods, operated legally and openly, as believers had not fully grasped the extent of the changes the Soviet regime was introducing into society. However, by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, many church communities were compelled to enter the new "catacombs," adopting a secret, unofficial nature, and their religious life became largely hidden and closed.

Starting from the late 1920s, the Soviet state launched a nationwide repression campaign against popular religious dissent movements and grassroots religiosity. This campaign involved mass arrests and repression targeting priests, monastics, and ordinary believers, as well as raids on clandestine churches and underground monasteries. These anti-religious repressions may have been linked to the wave of mass anti-kolkhoz protests in the Central Black Earth region, where collectivization reforms faced significant resistance in the early 1930s. Authorities associated this resistance with the flourishing Josephite Orthodox communities—part of the Orthodox priesthood and laity that rejected the declaration by Metropolitan Sergius (born Ivan Nikolaevich

Stragorodskii) of loyalty to the Soviet government.[2] Historians note that popular resistance during this period was infused with religious symbolism of an impending apocalypse, with priests and monastics often taking on vocal roles in local acts of disobedience.[3] Subsequently, the Soviet political police perceived dispersed underground Orthodox communities and individual believers as a "rebellious, terrorist organization," leading to the ensuing mass repression.[4]

By the end of the first decade of Soviet rule, the majority of churches in the Soviet Union had been closed, and monasteries were disbanded. A substantial portion of the population suddenly found themselves uprooted and mobile. This included thousands of disenfranchised priests with their families, as well as displaced monks and nuns who were left homeless, prohibited from residing in specific cities, or subjected to immediate resettlement from areas undergoing collectivization.[5] They roamed from village to village, resorting to begging or engaging in casual day labor. Despite being banned, they clandestinely performed rituals and preached about the imminent arrival of the Antichrist.

The attacks by Soviet authorities against the Russian Orthodox Church, repression of the clergy, and mass closure of churches and monasteries further triggered the growth of popular religious movements, often with an apocalyptic vision of the coming end. Sometimes, these mass eschatological expectations crystallized into distinct radical movements where figures of worship, prophets, or Messiahs emerged.[6] Being cut off from major church networks, with the priesthood and religious leaders repressed, ordinary believers attempted to make sense of a seemingly incomprehensible world. They developed both interpretive practices and survival strategies, while rebuilding their religious communities, distorted by waves of repression. Waiting for the coming end, people dug underground churches, built subterranean monasteries,

constructed chapels in cellars of their houses, in barns, and in bunkers, and continued to practice their faith in private homes at night or in remote places and forests.[7] In reality, the period from the 1920s to the early 1930s, marked by the commencement of collectivization and mass repression, witnessed a significant increase in widespread religious enthusiasm.[8] Various sisterhoods, brotherhoods, and other forms of religious unions proliferated across the Soviet Union, with the central figures being the elders (*startsy*) or luminaries (*svetil'niki*) of faith and piety. These individuals served as the main religious focal points around whom new clandestine religious communities were forming. Disbanded monastics frequently maintained connections with each other, living in groups of two or three or settling in close proximity to one another. Amidst the mass forcible closure of monasteries, a novel form of secret monasticism spontaneously emerged and gained popularity.[9] Ascetic men and women, sharing similar spiritual inclinations, started living together in small groups within private homes. The era of persecution also led to a reassembling of gender relations within the Orthodox church, often with female spiritual leaders forming the base of clandestine religious communities.

This chapter provides a glimpse into the life of clandestine Orthodox brotherhoods and sisterhoods during the early Soviet period, as revealed through the lens of secret police archival-investigative files (*arkhivno-sledtsvennoe delo,* hereafter "investigation file") and criminal files (*ugolovnoe delo*) focused on the clandestine communities known as *Svetil'niki* (the Luminaries). The history of thriving popular religiosity during the early Soviet period remains largely unknown. Many communities of peasant believers, revolving around former monastics or disenfranchised priests, were eradicated by Soviet authorities. Scholars note the pivotal role played by the Soviet secret police in this mass repression.[10] Investigation and criminal files produced by the Soviet secret police against believers often serve as the primary historical

sources to trace the life of catacomb faith communities. Paradoxically, testimonies of repressed believers and confiscated artifacts from once-thriving religious life were preserved by the very state institutions tasked with their destruction.

In 1933, the Joint State Political Directorate (*Ob"edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie* or OGPU) under the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del* or NKVD) uncovered and liquidated several catacomb Orthodox communities in the Central Black Earth region. In the records of the secret police, these communities were referred to as "the counter-revolutionary church-monarchist organization of brotherhoods and sisterhoods, the Luminaries." To this day, the materials from these criminal proceedings remain unstudied.[11] This study is based on two OGPU's investigation files related to the *Luminaries* case, which are currently preserved in the State Archive of Socio-Political History of the Voronezh region (GAOPI VO).[12] The two files (two-volume file P-21934 and six-volume file P-17298) led to charges against 189 and 118 people, respectively. The defendants included priests, children of priests, monks, nuns, kulaks, merchants, ordinary peasant churchgoers, housewives, and collective farmers. The investigation was carried out by the Ostrogozhsk OGPU in the Central Black Earth region, and it was closely connected to other cases in the region, particularly the criminal case against the secret monastery of Hieromonk Erasm (born Elisha Onufrievich Prokopenko), one of the most revered spiritual elders (*starets*) in the region during the 1920s and 1930s.[13]

The two files against the brotherhoods and sisterhoods of Luminaries were just among thousands of typical Soviet secret police investigation and criminal files during that era. Written in a wooden language that is often challenging to decipher, the documentation generated homogenized and standardized knowledge through recurring formulas and frameworks.

Concepts such as “red-dragon-type organization,” “ecclesiastic-monarchist underground,” and “True Orthodox Church” were formulated within the pages of the secret police files. As argued elsewhere, model criminal files against the “ecclesiastic-monarchist underground” often circulated among regional OGPU branches, serving as a sort of manual that transmitted a constellation of categories and techniques, training secret police officers in the regions to produce standardized investigation and criminal files.[14] The 1933 investigation file against the clandestine communities of the Luminaries fit into this framework; it was a model case applied in practice.

What set the *Luminaries* case apart from many other similar cases was the main narrator of the story: the key witness for the prosecution was revealed to be an active member of the Luminaries, a young woman who was revered in the region as a holy person. Her name was Alexandra Tolstykh, but she was mostly known simply as Sania. As a novice in Hieromonk Erasm’s secret monastery, she wandered across the region, actively preaching alongside her sisters in faith. However, in 1933, she denounced Hieromonk Erasm and his multiple communities to the secret police. Sania provided detailed information about the life of catacomb communities and secret monasteries in the Voronezh and Kyiv regions, as well as across the wider Central Black Earth region, disclosing hundreds of names and locations. The reasons behind why an active member of the catacomb community became a secret police informer and later acted as a witness for the prosecution may never be fully understood. Nevertheless, from the materials of the case, an extraordinary portrait gradually emerges of a young woman who, at different times, was regarded either as a blessed and holy person or as an apostate and a sinner.

As we will see below, Alexandra’s testimonies and denunciations underwent significant editing by the secret police investigators. Carlo Ginzburg, while examining transcripts of

inquisition trials, notes: “The voices of the persecuted reach us (when they do) through the filters of their persecutors’ questions and as copied down by third parties, the notaries.”[15] In a similar fashion, the voices of witnesses and defendants in Soviet secret police documentation were subject to filtering. In both historical cases, the transcripts of inquisitorial and Soviet political police trials were products of pressure and coercion. However, Ginzburg builds his research on the notion of a discrepancy between the questions posed by the inquisitors and the responses from the defendants—a gap that separates the narrative of the interrogations by the judges from the responses of the defendants. This narrative gap allows him to extract fragments of forgotten popular culture from sixteenth-century Italy. There is little gap to be found in the Soviet secret police file. The Soviet interrogator was empowered by the system to distort the voices of the persecuted. In the production of the Soviet secret police file, the officer’s task was to align it with the established state narrative of the documentation. However, interrogators were often not adept at mastering the narrative and encoding the text in standardized formats. Sometimes in their “brushed-up” interrogation protocols we can still detect the authentic voices of persecuted believers with their faith and agency, and can expose different storylines and viewpoints. This gap allows a glimpse into forgotten popular catacomb religious life in the early Soviet period.

Alexandra Tolstykh: A Witness for the Prosecution

From the investigation file No. P-17298, we can see into the life of a young woman who played a pivotal role in the indictment against members of the underground community of Hieromonk Erasm, along with hundreds of Orthodox believers from various cities and villages in the Central Black Earth region. Alexandra Tolstykh — Sania — was born in 1913 into a peasant family in

the village of Pereezzhee, Liskinskii District, Voronezh Oblast. According to testimonies from other witnesses in the case, Sania experienced clinical death as a child. After lying unconscious for several days, her recovery from illness was attributed to the prayers of a priest. Alexandra rose from her sickbed healthy and unharmed. Witness accounts in the interrogation protocols indicate a dramatic transformation in Sania's life after this incident. The main source of information about novice Sania is derived from the records of her interrogations.

She developed a profound faith, becoming a devout worshiper, and quickly acquired the skills of reading and writing. In her native village and neighboring areas, people began to refer to her as blessed or holy. Her reputation as a spiritual figure continued to grow among peasants throughout the Voronezh region. Later she joined Blessed Mikhail Liakhovskii, a renowned wandering preacher. Together, they traveled through the villages of the Liskinskii and Ostrogozhskii districts of the Voronezh region, preaching among the peasants, reading the Gospel, and, as indicated in the interrogation protocols, openly condemning the Soviet regime as the lawless power of the Antichrist.

In the second half of the 1920s, a significant shift occurred in Sania's life. Her relative, Evdokiia Medvetskaia, decided to embark on a pilgrimage to the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and invited the young woman to accompany her. In Kyiv, Sania met Hieromonk Erasm and his novice, a young nun named Ul'iana Perepelitsa. From that point until Erasm's arrest in 1933, Sania's spiritual journey became closely intertwined with the Kyiv community.

In the testimony provided by novice Sania, she recounts her introduction to Hieromonk Erasm and his secret monastery in the early months of 1927:

> It was at the beginning of 1927. Erasm asked me in detail about the religious movement in my homeland. I told him about the life of the "brotherhood" created by Mikhail and Filipp. Then Erasm suggested that I remain a novice with his community, saying that he had a "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" living according to the monastic rule. Simultaneously, he emphasized that we were living in the time when the Antichrist would come to reign, and we needed to distance ourselves from the "prodigal life of the world" for salvation. Regarding the brotherhoods founded by Mikhail and Filipp in the Central Black Earth Region, he proposed that they should unite with his Kiev community. To facilitate this unification, he suggested that I accompany the members of the brotherhood he had designated for the Central Black Earth region, acquainting them with all the brotherhoods that his people would guide onto the path of truth and establish connections.[16]

The young woman became a member of the secret monastery led by Hieromonk Erasm in the village of Irpin' near Kyiv, and after some time, she embarked on missionary work in the Central Black Earth region alongside the nun Ul'iana Perepelitsa. According to the OGPU's file, the community council of the Erasm secret monastery decided to extend its missionary activities throughout the entire USSR. Each community member received a specific assignment to travel to a designated region of the country with the mission of establishing new brotherhoods and sisterhoods. Given her familiarity with the Central Black Earth region, Sania, along with Ul'iana Perepelitsa, was assigned to that area.

By the mid-1920s, the small towns and villages of the Central Black Earth region witnessed a profound transformation, leaving thousands of believers without churches, priests,

religious services, and church schools. Consequently, there arose a necessity to establish new forms of communities adapted to the changing circumstances. According to the files, clandestine groups of believers would assemble in private homes, often during nighttime hours, to engage in collective prayer, read the Gospel and other Christian literature, share ritual meals, educate children, and offer mutual help and support. These groups did not constitute a theologically or organizationally unified phenomenon, nor did they form a social movement in the conventional sense. Instead, they were dispersed communities centered around wandering prophets and prophetesses, priests, and monastics.[17] Due to her extensive knowledge of the Voronezh region, widespread trust among the people, and high authority among believers, Sania was able to conduct active missionary work and gain access to clandestine communities of believers in various cities and villages of the Central Black Earth region. It appears that her mission involved connecting dispersed believers with the secret monastery in Irpin' and Kyiv, which existed during the late 1920s and the early 1930s. In pursuit of this mission, she made multiple visits to the Central Black Earth region, at times alone and at times accompanied by Hieromonk Erasm or other members of the Kyiv community. The investigation files contain numerous testimonies from defendants and witnesses describing Hieromonk Erasm's frequent visits to the Voronezh region and a mass pilgrimage of believers from different locations to see him. As time passed, individual believers forged strong and enduring connections with the Kyiv community led by Hieromonk Erasm. Many believers made pilgrimages to Kyiv and the town of Irpin' to engage in conversations and prayers, and to seek the elder's blessings. Some individuals even chose to join secret monasteries nurtured by Erasm. The case materials provide evidence that Hieromonk Erasm would bless believers to establish new communities and construct communal houses. Hieromonk Erasm had the authority to approve or deny blessings for secret monasticism and the

adoption of vows of celibacy. Sania often accompanied the nuns-preachers of the Irpin' Monastery on their trips to clandestine communities in Ukraine and Voronezh region. Their activities included missionary work, the establishment of brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and efforts to identify existing communities that could benefit from the guidance of Hieromonk Erasm. They also distributed church items such as crosses and icons, said prayers, and actively raised funds and collected food for the Kyiv community and their secret monastery.

In 1933, Sania's perspective on communal fraternal life underwent a profound transformation. The details of this shift remain elusive, leaving us with unanswered questions about the young woman's experiences. Whether she experienced a loss of faith in God or encountered other factors, her departure from Hieromonk Erasm and his community marked a significant change. Once an active Orthodox missionary, she unexpectedly transitioned into an accuser of those to whom she had previously preached about Christ and church life. Her denunciations became the foundation for several multi-defendant cases in the Voronezh region, targeting the Luminaries and ultimately leading to the prosecution of hundreds of individuals.

From the criminal file on the Erasm's community, we gather that Sania personally visited the Voronezh OGPU in January 1933. In her initial interrogation, she declared, "In the beginning of January, as advised by a woman, I went to Voronezh, where I approached the GPU and divulged everything I knew about the organization of Erasm."[18]

By this time, many members of the secret monastery of Irpin' had already been arrested in Kyiv, along with Hieromonk Erasm himself, initiating the pre-trial investigation in Kyiv. The initial testimony of Sania drastically redirected the course of the investigation in this criminal case. Sania the informer provided an extensive list of Erasm's adherents across various Ukrainian regions, as well as in Leningrad and its surroundings. This facilitated widespread

arrests of both monastics and laity by the secret police in February and April 1933, leading to the initiation of separate investigations. Drawing on statements from some defendants, the inquiry connected the Irpin' secret monastery with "the Kiev branch of the All-Union counter-revolutionary monarchist organization of churchmen, headed by Priest Dmitrii Ivanov."[19]

From the testimony of the novice Sania:

> At the beginning of 1928, Hieromonk Erasm and his *keleinitsa* [attendant] Lukiia Mishchenko arrived in the city of Ostrogozhsk on Ul'iana's call to found "brotherhoods" there. Prior to his arrival, Ul'iana was spreading rumors that a holy elder was coming soon […]. Erasm told the villagers in my presence that the communes, collective farms, state farms, Komsomol and other Soviet organizations were all "anti-Christ organizations" […]. Hieromonk Erasm, E. O. Prokopenko, was the leader of all our communities across the USSR. He led the communities with the help of live communication, sending out his followers and closest assistants to different areas for this. In addition, they sent letters to each other, and many leaders came to Kiev to Erasm for instructions. Erasm was in fact the leader of a large counter-revolutionary organization that branched out in different regions of the USSR. Erasm instructed the leaders of the communities who came to him, as well as those who he sent to visit other communities, about the need for an active struggle against the "anti-Christ" Soviet government and its organizations, especially collective farms.[20]

In the investigation file No. P-17298, we encounter several dozen pages of Sania's interrogation protocols. Strikingly, her account of the brotherhoods and sisterhoods of Luminaries appears

remarkably open and unreserved. There seems to be no effort to conceal names, places, or events from the GPU. Sania exhibited an exceptional memory, enabling her to provide the names of hundreds of believers who, according to her, comprised the brotherhoods and sisterhoods of the Luminaries. As a result of her role as an informant and a witness for the prosecution, the majority of the Luminaries community members were sentenced to imprisonment or exiled to Siberia. Intriguingly, Sania received only a three-year probationary term, an exceptionally brief sentence for the harsh Stalinist era. The brevity of her sentence could be interpreted as a reward for her cooperation, for potentially providing valuable information to the OGPU.

The interrogation protocols of novice Sania depict a communicative young woman who shares numerous nuances and details, often reproducing direct dialogues. However, despite Sania's apparent openness, the protocols reflect the interrogator's guiding hand in shaping the narrative. The recorded dialogues by the investigator focused mainly on revealing conspiratorial connections between various religious communities located thousands of kilometers away from each other, as well as the allegedly hidden politically subversive intentions. For instance, the interrogator's influence is evident in recording Sania's statement on an elders' clandestine meeting, concluding that, following the meeting, Ul'iana Perepelitsa dispatched messengers urging a struggle for the Orthodox Church against the control of Patriarch Sergius and the godless government. Sania's emotionally charged and naive descriptions of religious men, dressed in female monastic clothes for secrecy, who allegedly came from Turkey to visit Kyiv faith communities, were transformed on the pages of the interrogation protocols into a conspiracy story, suggesting connections with "foreign anti-Soviet circles" that intended to conduct sabotage activity.[21] Despite Sania's seemingly talkative nature, each protocol bears the unmistakable imprint of the interrogator's guiding hand.

Mapping Religious Dissent in OGPU Records

The case against the brotherhoods and sisterhoods of Luminaries was both typical of its time and had some distinctive features. Like many other criminal proceedings of that era, a large multi-volume file against a diverse range of defendants was completed in a very short time, commencing in March and concluding in May 1933. Extensive intelligence efforts, including surveillance and information gathering, preceded the criminal investigation. The formulaic wooden language of the Chekists (which is often difficult to read) is another typical feature of the OGPU's file. The text established essential categorizations, including anti-Soviet activity, conspiracy, counter-revolutionary unrest, an enemy disguised under the mask of religiosity, class struggle, liquidation campaigns, and denunciation of the enemy.[22] All defendants remained imprisoned throughout the investigation, a customary practice of the Stalinist secret police. This confinement allowed the Chekists to "polish" and refine the testimonies of the detainees. Each underwent two interrogations, spaced by several days to a month, often conducted by different officers. Reading their second interrogations, the palpable exhaustion and fear of the defendants, confined in prison cells, become apparent. They were ready to incriminate themselves and provide names of others who would soon face arrest. Typically, the second interrogation concluded with the presentation of a written indictment. The defendant had the choice to accept or reject the indictment, to sign or not sign the interrogation protocols. However, this was a mere formality with no impact on the course of the case.

The testimonies of the novice Sania sparked a broader investigation. She documented numerous settlements in which brotherhoods and sisterhoods existed, providing information on hundreds of believers who allegedly were members of these groups:

> During our travels through villages, we encountered Stepanida Smetankina and Vladimir Danilovich in the city of Ostrogozhsk. Through them, we discovered the presence of Luminary groups in Ostrogozhsk and nearby villages, sharing beliefs closely aligned with our Kiev communities. Subsequently, we discovered the presence of these same groups in Biriuchenskii district, as well as in Pavlovskii, Bobrovskii, Bogucharskii, Rossoshanskii, Liskinsii, and other areas. Additionally, they were identified in villages such as Peskovatka, Polubianka, Gvozdevo, Vorontsovka, Rastykailovka, Malakhino, Belogorie, Lipovka, Shestakovka, Khrenovoe, Talovaia, Podgornyi, Kalitva, Basovka, Riabenko, Prokopets, Rakone, Krasnyi Pakhar, Kolybel'ka, Evdakov, and Dolzhik.[23]

Soon the case started to grotesquely expand, drawing in many other believers from the Central Black Earth region who had no direct links to the secret monastery of Hieromonk Erasm in Kyiv. The OGPU included individuals who opposed the Soviet regime or resisted its social reforms, particularly collectivization in the countryside, indiscriminately in the case. The secret police documentation crafted an image of a networked, octopus-like adversary, depicting all cells and groups (such as communities of Luminaries or individual believers from the countryside) as somehow connected to their center—the secret monastery of Hieromonk Erasm. As argued elsewhere, Soviet record keeping, especially the documentation created by the secret police, played a distinct role in shaping the image of religious dissent as an organized, networked and

politically subversive organizational structure. When followers of these believers were arrested, they were charged not for their beliefs but rather for their actions as would-be members of the "insurgent counter-revolutionary ecclesiastic-monarchist underground."[24] The religious network scheme included in the OGPU's file against the clandestine communities of Luminaries visually presented religious groups as centralized, subversive political organizations (see Figure 1.1). Such visual diagrams of the religious underground were a common means of picturing the enemy as an network, and it drew on a longstanding KGB habit of representing criminal activity in terms of social connections.[25] As Lynne Viola writes, the Stalinist state did not merely create much of the political environment for resistance through its repressive politics but also "generated the lens and language of resistance" and "set the parameters of resistant behaviors, acts, and even intent"; it furthermore "produced most of our sources on resistance."[26] Likewise, according to OGPU investigators, the secret mission of the Luminaries was to "unify counter-revolutionary elements to fight against Soviet power; to organize the disruption of preparations for the spring sowing, through subversive and corrupt work in the collective farms; to trigger agitation against Soviet power declared as 'satanic'; to create discontent among the population by spreading provocative rumors."[27] In this portrayal, Erasm's spiritual daughters, engaged in mission trips across the Central Black Earth region, preaching, and collecting funds for their monastery in Irpin' and Kyiv (a common practice during economic hardships when religious communities served as food banks and redistributed resources among their members),[28] were depicted as clandestine agents fomenting opposition against Soviet power and raising funds for detrimental counter-revolutionary activities.

<<INSERT FIGURE 1.1 HERE>>

Figure 1.1 Religious network scheme of the “counter-revolutionary ecclesiastic-monarchist organization Luminaries”. Source: GAOPI VO

<<INSERT FIGURE 1.2 HERE>>

Figure 1.2 Photo collage featuring mugshots of leaders and active members of the Luminaires. Source: GAOPI VO

The diagram in Figure 1.1 aims to illustrate the extensive geographical presence of the clandestine communities of Luminaries, purportedly concentrated in towns and villages across the Central Black Earth region, including Liski, Ostrogozhsk, Alekseevka, Budënnyi, and Pavlovsk. It also highlights the revealed cave churches of Belogor’e, Shatrishche, and Kolybel’ka. Notably, the OGPU did not consistently distinguish between communities, brotherhoods, or groups, employing these terms interchangeably throughout their documentation.

The Secret Monastery of Hieromonk Erasm Through the Eyes of the Novice Sania

In 1926, the Bolsheviks transferred the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, a major Eastern Orthodox Christian monastery, to the Renovationists. This movement, a schismatic faction within the Russian Orthodox Church that emerged in the post-revolutionary era, was initially inspired and supported by the Soviet secret services as part of their efforts to undermine and to weaken the canonical church. The Renovationist movement split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the spring of 1922 after the arrest of Patriarch Tikhon. Initially it comprised several major groups such as the Living Church, the Union for the Renewal of the Church Revival, the Union of the

Communities of the Ancient Apostolic Church, and the People and the Church, along with numerous smaller entities. The Renovationist leaders established the Supreme Church Administration in May 1922, designed to replace Patriarch Tikhon.[29] Many clergy and monastics, unwilling to accept the new ecclesiastical order, left established churches and monasteries. Hieromonk Erasm was among them. He and his eighteen faithful followers relocated to the village of Irpin' near Kyiv, where they continued their monastic life in secret. Erasm rejected the 1927 Declaration of Metropolitan Sergius, which declared the absolute loyalty of the Church of Russia to the Soviet regime, terming it "a direct betrayal of the Church and the Orthodox religion." Subsequently, Erasm and his community aligned with Archbishop Dimitrii (born Dmitrii Gavrilovich Liubimov) of Gdov, a leader among clergy opposing Sergius. During interrogations, arrested monastics stated, "Our Irpen' community recognizes all the bishops, but most importantly, Metropolitan Peter of Krutitsy, the Patriarchal *locum tenens*, while the latter is imprisoned, as well as Archbishop Dmitrii of Gdov and Bishop Pavel of Kharkov while they were free."[30]

In Irpin', Erasm settled in a private house of his followers, Ignatii and Ul'iana Perepelitsa, where he began his secret services that gathered monastics and the laity from Irpin', Kyiv, and the surrounding region. During this period, he established the first clandestine brotherhoods and sisterhoods, providing a home for monks and nuns left without shelter due to monastery closures or rejection of the Renovationist schism promoted by the Bolsheviks. Erasm also appointed senior confessors, called Luminaries, in each clandestine community. Newly formed clandestine communities lived in private houses, strictly observing monastic rules. The secret monastic communities expanded, acquiring new houses in the area. By 1932, there were eight houses in the village of Irpin' and one in Kyiv, hosting around 146 members, many of

whom came from various regions of Ukraine. They all adhered to monastic rules, practicing celibacy and non-possession while sharing their income and food. The investigation file indicates that Erasm's community engaged in active missionary work in Ukraine, involving nuns and female novices who journeyed from village to village, spreading their teachings and collecting food and donations for their expanding monastic communities.

Erasm was arrested on 23 November 1932, and by the beginning of 1933, his entire community had also faced persecution.[31] Typical of Soviet documentation, the OGPU file shifted the narrative of Hieromonk Erasm into political dimensions. It claimed that, at the onset of collectivization, he dispatched followers to villages in Kyiv and other regions, persuading peasants not to join collective farms. The file asserted that Erasm's "emissaries" argued that "collectivization was the work of the Antichrist." Therefore, Orthodox believers should avoid collective farms, where "nobody observed fasting or feast days," warning that anyone joining the collective farm "will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." During the height of active dekulakization in Ukraine and the Central Black Earth region, nun-preachers undertook journeys to surrounding villages, persuading individual peasants that "the power of the Antichrist takes everything from people, and for salvation, all superfluous belongings must be contributed to the community for the construction of the monastery, preventing them from falling into the hands of the Antichrist authorities."[32]

Erasm gathered followers and established communities, the largest of which, with over two hundred people, was situated in the village of Velyka Vil'shanka (Kyiv region). Two other significant communities, ranging from sixty to seventy people each, were uncovered by the secret police in Voronkovo (Kyiv region) and Kobyshcha (Chernihiv region). Numerous other communities were found in various regions of Ukraine.[33] Believers clandestinely visited

Hieromonk Erasm and his secret monastery, seeking his blessings and providing financial support to the monks, who were living in an illegal situation. In the early 1930s, many members of these communities were arrested and deported, with only a small portion managing to escape to Irpin' to join the secret monastery of Erasm. All defendants and witnesses consistently reported a mass pilgrimage to Erasm wherever he traveled in Ukraine and the Central Black Earth region. On one occasion in 1920, Erasm was compelled to leave a farm in the Voronezh region as crowds gathered to see the "spiritual elder." He was also recognized among True Orthodox communities who visited him as a spiritual elder and mentor.[34] The conspicuous pilgrimages with numerous visits from strangers did not escape the attention of local authorities. In November 1932, the police conducted a raid on the secret monastery in Irpin' and arrested twenty-four monks, including Erasm. The arrest was likely associated with the surge in mass anti-kolkhoz protests and the unsuccessful collectivization reforms in the Central Black Earth region. Consequently, the primary charges against Hieromonk Erasm and his communities were based on their alleged organizational ties to the Josephite movement and their role in inciting opposition against Soviet reforms in the village. From the indictment of Hieromonk Erasm:

> In 1927–28, the group of Hieromonk E. O. Prokopenko […] opposed the legalization [of the Provisional Patriarchal Holy Synod], arguing that signing the declaration of loyalty to Soviet power, as Metropolitan Sergii of Nizhnyi Novgorod did, meant betraying the church to the power of the Antichrist. Subsequently, he and his group joined the Kiev "branch" of the all-union counter-revolutionary monarchist organization of churchmen, headed by priest Dmitrii Ivanov and others, through whose mediation Erasm contacted the Leningrad Bishop Dmitrii of Gdov (head of the all-union counter-revolutionary

> organization of churchmen), who is now exiled. Despite the arrest and the exile of the entire leadership of the Kiev "branch" of the all-union counter-revolutionary organization, the counter-revolutionary activity of the monastic element from Irpen', led by Erasm Prokopenko, who went underground, not only did it not stop, but, on the contrary, it intensified even more.[35]

In its record-keeping, the Soviet secret police transformed disparate textual pieces into a standardized format, converting the narrative of a clandestine religious community into a highly politicized story. The biased compilation of heterogeneous sources, including statements of defendants and witnesses, confiscated correspondence, diaries, and religious ephemera, constructed a new socialist reality that had enormous power over people's lives. However, through "brushed-up" copies of interrogated protocols, authentic voices occasionally leak through, revealing a story of popular religiosity in the early Soviet period. The investigation and criminal files against the secret communities of the Luminaries particularly provide an account of popular prophecies imbued with eschatological symbolism about the arrival of an army led by the Archangel Michael and the fall of Soviet power. From testimonies of witnesses, we learn that the prophecy was popular in the summer of 1933 and that it preached about an imminent war to be brought by God, who would destroy the kingdom of the Antichrist.[36] This popular eschatology envisioned the Archangel Michael with his heavenly White Army (*beloe voisko*) marking the second coming of Christ and the end of time. In anticipation of the Messiah's arrival, believers sewed tricolor banners of red, white, and blue with the inscription: "Christ is risen. We raise our banner and we rise for the victory over the Antichrist's action." Some embroidered apocalyptic and eschatological passages from the New Testament and the Book of

Ezekiel. Believers expected to meet the coming Savior in the near future with these embroidered flags. Sania interpreted it as follows: "These songs were embroidered so that when the leaders of the organization come out to meet the Heavenly Army (*nebesnoe voinstvo*) to defeat the power of the Antichrist, those […] left behind would look at the banners and sing these songs."[37] Omitting religious symbolism, the OGPU further interpreted this prophecy as the expectation of the remnants of the anti-Bolshevik White Army in exile (leftover of the troops of the White Russian Army from the Russian civil war evacuated in November 1920 from Crimea), and therefore, all those waiting for it were considered terrorists and rebels.

The testimony of the novice Sania significantly contributes to our understanding of the community led by Hieromonk Erasm. Specifically, her account reveals that the community was engaged in missionary activities amidst mass anti-ecclesiastic repressions, attempting to unite Orthodox believers dispersed due to the mass closure of churches and monasteries into new faith unions. Sania details how the missionaries were selected, their destinations, and the methods they employed. Her testimony provides insights into the internal life of the community, including its internal structure, the use of symbols and signs among members, initiation practices, and a distinctive form of marriage that allowed spouses to lead a monastic celibate life. Additionally, glimpses into the liturgical practices, sermons, and overall spiritual life of the community, including those of Hieromonk Erasm, are revealed through these testimonies.

Conclusion

In the challenging period of severe religious repressions in the USSR during the late 1920s and early 1930s, clandestine grassroots brotherhoods and sisterhoods emerged as a novel expression

of Orthodox church life. This occurred as church hierarchies were systematically repressed or eliminated, most churches and monasteries were shuttered, and many priests and monastics were disbanded. The Soviet secret police perceived these scattered and frequently informal gatherings of believers as a direct threat to the fundamental pillars of the Soviet regime. Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing throughout the 1930s, the Soviet government initiated a series of "liquidation campaigns" targeting these grassroots religious movements, viewing them as part of the wider effort to suppress mass peasant rebellion.

The *Luminaries* case provides a distinctive perspective on the vibrant popular religious culture in the Central Black Earth region during the early Soviet period. At the same time, it sheds lights on how the Soviet state attempted to control and suppress religious practices perceived as challenging its political regime. This occurred even as faith communities persisted in practicing their faith clandestinely, against the backdrop of political and social turmoil. The Soviet state, through the lens of the OGPU, portrayed these grassroots religious movements as organized, networked and politically dangerous organizations, often using terminology like "the church-monarchist underground," "the terrorist counter-revolutionary religious organization," or "insurgent counter-revolutionary ecclesiastic-monarchist red-dragon-type organization."

The narratives within the OGPU documentation reveal at the same time the intricate dynamics of these clandestine communities, including their internal structures, everyday life practices, and missionary activities. The testimonies of individuals like Sania provide a glimpse into the life of these communities, their beliefs, and their interactions with the broader population.

The enigmatic and intriguing figure of a young woman, one who portrayed herself as a significant participant in shaping the religious community's space, emerges as the primary

informant for the OGPU. According to novice Sania's testimony to the OGPU, she frequently traveled from village to village with her sisters in God, selling crosses, icons, incense, books, and other church items to believers. Spreading like a wild fire through word of mouth, they reached diverse rural Orthodox communities across the region. Sania then reported on every elder in each community she encountered on her journey. Based on her reports, the OGPU, in turn, construed a conspiracy image out of what seemed to be the missionary work of a faith community. Sania's interrogation protocols palpably seem to be edited by her investigators: "In secret from the authorities, [we] conducted propaganda against the authorities, especially against collective farms. We were saying that a perilous time is approaching—a world war and the triumph of all evil, so everyone must prepare everything necessary for the afterlife and rid themselves of everything satanic."[38]

What is noteworthy, however, is that the OGPU did not deem it necessary to locate and apprehend all the individuals that novice Sania identified. Instead, the Chekists randomly detained individuals who, in their perspective, merely matched the profile of a member of the church-monarchist organization due to their social status, beliefs, background, or, in some cases, because the local authorities had a dislike for them for various reasons.

After the *Luminaries* case was reviewed by the Extrajudicial Troika, the defendants faced sentences of up to ten years in Siberian labor camps, with the exception of Sania, who received a three-year probationary term. The unfolding of her story from that point onward remains shrouded in mystery. Only a brief five-page OGPU investigation file from 1934 provides a glimpse into her subsequent years.[39]

On 23 January 1934, the former novice Sania was arrested again by an on-duty officer on charges of "conducting anti-Soviet agitation against the measures implemented by the Soviet

authorities." Several days later, on 27 January 1934, the prosecutor sanctioned the opening of a criminal file against her. Interestingly, on that very day, a resolution was issued for Sania's release from custody, and the termination of the criminal case against her. The pertinent documents, however, present signatures of other individuals, unclear handwriting, and were recorded in pencil. The prosecutor was simply notified of Sania's release.

Strikingly, documents confiscated during the search at her residence reveal that, before second her arrest, Sania lived and worked in the Vinikovskii state farm of the OGPU (the location of this farm is unknown). OGPU farms were established across various regions as entities ensuring the provision of supplies for OGPU staff and commanders of OGPU troops.[40]

The mysterious circumstances surrounding Sania's release, coupled with her connection to an OGPU state farm, add another layer of complexity to the narrative. However, what the case of novice Sania unravels is the intricate fate of a believer caught in the machinery of Soviet secret police surveillance and repression. The ambiguous story of novice Sania and the clandestine communities she was part of offer a glimpse into the complex interplay between popular religious culture and state control during a tumultuous period of the early Soviet history. The echoes of this intricate narrative continue to resonate through the archives, revealing fragments while concealing the complete story.

Notes

1 *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia tserkov' i kommunisticheskoe gosudarstvo. 1917-1941. Dokumenty i fotomaterialy* (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii institut Sviatogo ApostolaAndreia, 1996), 30–35.

2 Mikhail V. Shkarovskii, “The Russian Orthodox Church versus the State: The Josephite Movement, 1927–1940” *Slavic Review* 54 no. 2 (1995): 365–384.

3 Lynne Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside,” *Journal of Modern History* 62, no. 4 (1990): 747–70; Tracy McDonald, “A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin’s Russia: The Pitelinskii Uprising, Riazan, 1930,” in *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, ed. Lynne Viola (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 89.

4 Shkarovskii, Mikhail V. *Iosiflianstvo: Techeniie v Russkoi Pravosalvnoi tserkvi* (St. Petersburg: “Memorial”, 1999), 107.

5 By the end of the 1930s, approximately 28 percent of churches remained opened in the entire Soviet Union out of some fifty thousand churches that existed before the Revolution. In 1937– 39, there were over 9,500 underground illegal parishes. See Aleksei Beglov, *V poiskakh “bezgreshnykh katakomb:” Tserkovnoe podpol´e v SSSR* (Moscow: Arefa, 2008); and Dmitrii V. Pospelovskii, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov´ v XX veke* (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), 174–75.

6 Alexei Beglov, “Eschatological Expectations in Post-Soviet Russia: Historical Context and Modes of Interpretation,” in: *Orthodox Paradoxes. Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy*, ed. Katja Tolstaja (Brill, 2014), 112–123; Lynne Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare”.

7 Aleksandr I. Dem’ianov, *Istinno-pravoslavnoe khristianstvo: Kritika ideologii i deiatel´nosti* (Voronezh: Izdatel´stvo Voronezhskogo universiteta, 1977), 25; See also HADSBU, 16-op.1.-206-(16–17); 16-op.1-45-(73–74).

8 Elena L. Lopushanskaia, *Episkopy ispovedniki* (San Francisco, 1971), 69; Pospielovsky *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov´*, 164– 6; Beglov, *V poiskakh “bezgreshnykh katakomb,”* 68.

9 For more on secret monasticism in the USSR, see Jennifer Jean Wynot, *Keeping the Faith: Russian Orthodox Monasticism in the Soviet Union, 1917– 1939* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

10 James Kapaló and Kinga Povedák. *The Religious Underground and the Secret Police in Communist and Post-communist Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2021).

11 Excerpts from the archival-investigative file (*arkhivno-sledstvennoe delo*) have been published in Anna Samsonova. "'Novice Sania:' Underground Church Communities of the Central Chernozem Region of the Early 1930s in the Testimony of a Novice of a Secret Monastery," *ISTORIYA* 6/116, no. 13 (2022) (https://history.jes.su/s207987840021704-3-1).

12 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-21934; 9353-op.2-P-17298. Notably, the six-volume investigation file P-17298 commenced on 03.03.1933 and concluded on 24.05.1933.

13 Investigation files on the Erasm community: TsDAHOU, 263-op.1- 62198 and TsDIAUK, 128-op.1-360; Criminal file on Erasm: HDASBU, 6-67566FP. For a review of the investigation file on the secret monastery in Irpin', see: http://www.pstbi.ccas.ru/bin/db.exe/ans/nm/?HYZ9EJxGHoxITcDUsuyjfe9fdMGZeu-y6eGZeusUfOKfdOCUeymhfeYUteLUeeuWfOud68uVuOWhum0cdS0if8uhcCKU67rUc8Sgc0*cXy0ieeujdOqefWYi66ecdO9Vee1j68si900jfi2iWC0jdOrg90*lCHAncmsW**. Special thanks go to Irina Osipova for providing additional archival materials on the Erasm community.

14 Tatiana Vagramenko and Gabriela Nicolescu. "The Hand at Work or How the KGB File Leaks in the Exhibition." *Martor*, special issue "Visual Ethics after Communism," 26 (2021): 24–46.

15 Carlo Ginzburg. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), x.

16 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.1-102.

17 In the secret police documentation, these groups were known by various names: Ioannites, Fëdorovtsy, Samosviatsy, Buevtsy, Stefanovitsy, Podgornovtsy, Suzdaltsy, Mikhailovtsy, Ignat'evtsy, Inochentists, Enokhovits, Massalovtsy, Iliodorovtsy, and others. The most common name was Fëdorovtsy, named after Fëdor Rybalkin, venerated as a holy fool, whose catacomb communities were among the first spiritual unions of peasant believers in the Black Earth region in the early 1920s. Hence, the term Fëdorovtsy was often indiscriminately used by the state authorities in relation to all groups of believers in the territory of Voronezh Oblast. See Dem'ianov, *Istinno-pravoslavnoe khristianstvo,* 5.

18 TsDAHOU, 263-op.1-62198.

19 Ibid.

20 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.1-(51, 102).

21GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.1.-71.

22 Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truth: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2014), 55.

23GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.1-52.

24 Tatiana Vagramenko, "Visualizing Invisible Dissent: Red-Dragonists, Conspiracy and the Soviet Security Police," in *The Religious Underground and the Secret Police in Communist and Post-communist Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. James Kapaló and Kinga Povedák (Routledge, 2021), 60–82.

25 Tatiana Vagramenko, "KGB Photography Experimentation: Turning Religion into Organized Crime," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History,* 23, no. 3(2022): 493–522.

26 Lynne Viola, “Introduction,” in *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, ed. Lynne Viola (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 9–13.

27 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.4-(372-387).

27 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.4-(214; 217).

28 James Kapaló, “Feasting and Fasting: The Evidential Character of Material Religion in Secret Police Archives,” in *The Religious Underground and the Secret Police in Communist and Post-communist Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Kapaló, James and Kinga Povedák (Routledge, 2021), 254–272.

29 Mikhail B. Danilushkin, ed., *Istoriia Russkoi Pravosalvnoi tserkvi. Ot vosstanovleniia Patriarshestva do nashikh dnei.* Tom 1 (1917–1970) (St. Petersburg: Voskresenie, 1997); Mikhail Shkarovsky, *Obnovlencheskoe dvizhenie v Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi XX veka* (St. Petersburg, 1999); Anatolii Levitin and Vadim Shavrov, eds., *Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkovnoi smuty*. Vol. 9 (Moscow: Krutitskoe Patriarshee podvor’e; Kusnacht: Inst. Glaubeinder 2. Welt, 1996).

30 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.1-67.

31 TsDIAUK, 128-op.1-360; HDASBU, 6-67566-FP; TsDAHOU, 263-op.1-62198.

32 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.1-102.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 TsDAHOU, 263-op.1-62198

http://www.pstbi.ccas.ru/bin/db.exe/ans/nm/?HYZ9EJxGHoxITcDUsuyjfe9fdMGZeu-y6eGZeusUfOKfdOCUeymhfeYUteLUeeuWfOud68uVuOWhum0cdS0if8uhcCKU67rUc8Sgc0*cXy0ieeujdOqefWYi66ecdO9Vee1j68si900jfi2iWC0jdOrg90*lCHAncmsW**

36 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-P-17298-t.4-354.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 GAOPI VO, 9353-op.2-313.

40 Data on OGPU farms in the Moscow regions can be found in Postanovlenie TsK VKP(b) ot 27.XII.1931. O raspredelenii MTS por raionam i naznacheniiu: RGASPI, 17-op.3-867-46; see https://istmat.org/node/54139. O khoziaistvennykh organizatsiiakh OGPU. Prilozhenie No. 9, p. 112/74 PB No. 82: RGASPI, 17-op.3-867-47, see https://istmat.org/node/54140.

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