

The KGB and the Vatican: Secrets of the Mitrokhin Files

Sean Brennan (Catholic University Press of America, 2022), 103 pages, index.

Reviewed by John C.

On May 13, 1981, Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Ağca shot and critically wounded Pope John Paul II as the pontiff's motorcade entered St. Peter's Square in the Vatican. CIA Director William Casey, himself a practicing Catholic who often spoke of US-Soviet conflicts in religious terminology and even briefed the pope on various Cold War policy developments,^a was eager to know if the Soviets were involved in the assassination attempt of a Polish pope widely known as an opponent of communism. Indeed, although the United States did not at the time have access to it, a 1980 report from KGB headquarters to its Warsaw field office labeled the 1978 election of Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła to the pontificate as reflecting the Vatican's "support of world imperialism" and an attempt to "divide socialism from the inside." (31)

Whether the Soviets were behind the attack is, as former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates recounted, "one of the great remaining secrets of the Cold War."^b Regardless of culpability, it is certainly true the Kremlin viewed Catholicism as a threat, as Sean Brennan's short and very readable new book *The KGB and the Vatican: Secrets of the Mitrokhin Files*, makes clear. A translation of transcripts of KGB records regarding the policies of the Soviet secret police toward the Vatican and the Catholic Church in Communist-controlled countries as provided by KGB archivist and defector Vasili Mitrokhin, the book offers fascinating insights into the Soviet regime's policy toward Catholicism from the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) to the first decade of the pontificate of John Paul II.

Brennan's introduction offers valuable historical background explaining that KGB antagonism toward Catholicism can be traced to the very beginning of communist Russia. Feliks Dzerzhinsky (1877–1926), a baptized Polish communist and Lenin's choice as director of the first Soviet secret police force, the Cheka, was deeply suspicious of the Catholic Church. In 1920, he wrote,

In my opinion, [Catholic] clergy have played a large role in espionage and conspiracies. They need to be deactivated. For this, I propose the publishing of a circular to be sent to provinces that all priests must be registered and under supervision. Furthermore, the clergy hear the confessions and fantasies of Catholics.... (96)

There were certainly plenty of Catholics in Soviet-held territory—approximately 1.2 million of them as of 1921. Two years after Dzerzhinsky's comments on Catholicism, Lenin published an essay entitled "On the Significance of Militant Materialism," urging all party cadres to disseminate scientific-materialistic propaganda with the goal of eventually eradicating religious faith and institutions. By the late 1930s, practically all Roman and Byzantine rite Catholic churches in the Soviet Union were forcibly closed, and hundreds of Catholic clergy had been sent to the gulags.

Mitrokhin's writings, which are not transcriptions of individual KGB reports but summaries of numerous documents he secretly transported to his home from the KGB archives, discuss Soviet activities against the Catholic Church after World War II. *The KGB and the Vatican* serves as a tidy consolidation of that archive as it relates to the KGB's position on all things Catholic. Surveying the Mitrokhin archive, translator Sean Brennan observes that no institution "dominated the attention of the Kremlin more than the Catholic Church and the state that directed it—the Holy See." (1) That certainly meshes with Mitrokhin's own summary: "The anti-Soviet nature of the churches and the incompatibility of their beliefs with Marxist-Leninist ideology mandated that the organs of the state security in the USSR put a stop to their activities. The Vatican is one of the main targets of observation and penetration by agents of the KGB." (33) The KGB viewed the church as preventing the spread of communist ideas, distracting workers from the fight for social

a. See Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: The Lives and Secrets of William J. Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (Viking, 1990).

b. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows* (Simon and Schuster, 1996), 356.

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progress, and using ideological diversions to weaken the Soviet Union.

Brennan's effective organization of the Mitrokhin archive—which include extensive footnotes providing essential historical and religious context—indicates that the KGB interpreted the church as representing two distinct threats to communism. The first of these was ideological. As one KGB document explains,

The Catholic clergy are trained to have an irconcilable position toward the politics of the Soviet government with regards to questions of religion, to win independence of the Church from control by the Soviet state, and to create opposition on the part of their parishioners towards socialism. (49)

This concern was not unfounded: beginning in the 19th century, popes had issued various statements and documents censuring socialism and Marxist doctrines. As early as 1846, Pius IX condemned socialism, specifically in its atheistic manifestations. Leo XIII in his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* declared: “the main tenet of socialism, community of goods, must be utterly rejected.”

Yet it was not simply that the Catholic Church on a matter of principle repudiated Marxist political, economic, and social doctrines. The KGB also perceived the church as acting on behalf of capitalism and imperialism, particularly as the Vatican was often aligned with those historically (and predominantly) Catholic nations (e.g. France, Spain, Italy) that maintained overseas possessions and participated more freely in the global economy. After World War II, KGB propaganda even portrayed the Vatican as pro-fascist because of its positive relationship with regimes like Portugal under António de Oliveira Salazar.

The second perceived threat to the Soviet Union and its allies was the Catholic Church's role in fomenting nationalist fervor. For example, KGB documents regularly cite concerns regarding widespread beliefs among Poles and Lithuanians that their respective nations' cultural and religious identities were inseparable from the church. Moreover, several of the non-Latin rites of the Catholic Church were distinctly national in origin (e.g., Ukrainian, Ruthenian), which created a space for Eastern European peoples to preserve their unique cultural identity and traditions. For a Soviet regime seeking to curb if not eradicate those nationalist tendencies, these alternative

Catholic rites (often called Uniat) represented an obstacle to that geopolitical objective. By extension, the KGB also viewed the church's identity as an international (if not explicitly political) entity that vied for the allegiance of people across the world as a competitor to global communism.

For these reasons, the Mitrokhin archive makes clear that the KGB viewed the Vatican as “one of their primary subversive opponents abroad.” (25) Soviet intelligence thus exerted efforts to resist the Catholic Church, both within the Eastern Bloc and across the world. In 1969, Chairman of the KGB Yuri Andropov approved a strategic document aimed at combatting the influence of the Catholic Church. Its aims included gaining influence over members of the Roman Curia, infiltrating various Catholic institutions via KGB agents, discrediting Catholic officials, forcing the Vatican to suspend its support for Catholic activities in the USSR and satellite states, and disseminating disinformation against the Catholic Church. These were all classic examples of KGB active measures.

In the mid-1970s, the KGB sent several code-named agents to “compromise the activities of the Vatican and its abilities to inspire people,” (78) and to foster divisions within the Catholic hierarchy. Within the Eastern Bloc, KGB recruits included the head of a Uniat monastery, priests, and nuns. The KGB coopted one priest by threatening to kill his sister. The KGB published anti-Catholic propaganda across Western Europe, including one tract in France that accused the Vatican of fascism. In Poland, more than 800 members of the country's security organizations worked as agents within Catholic institutions.

The Vatican itself, however, proved a more difficult nut to crack, though not for lack of effort on the part of Russian intelligence officers. A 1975 document from the KGB's First Main Directorate and Fifth Department outlined Soviet intelligence requirements and covert action objectives vis-à-vis the Vatican. This included seeking to “obtain information about the intentions and activities of the state organs of the Vatican.” (81) Yet the KGB often had difficulty collecting on the Catholic hierarchy. The KGB *resident* in Rome in 1968 noted the difficulties of infiltrating the Vatican, because of its small, insular nature and the “considerable mistrust” toward outsiders. (71)

Nevertheless, some individuals in the Vatican, with papal approval, pursued a policy later termed *Ostpolitik* (“Eastern Politics”). During the pontificates of John XXIII

(r. 1958–63) and Paul VI (r. 1963–78), Vatican officials attempted to open limited dialogue with Soviet satellite regimes in Eastern Europe and even the Soviet leadership in Moscow. A delegation of clerics from the Russian Orthodox Church, which included several (undercover) KGB agents, were invited to attend the Second Vatican Council as observers. Soviet premier Nikolai Podgorny met with Paul VI in 1967, and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko met with the pope six times between the late 1960s to the late 1970s.

The KGB, perhaps unsurprisingly, looked with suspicion at Ostpolitik. A 1966 report composed by the KGB's Second Directorate called the Vatican policy of rapprochement a "diversionary maneuver." (22) Another 1971 report from the KGB's Fifth Directorate called the Vatican a "well-organized apparatus" with an "anticommunist orientation." (22)

Those descriptions of the Vatican (and the church more broadly) were more or less true. Yet in reading the Mitrokhin archives, one gets the impression that as much as the Soviets appreciated the ideological and national threat posed by the Catholic Church, the KGB also failed to fully understand how church leaders understood themselves. "Prominent members of the clergy and the laity continue to attempt to organize local children in religious life, to extend greater influence over them," (47) reads one KGB assessment. Yet if Catholic clergy actually believed they were in the business of saving souls, exposing children to religious catechesis would not, at least from a Catholic perspective, be "indoctrination," but the imparting of objective, necessary goods.

Perhaps because of the Soviets' own ideological commitments, as well as a deep skepticism toward religion

and religious persons, the idea that Catholic officials actually believed what they taught, seemed, cynically, irrelevant. Perhaps beholden to a manifestation of confirmation bias stemming from the fact many, if not most KGB officials did not think religiously, they were in certain senses unable to understand why Catholics (and the Vatican) did what they did. Otherwise, they might have identified the church's self-understanding as a moral check on *all* regimes not just communist ones. Indeed, as Brennan explains in the introduction, in the 19th and 20th centuries, popes had issued plenty of criticisms of global capitalism and the exploitative qualities of imperialism. Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* spoke quite concernedly of the detrimental effects of industrialism and capitalism on families and human labor, while expressing support for labor unions, social welfare organizations, and a living wage.

The final documents cited by Brennan in this important contribution to continued scholarship on the Mitrokhin archive note the Soviets' grave concern with the pontificate of John Paul II, as well as various KGB strategies to combat the Polish pope's influence. This included, among other intelligence activities, disinformation campaigns, infiltrating the pope's inner circle, and even discouraging Orthodox churches from communicating or collaborating with the Catholic Church. A document from a May 1982 conference of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia made clear the Soviets' concerns about John Paul II's pontificate, claiming that the Vatican had "openly embarked on the path of support of world imperialism." (93) Whether or not Russian intelligence ultimately had any connection to that 1981 assassination attempt, Moscow certainly feared John Paul II. And, as the remainder of Soviet history would bear out, that fear was not entirely misplaced.



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