

UDC 94(477.42)“1937/1938”:323.281:2-726.3
DOI 10.24919/2519-058X.39.364972

Olexandr BURAVSKY

PhD hab. (History), Professor; Professor of the Department of World History, Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University, 40 Velyka Berdychivska Street, Zhytomyr, Ukraine, postal code 10008 (buravskij@i.ua)

ORCID: 0000-0002-1847-4605

ResearcherID: AAR-1269-2020

Scopus ID: 58885865500

Igor VLASYUK

PhD (History), Associate Professor; Associate Professor of the Department of World History, Ivan Franko Zhytomyr State University, 40 Velyka Berdychivska Street, Zhytomyr, Ukraine, postal code 10008 (vlasyuk@zu.edu.ua)

ORCID: 0000-0003-4679-4101

ResearcherID: E-5163-2016

Scopus ID: 57847647200

Олександр БУРАВСЬКИЙ

доктор історичних наук, професор, професор кафедри всесвітньої історії, Житомирський державний університет імені Івана Франка, вул. Велика Бердичівська, 40, м. Житомир, Україна, індекс 10008 (buravskij@i.ua)

Ігор ВЛАСЮК

кандидат історичних наук, доцент, доцент кафедри всесвітньої історії, Житомирський державний університет імені Івана Франка, вул. Велика Бердичівська, 40, м. Житомир, Україна, індекс 10008 (vlasyuk@zu.edu.ua)

Bibliographic Description of the Article: Buravsky, O., & Vlasjuk, I. (2026). The Repressive Policy of the Soviet Regime Against the Clergy and Anti-Religious Propaganda in Zhytomyr Region in 1937 – 1938. *Skhidnoievropeyskyi Istorychnyi Visnyk [East European Historical Bulletin]*, 39, 82–92. doi: 10.24919/2519-058X.39.364972

**THE REPRESSIVE POLICY OF THE SOVIET REGIME AGAINST
THE CLERGY AND ANTI-RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA IN ZHYTOMYR REGION
IN 1937 – 1938**

Abstract. This article, utilizing archival documents and local periodicals, investigates the implementation of the repressive policy of the Soviet regime against the clergy in Zhytomyr region in 1937 – 1938. It examines the punitive actions carried out by the authorities against specific representatives of the Orthodox clergy in the region and elucidates the methods employed for anti-religious propaganda. **The methodology of the research** is grounded in general scientific principles and approaches, along with specialized and general methods. The civilizational approach is central to the research, allowing for a focus on factors associated with the Bolsheviks' anti-religious policy in

Zhytomyr region in the 1930s. General scientific principles applied include objectivity, historicism, and multi-factor analysis. Specialized methods of historical inquiry employed are the comparative historical, problem-chronological, and historical typological methods. The research was partially conducted in the context of social history. **The scientific novelty** of this research lies in clarifying the specifics and features of the Soviet regime's repressive policy and the methods of anti-religious propaganda in the region based on archival materials and local periodicals from the specified period. It also elucidates the fates of lesser-known religious ministers in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s. **Conclusions:** The policy of repression against religion and its figures, particularly the Orthodox clergy, in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s was an integral component of the totalitarian all-Union policy of the Stalinist regime. In Zhytomyr region, this was compounded by the campaign against supposed spies allegedly working in the interests of neighbouring Poland, given the region's border position. The clergy who fell victim to the repressions in the region were posthumously rehabilitated only during the Khrushchev Thaw. Appeals from their wives and children often served as the impetus for the rehabilitation of the unjustly convicted local Orthodox clergy. The authorities eventually conceded that the so-called counter-revolutionary monarchist organizations in the region did not, in fact, exist in the 1930s; they were fabricated to provide grounds for the condemnation of Orthodox clergy in the city of Zhytomyr and the wider region. The authorities relentlessly pursued an ideological struggle against religion and its representatives in Zhytomyr and the surrounding villages, portraying them in the local press (notably, the newspaper *Radianska Volyn*) as conscious enemies of the Soviet regime who allegedly hindered the economic and cultural development of contemporary society. In this struggle, the article authors consistently used offensive language directed at local priests, distorted religious sentiments, and cast doubt upon sacred concepts. It was paramount for the regime to indoctrinate the population with an atheistic spirit and shift social consciousness and attitudes in its favour. The tragic destinies of previously unknown priests who suffered under the repressive policies in the region attest to the cost of a human life during those dreadful years and compel a deeper understanding of the essence of the Soviet totalitarian regime.

Key words: repressive policy, clergy, church, anti-religious propaganda, Soviet regime, Zhytomyr region.

РЕПРЕСИВНА ПОЛІТИКА РАДЯНСЬКОЇ ВЛАДИ ПРОТИ СВЯЩЕННОСЛУЖИТЕЛІВ І АНТИРЕЛІГІЙНА ПРОПАГАНДА НА ЖИТОМИРЩИНІ У 1937 – 1938 рр.

Анотація. У статті на основі архівних документів та місцевої періодики з'ясовано проведення репресивної політики радянської влади проти священнослужителів на Житомирщині у 1937 – 1938 рр. Досліджено каральні дії влади проти окремих представників православного духовництва на цих теренах. Висвітлено методи проведення антирелігійної пропаганди в регіоні. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на загальнонаукових принципах та підходах, спеціальних і загальних методах. Ключовим у дослідженні є цивілізаційний підхід, що уможливив зосередити фокус уваги на факторах, пов'язаних з антирелігійною політикою більшовиків на Житомирщині у 1930-х рр. Серед загальнонаукових принципів використано принципи об'єктивності, історизму та поліфакторності. З-поміж спеціальних методів історичного пізнання – порівняльно-історичний, проблемно-хронологічний та історико-типологічний. **Наукова новизна дослідження** полягає у тому, що на основі архівних матеріалів та місцевої періодики зазначеного періоду з'ясовано специфіку й особливості репресивної політики радянської влади, методи проведення антирелігійної пропаганди у регіоні, долі маловідомих релігійних служителів на Житомирщині у 1930-х рр. **Висновки.** Політика репресій проти релігії та її діячів, зокрема, православного духовенства, у Житомирській області в 1930-х рр. була складовою загальносоюзної тоталітарної політики сталінського режиму. На Житомирщині вона доповнювалася боротьбою проти т. зв. шпигунів, які нібито працювали в інтересах сусідньої Польщі, оскільки область займала прикордонне становище. Священнослужителі, які стали жертвами репресій в регіоні, бути реабілітовані посмертно лише у період хрущовської відлиги. Часто звернення їхніх дружин та дітей слугувало поштовхом до реабілітації несправедливо засуджених представників місцевого православного духовенства. Влада визнала, що контрреволюційних монархічних організацій в регіоні у 1930-х рр. насправді не існувало, вони були вигадані для того, щоб мати підстави засудити представників православного духовенства

м. Житомира та регіону. Влада не переставала вести ідеологічну боротьбу проти релігії та її представників у Житомирі та селах області, зображуючи їх на сторінках місцевої преси (як-то газети “Радянська Волинь”) як свідомих ворогів радянської влади, які нібито завдавали шкоди господарському та культурному розвитку тогочасного суспільства. У цій боротьбі автори статей постійно вживали образливі вислови на адресу місцевих священників, спотворювали релігійні почуття людей, вносили сумніви у їхні святі поняття. Владі важливо було виховати населення в атеїстичному дусі, змінити свідомість та настрої у суспільстві на свою користь. Доли окремих раніше невідомих священників, які постраждали від репресивної політики влади в регіоні, засвідчують, якою була ціна життя людини у ті страшні роки, і спонукають до глибшого розуміння сутності тоталітарного радянського режиму.

Ключові слова: репресивна політика, духівництво, церква, антирелігійна пропаганда, радянська влада, Житомирщина.

Problem Statement. One crucial research vector is the study of regional aspects of the Bolshevik regime’s repressive policy in the 1930s. Current research objectives include, but are not limited to, clarifying the specifics of the Soviet regime’s repressive policy toward the Orthodox clergy and other confessions in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s, and providing an objective analysis based on unpublished archival materials and recent scholarly works. Equally important is the study of the lives of previously unknown clergymen who became victims of political repression in this region, and the restoration of their good memory.

Review of Recent Research and Publications. The repressive policy of the Soviet regime toward the church in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s has been reflected in the works of Serhiy Zhylyuk, Tetiana Rafalska, Viktor Bernatskyi, Oleksandr Buravsky, Ihor Vlasiuk, and the others. The application of punitive actions by the Soviet regime against the Orthodox clergy in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s was traced in the scholarly work of Professor Serhiy Zhylyuk (Zhylyuk, 2002).

The monograph *Anti-Religious Policy of the Bolsheviks in Volyn-Zhytomyr Region in the 1920s–1930s* by Viktor Bernatskyi, Serhiy Zhylyuk and Valeriy Sheretyuk (Rivne, 2017) thoroughly details the scale of repressions against the clergy and faithful of the UAOC and ROC. The authors state that in the mid-1930s, punitive measures such as the deprivation of the right to religious activity, imprisonment, eviction, deportation, and execution were actively employed (Bernatskyi, Zhylyuk, & Sheretyuk, 2017).

Tetiana Rafalska, analyzing the Soviet regime’s repressive policy against priests in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s, emphasizes that they were primarily accused of espionage in favour of Poland, counter-revolutionary activity, and participation in a “counter-revolutionary fascist organization” (Rafalska, 2010). The anti-religious policy of the Soviet regime in Volyn–Zhytomyr region in the 1920s – 1930s and the fates of the Orthodox clergy were also partially covered in the scholarly article by Oleksandr Buravskyi and Ihor Vlasiuk (Buravskyi, & Vlasiuk, 2016).

The collective scholarly work *Rehabilitated by History (Zhytomyr Region)* features the tragic fates of certain prominent representatives of the region’s Orthodox clergy in specific volumes, alongside brief reference data on their activities and sentences (Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomirskaya oblast, 2006; 2010; 2013). A. Kyrydon’s monograph analyzes, *inter alia*, state-church relations in the Ukrainian SSR in the 1930s, the influence of Bolshevik ideology on societal consciousness, and the suppression of religious sentiments (Kyrydon, 2011).

Viacheslav Litynskyi devoted his research to the technologies of execution of death sentences by employees of the NKVD in 1937 – 1938, including in Zhytomyr region (Litynskyi, 2024).

The regional aspect of the problem of repressions of the Bolshevik authorities against Christian denominations, in particular in Podillia in the 1930s, was reflected in the scientific article by Anatoly Voynarovskiy, Natalka Zhmud, and Valentyna Hrebenova (Voynarovskiy, & Zhmud, & Hrebenova, 2024). Olha Kolyastruk's research is devoted to Soviet repressive measures and mass terror in Podillia (Kolyastruk, 2023).

Some modern studies are devoted to the problem of religiosity of the population in the Ukrainian SSR. In particular, Tetiana Havryliuk and Vladyslav Diatlov studied the motives of the population's religiosity and the influence of communist ideology on it (Havryliuk, & Diatlov, 2023).

The source base is defined by the research purpose and objectives and consists of a complex of documents, the unbiased analysis of which creates the conditions for the objective elucidation and analysis of this problem. To achieve the stated objective, unpublished documents from the State Archive of Zhytomyr Oblast (SAZhO) were analyzed to clarify the reasons for arrests, investigative procedures, and the fates of clergymen, church activists, and the faithful. Local periodicals from 1937 – 1938 were also analyzed to understand the nature and methods of the Soviet regime's anti-religious propaganda.

The purpose of the article is to ascertain the specific features of the repressive policy of the Soviet regime toward the clergy of Zhytomyr region in 1937 – 1938, as well as the anti-religious propaganda, and to highlight its consequences.

Research Results. In discussing the regional component of the totalitarian communist regime's repressions against religious figures of various churches and anti-religious propaganda, particularly in Zhytomyr region, it is vital to emphasize that these measures were distinctly integrated into the system of all-Union measures to combat real and imagined adversaries of the Stalinist regime (Shapoval, 2012, p. 163).

The intensive closure of churches in Zhytomyr region was a characteristic phenomenon of the 1930s. By way of example, the following churches were closed in the region in 1930: in the villages of Slipchytisi, Holovino, Shcheniieva of Cherniakhiv district, Holovino; and St. Michael's Church in Zhytomyr (Buravskiy, & Vlasiuk, 2016, p. 52).

By 1937, only 2 functioning churches remained in Zhytomyr city out of the 33 that had existed previously. Clergy who remained in the city were gradually evicted by the authorities to the border zone. Their overall situation was dire: they were forced to live with relatives or acquaintances, work odd jobs, or resort to begging (Reabilitovani istoriiei. Zhytomyrska oblast, 2006, p. 40).

V. Bernatskiy provides information on the number of repressed priests in the Zhytomyr region as of 1937 – 1938: 283 representatives of the Orthodox clergy, of whom 193 were shot and 80 were serving sentences. As of 1937, 500 churches in the region had been closed in violation of existing Soviet legislation (Bernatskiy, 2016, pp. 127, 149).

The SAZhO files containing evidence of the unfolding repressions against the Orthodox clergy in Zhytomyr region in 1937 – 1938 reveal the fates of individual, lesser-known priests.

Havryliuk Oleksandr Vasyliovych, Archpriest of the Smolianka Church in Zhytomyr, was arrested on November 4, 1937, "for statements in defense of the enemies of the people Tukhachevsky and Yakir." The Troika of the UNKVS for the Zhytomyr region sentenced him to 10 years in labour camps on charges of "counter-revolutionary fascist agitation aimed at undermining the power of the Soviet Union" (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 59, pp. 17, 23). According to a witness, in 1937, "when the enemies of the people, fascist spies, and traitors of the fatherland Tukhachevsky and Yakir were shot, the priest Havryliuk said: 'They were

smart people, they fought for the liberation of the people from the violence of the communists, and for that the communist-atheists shot them. The time will soon come when the people will destroy them” (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 59, pp. 12, 16).

Dombrovskiy Artem Martynovych (born October 20, 1895), a native and former resident of Zhytomyr city, a priest, was arrested on April 17, 1938. He was accused of allegedly belonging to a counter-revolutionary monarchist organization and conducting anti-Soviet agitation, for which the Troika of the UNKVS for the Zhytomyr region sentenced him to the highest measure of punishment – execution by firing squad – on May 10, 1938. The sentence was carried out on June 3, 1938, in Zhytomyr. The case contains an inquiry from the priest's daughter, Liubov Artemivna Dombrovska, about her father's fate. He was rehabilitated in 1958 (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1834, p. 75).

Teodorovych Ivan Hnatovych, a resident of Zhytomyr city, a priest, was arrested by the UNKVS bodies for Zhytomyr region in Zhytomyr on April 11, 1938. On May 10, he was sentenced to execution by firing squad by the Troika of the UNKVS for Zhytomyr region, accused of participation in an anti-Soviet monarchist organization and preparing an armed uprising against the Soviet regime. The sentence was carried out on June 3, 1938. His burial place was not specified (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1834, p. 79).

In the case concerning the priest of the Skrahlivka village church, Berdychiv district, Zhytomyr region, Rubanovych Serhii Yosypovych (born 1874), a witness testified: “The priest of our village, Rubanovych Serhii, as early as 1918, before Petliura's arrival in Ukraine, traveled to Kyiv for a church congress, after which he preached sermons in the village in support of Petliura, for the liberation of Free Ukraine. On the feast of Epiphany, priest Rubanovych went around the houses with prayer and during these rounds conducted agitation against collectivization” (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1192, pp. 18–19). He was sentenced to 3 years in a concentration camp (Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast, 2013, p. 147).

Rudenko Yakym Korniiievych, a native of Zabolot village, Radomyshl district, a priest. According to the investigation files, he was ascribed to conducting counter-revolutionary agitation among collective farmers against the measures of the Soviet regime. His character reference specifically noted that “priest Rudenko gathered believers in his apartment during the Supreme Soviet elections, among whom he conducted counter-revolutionary agitation. He performed religious rites and maintained contact with reactionary elements and those repressed by the Soviet regime” (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 14846, p. 10). An excerpt from the protocol No. 30 of the meeting of the Troika under the UNKVS for Zhytomyr region on November 27, 1937, testifies that Ya. K. Rudenko was accused of grouping counter-revolutionary, church elements and, under the guise of religious convictions, calling on them not to implement the decisions of the party and government, spreading slander against the Soviet authorities and collective farm construction, and forecasting the inevitability of war and the defeat of the Soviet regime. He was sentenced under Article 54 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR to 8 years in a corrective labor camp (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 14846, p. 18).

Romanovskiy Leonid Polikarpovych, priest of the Mshanets village church, Liubar district. The village council chairman's reference noted: “The local priest is deprived of electoral rights. Maintains broad ties with kulak and anti-Soviet elements. Incites peasants to leave the collective farm”. The protocol of the special session of the GPU Collegium of the Ukrainian SSR on July 28, 1933, reveals his conviction under Article 54-10 to 3 years of exile to the northern region (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 13428, pp. 3, 16).

By the decree of the Assistant Operative Commissioner of the NKVD for the Zhytomyr region on June 20, 1938, the clergyman A. S. Mykhalevych, residing in Zhytomyr, was arrested for gathering people in the Vilsky church and conducting anti-Soviet agitation among them, maintaining ties with Polish landlords and “enemies of the people” Morozov, Bychkovskyi, and the others. He was charged under Articles 54-10 and 54-11 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR. A. S. Mykhalevych died on August 27, 1938, while in Zhytomyr prison (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1822, p. 371).

T. Rafalska draws attention to the multi-ethnic composition of the population in Zhytomyr region and that the Bolshevik regime’s atheistic policy harmed believers of various religions and confessions. The author provides numerous examples of the authorities’ repressive actions against individual priests, suggesting that the schism within Orthodoxy facilitated the repressions against this church. For instance, the investigation file against Malyn priest K. Kulchytskyi was concluded in a single day; he was sentenced to 10 years of corrective labour for allegedly counter-revolutionary nationalist activity in favour of Poland. Investigations were often very brief, requiring only the signing of pre-prepared interrogation protocols (Rafalska, 2010, pp. 110–111, 115).

Archival files on repressed priests also contain applications from their wives in the mid-1950s requesting the local MVD bodies to review the case and rehabilitate them. They also appealed due to the necessity of receiving a pension from the eparchial administration. Specifically, one such case includes information about 56 convicted priests in Zhytomyr region in the second half of the 1930s. According to the case data, in 1938, the NKVD bodies in Zhytomyr region arrested, inter alia, the priest Yevdokymov Oleksandr Mykhailovych, who was charged under Article 54 (parts 10, 11) of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR and sentenced to the highest measure of punishment. The priest was accused of active participation and activity in an anti-Soviet monarchist organization. The NKVD used its methods to extract a personal confession from him that he had conducted agitation against the Soviet regime in villages in 1930, and in 1935, he was allegedly recruited by his acquaintance Orest Bychkovskyi to participate in the aforementioned organization (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1833, pp. 1–2).

The priest Davydiuk Omelian Ivanovych (born 1877) was also sentenced to the highest measure of punishment under the same article in 1938 (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1833, p. 10).

Crucial, in our opinion, is the analysis of the interrogation protocol of witness Boiko Silvestr Pylypovych dated December 7, 1957, a priest who served in the Zhytomyr Cathedral. He had worked with many of the repressed Zhytomyr priests in the second half of the 1930s, gave them a positive characterization, did not notice any counter-revolutionary activity on their part, and was unaware of any counter-revolutionary monarchist organization to which these individuals allegedly belonged (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1833, pp. 15–19). We note that this testimony was given during the period of de-Stalinization, when the person could feel freer during the interrogation, and thus spoke the truth.

Liudmyla Kopiichenko and Yevhen Timiriaiev cite numerous figures and facts about the repressions in Zhytomyr region during the ‘Great Terror’. They suggest that the Stalinist totalitarian system fabricated the necessary cases in accordance with the limits specified by the authorities, through moral and physical pressure on the arrested, falsifying interrogation protocols and other documents (Kopiichenko, & Timiriaiev, 2013, p. 249).

Another tragic figure among the repressed priests is Sokhatskyi Oleksandr Markovych (born 1891), a native of Denyshe village, Zhytomyr district, Zhytomyr region. On the day of his arrest on April 1, 1938, he resided in Berdychiv, Zhytomyr region, working as a labourer at

the Berdychiv sugar factory. His family included: a wife Sokhatska Mariia Mykolaivna (born 1898); a son Sokhatskyi Serhii Oleksandrovych (13 years old); a daughter Sokhatska Vira Oleksandrivna (9 years old); a son Sokhatskyi Vasyl Oleksandrovych (5 years old). On April 17, 1938, by decision of the Troika under Zhytomyr Oblast UNKVS (protocol No. 47), Sokhatskyi Oleksandr Markovych was sentenced to execution by firing squad for active participation in an anti-Soviet organization and for grouping anti-Soviet church elements for an armed uprising against the Soviet regime. The sentence was carried out on April 22, 1938. The burial place was not specified. On September 12, 1958, he was rehabilitated by the Military Tribunal of the Carpathian Military District (SAZhO, f. R-5013, d. 2, c. 1833, p. 363).

A researcher Viacheslav Litynskyi notes that in 1937 – 1938, in particular, in the Zhytomyr department of the NKVD, from 100 to 300 people could be shot in one night. The executioners often made false promises to the victims before carrying out the sentence (Litynskyi, 2024, p. 33).

The review of the 1938 cases of 56 repressed priests in Zhytomyr region by the MVD bodies in Zhytomyr region in the second half of the 1950s confirms that they were unjustly convicted, and that no counter-revolutionary monarchist revolution existed in Zhytomyr city in the 1930s. These were shocking, belated conclusions by the relevant authorities, who were approached by the relatives of the illegally repressed priests whose lives were shattered by the Stalinist punitive repressive machine.

Studying the testimonies of the priests, one can conclude that they denied any anti-Soviet agitation. The interrogation protocols themselves appear highly suspicious due to their uniform questions from investigators and the stereotypical answers from the arrested.

It should be noted that 1938 was a tragic year for thousands of people of various nationalities living in Zhytomyr region. According to some researchers, from September 25–27, 1938, a total of about a thousand people of German, Polish, and other nationalities from various districts of the region were convicted, sent to prisons, deported, and shot (Slobodeniuk, 2023).

The communist regime's anti-religious campaigns were also reflected in periodicals. We particularly noted the local press. For instance, in 1937, the pages of the newspaper "Radianska Volyn" featured numerous publications on this subject. In the issue of July 6, 1937, in an article titled "Relentlessly Expose the Counter-Revolutionary Actions of the Priesthood," the priest and members of the church community in Veresy village, Zhytomyr district, were accused of allegedly subversive activities concerning the harvest collection on the collective farm. "Under the guise of religion, church officials travel to Zhytomyr, Kyiv, informing 'holy fathers' about their work and receiving instructions on how to conduct vile anti-Soviet agitation," the article stated.

In the neighbouring villages of Vatskiv and Hadzintsi, believers were also accused of such subversive work and hostile agitation in the village. The article mentioned that the village leadership was conducting no political-mass work with the youth, and in Psyshchi village, the sexton and one of the believers allegedly obstructed the construction of a school planned by the collective farm (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 155 (3716), 6.07, p. 3). Generally, as we understand it, this concerned the ideological struggle with believers in the region's villages, who, through their way of life and religious views, influenced the consciousness of their fellow villagers, thereby creating problems for the Soviet authorities' actions.

One of the Old Believer priests in Zhytomyr city was accused of using the church premises to hide suspicious persons, speculating in manufactured goods and meat, and organizing drunken parties (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 190 (3752), 17.08, p. 3).

In some articles of the “Radianska Volyn” newspaper in 1937, priests were ascribed espionage actions against the Soviet regime. The content of the articles was aggressively directed against religion and other countries, discrediting it in people’s eyes: “Never has any religion defended the interests of the working people. And in our time, church organizations in all countries, as a rule, are closely connected with fascism, with the enemies of the USSR, with the most reactionary elements of the international bourgeoisie, and assist them in all their crimes against the working people” (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 194 (3756), 22.08, p. 3).

In the lengthy article “Spies and Saboteurs in Cassocks,” it was emphasized that during the years of Soviet communist construction, just as during the Civil War, “the church agency of capitalist counterintelligence waged a rabid struggle against all measures of the communist party and the Soviet government, fought against the transformation of a backward country into a mighty, strong socialist homeland.” The author quoted Stalin, who believed that anti-religious propaganda should undermine the influence of the “reactionary clergy” (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 222 (3784), 24.09, pp. 3–4).

By labelling the clergy and accusing them of counter-revolutionary activity, the authors of some publications called for an even greater expansion of the work of militant atheists (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 102 (3663), 04.05, p. 3).

Analyzing the content of many newspaper articles, we realize how the anti-religious propaganda on the pages of hundreds of newspapers destroyed traditional religious values and the inner world of man, instilling doubt and hostility against one’s own church, thereby paving the way in the souls of many non-believers to approve the totalitarian authorities’ repressions against the clergy, torture, and executions.

At the same time, it must be noted that the Soviet regime closely monitored the implementation of anti-religious propaganda in every village and city. For instance, in Levkovo village, Zhytomyr district, the anti-religious circle organized by the authorities ceased to function due to the departure of its leader. However, anti-religious lectures by district representatives were conducted for collective farmers and all village residents, poisoning the consciousness of those present with their arguments. The article called on the party and Komsomol organizations of the village to carry out this work (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 223 (3785), 26.09, p. 3).

From the content of some articles in the same newspaper, one can conclude that not all collective farm chairmen saw counter-revolutionary actions in the existence of churches and the lives of believers in their villages. For example, the author of the article “How Long Will Priestly Henchmen Rule in the Kalynivka Collective Farm?” expressed surprise why a collective farm chairman I. Kozel, instead of cleansing it of “hostile people, of counter-revolutionary priestly rabble,” took no measures to do so (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 226 (3788), 29.09, p. 3). In Berezivka village, Zhytomyr district, for example, the village and collective farm leaders were consequently accused of political blindness and the lack of anti-religious propaganda (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 84 (3645), 10.04, p. 3).

In the article “To Conduct Anti-Religious Propaganda Systematically,” the author wrote that the 1936 Stalin Constitution of the USSR granted all citizens freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda, while omitting the fact that the latter freedom, unlike the former, was indeed supported and practiced by the authorities. An example is given of a synagogue operating in a private building next to the agitation and propaganda department of the district party committee in Radomyshl city. “And what is counterposed to this?” the author asks. “What anti-religious work is conducted among Jewish

workers in Radomyshl? None”. It was proposed to systematically educate the workers in an anti-religious spirit, involving teachers and other cultural forces of the city (Radianska Volyn, 1937, 120 (3681), 26.05, p. 1).

The Zhytomyr Regional Lecture Bureau systematically organized lectures on anti-religious themes at enterprises and collective farms in the districts. Specifically, one issue of the “Chervone Polissia” newspaper reported on a lecture held on September 24, 1938, on the topic: “Marxism-Leninism on the Origin of Religion” at the ‘Bolshevik’ artel in Korostyshiv (Chervone Polissia, 1938, 224 (4088), 28.09, p. 4).

The formally proclaimed freedom of conscience and religion in the USSR did not protect believers in real life. The separation of church and state, as Tetiana Havryliuk notes, led to the dominance of the right of the atheistic worldview, and the religious worldview was subjected to devastating criticism (Havryliuk, 2022, p. 94).

Overall, the Bolshevik regime in the 1930s failed to achieve rapid changes in the religious consciousness of citizens. Oleh Bazhan notes that Soviet special services reported an increase in the population’s religious activity during and after the all-Union census conducted in January 1937. In total, 56.7% of citizens across the USSR identified themselves as believers (Bazhan, 2020, p. 301). The persistence of the population’s religiosity, according to Alla Kyrydon, testified to the complexity and a contradictory nature of the process of society’s transition to a new paradigm of existence, as well as the defense of “traditional socio-cultural relations against communist ideology” (Kyrydon, 2011, p. 196). Some researchers of the population’s religiosity issue in the Ukrainian SSR highlight the significant influence of family upbringing on the preservation of religious faith, the complex process of choosing a worldview under ideological pressure from the authorities (Havryliuk, & Diatlov, 2023, p. 58).

Thus, the policy of repression against religion and the Orthodox clergy in Zhytomyr region in the 1930s was an integral component of the communist regime’s all-Union totalitarian policy. Anti-religious propaganda became systematic, directed against the church as a social institution, and against the religious beliefs of the population in favour of communist ideology.

Conclusions. The repressive policy against the Orthodox clergy in Zhytomyr region was closely linked to the system of all-Union measures to combat real and imagined adversaries of the Stalinist regime. Furthermore, as evident from archival case materials and local periodicals, the Soviet regime viewed the church and the sermons of priests as an ideological competitor in the struggle for influence over the population’s consciousness, aiming to indoctrinate them with communist totalitarian concepts and principles.

The archival criminal cases are of crucial importance in clarifying the reasons for the terror against the clergy in Zhytomyr region in 1937 – 1938, who were incriminated for anti-Soviet activity, including the clergy’s participation in monarchist, nationalist, espionage, and insurgent organizations fabricated by the NKVD officers for the purpose of “overthrowing the Soviet regime” and proclaiming independent Ukraine.

The content of the archival investigative cases and issues of the newspapers “Radianska Volyn” and “Chervone Polissia” is striking in its biased, a hostile attitude toward the arrested priests, and the incitement of negative feelings toward the Orthodox clergy in society. Anti-religious propaganda became systematic, aimed against the church as a social institution, introducing doubt into the population’s minds about the correctness of religious beliefs, convincing them of its own arguments in favour of the ruling Bolshevik party, inflicting severe damage on the human relationship with God, by denying and distorting the church’s activities. At the same time, anti-religious propaganda was not carried out in all villages of

Zhytomyr region as the authorities desired, which indicated the deep rooting of religion in the everyday lives of the peasants. The insults directed at priests by the authors of the articles, the ascription of illegal actions to them, espionage activity against the Soviet regime, and the distortion of religious concepts were intended to discredit religion and the priesthood in the eyes of the population and to persuade them of the necessity of supporting the Bolshevik regime and communist ideology. The destruction of the population's traditional religious consciousness and the inner world of a man harmed both the church and society as a whole.

Acknowledgments. We express our sincere gratitude to all members of the editorial board for the consultations provided during the preparation of the article for publication.

Funding. The authors did not receive any financial assistance for the research and publication of this scholarly work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bazhan, O. H. (2020). Peresliduvannia pravoslavnoho dukhovenstva v URSR u chasy Velykoho teroru: osoblyvosti, masshtaby, naslidky [Persecution of Orthodox clergy in the Ukrainian SSR during the Great Terror: features, scale, consequences]. *Tserkva muchenykiv: honinnia na viru ta Tserkvu u XX stolitti: materialy Mizhnar. nauk. konf.* (Kyiv, 6–7 liutoho 2020 r.) / uporiad. S. V. Shumylo; vidp. red. prot. V. Saveliev. Kyiv, 301–311. [in Ukrainian].

Bernatskyi, V. (2016). *Relihiini obiednannia Volyni-Zhytomyrshchyny v umovakh bilshovytskoho rezhymu 1920 – 1930-kh rr.* [Religious associations of Volyn-Zhytomyr region under the Bolshevik regime of the 1920s – 1930s]. (Candidate dissertation). Rivne. [in Ukrainian].

Bernatskyi, V., Zhyliuk, S., & Sheretiuk, V. (2017). *Antyrelihiina polityka bilshovykiv na Volyni-Zhytomyrshchyni u 1920 – 1930-kh rokakh* [Bolshevik policy against religion in Volyn-Zhytomyr region in the 1920s – 1930s]: monohrafiia. Rivne. [in Ukrainian].

Buravskyi, O. A., & Vlasiuk, I. M. (2016). Antyrelihiina polityka radianskoi vlady na Volyni – Zhytomyrshchyni u 1920 – 1930-kh rr. i doli pravoslavnoho dukhovenstva [The policy of the Soviet government against religion in Volyn-Zhytomyr region in the 1920s – 1930s and the fate of the Orthodox clergy]. *Eminak*, 3, 51–55. [in Ukrainian].

Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zhytomyrskoi oblasti [SAZR – State Archives of Zhytomyr Region].

Zhyliuk, S. (2002). Represii proty dukhivnytstva ta viruiuchykh na Zhytomyrshchyni u 30-kh rokakh [Repressions against the clergy and believers in the Zhytomyr region in the 1930s]. *Liudyna i svit – Man and the World*, 7–8, 40–44. [in Ukrainian].

Kyrydon, A. (2011). *Derzhava-tserkva-suspilstvo: inversna transformatsiia v Ukraini* [State-Church-Society: inverse transformation in Ukraine]. Rivne. [in Ukrainian].

Koliastruk, O. (2023). Radianski represyvni praktyky i masovyi teror u 1920-ti rr. (na prykladi Podillia) [The Soviet Repressive Practices and Mass Terror during the 1920s (Based on Podillia region)]. *Naukovi zapysky VDPU imeni Mykhaila Kotsiubynskoho. Serii: Istoriia – Scientific Papers of the Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskiy State Pedagogical University. Series History*, 45, 98–104. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31652/2411-2143-2023-45-98-104> [in Ukrainian].

Kopiichenko, L., & Timiriaiev, Ye. (2013). Osoblyvosti «Velykoho teroru» na Zhytomyrshchyni [Features of the “Great Terror” in Zhytomyr region]. *Politychni represii v Ukrainii RSR 1937–1938 rr.: doslidnytski refleksii ta interpretatsii. Do 75-richchia “Velykoho teroru” v SRSR: Materialy Vseukrainskoi naukovoï konferentsii*, m. Kyiv, 15 bereznia 2012 r. / Uporiad.: O. H. Bazhan, R. Yu. Podkur. Kyiv, 222–250. [in Ukrainian].

Litynskyi, V. (2024). Tekhnolohiia vykonannia smertnykh vyrokiv pratsivnykamy NKVD u 1937 – 1938 rokakh [The technology of executions by NKVD officers in 1937 – 1938]. *Naukovi zapysky VDPU imeni Mykhaila Kotsiubynskoho. Serii: Istoriia – Scientific Papers of the Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskiy State Pedagogical University. Series History*, 49, 30–36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31652/2411-2143-2024-49-30-36> [in Ukrainian].

Rafalska, T. L. (2010). *“Velykyi teror” na Zhytomyrshchyni (lypen 1937 r. – lystopad 1938 r.)* [“Great Terror” in Zhytomyr region (July 1937 – November 1938)]. (Candidate dissertation). Kyiv. [in Ukrainian].

Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast. (2006). *Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast* [Rehabilitated by history. Zhytomyr region]. Book 1. Zhytomyr. [in Ukrainian].

Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast. (2010). *Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast* [Rehabilitated by history. Zhytomyr region]. Book 3. Zhytomyr. [in Ukrainian].

Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast. (2013). *Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zhytomyrska oblast* [Rehabilitated by history. Zhytomyr region]. Book 6. Zhytomyr. [in Ukrainian].

Slobodeniuk, O. (2023). U Zhytomyri vshanovuiut pamiat zhertv politychnykh represii [Zhytomyr commemorates victims of political repression]. *Suspilne Zhytomyr*. URL: https://suspilne.media/zhytomyr/482608-u-zitomiri-vsanovuut-pamat-zertv-politichnih-represij/?utm_source=perplexity [in Ukrainian].

Shapoval, Yu. (2013). Ukraina v dobu “Velykoho teroru”: etapy, osoblyvosti, naslidky [Ukraine during the “Great Terror”: stages, features, consequences]. *Politychni represii v Ukrainskii RSR 1937 – 1938 rr.: doslidnytski refleksii ta interpretatsii. Do 75-richchia “Velykoho teroru” v SRSR*: Materialy Vseukrainskoi naukovoï konferentsii, m. Kyiv, 15 bereznia 2012 r. / Uporiad.: O. H. Bazhan, R. Yu. Podkur. Kyiv, 128–164. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 84 (3645), 10.04. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 155 (3716), 6.07. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 190 (3752), 17.08. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 194 (3756), 22.08. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 222 (3784), 24.09. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 102 (3663), 04.05. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 120 (3681), 26.05. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 223 (3785), 26.09. [in Ukrainian].

Radianska Volyn. (1937). *Radianska Volyn* [Soviet Volhynia], 226 (3788), 29.09. [in Ukrainian].

Chervone Polissia. (1938). *Chervone Polissia* [Red Polissya], 224 (4088), 28.09. [in Ukrainian].

Havryliuk, T. (2022). Real and Declared Individual Freedom in Legislative Acts on Freedom of Religion During the Soviet Era. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 42(4), Article 8, 85–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2354> [in English].

Havryliuk, T., & Diatlov, V. (2023). The Nature and Motives of Religiosity in an Atheistic State (on the Example of Scientific Research Conducted in Soviet Ukraine). *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 43(4), Article 5, 47–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2429> [in English].

Voynarovskiy, A., Zhmud, N., & Hrebenova, V. (2024). Persecution of Christian Confessions in Ukrainian Podilia during the 1930s. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 44(7), Article 4, 37–57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2229.2551> [in English].

The article was received June 23, 2025.

Article recommended for publishing 30/05/2026.

This article is available under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license