

## In Lubyanka's Shadow: An Assumptionist Priest In Stalin's Moscow, 1934 – 1945

By G. M. Hamburg

From 1934 to 1999 Assumptionists from the United States served as chaplains of the American embassy in Moscow. For much of the same period they acted as pastors of the venerable St. Louis des Français church, located across the street from the Lubyanka prison, the main political prison in the Soviet capital. Under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, whose hostility to Catholicism in particular and religion in general was undisguised, the American Assumptionists were among the few ordained priests legally permitted to operate a Catholic church or chapel in central Russia. Given the extraordinary difficulties under which they worked – multiple pressures from the Soviet government, uneven support from U.S. and Western diplomatic corps, physical isolation from their religious community, and a paucity of material resources – the American chaplains' survival in Moscow is a remarkable, virtually untold episode in church history and in the annals of the Cold War.

Among the American chaplains perhaps the most remarkable figure was Father Marie-Léopold Braun (1903 – 1964), who served in Moscow from 1934 to 1945. During those twelve years as embassy chaplain and priest at the St. Louis des Français church Braun ministered to a mixed congregation of diplomats from the United States and Catholic countries of Europe, to Russian Catholics displaced from other churches, and to members of various confessions, who, for a variety of reasons connected with political events, had lost their own places of

worship and had come to the “foreigners’ church” to participate in Christian rites. After the August 1936 departure from Moscow of Braun’s mentor and immediate superior, Bishop Pie Neveu, Braun had to cope alone with his small congregation’s urgent needs. In the extreme circumstances of the Stalin purges and the second world war Braun confronted personal surveillance and harassment by the Soviet political police, the arrest of many parishioners, periodic attempts by the Soviet government to seize the church’s assets or close it, as well as five robberies of church property and two desecrations of the altar. By putting hard-won knowledge to good use, he kept alive the Catholic clerical presence in Moscow and laid a foundation upon which his successors from the Assumptionist order might build. Because of Braun’s strategic importance in the Assumptionists’ Russian mission and the intrinsic significance of his actions as a religious leader in Stalin’s time, study of his Moscow chaplaincy and pastorate is justified.

This essay will offer an overview of Braun’s ministry, which, for analytical purposes, will be divided into three parts: first, a brief comment on his apprenticeship to Bishop Neveu from 1934 to 1936; second, a more extended discussion of his activity between 1936 and 1941; and third, a necessarily fragmentary treatment of Braun’s deeds during the second world war. The essay will draw on Braun’s personal papers in the Assumptionist archives in Boston, Massachusetts, and on his correspondence in the Archivio di Padri Assunzionisti in Rome.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are two overviews of the first quarter century of American Assumptionist activity in Moscow, each of which treats Braun’s ministry. Both remain unpublished. See Assumptionist Archive, Boston. Robert J. Fortin, A. A., “The Catholic Chaplaincy in

In the present essay the larger Soviet historical context of Braun's work in Moscow will be sketched out only where necessary to clarify his actions. Braun's reactions to the Stalinist "show trials" from 1936 to 1938 constitute a separate theme too complex to analyze in a paper of short scope. Braun's fate after returning to the United States and the history of his memoirs, both fascinating topics that deserve special attention, must also be treated elsewhere.

## I

Braun was posted to Moscow almost immediately after the signing of the November 1933 Roosevelt-Litvinov accords that opened an American embassy in Moscow and provided for the appointment at the embassy of a chaplain with the right "to conduct without annoyance or molestation of any kind religious services and rites of ceremonial nature." In negotiations with the U.S. State Department, Father Crescent Armanet managed to secure the appointment as chaplain of Father Braun, who was allowed to accompany Ambassador William Bullitt and the first U.S. legation to Moscow. In talks with Bullitt and with the Soviet consulate in Washington, Braun made clear his determination not only to serve the American embassy but also to assist Bishop Neveu in ministering to the congregation at the St. Louis des Français church. This arrangement made it possible for Braun, once

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Moscow. A History of its First Twenty-Five Years. 1934 – 1939," (Milton, Massachusetts, 1989); Patrick Croghan, "Twenty-Five Difficult Years 1934 – 1959. (An outline of the history of the first American Assumptionists in Moscow compiled from their letters and other writings contained in the Provincial Archives.). In addition, we possess two books on the problem of Catholic relations with the Soviet Union, both of which draw heavily on Braun's correspondence and illuminate aspects of his ministry but without singling him out for monographic study. See Antoine Wenger, *Rome et Moscou: 1900 – 1950* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1987); *idem.*, *Catholiques en Russie d'après les archives du KGB 1920 – 1960* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998).

arrived in Moscow, to perform his spiritual duties with U.S. embassy personnel while simultaneously living close to Neveu in the French embassy compound. Braun's connections to two Western diplomatic legations later presented him with crucial advantages: access to information from two Western perspectives in a country where information of any sort was rationed by the police; access to two diplomatic couriers; potential support from more than one Western country in cases where the Catholic church's interests might be compromised through Soviet pressure.

When Braun arrived in Moscow on 1 March 1934, he was not yet thirty years old. In some respects his education was excellent: he spoke English and French with native facility; he had learned German well enough to teach literature at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts; he knew Castillian Spanish and could read Italian; he was a fine pianist and had briefly studied musical theory in London. Unfortunately, Braun came to Moscow without a word of Russian language, without knowledge of Russian culture or familiarity with the Soviet political system. He saw himself as "only a young priest understandably bewildered at the very thought of being sent to Moscow."<sup>2</sup>

During his first two years in Moscow, Braun assisted Neveu at the French church, learned Russian language and familiarized himself with Soviet life.

Initially, Braun's priestly duties were far from onerous. On weekdays he helped open the St. Louis church at seven in the morning, then attended the bishop at mass, which was read at a side altar. We do not possess exact numbers

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<sup>2</sup> Assumptionist Archives, Boston, Braun, *Twelve Russian Years to Remember*, unpublished memoir, p. 6.

for attendance, but a 1933 letter from Neveu estimated “an average of 25 Holy Communion, and to this must be added those who do not communicate.”<sup>3</sup> Because of on-going anti-religious activity, daily mass attendance may have declined in 1934, but there is no reason to suppose it fell precipitously. On Sundays the priests presided over two services. At nine Braun offered mass in English, to a congregation of fifteen English speakers. Most of these congregants were from the British embassy. According to Braun, the number of Catholics in the U.S. embassy was five.<sup>4</sup> At ten o’clock Bishop Neveu, attended by Braun, read high mass before the main altar in French. Although high mass was the week’s chief liturgical event, attendance depended on whether Sunday coincided with a rest day [vykhodnoi den’] in the Soviet work calendar. On work Sundays, according to Braun, mass attendance was only a “sprinkling of people.” On rest Sundays, however, attendance rose significantly. On high holidays, like Easter and Christmas, the church, which could comfortably seat five hundred, was filled to overflowing.<sup>5</sup>

After doing church business in the mornings, Braun took daily lessons in Russian from Neveu or from the Russian tutor engaged by the bishop. According to his memoirs, Braun “declined, conjugated and translated for months on end. I got acquainted with Krylov, Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol’ and so many other authors, as I found time to read in the original.” He supplemented these formal

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Croghan, *The Peasant from Makeyevka, Biography of Bishop Pius Neveu A. A.* (Worcester, Mass.: 1982) p. 236.

<sup>4</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No 38, Letter from Braun to Father Antonin Coggia, 12 March 1935, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember,* pp. 184 – 186.

lessons by listening to Soviet radio broadcasts whose “splendid slowly spoken lessons could be heard in impeccable pronunciation.”<sup>6</sup> As Braun advanced in his linguistic competence, he started his own collection of printed materials – mostly books and pamphlets circulated by the League of the Militant Godless, the leading Soviet anti-religious organization. In 1936, he purchased several of the League’s tracts, including a brochure describing the means by which Christianity would be destroyed in the USSR.<sup>7</sup>

To master the complexities of Soviet jargon and popular speech, Braun devised a plan to tour Moscow, section by section, on foot. To disarm pedestrians who might be startled by a foreigner dressed in Roman collar, he walked alongside Neveu’s large, black-and-white Siberian dog “Flip.” For a full year in the afternoons he trod the by-ways of Moscow, “several times exploring its entire periphery.”<sup>8</sup> These excursions provided an invaluable education not only in the Russian language but in Soviet life.

At Torgsin stores in central Moscow Braun witnessed poor Russians from “socially-harmful” classes (former tsarist officials, people from noble or merchant backgrounds, relatives of priests or foreigners) tearfully surrendering family heirlooms or religious items for food. He watched clerks remove icon covers [rizi] of gold or silver from the icons themselves, assay the metals with acid, then throw the covers on a pile. At the *lavki* of street vendors and at occasional bookstores, Braun saw “old Slavonic in-folios and invaluable church volumes...being used as

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<sup>6</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 70, Letter from Leopold Braun to Father Ernest Baudouy, dated feast of St. Thomas de Villeneuve [September] 1936.

<sup>8</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 51 – 53.

wrapping paper.”<sup>9</sup> At a bookstore on *Miasnitskaia ulitsa* he watched a saleswoman wrap purchases with pages “from an immense edition of the *Lives of the Saints* in Slavonic.”<sup>10</sup> Also in central Moscow, Braun witnessed the slow demolition of various Orthodox churches. He saw on *Nikol’skaia ulitsa* just off Red Square the marvelous seventeenth-century Kazan’ Cathedral demolished, its teeming tent-rooves and cupola yielding to a soft drink stand. In 1936 in *Zemlianoi gorod* he noted the gradual demolition of monastery walls and several interior buildings of the Passion Monastery [Strastnoi monastyr]. He carefully observed passers-by and listened to their comments in order to discover their attitudes toward the Orthodox church and toward Soviet authorities. On the outskirts of Moscow, at a farmers’ market where peasants sold food from their gardens, Braun befriended the market manager, who allowed him to smoke his pipe and listen to interactions of peasant entrepreneurs with their customers. There, Braun reported: “Very often there were groups of peasants standing in a circle around an invalid who for his living would read a few verses out of the Bible. Most always it was done in Slavonic, which is the principal tongue of the Eastern rite. This of course was merely tolerated and never encouraged. When darkness came, everybody disbanded and returned to his home. These improvised audiences usually listened with bowed and uncovered heads to the reading of scriptural texts.” Apparently Braun listened to such readings on more than one occasion and from more than one reader. He noticed that the Bibles from which the readers read were pre-revolutionary editions “of the Synodal typography”

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<sup>9</sup> Assumptionist Archives, Boston, “Fr. Braun - 1948 Manuscript,” p. 39

<sup>10</sup> “Fr. Braun – 1948 Manuscript,” p. 41.

“carefully wrapped in cloth or paper to protect the binding.”<sup>11</sup> Braun’s impressions after a year of exploring urban Moscow were that Soviet authorities had done much to marginalize religion in daily life, but had done little to diminish religious belief among the populace. He concluded that “the great mass of worshipping Russians never repudiated their religious beliefs. They were simply prevented in effect, by state decree, from being present in their village and city churches.”<sup>12</sup> In Braun’s opinion, Russia was “incurably religious.”<sup>13</sup>

## II

Throughout the winter of 1935 – 1936 and spring 1936 Bishop Neveu suffered from hypertension, high cholesterol, angina and nephritis. By July 1936 Neveu was too sick to survive another winter in Moscow, so Braun spent that month arranging for Neveu’s exit visa. The bishop left the Soviet Union on 31 July 1936, never to see his beloved parishioners again. In a sense, Neveu’s departure meant that the Catholic church in the USSR had been decapitated, for he had been the only bishop at freedom in central Russia. Braun was now left alone to serve as acting pastor of the St. Louis des Français church, a position he held until exiting the Soviet Union in December 1945.

The degree of difficulty facing Braun can be gauged statistically by perusing data on the number of operating churches in the USSR. In 1934 St. Louis des Français church was one of three operating Catholic churches in Moscow and one of thirty-one in the Soviet Union. By summer 1937 St. Louis

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<sup>11</sup> “Father Braun – 1948 Manuscript,” p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian years To Remember*, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup> “Father Braun – 1948 Manuscript,” p. 118.



des Français was the only operating Catholic church in Moscow, where it served more than twenty thousand Catholics. By late 1938 it was the only operating Catholic church in the entire Russian Socialist Republic.<sup>14</sup> The closure of so many other churches meant that Braun suddenly found himself at the center of Catholic life in a vast realm spanning nearly one-sixth of the globe, yet he lacked the formal authority to ordain new bishops or priests and remained physically at the mercy of those very Soviet institutions responsible for the church closures.

From 1936 to June 1941 some features of Braun's routine at the St. Louis des Français church remained the same as earlier. On week days he opened the church at seven thirty to prepare for eight o'clock mass. As before, attendance was modest. On Sundays he regularly said two masses – a low mass with gospel reading and sermon in English for diplomatic personnel from the U.S. and British embassies, and a high mass with gospel and sermon in French for the longtime French inhabitants of Moscow and for Francophone diplomats. At Easter service in April 1937 Braun followed Neveu's example, reading a sermon in Russian and delivering the traditional paschal greeting in that language.<sup>15</sup>

In May 1937, however, with the closure of two nearby Catholic churches, Braun's clerical mission was radically transformed. During preparations for the feast of Corpus Christi in June he heard confessions, mostly from displaced parishioners of the Polish Catholic church, for seven hours over two days

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<sup>14</sup> Rev. Christopher Lawrence Zuger, *The Forgotten Catholics of the Soviet Empire from Lenin through Stalin* (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2001) pp. 255 – 278.

<sup>15</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 6 April 1937, p. 2

“without stopping.”<sup>16</sup> At mass these same displaced Catholics “flood[ed] St. Louis where we have communions without number.” For these new parishioners Braun added the regular reading of the gospel in Russian. He lamented: “That is all I can do. For the moment I give no sermon in Russian.”<sup>17</sup> At some point that year, Braun decided to add a sermon in Russian at Sunday high mass. In his memoirs he claimed: “Sermons were to be heard nowhere else in the entire capital, including the Russian Orthodox churches that were still open.”<sup>18</sup>

We have no copies of these sermons, but we do possess Braun’s short characterization of them: “At all times by the grace of God did I speak freely of the verities of Christian doctrine. At no time did I submit what I had to say to local authorities. To what extent the Soviets approved of my reading the scriptures or of my delivering sermons, is an entirely different question. Foreigners and nationals alike often expressed surprise not on what I said, but on my daring to say it. To these I simply quoted St. Paul: ‘The word of God is not fettered.’ (II Timothy 2:9). Soviet disapproval of what I said from the pulpit of that church was made known to me in no uncertain manner.”<sup>19</sup> Probably in reaction to Braun’s reading the Gospels and sermons in Russian, the Soviet police sent a stenographer to church on Sundays and holy days to “record everything [Braun] said in English, French, or Russian.”

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<sup>16</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 27 June 1937, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 84, Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 1 June 1937.

<sup>18</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 254.

<sup>19</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 254.

The stenographer's presence at worship signaled the beginning of intense official pressure on Braun and of intensified surveillance of the church congregation. In May 1937 a French embassy official warned Braun to be "on guard" because "something is being prepared [by the Soviet authorities] against you [J'ai l'impression que l'on prépare quelque chose contra vous là-bas]." The official did not explain what sort of official enterprise might be under "preparation," but he noted ominously that "a wave of xenophobia had struck Russian administrators" – a hint that, as a foreigner, Braun constituted a special irritant to the "xenophobic" Soviet officials.<sup>20</sup> On 31 July 1937 the scheme against Braun came to light when the Moscow district commissar of cults asked him to surrender the St. Louis church's baptismal registers -- its so-called *metricheskie knigi*. Entering the church sanctuary the commissar requested to see the form used for recording baptisms. When Braun produced a blank form, the commissar asked for the parish baptismal registers, claiming "all other churches in the city have handed over the books. If you do not do likewise, you are exposing yourself to severe penalties."<sup>21</sup> He told Braun that his office was "interested in the *number* of baptisms" performed in the church. According to a letter to Bishop Neveu, Braun responded negatively to this request: "'That does not concern you.' I explained to him that we attach no civil or juridical value to those records which have purely sacramental character, and, so far as the administration of sacraments is concerned, the government plays no role since the

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<sup>20</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 3 May 1937, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 263 – 264.

decree [of January 1918] promulgating the separation of church and state.” The commissar nevertheless wanted to see the registers; Braun informed him that he would display the registers for the commissar’s inspection on the church premises, but would not surrender their custody.<sup>22</sup> After this encounter, Braun sought the advice of the French ambassador Robert Coulondre, who agreed that the church registry should not be surrendered. Braun also made an appointment with then U.S. ambassador Joseph Davies, whom he told that “if the Soviets resort to force in obtaining possession of these records, I [am] determined to follow them wherever they [go], even to the point of being jailed.” Like Coulondre, Davies supported Braun’s moral stand, writing a letter to Minister of Foreign Relations Maksim Litvinov on Braun’s behalf.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, under scrutiny from the two Western embassies, the Moscow officials who had initiated the demand for the baptismal registers backed down.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 9 August 1937, pp. 2 – 3.

<sup>23</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> Curiously, during this dramatic encounter in Moscow, Braun’s superior in Rome, Monsignor Filippo Giobbe, instructed him to make three copies of the baptismal registry – one for Rome, a second to be held in the French embassy out of the police’s reach, and a third copy of each baptismal record to be given to each baptized Catholic. Braun brushed off this last stipulation. He told Neveu: “Remitting a copy to the baptized, I find, would expose poor people to unnecessary risks and perils. The poor peasants are capable in their ignorance of taking the certificates to the civil registry [ZAGS] and of being accused of trying to use [religious] documents for civil purposes. I think you [Neveu] will share this opinion and will explain to Filippo [Giobbe] that the contemplated step presents grave complications.” Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 24 August 1937, p. 2. Although Neveu did as Braun asked, Giobbe nevertheless insisted that Braun supply a copy of the certificate to the baptized. Braun responded by a small deception. He told Giobbe “*bene benissimo*,” but persisted in holding back the records. Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 27 September 1937, p. 2.

Although the immediate danger of his arrest had passed, Braun continued to feel pressure from the Soviet authorities. In September 1937 he wrote Paris: “At the church all is relatively tranquil, except that we are under strict surveillance [nous sommes sévèrement surveillés].”<sup>25</sup> By late 1937/early 1938 the level of surveillance of Braun and other church personnel had intensified. In November 1937 one of Braun’s most trusted parishioners, Mademoiselle Malinovskaia, was arrested and confined in the women’s prison on *Novinskii Boulevard*. After she died in prison on 15 January 1938, Braun celebrated mass “for the soul of this martyr.”<sup>26</sup> On 5 March 1938 the police arrested the church sacristan Albert Ott, then searched his apartment, terrifying his wife in the process.<sup>27</sup> Two weeks later, in a letter announcing the expulsion from the USSR of Father Michel Florent, Braun declared that he expected his own expulsion to occur soon. In a conversation with Loy Henderson of the American embassy, Braun was told “of the probably eventuality” of that action, although Henderson promised “that he would do everything possible to protect me.”<sup>28</sup>

Throughout this entire period of intensified surveillance, police pressure and official harassment, Braun struggled to keep the doors of St. Louis des Français open. Annual taxes on the church building and its land came to 377

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<sup>25</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma, CL 2 DZ, No. 91. Letter from Braun to Frs. Ernest Baudouy and Antonin Coggia, 6 September 1937.

<sup>26</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 24 January 1938, p. 2. Malinovskaia had served Braun as a courier, carrying money to priests and parishioners operating clandestinely elsewhere in the USSR.

<sup>27</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 8 March 1938, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 22 March 1938, p. 2.

American dollars – a hefty amount beyond the ability of the parish itself to cover. Electricity rates were exorbitant, being twenty-two times the established rate per kilowatt-hour charged to state enterprises. Moscow Gas and Electrical Supply refused to provide coal or heating fuel to the church, so Braun had to turn to other sources and pay in hard currency. When the church roof needed replacement, the state's refusal to sell roofing materials to the church forced Braun to choose between paying high rates on the black market and importing material from Finland, again for hard currency.<sup>29</sup>

In principle, the failure to deal with any one of these problems might have led to the church's closure – for nonpayment of taxes, violation of the local building code, or dealing on the black market. Other churches in central Russia had been closed on similar pretexts. Braun avoided that fate because he was able to tap a wellspring of support from the two Western embassies, from Assumptionists abroad and from private donors. In March 1937 the French ambassador paid the church's taxes out of embassy funds on the grounds that the church was “not only a source of French influence [in the USSR] but...a powerful source of support for the entire French colony [in Moscow].”<sup>30</sup> At various points both Bullitt and Davies contributed from their own pockets to the church's maintenance. The French embassy solved the fuel problem by selling Braun some of its own heating oil. The French embassy also facilitated the import of roofing materials from Finland; the costs were met by private donors to the

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<sup>29</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 90 – 96.

<sup>30</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2ES, No. 205. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 10 March 1937, p. 2.

church and by the Assumptionist community. Contingencies that might have led to the church's closing led rather to nothing more than chronic headaches for its beleaguered pastor.

Much more disheartening to Braun was a series of five robberies of the St. Louis des Français church that occurred between 6 December 1940 and 15 February 1941, robberies that he attributed to the Soviet political police. The justification of that attribution was circumstantial: since the church lay across the street from the well-guarded Lubyanka prison, Braun could not fathom how amateur burglars could have broken into the church without attracting attention from nearby NKVD officers, nor could he imagine that common criminals would take the risk of entering a foreign-owned church located so close to Soviet political police headquarters. In any case, he duly reported the first three burglaries to the Moscow militia and notified the French and U.S. embassies of the church's lost property. The fourth robbery, however, was more serious: on Christmas evening 1940 thieves hacksawed the steel bars of a sanctuary window, entered the church and stole sacred vessels including one gold and silver plate and "a beautiful gold pyx of extraordinary design with an *Agnus Dei* engraved on the cover." Worst of all, the thieves broke the tabernacle doors and strewed the Blessed Sacrament on the altar. When the distraught Braun reported the burglary and desecration to the militia, they sent investigators to tell him that "no clues could be found" as to the thieves' identity.<sup>31</sup> To add insult to injury, the Moscow city council sent a delegation to inventory the church's lost valuables, then

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<sup>31</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 271 – 273.

presented Braun with a bill for several thousand rubles – the cost of state-owned property for which the church, not the thieves, had assumed civic responsibility in the 1920s.

On 15 February 1941 the church was robbed a fifth time, again at night, but on this occasion the thieves entered by smashing the solid oak paneled front doors in plain view of Lubianka guards. In Braun's opinion, there was no doubt that this last robbery had been committed by the police themselves. As before, the tabernacle doors were sprung and the Sacred Species spread over the altar. Everything that remained of value was hauled away by the thieves or spoiled, including Braun's vestments for mass. He concluded: "I felt as though the evil-doers were telling me: Here is another sample of what we can do. Why don't you go home?"<sup>32</sup> As before, Braun notified the militia and the Western embassies of the church's losses, but this time he also contacted the international press in the person of Henry Cassidy, then chief of the Associated Press in Moscow. Cassidy's story about the five robberies and two desecrations of the St. Louis church was carried in newspapers throughout the Western world.

During this stressful period Braun carefully watched for signals that Soviet authorities might terminate their aggressive anti-religious campaign, or that they might at least reduce official pressures on believers. In September 1936 Braun, disguised as a Spanish agitator, visited the Moscow headquarters of the League of Militant Godless. There he listened to a guide's summary of the role of atheistic propaganda in the current five-year plan, and he obtained various books and slides

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<sup>32</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 274 – 275.



used by League anti-religious agitators. Although Braun later expressed amusement that his imposture had fooled his Soviet adversaries, he left alarmed at the League's implacable hostility toward religion. In a letter to Paris written just after the visit, he begged his Assumptionist superiors "to pray that the Lord will assist us. Instead of the situation clarifying and improving, it becomes more obscure and complicated every day."<sup>33</sup>

In late 1936, when new version of the Soviet constitution renewed the promise of early Soviet legislation that church and state would be strictly separated, Braun investigated the possibility that the new constitutional guarantee might lead to a cessation of the anti-religious campaign. In October 1936 he attended a presentation by Justice Commissar N. V. Krylenko on article 124 of the new charter. Krylenko declared that, under the new constitution, Soviet citizens might baptize their children, marry and bury in the church, even "bury their potatoes with religious ceremonies if they wish" without state interference. At the same time, however, Krylenko underlined the legal responsibility of citizens to refrain from religious propaganda of any sort. On this matter, Braun observed, the commissar spoke with "extreme hostility [mépris]" that was "evident in his gestures, his attitude and tone of voice." From the presentation Braun "learned nothing new."<sup>34</sup> A month later *Pravda* published what purported to be a transcript of Krylenko's remarks; upon inspection Braun found that "a large portion of what he [Krylenko] had said [in September] did not appear [in the

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<sup>33</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 70, Letter from Braun to Fr. Ernest Baudouy, 22 September 1936.

<sup>34</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2ES, No. 136. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 6 October 1936, pp. 3 – 4.

newspaper story].”<sup>35</sup> In sifting the evidence, Braun found no justification to think that the Soviet state had changed its policy toward religion in promulgating the new “Stalin” constitution.

In summer 1937 there came various reports that the communist party wanted quickly to put an end to religion in the Soviet Union. On 27 July Braun wrote his superiors in Paris that “a communist neighbor of a women believer who lives on good terms with her recently said to her that she should bear in mind the party’s decision to finish off religion at all costs [la décision du parti qui veut à tout prix en finir avec la religion].”<sup>36</sup> That same month, the leader of the League of the Militant Godless, Emel’ian Mikhailovich Iaroslavskii, gave a radio address in which he declared that the party must put an end to “religious obscurantism” in the USSR.<sup>37</sup> Given the atmosphere then prevailing inside the communist party, it is unlikely that Iaroslavskii would have spoken so definitively without the approval of Stalin and the Politburo generally.

The Soviet anti-religious campaign targeted all confessions, but there were also pressures directed specifically against Soviet Catholics. For example, in September 1937 Braun read an anti-Catholic polemic in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* attacking “the pope and his ministers” by the “vilest inventions that one can

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<sup>35</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2ES, No. 138. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, Feast of St. Gertrude, 16 November 1936, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 88. Letter from Braun to Frs. Ernest Baudouy and Antonin Coggia, 27 July 1937.

<sup>37</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 89. Letter from Braun to Frs. Ernest Baudouy and Antonin Coggia, 9 August 1937, p. 2. Braun dated the broadcast “three weeks earlier.

imagine.” Braun found the article “disreputable and disgusting.”<sup>38</sup> In November 1937 the Leningrad journal *Antireligioznik* carried a “violent attack on the Jesuits” – an attack that the Dominican Michel Florent somehow felt was directed against him, as a foreign missionary in the city. Braun found nothing in the article explicitly indicting Florent, but he nevertheless wondered “what kind of salad the G.P.U. [sic] is making.”<sup>39</sup> In January 1938 the Leningrad authorities’ intentions toward Florent became manifest when the newspaper *Smena* declared the Dominican a fascist agitator among Leningrad’s youth. The newspaper asserted that “fascism only exists in Leningrad thanks to Catholicism.”<sup>40</sup> Within two months, as we noted above, Florent was ordered to be expelled from the Soviet Union. Here again was superfluous proof that the League of the Militant Godless, the anti-religious press and government organs, including the police, were collaborating in an effort to end religion in the Soviet Union.

As he surveyed the dispiriting political landscape, however, Braun saw one sign of hope: the party’s and government’s anti-religious efforts were not generating much popular support. In April 1937 he wrote his Paris superiors that there were “numerous defections in every corner of the country from anti-religious organizations.”<sup>41</sup> That same month he suggested in a letter to Monsignor Filippo Giobbe in Rome that, despite unrelenting pressure from anti-

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<sup>38</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 91. Letter from Braun to Frs. Ernest Baudouy and Antonin Coggia, 29 November 1937.

<sup>39</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2DZ, No. 97. Letter from Braun to Frs. Ernest Baudouy and Antonin Coggia, 29 November 1937.

<sup>40</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 28 January 1938.

<sup>41</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. CL 2 DZ, No. 81. Letter from Braun to Frs. Ernest Baudouy and Antonin Coggia, 19 April 1937.

religious organizations, “the reaction of the population in general seems to me more than indifferent.” Moreover, Braun now suspected that among the five million militant atheists in the USSR there were many religious believers who had been coerced into joining the anti-religious movement. For that reason, he predicted that the atheistic movement would unravel as soon as state coercion diminished. “*Violenta non durant,*” he exclaimed.<sup>42</sup>

From Braun’s perspective, the acid test of the regime’s anti-religious policies was the 1937 census, which asked citizens: “Are you a believer or non-believer?” Writing in his memoirs, Braun asserted: “militant atheists expected the record [of the census] to show in black and white that the peoples of Russia had thrown overboard their belief in God along with the religious traditions. The census would officially demonstrate that communist materialist teachings had finally conquered the remnants of bourgeois doctrines.”<sup>43</sup> Recruiting of census takers and technical planning for data collection occupied several months before the census actually occurred, on 6 January 1937, a day coinciding with Orthodox Christmas. During late winter and spring 1937 the census bureaus in various parts of the USSR processed the results. As early as April 1937 the Leningrad central census bureau reported “statistical and political problems” with the census data – a sure sign that the results were not what the party had anticipated.<sup>44</sup> That same month Braun heard rumors that the census had gone badly for the government.

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<sup>42</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Monsignor Filippo Giobbe, 21 April 1937.

<sup>43</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 362.

<sup>44</sup> V.B. Zhiromskaia, I. N. Kiselev, Iu. A. Poliakov, *Polveka pod grifom sekretno. Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1937 goda*, pp. 123 – 124.

On 6 April he wrote Bishop Neveu that *Pravda* had recently published an editorial asserting “a believer is no enemy of the government [veruiushchii ne vrag vlasti].” Apropos that editorial he remarked to Neveu: “There is certainly something unusual, even extraordinary, in that attitude. Is it because the census has given unexpected results on the number of believers just as the “Letter from Rome” predicted, and now Uncle Joseph [Stalin] will begin to sound a retreat [on the religious front]?”<sup>45</sup>

In his memoirs, Braun reported that [unnamed] Moscow acquaintances in the Central Department of the All-Union Census Office told him that “seventy percent of the population had answered in the affirmative to the question ‘Are you or are you not a believer?’”<sup>46</sup> In fact, as a recent post-Soviet study of the 1937 census has shown, Braun’s associates overestimated the number of believers. Actually, fifty-five million Soviet citizens declared themselves believers on question five of the census, against forty-two million who recorded themselves as unbelievers. Thus, of the ninety-seven million citizens who answered the question, roughly fifty-six percent classified themselves as believers.<sup>47</sup>

Most significant for our purposes is that, early in April 1937, Braun had concluded that the tide in the anti-religious campaign might be turning against militant atheists. On 7 April Braun wrote Monsignor Filippo Giobbe that

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<sup>45</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Pie Neveu, 6 April 1937, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian years To Remember*, p. 363.

<sup>47</sup> Zhiromskaia, Kiselev, Poliakov, *Polveka pod grifom sekretno*, pp. 98 – 101. Among the believers, seventy-five percent or forty-one million citizens were Orthodox; roughly fifteen percent or more than eight million citizens were Muslims. Only four-hundred-eighty thousand or eight-tenths of a percent of the believers were Catholic.

“personally, I believe that Stalin is allowing a certain liberty to two currents of thought: the first, completely anti-religious, unprecedentedly aggressive; the second, in favor of believers, very timid, hesitant and lacking self-assurance. Perhaps before reacting to these two currents Stalin hopes to see which side will gain momentum, and perhaps he has already taken appropriate, if imperceptible, measures permitting them to exist *in order to begin the contest* [between them].”<sup>48</sup>

In retrospect, it is clear that during the interwar period the party never reduced pressure on the Christian churches. If Braun was mistaken about the direction of government policy, however, his error was minor. Even when armed with evidence of a reversal to the government in the 1937 census, he recognized that the dominant message from the Soviet apparatus was “completely anti-religious, unprecedentedly aggressive.”

### III

In spite of the impression created by the Soviet press that the Nazi-Soviet relationship between September 1939 and June 1941 had been correct, even cordial, and that therefore the 1941 invasion was a great surprise, Braun contended in his memoirs that “there was no difficulty in foreseeing that a hot war was in preparation, all the more so that Soviet fortifications were being hastened in that part of Polish territory evacuated by the Soviets of its civilian population. Armament and munitions factories in the Soviet Union were working as they never had before, although war stocks had been piling up for over twenty years.”

Braun claimed to have heard rumors of impending war from two sources:

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<sup>48</sup> Archivio dei Padri Assunzionisti, Roma. No registration number. Letter from Braun to Monsignor Filippo Giobbe, 7 April 1937, p. 3.

“diplomats belonging to the Axis powers,” who “dropped hints from time to time”; and “parents of displaced Soviet soldiers,” who knew about troop movements occurring within the Soviet Union “though not a word was appearing in the press.” In view of the high probability of conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union, Braun had written the Vatican in spring 1941 “that come what may,” he was “determined with God’s help to remain at my post.”<sup>49</sup> In advance of the Nazi invasion, he managed to secure papal approval for his plan to remain in Moscow in the event of conflict and a special blessing for his congregants.

On the morning of 22 June 1941 Braun drove to church to prepare for Sunday services. He observed nothing extraordinary in the city “except for speeding cars going to or leaving the Kremlin” and “signs of unusual activity...in all the N.K.V.D buildings surrounding the church” itself. Not until noon that day, when Viacheslav Molotov announced on radio the news of the Nazi invasion, did Braun become aware that the Soviet Union was at war.<sup>50</sup>

The hostilities had immediate effects on Braun and his church. Within a week of the conflict’s outset, the Vichy regime broke diplomatic relations with the USSR. That break in relations, in turn, led to the closure of the French embassy where Braun had spent seven years. For three days in late June, the Soviet police held him incommunicado along with French residents of the compound. Although he was released, the diplomatic personnel who had constituted the backbone of the French colony in Moscow and who had often served as his patrons in confrontations with Soviet authorities were compelled to

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<sup>49</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 402.

<sup>50</sup> Braun *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 374 – 375.

leave the USSR.<sup>51</sup> Their departure now forced Braun to depend on help from the U.S. embassy, which, under Ambassador Lawrence Steinhardt, proved reluctant to assert itself on his behalf. Indeed, in July 1941 the ambassador pressured Braun to leave the USSR along with “nonessential” embassy personnel.<sup>52</sup> His refusal provoked the ambassador to deny Braun help finding a new domicile and securing war rations. Thus, the war’s outbreak threatened to isolate Braun from the diplomats that had previously sustained him, placing his church in a precarious position.

In summer and fall 1941 Moscow itself came under air bombardment from the *Luftwaffe*, and soon the capital’s population steeled itself to face a German infantry attack. The St. Louis des Français church sustained damage during the German air offensive: anti-aircraft flack pierced the roof in many places, and church windows were blown out of their frames by explosions.<sup>53</sup> To repair the damaged church, Braun secured surplus lumber via a parishioner’s husband and covered the window openings with plywood. When the city council cut off electricity to the church, Braun removed the reflector from one of his automobile headlights, hooked it to a makeshift battery, and installed it above the tabernacle of the main altar. By means of this contraption, he could throw enough light into the darkened church to see during mass. To procure food for himself and indigent parishioners, he fabricated a requisition order for a ton of potatoes and half a ton

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<sup>51</sup> See Assumptionist Archive, Boston. Correspondence/Notes – Father Braun. “Pro Memoria concernant certains details inédits de la mission actuelle des Augustins de l’Assomption en Russie, comprenant surtout les années 1934 – 1945,” pp. 20 – 22.

<sup>52</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 415 – 418.

<sup>53</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 406.



of carrots and submitted it to the *Mosovprom Kombinat* [Moscow Vegetable Supply Bureau]. When the “order” was accepted, he obtained enough food to survive the winter of 1941-1942 without a ration card.<sup>54</sup>

Like other residents of the capital, Braun was a witness to the Moscow panic of 1941. Inside the U.S. embassy there had been considerable apprehension since mid-summer: the ambassador opened his office at Spasso House for a few hours each day, but left the city in the afternoon for a forest dacha that the German air force would be less likely to bomb. Most Americans in the capital also took refuge outside the city.<sup>55</sup> Already in July preparations were under way to send non-essential personnel from the country, and contingency plans were being formulated to remove the embassy from Moscow. On 14 October 1941 the remaining Americans in Moscow were notified by the embassy to evacuate Moscow for Kuibyshev, where Soviet officials had decided to locate their own operations. As before, Braun refused to abandon his parish. The ambassador demanded of Braun a written declaration of that intention and informed him that security was his own responsibility. The Americans then joined the crush of people from foreign legations and Soviet ministries leaving the capital. In his memoirs, Braun reported: “a large section of the city’s population was hoping to be rid of a detested regime. On the one passable road out of Moscow fleeing commissars late in leaving were being mauled to death by infuriated Russians.” Meanwhile, inside the city, residents experienced the onset of a horrific winter, the coldest in a century. Braun recalled: “the cold was so intense...that water

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<sup>54</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 406 – 408.

<sup>55</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 415.

mains froze and burst in a section where I was living. We had to leave the house to go and get our water in pails.”<sup>56</sup>

As Braun and his congregants faced the brutal material privations of the first war year, they took encouragement from an unexpected turn in Soviet policy toward religion – the virtual abandonment of aggressive anti-religious propaganda. According to Braun, two developments explained the government’s sudden *volte-face*. First and most important, German forces carried orders requiring them to pay respectful attention to Orthodox churches in occupied Soviet territory: each unit commander read a public proclamation “restoring to the Orthodox church the plenitude of its rights and privileges,” and promising it “the exclusive protection of the German Reich.” Working with the Russian émigré church, the Belgrade Synod, the *Wehrmacht* distributed sacred vessels, vestments and liturgical books to indigenous Orthodox clergy, and sometimes even escorted émigré priests from central Europe back into Russia. In the first days of occupation, German unit commanders helped organize religious services in conquered cities to “give thanks” for liberating believers from the Soviet yoke. In some places, such as Smolensk, the old cathedral was restored and reopened with festive polyphony. Inside Moscow Braun heard portable radio broadcasts of such ceremonies.<sup>57</sup> Plainly, the German tactic was to use religious freedom for the Orthodox as a political instrument to detach the majority of the population from the Soviet regime. According to Braun, the German maneuver had the effect of

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<sup>56</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 423 – 424.

<sup>57</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years to Remember*, pp. 369 – 371, 375 – 377.

releasing pent-up religious sentiment among the Russian Orthodox “far beyond the limits of [German] occupied territory.”<sup>58</sup>

Second, on the very day of the invasion, the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Sergei issued a patriotic call for national unity against the Nazis – a call that, according to Braun, “obtained the respect and attention of great multitudes of Russians” particularly in the absence of leadership by Stalin, who for two weeks after the Nazi attack did not speak in public.<sup>59</sup> By identifying the Soviet church hierarchy with the defense of Russia, Metropolitan Sergei made it possible for the Soviet government to respond to the Germans’ pro-Orthodox tactics with moves of its own. Initially, the government suspended publication of *Bezbozhnik* [Atheist], the newspaper of the League of the Militant Godless. It also closed anti-religious museums, then canceled anti-religious lectures and films. In 1942, in the pages of the propagandistic book *Pravda o religii v Rossii* [Truth about Religion in Russia], a book designed to prove that the Orthodox church needed no “liberation” by the Nazis, the Soviet government printed several pages of prayers in Slavonic, with the name of God appearing in capital letters – the first resort to the old orthography since 1918.<sup>60</sup> The Soviet government soon began lamenting the destruction by the *Wehrmacht* of “our holy shrines,” a lamentation

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<sup>58</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 378.

<sup>59</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 381.

<sup>60</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 382 – 383. See Metropolitan Nikolai (Iarushevich) et al., *Pravda o religii Rossii* (Moscow: Moskovskaia patriarkhiia, 1942). According to Braun, the first copies of the book were printed as a “vypusk iz antireligioznoi pechati SSSR [offprint of the anti-religious press of the USSR].” This “technical error” led to the confiscation of the original run and the attribution of the book to the Moscow patriarchate. The problem with the latter attribution was that the Moscow patriarchate was not restored until September 1943, more than a year after the book’s release.

that, according to Braun, was indignantly received by the Russian Orthodox who were “well aware of this duplicity.”<sup>61</sup> Within unoccupied territory, the government selectively reduced police pressure against religious worship. The culmination of the new tactic toward religion was the restoration of the Moscow patriarchate in September 1943, a step that carried Stalin’s personal sanction.

In Braun’s opinion, the new Soviet approach toward religion did not demonstrate a change of heart by the communist leadership; rather it was a cynical political maneuver meant to counteract the Germans’ early success in identifying themselves with the Russian Orthodox in the occupation zone. He feared that, as soon as the German threat had disappeared, the Soviet regime would resume its old anti-religious habits. As he looked behind the scenes of Soviet moves to revive the Moscow patriarchate, for example, he wondered whether Metropolitans Sergei, Aleksei and Nikolai had actually taken the initiative in asking for a meeting with Stalin to arrange the election of a new patriarch in September 1943, or whether they had been summoned to the Kremlin and ordered to do so. In May 1944, when Patriarch Sergei died, the police had begun to search the rosters of prison camps to find a quorum of responsible clergy to vote for Sergei’s successor; after more than six months’ search, scarcely thirty delegates to the church council could be mustered and one of these died during the council sessions.<sup>62</sup> In Braun’s opinion, the “revived” Russian Orthodox church was sustained by the government not out of conviction but out of expediency. His impression was shared by “Russian worshipers” who told him, apropos the Soviet

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<sup>61</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 383.

<sup>62</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp.387 – 388.

about-face toward religion: “*Vidno teper’, chto im Bog nuzhen* [Now one can see that they (the authorities) need God].”<sup>63</sup>

Braun’s intense suspicion of the communist regime led him to the conclusion that, appearances notwithstanding, “the Soviets were *not* our allies.” “More than anyone else perhaps among the foreigners, I knew that the Soviets as distinguished from honest-to-goodness Russians, *were never our allies*, never had been and never will be!”<sup>64</sup>

Western diplomats interpreted that judgment as non-support for the war against the Germans, making Braun virtually *persona non grata* in the capital. For example, Braun’s position on the war irritated the Free French, who in April 1942 sent Roger Garreau to serve as their diplomatic liaison in Moscow. From the moment of his arrival in the Soviet capital, Garreau did everything he could to flatter his Soviet hosts, even supporting a Soviet demand to requisition the French embassy compound for a military academy. As a man of the left, Garreau was indifferent to matters of religion and viewed religious questions from the perspective of state interest; naturally, therefore, he found Braun’s fierce suspicion of the Soviet regime inconvenient, irrational and repugnant. In 1944, when Garreau asked Braun to permit filming of a mass and choral singing at St. Louis des Français, he was appalled that Braun rejected the proposal. But Braun felt he could do no other: “It was simply revolting after ten years of the progressive extermination of Catholicism to be forced now to show it

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<sup>63</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 457.

<sup>64</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 428.

hypocritically in a false light.”<sup>65</sup> Braun’s decision led the infuriated Garreau to resolve to have Braun removed from Moscow.

American diplomats were also unhappy with Braun’s attitude toward the Soviet regime. According to Braun’s memoirs, “an unbelievable warped psychosis among some fellow countrymen in Moscow continually associated me with anti-Soviet (meaning anti-Russian) convictions....I was just simply down on the record as opposing the war efforts. I suffered much on that score though the accusation was completely untrue.”<sup>66</sup>

For Braun the clearest proof of this disdain was a meeting at the U.S. embassy in early 1945 with a presidential aide, Mr. Edward J. Flynn, just returned from the Yalta conference. After telling him that, at Yalta, Stalin had asked Roosevelt to recall Braun to the United States and that Roosevelt had rebuffed the request, Flynn asked Braun to report on the religious situation inside the Soviet Union. In Braun’s opinion, the visitor, who had previously consulted with Soviet and Russian Orthodox church officials, was not willing to entertain an unfavorable assessment.<sup>67</sup> Braun’s account of the conversation, which remains unpublished, deserves to be quoted *in extenso*:

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<sup>65</sup> Assumptionist Archive, Boston. Correspondence/Notes – Father Braun, “Pro Memoria,” pp. 2 – 27, here p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 428.

<sup>67</sup> See Assumptionist Archives, Boston, “Twenty-Five Difficult Years.” Patrick Croghan, A.A. “Twenty-Five Difficult Years 1934 – 1959. (An outline of the history of the first American Assumptionists in Moscow compiled from their letters and other writings contained in the Provincial Archives.)” pp. 19 – 20. According to Croghan, “On his return to the US, Mr. Flynn reported that Fr. Braun was narrow-minded, had fixed ideas and should be recalled and Fr. Armanet was summoned by Cardinal Spellman and informed of these findings. Fr. Armanet wrote to Fr. Quenard on April 27, 1945 to make him aware of the situation.”

As briefly as possible I explained the Kremlin's fantastic about-face and the slow but cunningly calculated neo-religious policy then being developed. I insisted on the sad fact that religion in general and Orthodoxy in particular had been in a long phase of agony at the time of the *Wehrmacht* invasion. I emphasized that the church and worshipers had had a sovereign and crying need of liberation from religious oppression at the beginning of World War II in Russia.

It was the absolute contrary to what the visitor had been hearing from the mouths of suddenly freed and highly influenced spokesmen of all faiths barring the Catholic, with whom he had spoken. What I had to say proved displeasing to my listener. How could I be right when I was alone saying these things? I was given the impression that the White House-designated traveler did not *want* to hear the truth. He was quite unhappy at seeing me destroy the wonderful impression he had acquired and was prepared to take home.

Questioned on the status of Catholicism, it was my painful duty to inform him of its quasi-total material annihilation. Three large dioceses had been completely disrupted. There was not a single Catholic bishop, nor one single priest left, and no seminary to train the clergy operating in all of Russia properly speaking!

Following the disheartening but true picture I was not a little surprised to be asked: "What are you complaining about? Isn't your church operating?" The fact that the St. Louis church of Moscow was the one and only remnant of 1500 other Catholic churches of the Latin rite alone, left open in the entire country appeared not to impress him at all. On his return he could report that Catholicism in the Soviet Union was operating. The statement would essentially be true and carry weight because it would be coming from a returning on-the-spot eyewitness. It would be a statement similar to that made by Lozovsky at the time of the Beaverbrook-Harriman Lend-Lease Mission of late September 1941.<sup>68</sup>

Among diplomats posted to Moscow, only representatives of the Polish government-in-exile cultivated Braun and warmly supported the St. Louis church. In summer 1941 the Soviet government released from the Lubianka prison General Wladyslaw Anders, whom the Polish government in London quickly named commander of the then non-existent Polish army. Anders was instructed by his government to form a Polish army of seven divisions on Soviet soil from ethnic Poles who had fled the Nazis, been deported from occupied eastern Poland

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<sup>68</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 459 – 460.

by Soviet authorities and/or been imprisoned by the Soviets before the Nazi invasion. By the Polish government's calculations, with Soviet cooperation Anders would be able to organize a force of roughly 300,000 troops. In early September the London government-in-exile sent to Moscow its ambassador, Stanislaw Kot, to help Anders gain the release of Polish officers from Soviet prisons and to negotiate agreements that would place the reconstituted Polish army in the field against the Nazis.

On 9 September 1941, at a meeting of the Polish-Soviet Commission on deportees, the Soviets asserted that only 300,000 to 350,000 ethnic Poles were living in the USSR; Polish estimates had put the total well over a million. Soviet military authorities would concede the availability of only 21,000 Polish fighting men, and a thousand officers. For Anders and Kot, the crucial question quickly became the location of the more than fifteen thousand Polish officers who had been interned after September 1939 in Soviet camps at Kozelsk, Storbelsk and Ostashkov.<sup>69</sup> Although the Poles doggedly pressed the Soviet government to disclose the whereabouts of these officers, they met with nothing but lies and stonewalling. On 13 April 1943 German radio announced that the Polish officers' bodies had been found in mass graves in Katyn forest; forensic evidence showed that they had all been killed by single gunshots to the head – a *modus operandi* consistent with N.K.V.D. execution squads.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Allen Paul, *Katyn. The Untold Story of Stalin's Polish Massacre*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991) pp. 162 – 164.

<sup>70</sup> For Anders' account of the Polish investigation, with a selection of documents, see *The Crime of Katyn. Facts & Documents* (London: Polish Cultural Foundation, 1965). For a joint post-Soviet Russian and Polish account of the massacre at Katyn and Polish efforts



From the time of Anders' release from Lubianka the general and a dozen officers came to church at St. Louis des Français. "In the number," Braun reported, "figured a non-Catholic officer so happy at being released from the N.K.V.D. inferno, that for 1 1/2 hours all through the service he lay stretched out and face down in the central aisle in front of the sanctuary. With his arms extended in the form of a cross, he remained motionless in an act of thanksgiving to God. Beginning with General Anders, this released military [man] and all the other members of his staff had been severely manhandled, rubber-hosed and otherwise maltreated during weeks and weeks of questioning at the hands of their captors."<sup>71</sup> When Kot arrived in Moscow, he confided to Braun details of his search for the missing Polish officers, including the "explanations" by Stalin, Molotov and Antonov as to why the officers had not been located.<sup>72</sup> Having become friendly with Ambassador Kot and sympathetic with the goals of the Polish investigation, Braun followed the story even after the April 1943 announcement by the Germans that the graves of the massacred officers had been found. He interviewed American journalists who, in 1943, had visited Katyn forest at the Soviet government's invitation to witness the falsehood of the Nazi accusation. According to Braun, "many of these newsmen said privately that not a single one of their group was convinced of what the Soviets were attempting to

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to secure release of the perished officers, see General'naia direktsiia gosudarstvennykh arkhivov Respubliki Pol'shi, Federal'naia arkhivnaia sluzhba Rossii, *et al.*, *Katyn. Mart 1940 g. – Sentiabr' 2000 g., Rasstrel. Sud'by zhivyykh. Ekho Katyni. Dokumenty* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Vesi Mir", 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 396 – 397.

<sup>72</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 395.

prove—German guilt.”<sup>73</sup> In his memoirs, Braun called the Katyn forest massacre an act of “Soviet genocide” against the Poles. Meanwhile, after April 1943 his private insistence that official US solidarity with the USSR over the Katyn affair was a product of American “war psychosis” did nothing to endear him to American diplomatic personnel in the Soviet Union or at home. It further marked him as an enemy of Soviet power, to be removed at the earliest opportunity.<sup>74</sup>

The pretext for Braun’s removal was an October 1944 altercation between him and a Soviet caretaker at the French embassy where Braun had again taken up residence. In the last years of the war Braun was not a healthy man, physically or psychologically. He had contracted chronic bronchitis, a condition to which he remained susceptible until the end of his life. He suffered from hypertension and, his nerves stretched taut, was prone to fits of temper. In October 1944, his temper snapped after he had caught caretaker, N. A. Kniazev, stealing firewood reserved for heating the homes of sick Russian peasants to whom Braun ministered in the Moscow suburbs. Incensed over this pilferage, Braun had raised his fist and had threatened to strike the thief.

A result of this encounter was Kniazev’s decision, on 2 November 1944, to file a lawsuit charging Braun with assault and battery. According to the court allegation, the priest “threw himself upon me [Knaizev] like a beast flailing his arms. Gnashing his teeth, he [Braun] struck me on the nose and wanted to strike

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<sup>73</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 399.

<sup>74</sup> Chapter twenty six of Braun’s memoirs is entitled, “Soviet Genocide and Strange US War Psychosis.” See *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, p. 394.

me again, but I seized his arm.”<sup>75</sup> Braun was mystified by this charge. He did not deny raising his fist and warning Kniazev not to touch the specially-designated firewood, but he firmly denied striking the caretaker. When the case came to trial in June 1945, Braun told the Soviet court that the caretaker’s charge of assault and battery was “outrageous and utterly defamatory.” He accused Kniazev of “provocation” and being “habitually in a state of inebriety.”<sup>76</sup> Braun suspected, with good reason, that Kniazev was an N.K.V.D. employee who had filed the lawsuit in order to discredit Braun and provoke his withdrawal from Moscow. Braun was irritated that neither Mr. Garreau of the Free French legation nor employees of the U.S. embassy helped with his defense in court. At trial Braun was found guilty and fined one hundred rubles; on appeal in late August 1945, however, Braun was vindicated. The plaintiff withdrew the charges citing coercion by the police as the main reason he had filed them in the first place.<sup>77</sup>

In spite of his formal legal victory, Braun’s reputation had suffered irreparable harm. The U.S. embassy, under whose auspices he had operated in Moscow, was eager to have him replaced. Moreover, Braun’s Assumptionist superiors, long worried about his health, decided in the wake of the assault case to summon him home from Moscow.

The circumstances surrounding his removal made Braun’s last months in Moscow a melancholy time. As Soviet war survivors celebrated their country’s

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<sup>75</sup> English translation of Kniazev’s deposition to the People’s Tribunal of the Lenin district, in Assumptionist Archives, Boston. “Correspondences/Notes – Fr. Braun,” 2 November 1944.

<sup>76</sup> Assumptionist Archives, Boston. “Correspondences/Notes – Fr. Braun.” “Formal Declaration of 30 June 1945.

<sup>77</sup> Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 439 – 450.

astonishing success in defeating National Socialism, Braun sadly contemplated what he felt to be a nearly complete Soviet triumph in obliterating Latin-rite Catholicism in Russia. He still took no comfort in the unquestionably freer religious climate that had obtained in Moscow after the Soviet government had dropped, for reasons of expediency, its overtly anti-religious policies. His own recent experience illustrated only too clearly that any priest or lay person inconvenient to Soviet authorities could be removed from sacred ministry, and that the removal could be done with the acquiescence of church officials and with the full knowledge of Western embassies. Feeling utterly alone and betrayed, he was anxious that the Soviet police would have him killed as he left the country.<sup>78</sup> He did not fret for his own life, which he had long been ready to sacrifice for the church's sake: his greatest fear was that he would not live to tell the story of his ministry and parishioners.

#### IV

Braun returned from Moscow to the United States on 29 December 1945 no longer the inexperienced young priest of twelve years earlier, but a profoundly changed, broken man. He was a naturally combative person who had lost hope in the fight, a candle burnt up from both ends. His Assumptionist superiors, shocked by his bad health, permitted him nearly two full years to recuperate from the Moscow mission. Although Braun eventually resumed priestly activities, he never

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<sup>78</sup> In his memoirs, Braun wrote: "I do not remember how many times I was told by Russians who had gone through N.K.V.D. questioning on my account, that I would never get out of the country alive. I knew too much." In November 1945, a young lady rushed into his apartment to say "Father, don't take that plane." Braun did not disclose the warning to a single soul. See Braun, *Twelve Russian Years To Remember*, pp. 466 – 468.

again received an assignment in which he could happily invest his remaining energies. It might have been said that his life's blood had been spilled in twelve years as chaplain of the U.S. embassy in Moscow and as pastor of St. Louis des Français church. Before his death in 1964, he was, like so many others before and after, a human shade haunted by memories of those terrible Stalinist years when, as Anna Akhmatova noted, "even the dead were grateful for release."

But if Braun departed the world in sad resignation, he left behind in Moscow a genuine legacy. His years as U.S. embassy chaplain set a worthy precedent for Father George (Antonio) Laberge and ten other American Assumptionists, who served with distinction in Russia through the Cold War and beyond. Braun's long tenure accustomed U.S. diplomats to a Catholic connection in Moscow and made them more likely to respect the chaplain's relative autonomy in the city, even if that autonomy sometimes made them nervous or irritated. The independence of mind that marked Braun as a problem for the embassy in his day was likely the very trait needed to blaze a trail for energetic successors who would work in less harrowing, if still onerous, conditions.

After 1945 the St. Louis des Français parish continued to function under the leadership of Father George Laberge and his various successors. In early 1946 daily mass attendance was less than forty, but Sunday services were packed: the average Sunday attendance was 1100, with 150 communicants.<sup>79</sup> Those more than respectable attendance statistics were a consequence of Braun's efforts to sustain the parish in great adversity.

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<sup>79</sup> Assumptionist Archives, Boston. "Twenty-Five Difficult Years." Croghan, "Twenty-Five Difficult Years 1934 – 1959," p. 24.

There is no doubt, of course, that Braun's tenure in Moscow illustrates how a modern state can bring to the brink of destruction a vibrant religious community that depends crucially on apostolic succession in ordaining bishops and on priests administering sacraments to the laity. If Latin Catholicism survived Stalin's persecutions, that survival was a close call. Yet in the struggle for a continuing Catholic presence in the Soviet Union there was remarkable courage manifested not only by Braun but by the Russian Catholic laity: parishioners at St. Louis des Français endured years of scrutiny by the Soviet police, who monitored their presence in mass and recorded the words of their pastor's homilies; certain parishioners risked their lives running money to needy Catholics in other areas of the Soviet Union; some parishioners suffered arrest, even martyrdom for a faith they would not abandon. Their moral heroism – the Russian word is *podvizhnichestvo* – suggests that Braun was exactly right to conclude: "*Violenta non durant.*"

