THE DESTRUCTION AND TRANSFER OF ORTHODOX CHURCH PROPERTY IN POLAND, 1919–1939

by Antoni Mironowicz

The transfer of Orthodox Church property was part of the Polish government’s policy of building a revived Polish state and its national unity on the basis of Roman Catholicism. Realising this policy meant decreasing the number of Orthodox parishes and monasteries, the confiscation of church property by the state or its transfer to the Roman Catholic Church, closing Orthodox churches, and converting the faithful to Roman Catholicism.

The first transfers took place in 1918–1924. In the first few years after the First World War’s end, about 400 church buildings were confiscated from the Orthodox Church. Some were transferred to the Uniates, while the rest were taken over by the Roman Catholic Church. Polish authorities also authorised the demolition of Orthodox Churches in major Polish cities. This fate befell the churches in Augustów (1926), Aleksandrów Kujawski, Janów Lubelski (1922), Jedrzejów (1921), Grajewo, Kalisz (1920), Kolno, Kozienice, Lubartów, Lublin (1924), Łask, Łomża, Mława, Modlin, Opoczno (1924), Osowiec, Ostrów Mazowiecka, Pinczowo, Płońsk (1918), Przasnysz (1918), Pułtusk, Raczki, Radomsko, Raducz, Rawa Mazowiecka, Rozań, Rypin, Sieradź, Sierpc, Skierniewice, Słupce, Sosnowiec, Stanisławowo, Staszów, Suwałki, Tomaszów Mazowiecki (1925), Włocławek, and many
other towns, as well as six churches in Warsaw including the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Saski Square (1920–1926). Most Orthodox churches in central Poland were handed over to the Roman Catholic Church and most of them were changed into garrison churches. For example, in Białystok the Orthodox garrison churches of Kazansk and St. Seraphim became Roman Catholic. In the Białystok region alone, the local authorities liquidated Orthodox parishes in Hodyszew, Kolno, Lipsk, Łapy, Łomża, Ostrołęka, Pokrowsk, Rożanystok, Rygałówka, Sejny, Szudziałowo and Wysokie Mazowieckie. The greatest loss for the whole Orthodox Church was the loss of the Supraśl Monastery. Many of the churches lost their religious function. In Ostrołęka a junkyard was organised in one church, in Skierniewice a grain warehouse, in Staszów a church became a cinema. In most, no furnishings were removed but the altar and icons left in place. This failure to remove these holy objects was regarded as a further profanation of the church and an insult to the religious feelings of the Orthodox faithful living there.

In those regions with an Orthodox majority, the number of functioning parishes was tightly limited. Among others the Orthodox churches in Lida, Snipishki near Vilnius, Krywicze, Nowy Dwor, Światkowo, Wołkowysk, Jałowo, Samogrod were taken away from their faithful. This attitude of the authorities was caused not so much by a desire for revenge in society as by a conscious state policy towards the eastern parts of the Republic, where non-Polish inhabitants were to be integrated with the other parts of Poland.

through implementation of a policy of national, cultural, and religious assimilation. The first phase of these transfers was in the interests of the Roman Catholic Church, but clashed with the interests of the state, for it caused a public uproar. The administrative-police method of the transfers stood in contrast with democratic procedures and showed the need for specific legal regulations concerning the problem. The unrestrained transfers created numerous property disputes between two churches, deepening social conflicts instead of relieving them.

The second period of transfers occurred in 1929. The formal reason for the initiation of lawsuits by the Roman Catholic episcopate was the important decision of the Supreme Court canceling the expiration of claims for returning property lost during the partitions of Poland. Soon after this shift, thirty-two suits against the state and 109 against other institutions and private individuals were filed simultaneously. Roman Catholic bishops demanded the return of Orthodox churches, parish buildings, and estates which had belonged to both Roman and “Greek” Catholic. Unfortunately, many of these suits concerned churches in places where no Roman Catholics lived. The Roman Catholics also demanded the return of Orthodox monasteries in Poczajów, Vilnius, Zhyrowitse, Derman, Zimno, Korzets, Krzemieniets and Mielets, as well as Orthodox Cathedrals in Lutsk, Krzemieniets, and Pinsk. Almost a third of all Orthodox Church property was included in the Catholic claims\(^6\). The greatest numbers of these claims were filed by the bishop of Podlachia – Henryk Przezdziecki, who demanded that the court turn over 248 churches in his diocese.\(^7\) In total, Roman Catholic clergy demanded over a 100 Orthodox churches built after 1839 and never under the jurisdiction of Catholic bishops\(^8\).

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\(^7\) W. Mysłek, Przedmurze. Szkice z dziejów Kościoła katolickiego w II Rzeczypospolitej, Warsaw 1987, p. 166.

\(^8\) A list of such churches upon which demands had been made was published in the Orthodox Calendar, Warsaw 1931, pp. 68–72.
The new wave of transfers, through the numerous court claims, endangered the functioning of the Orthodox Church in large areas of Poland. The Roman Catholic bishops were fully aware of the dangers of their action for the Orthodox Church as well as to the Polish state. The Catholic Press Agency wrote: “A verdict returning about 500 churches would be a terrible blow to the Orthodox Church. Many parishes may be left without a church and therefore no way of fulfilling its religious needs, which would cause an uproar among hundreds of thousands of citizens of the Orthodox faith, protests would come, agitation would start both in Poland and abroad, which would be just what those hostile to the Polish state need”\(^9\).

The Orthodox community felt threatened by these new claims for transfer. The episcopate’s claims seemed both historically and legally unjustified and were considered an attack on Orthodoxy itself. The task of defending the property rights of the Orthodox Church in court was given to a specially established Metropolitan’s commission. Metropolitan Dionizy issued on 26 October 1926 a special address summoning the faithful to “defend their Mother – the Orthodox Church” although he expected just verdicts “putting my trust in the well known justice of the laws of our motherland and the impartiality of its judges”\(^10\). An Orthodox synod of bishops summoned in 1930, introduced diocese committees, which included both clergymen and laymen and were to gather evidence needed in the trials. The clergy and faithful gathered around their hierarchy. Many Orthodox communities sent memorials to the Warsaw government pleading for its protection of Orthodox Church property.

Russian community organisations functioning in Poland also gave their support to the hierarchy. The protests of the Orthodox community reached the League of Nations in Geneva as well as the governments of many countries. A complaint to the League of Nations was issued in 1929 by Vitaly, the former archimandrite of Lavra Poczajowska, the then-bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church-in-exile. He pointed to the leaders of the League of Nations “the religious discrimination and oppression which

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\(^9\) Catholic Press Agency of 2 January 1930 as cited in M. Papierzyńska-Turek, Między tradycją a rzeczywistością, p. 344; A. Mironowicz, Kościół prawosławny na ziemach polskich w XIX i XX wieku, p. 132.

have been used since the beginning of the new Polish Republic. (…) The demolition of Orthodox churches, closure of Orthodox cemeteries, expulsion of Orthodox bishops from their parishes, removing the Orthodox patriarch from the position of the head of the Orthodox Church, renaming the Orthodox Church as the “Polish Orthodox Church” - all are acts that breach the essential rights of the Orthodox Russian minority in Poland, guaranteed by the Versailles Treaty of 28 June 1919.” He also pointed out the partiality of the courts judging the Orthodox Church property cases and the official authorities’ support for the demands of Roman Catholic bishops.\(^{11}\) In addition, the Belarusan and Ukrainian communities in Poland saw the property transfers as a political action against the national minorities. A petition condemning them was therefore presented to the League of Nations by the Members of Parliament from the Belarusan Club.\(^{12}\)

The transfers were widely commented upon in the Polish and foreign press. Protests against the activity of the Roman Catholic Church towards the Orthodox in Poland appeared in several newspapers. Statements from the Metropolitan of Vilnius Romuald Jałbrzykowski, that “I do not want the transfer of a single Orthodox church to the Roman Catholics. My only aim is for those churches, which had been taken by force by the Tsar’s government, to be returned, in the name of justice, to their lawful owners.” However, his plea did little to convince anybody. The situation was similar with the address to “our Orthodox brothers” put forward on 6 December 1929 by the Bishop of Pinsk, Zygmunt Łoziński.\(^{13}\) On the other hand, the Greek Catholic Metropolitan, Andrej Sheptytsky, in an interview published on 2 November 1930 in Dzień Polski, stated that “the Greek-Catholic clergy will not take part in these transfers.” The Greek Catholic hierarchy thought that the activities of Roman Catholic bishops

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\(^{11}\) Archiwum Akt Nowych, Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego, No. 1010, pp. 96–99.


\(^{13}\) W. Kosonotskyj, Protces…, pp. 11–12.
should be considered dissolution of the union from the other side.” In contrast, a clear position supporting the claims of the Roman Catholic bishops was adopted by the papal nuncio, Francesco Marmaggi.

The Polish government was in a difficult position. On one hand, it supported the transfer activities of the Roman Catholic bishops, thus “solving” the problem of post-Uniate property. On the other hand, however, it feared social unrest in the eastern regions of Poland and the accompanying international protests. The Warsaw authorities understood that it would not be possible to define the legal position of the Orthodox Church without dealing with issues arising from the implementation of the 1925 concordat with the Holy See. Indeed, court rulings concerning particular church property would not soothe conflicts but ignite them. The increase in anti-government activity caused Warsaw to try and delay the court decisions giving time to the Ministry of Religion and Public Education to divide the property to the satisfaction of all sides.

The transfer cases took place until the end of 1933. Finally, on 16 January 1934 the Supreme Court, deciding in the case of 69 churches, stated that transfers through legal proceedings was improper because the churches were administrated by state authorities. Lower courts followed suit and refused to bring transfer cases into court. They also refused to carry out the 1919 decisions of the General Commissioner of Eastern Lands concerning the transfer of former Catholic churches taken over by the Orthodox.

However, as a result of earlier transfers, the Orthodox Church lost a significant number of parishes. Despite the loss of many churches in 1936 the Warsaw-Khelm diocese still comprised 155 parishes with 155 parsons, 21 vicars, 19 deacons, and 176 psalmists. The Grodno-Novogrod diocese administrative unit included 192 parishes with as many parsons, 27 vicars, 46 deacons, and 220 psalmists. The Pinsk-Polesie bishopric comprised of 339 parishes with as many parsons, 20 vicars, 52 deacons,

\[\text{\scriptsize 14} \text{ S. Kiryłowicz, Z dziejów..., p. 55; S. Piotrowski, Wojna religijna na kresach, Warsaw 1930, p. 5.} \]
\[\text{\scriptsize 15} \text{ M. Papierżyńska-Turek, Między tradycją a rzeczywistością, pp. 351–352; A. Mironowicz, Kościół prawosławny na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku, p. 134.} \]
and 359 psalmists. The Vilnius-Lida diocese had 177 parishes with as many parsons, 14 vicars, 22 deacons, and 191 psalmists. These first two stages of revindication did not destroy the Orthodox Church organisational structure. In place of lost parishes, new churches were built or attempts were made to reactivate the old. In comparison with the data from 1922, the number of parishes and clergy actually increased.

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The third transfer stage took place from 1937 to 1939 and, for the most part, took the form of demolishing Orthodox churches. (It should be noted that the demolition of Orthodox churches happened throughout the whole period of the existence of the Second Polish Republic.) The churches which were destroyed were those which were the symbols of the Tsar’s reign. Over thirty Orthodox churches were destroyed, including the sobor (cathedral) in Saski Square in Warsaw, the Sts. Cyril and Methodius sobor in Khelm and the Resurrection sobor in Białystok. The demolition of these Orthodox churches – regarded as symbols of Russian rule - was spontaneous and often irrational. Nevertheless, it never happened on a massive scale. Only in 1938 did a programme of destroying Orthodox churches emerge as a distinct element of the Polonisation effort. This programme was initiated by the government itself. The official reason was that those churches were not needed, dilapidated, or had been built as a result of Russification. However, it appears that the reason was to weaken the Belarusian and Ukrainian movement through closing parishes and active Orthodox churches. The “pacification: of parishes in 1937 started in the Lublin region. First, a kind of social movement for the “propagation of Polish values and traditions” was created. Then the army and police persecuted the Orthodox Church and people in order to convert them to Roman Catholicism. The autonomous Society for the Development of the Eastern Regions officially stood behind these activities. In reality, it was

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17 W. Mysłek, Przedmurze…, p. 170.
largely inspired by the military. The Orthodox community in the Lublin region resisted the Roman Catholic missionary activities. In the Khelm region, the demolition of Orthodox churches was taken up with full awareness of Orthodox attitudes. The very same governor of the Lublin region wrote to the Ministry of Religion and Public Education that “further demolition of closed Orthodox churches will in all cases surely be a source of more or less active protest actions from the Orthodox community and could be a potential threat to the safety of any community.”

Despite these fears, a Co-ordination Committee was formed in Lublin to “return Polish values and traditions” to the Khelm and Volynia regions, lands considered to be “essentially Polish.” In April and May 1938, there were Roman Catholic gatherings and rallies where resolutions were passed that demanded the demolition of closed Orthodox churches. The non-governmental, nationalist press played an important role in creating an anti-Orthodox atmosphere for it was informed in advance about such gatherings in order to spread the argument for liquidating Orthodox churches.

The demolition of Orthodox churches was conducted from the second half of May until the first half of July 1938. The actions were taken up by the local administration and co-ordination committees with help from the army and police in a hostile, anti-Orthodox atmosphere. To this end, the government used youth, army sappers, worker brigades, and even prisoners. Administrative and material measures were used to pressure the Orthodox who were blackmailed and threatened while their churches, which often served thousands of faithful, were destroyed. In most cases, the Orthodox community made no attempt to resist actively the demolitions. They prayed and protested, but were unable to oppose such an officially organised action.

This policy gave rise to many interpellations from members of parliament of various denominations. On 6 July 1938, a member of parliament, Stefan Baran, presented the desperate situation of the Orthodox Church.

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in the Lublin region. He made a similar, desperate interpellation on 21 July 1938 on the subject of the demolition on the order of the local authorities of 107 Orthodox churches and the sinister burning by unknown arsonists of three Orthodox churches in June and July 1938 in the Lublin region, as well as the religious persecution and unjust punishment of the Orthodox clergy and faithful in this region. Similar was the pronouncement of a member of parliament Martin Wolkow on 6 July 1938. “An impossible, unbearable situation, much worse than that in the times of the pronouncement of member Drzewinski and his contemporaries; incredible things are happening there. Brigades of church demolishers have been formed; these brigades—legal and protected by the police—destroy a church within a day.” Interpellations and protests concerning the demolition of Orthodox churches were issued by many other members of Parliament, including Stefan Skrypnyk, Michael Maslow i Stanislaw Lutsky. These pronouncements and the events in Khelm and Podlachia regions were widely discussed in the Belarusan and Ukrainian press.

In answer to the Orthodox church demolitions, a meeting of bishops and deans of the Khelm and Podlachia region and Orthodox members of parliament took place on 30 June and they drafted a memorial to the President of Poland, the marshals of both houses of parliament, the Minister of Religion and Public Education appealing for the immediate halt to the demolition programme. On 16 July 1938, a synod of all Orthodox bishops took place, which issued a proclamation calling the faithful to fast for three days. The synod also sent a memorandum concerning the events in Khelm and Podlachia regions to President Ignacy Mościcki and Prime Minister Felicjan Sławoj-Składkowski. It stated that there was no legal

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19 Cerkiew Prawosława na Chełmszczyźnie – przemówienia i interpelacja posłów i senatorów ukraińskich w Sejmie i Senacie, Lwów 1938, pp. 1–54.
20 The author of the interpelation refers to a speech of the Volhynian Wawrzyniec Drzewinski, who spoke of the situation of Poland’s Orthodox population. The speaker presented drastic examples of reducing the Orthodox community’s freedom of worship and access to posts in the city authorities in the beginning of the sixteenth century. See N. Bantysh-Kamiensky, Istoricheskie izvjestie o voznikshei v Polshe unii, Vilna 1886, pp. 64–69; A. Mironowicz, Kościół prawosławny w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej, Białystok 2001, p. 82.
basis for the destruction of the Orthodox churches which often deprived
the faithful of the only nearby church. The proclamation, published in the
Orthodox press, was confiscated.\footnote{A. Svitich, \textit{Pravoslavnaia Tserkov v Polshe}, p. 227–234.}

The church demolitions echoed widely abroad and caused many pro-
tests. The synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sremskie Karlowitse
[Yugoslavia] condemned the persecution of the Orthodox in Poland. It
also decided, at the suggestion of archbishop Vitaliy from the USA,
that it was necessary to inform all governments and the international
public of the destruction of Orthodox churches in the Khelm and
Podlachia regions. In the USA and Canada, “Committees for the Pro-
tection of Orthodoxy in Poland” were formed, initiated by Russian and
Ukrainian organisations. Protests and demonstrations were organized.
Anti-Orthodox actions in Poland were widely commented upon in the
British, Bulgarian, and Romanian press. German propaganda used events
to prompt anti-Polish actions in Gdańsk. The Bulgarian Metropolitan
Stefan returned the state honors he received from the Polish government
as a form of protest.\footnote{Ibidem, p. 237; A. Mironowicz, \textit{Kościół prawosławny na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku}, pp. 137–138.}

The Roman Catholic episcopate kept silent on this pressing subject.
The Bishop of Lvov, Marian Leon Fulman, when accused of taking part in
inspiring the demolition of Orthodox churches, issued a paper on 2 June
1938, in which he distanced himself from the demolitions, but significantly
he did not condemn it. However, the bishop questioned the government’s
right to administer former Uniate property. “The Bishop’s curia was not
consulted on the demolition, burning or liquidation of former Uniate
churches in our diocese. If done by the authorities, it is done of their
own accord and on their own responsibility. (…) Generally, we cannot
accept the methods used in the liquidation and demolition of churches.”\footnote{J. Kania, \textit{Rozbiórki cerkwi na Lubelszczyźnie w roku 1938 a stanowisko biskupa Fulmana}, [in:] R. Łużny (ed.), \textit{Chrześcijański wschód a kultura polska}, Lublin 1989, pp. 50–51.} Unfortunately, the bishop’s statement was an internal church document
and was not released to or published in the press. The silence and lack
of reaction from the Roman Catholic Church during the whole period of the demolitions suggested to the public that the episcopate accepted these actions.

In contrast, the Greek Catholic metropolitan Andrej Sheptytsky boldly condemned the demolition of Orthodox churches in a pastoral letter. “The terrifying things that have happened in recent months in the Khelm region force me to publicly defend our Christian brothers in Volhynia, Khelm, Podlachia, and Polesie regions and to call upon you to pray for them and to repent and ask for our Lord’s mercy.”25 Official censorship prevented the publication of this pastoral letter, which in itself caused comment in the Polish press. While the remaining independent press definitely condemned the government’s activity in the Khelm and Podlachia regions, government-controlled media suggested that the Roman Catholic hierarchy knew about the church demolition action. This information was later corrected by the Church itself.

This issue of Roman Catholic involvement in the demolition requires further explanations. The Roman Catholic clergy officially played no part in what happened in 1938, but the lack of protest from the Catholic hierarchy and the clergy suggests that the weakening of Orthodoxy was considered to be in the interest of the Roman Catholic Church. This feeling is reinforced by an important agreement on former Uniate proper being negotiated at that time. One has to agree with the reasoning of Mirosława Papieprzyńska-Turek, that the concurrence of two such important events inevitably suggests a certain degree of involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in these actions. For the Orthodox church demolitions occurred at the same time as the signing of an agreement between the Polish government and the Holy See concerning post-Uniate property. Although the document stated only that the government would consider handing over to the Roman Catholic Church those former Uniate churches not used by the Orthodox Church, the timing suggests that some unwritten agreement had been reached concerning the demolition of closed Orthodox

25 M. Papieprzyńska-Turek, Między tradycją a rzeczywistością, p. 369.
churches. From the documents of the Command of the Second Army Corps in Lublin, a conclusion can be drawn that the Catholic clergy not only knew about the government’s plans, but also took an active part in Orthodox church demolitions. Military sources name almost one hundred clergymen taking part in the transfer action.

There was a clear reaction to the news about the destruction Orthodox churches from some Polish intellectuals and left-wing press. For example, the journalist Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz wrote in *Słowo*: “This whole Orthodox matter, which we do not write about for reasons which we have no influence over is an aggravation for Poland, for us all, our foreign policy, our broader political plans”. In another article, he stated that “in connection with this case, if I were a member of parliament, I would put forward a suggestion to accuse responsible ministers in front of the Tribunal of State.” This important historian and politician, while in emigration, accused the military of collaboration in the last Polonisation and transfer campaign. “So great and true was the loyalty of the Orthodox Church, that only a miracle could turn the Orthodox clergy from this road. The indeed extraordinary stupidity of our rulers turned out to be that miracle. It has to be noted here that the Orthodox Church policy, for some unknown reason, became a matter of the Ministry of Military Affairs as Minister Tadeusz Kasprzycki, who was interested in everything: the drainage of Polesie, the Hucul tapestry – anything apart from the problems of the country’s defence. It started with the Polonisation of the Orthodox liturgical language. (…) The changes in liturgy were not all. The military began forcing the Orthodox into Catholicism and even to burn those Orthodox churches that it deemed no longer necessary. These wild, stupid, and despicable acts caused a great deal of harm to our country and they were after all absolutely unjustifiable because, of all the minorities,


\[27\] W. Mysłek, Przedmurze, pp. 182–183.

\[28\] Słowo, 2 and 25 August 1938, nos. 210 and 233.
the Orthodox clergy was the most loyal.”

His voice was not alone among Polish intellectuals.

In 1937–1938 in the Lublin region, according to the account of the region’s administrator (voivod) Jerzy de Tramencourt, 127 Orthodox church buildings were demolished and one, in Szczebrzeszyn was left in ruins. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church took over eight Orthodox churches. In the whole area, only one closed Orthodox Church remained, defended by the local Orthodox community. (This church was preserved in order to be handed over to the Roman Catholic Church later.) No regulations were observed when demolishing Orthodox churches. With the agreement of the Polish authorities, churches were destroyed which were built after the cessation of the Union and even twenty built after 1918. Churches were also destroyed which, according to the decisions of the Mixed Commission of 1937, were supposed to become parish churches. The religious needs of parishioners were never taken into account; churches were destroyed which served more than a thousand faithful. Monuments were also not spared: icons and Holy Scriptures were profaned. During the campaign, a 1582 Orthodox church in Biała Podlaska was destroyed as well as a 1589 church in Zamość and a 1578 church in Kołynce. An attempt was made to demolish the 1598 Orthodox Church in Szczebrzeszyn, but due to the protests of the local intelligentsia, it was only devastated. Mirosława Papierzyńska – Turek was right to call issuing at the time 100 zloty by the prime minister for an Orthodox church in Stolptse a joke. As a final result of transfers and the deliberate destruction of Orthodox churches, on 1st September 1939 in the Khelm and south Podlachia regions only 49 parish churches, four filial churches, and one monastery (in Jableczna) remained as Orthodox Church buildings. In total, in 1937–1939, in the Lublin, Khelm, and Podlachia regions 127 Orthodox Church buildings were destroyed.

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29 S. Mackiewicz-Cat, Historia Polski od 11 listopada 1918 r. do 17 września 1939 r., London 1941, pp. 312–313.
30 M. Papierzyńska-Turek, Między tradycją a rzeczywistością, p. 374; A. Mironowicz, Kościół prawosławny na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku, p. 140.
31 J. Kania, Likwidacja cerkwi na Lubelszczyźnie w okresie międzywojennym,
This campaign was not limited to the Khelm and Podlachia regions. In 1937–1938, in the Polesie bishopric the number of parishes declined from 339 to 269 full parishes and 15 filial parishes. State and local authorities also demanded the closure of many Orthodox churches in the Vilnius and Grodno dioceses. For example, on 14 March 1938 the administrator of the Lipsk borough, Jan Raczkowski, demanded the local Orthodox church be demolished because of the small number of parishioners (24) and the alleged use in its construction of materials intended for the building of a Roman Catholic church. With regard to the church in Zabludow, which had throughout its whole history been Orthodox, the local authorities searched the archives for any documents concerning its Uniate roots in order to open a transfer case. As a result of the activities of the state administration, the Orthodox lost, among others, some of the buildings of the Holy Trinity monastery in Vilnius, the Piatnitsk church in Vilnius, and churches in Mamaj and Dabrowa. In addition, minor changes in the number of parishes took place in the Volhynia eparchy. The Volhynia bishopric, which before the third phase of transfers had 426 full parishes and 137 filial parishes in 1939 it was reduced to 569 lay parishes and 7 monastic parishes.

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The transfer and destruction of Orthodox Church property naturally weakened the position of the Orthodox Church for the campaign limited its priestly activities, in turn creating the very conditions for transfer, the main goal of the state’s policy. Many Orthodox faithful started attending Roman Catholic churches when they had no church or parish of their own. Nonetheless, the threat to the property of the Orthodox Church brought the faithful, clergy, and church hierarchy closer together. Anti-government

32 Dzierzhanyi Arkhiv Grodzenskoi Oblesti, Grodno, f. 92, op. 1, no. 6, pp. 1–14v.
35 I. Kasiak, Z historyi Pravoslauñai Tsarkvy..., pp. 70–71.
36 Dzierzhanyi Arkhiv Grodzenskoi Oblesti, Grodno, f. 92, op. 1, No. 5, pp. 1–33v.
and anti-Polish attitudes began to grow in the Orthodox community. The result may be seen in the Khelm, Podlachia, and Volhynia regions during the Second World War.

The pacification of Orthodox churches represents one of the darkest episodes in the history of interwar Poland for it not only undermined a religious faith important to some of the largest national minorities, but it undermined the very legal basis for democratic rule in the Second Republic. An unholy alliance of the right-wing government, the military, and the Roman Catholic hierarchy which refused to publicly condemn the government actions and indeed profited from them undermined support for the government and indeed for the Polish cause in the eastern (kresy) and eventually established the groundwork for the bitter hostilities which broke out between Poles and Ukrainians during World War II. The campaign to destroy or transfer Orthodox religious buildings undermined the Polish cause itself.

**SUMMARY**

The most difficult period that the Polish Autocephalous Church of the 2nd Polish Republic experienced was in 1938 when, by the decision of administrative authorities, over 127 sacral buildings in Khelm region and Podlachia were pulled down. The third transfer stage took place from 1937 to 1939 and, for the most part, took the form of demolishing Orthodox churches. (It should be noted that the demolition of Orthodox churches happened throughout the whole period of the existence of the Second Polish Republic.) The churches which were destroyed were those which were the symbols of the Russian Tsar’s reign. Over thirty Orthodox churches were destroyed, including the cathedral in Sashi Square in Warsaw, the Sts. Cyril and Methodius cathedral in Khelm and the Resurrection cathedral in Bialystok. The demolition of these Orthodox churches – regarded as symbols of Russian rule – was spontaneous and often irrational. Nevertheless, it never happened on a massive scale. Only in 1938 did a programme of destroying Orthodox churches emerge as a distinct element of the Polonisation effort. This programme was initiated by the government itself. The official reason was that those churches were not needed, dilapidated, or had been built as a result of Russification in the past. However, it appears that the reason was to weaken the Belarusian and Ukrainian national minority movement through closing parishes and active Orthodox churches. The “pacification: of parishes in 1937 started in the Lublin region. First, a kind of social movement for the “propagation of Polish values and traditions” was created by the polish
local authority. Then the army and police persecuted the Orthodox Church and people in order to convert them to Roman Catholicism. The demolition of Orthodox churches was conducted from the second half of May until the first half of July 1938. The actions were taken up by the local administration and co-ordination committees with help from the army and police in a hostile, anti-Orthodox atmosphere. To this end, the government used youth, army sappers, worker brigades, and even prisoners. Administrative and material measures were used to pressure the Orthodox who were blackmailed and threatened while their churches, which often served thousands of faithful, were destroyed. In most cases, the Orthodox community made no attempt to actively resist the demolitions. They prayed and protested, but were unable to oppose such an officially organised action.

The transfer and destruction of Orthodox Church property naturally weakened the position of the Orthodox Church for the campaign limited its priestly activities, in turn creating the very conditions for transfer, the main goal of the state’s policy. Many Orthodox faithful started attending Roman Catholic churches when they had no church or parish of their own. Nonetheless, the threat to the property of the Orthodox Church brought the faithful, clergy, and church hierarchy closer together. Anti-government and anti-Polish attitudes began to grow in the Orthodox community. The result may be seen in the Khelm, Podlachia, and Volhynia regions during the Second World War.

**Keywords:** Orthodox Church, Poland