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THE POLICY OF THE MUSCOVITE TSARS
TOWARDS THE JESUIT MISSION IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA*

The expansion of the Jesuit order was accompanied from the start by an apostolic dynamism which left a mark on almost every domain.¹ Special interest should be paid amongst other things to the involvement of the Jesuits in missionary and diplomatic work, which demanded of the Jesuit Order a thorough and all round education, but also a quick and reasonably safe means of transport from one region of the globe to another, a factor which often played a principle part in the success or failure of a venture. In these times, journeys to Asia, especially to China, India and Japan, were most often undertaken by sea, a rather unsafe and time consuming form of travel which delayed the missionary-diplomatic cause or brought about unconquerable perturbations. For this reason the Jesuits sought other, more direct and comfortable routes which led through the land-locked areas of Central Asia, far to the north of the Himalayas. Such land routes had to pass through Siberia, a territory which had already by the XVIIIth century been conquered by the Russian empire, whose eastern frontiers bordered with China. According to many authors it appears that, apart from a few Russian and Mongolian merchants and army couriers, no-one knew exactly the ideal route which existed independent of the Silk Route or the Tea Route, kept in strictest secrecy before all foreigners. The Jesuits probably gained more information about the secret Siberian trail for the first time from Prince Fiodor Golovin, who came as the Tsar's envoy to Peking to the court of emperor Kanghi to discuss the matter of the increased conflict along the border between the two empires.² It was perhaps at the time of this mission that the Jesuit, Father Verbiest, in the employ of the Chinese emperor as official translator during Russo-Chinese negotiations, was first able to observe the Kremlin's policy towards China and render Prince Golovin his services. Services which were later beneficial in gaining information by the Jesuits on the land route, not only to China but to the whole of Asia.

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¹ J. T a z b i r, *Piotr Skarga, szermierz kontrreformacji*, Warszawa 1983, PWN, p. 25.

² F. A. P l a t t n e r, *Gdy Europa szukała Azji*, Kraków 1975, WAM, p. 195.

After learning from the letters of Father Verbiest to his Superior of the possibility of travelling via Moscow and Siberia to China and Japan, the Jesuits prepared the first expedition through Russian territory. Once they entered the territory under the direct control of the Moscovite Tsars, they encountered, however, long and unexpected difficulties from the side of the Kremlin, which showed a visible distaste for the Jesuits' plans. They were perhaps suspected of having political ambitions. History proves that Ivan the Terrible's distrust of the Jesuits was not altogether unfounded, as the Jesuits were involved in Europe not only in the struggle against Reformation. They were also involved in the action uniting the Orthodox Russian Church with Rome, and were employed as Papal legates endeavouring to convince the Tsar to enter into a league against the Turks, (e.g. A. Possevio 1581-1583). The conditions set out by Rome were, according to the Tsar, unfavourable for Russia. They were also often sent as envoys of Catholic Polish kings, especially by Stefan Batory and Sigismund III Waza, entangled in a war with Russia.³

The presence and active involvement of the Jesuits, as well as their influence on the outcome of many events in various areas of political life, may well have been at the base of the reluctance the Tsar felt towards the Society of Jesus. He was also concerned over the wide-scale plans of settlement in Siberia. Perhaps his actions were also influenced by his wish to control the fur trade. It may be for this reason also that the Jesuits were subjected to unpleasant treatment in these territories. Ivan the Terrible ordered that every Jesuit passing via Siberia to China or south-east Asia not only needed a special passport issued by the Tsar's court, but was also subject to strict surveillance. As the Jesuit historian S. Załęski commented, the Jesuits were "honorary prisoners" in such a situation, denied the right of safe contacts with others, constantly spied upon and kept far from the Kremlin chancellery.⁴ Papal legates, who amongst other things tried to obtain from the Tsar unhindered passage for the Jesuits through Russia, were treated in a likewise manner. The already mentioned Passevino, for example, was located in quarters surrounded by high walls in a single room together with a Cossack supposedly as his manservant.⁵ At times, Jesuits applying for passports, as for example Fathers Barnabe and Avril, were subjected to lengthy interrogations by the chancellery, and their applications underwent a long and complex journey full of difficulties before they finally reached the Tsar. In many other cases, applications simply disappeared along the way. The few Jesuits who received passports from the tsarist chancellery were often turned back by Tsarist decree several weeks after having embarked on the lengthy journey, no clear reason having been given.

³ S. Załęski, *Jezuici w Polsce*, Lwów 1900, Drukarnia Ludowa, t. I, p. 281.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

⁵ A. Possevino, *Moscovia*, Warszawa 1988, PAX, p. 49.

After the death of Ivan the Terrible, the policy of his successors towards the Jesuit journeys to south-east Asia, without changing tack, became somewhat milder. For example, according to several historical sources, Tsar Fiodor III might have given his approval to Jesuit passage via Siberia had Pope Clement X granted him the title of Tsar.⁶ Another example of the milder approach is the regent Sophie, who held as one of the conditions for approving Jesuit passage via Siberia, the outcome of negotiations with the Polish king Jan III Sobieski, a known Jesuit sympathiser.⁷ She judged that in exchange for such approval she would be able to keep the lands belonging to the Polish Crown which had been conquered, and conclude a peace with Poland. Moscow's foreign policy, and the possibility of using the Jesuits as a pawn, endlessly prolonged and delayed the possibility of granting them free passage.

Tsar Peter I took up a similar albeit singular approach towards Jesuit travels through Russia. Worthy of mention are his tactics, and above all his two main political aims, in the context of which the Tsar's relation to the Jesuits becomes clear. The first of these was Peter I's plan of subordinating Turkey to Russia. Under the pretext of defending Christianity before the infidels, and manifesting a seeming willingness to join the anti-Turkish league, the Tsar started a war into which he tried to draw the Polish king Frederyk August Sas as well as the Catholic nobility. However, in order to succeed, he needed the Jesuits not only to gain for him the favour of the Polish nobles, but also the acceptance of European courts, not least that of the Pope, from whom he hoped to receive the title of imperial caesar.

The Tsar met together with Frederyk August and the papal nuncio Davia in Zamość in 1699 in order to settle a strategy. The meeting was held in secrecy, but as historical sources state, the papal nuncio was anxious above all to settle with Peter I the matter of Jesuit passage via Russia to Asia. After settling the preliminary arrangements, further conditions of Jesuit journeys were negotiated with the Tsar by Father Vota. Apart from guaranteeing free and safe passage of Jesuits through Siberia, the Tsar also undertook to cover their expenses from his treasury. He set down as a condition, however, that every Jesuit undertaking such a journey must have a passport issued by the Polish king, the emperor and by the papal nuncio, and that he may not be a Frenchman.⁸ Both Father Vota and the papal nuncio Davia, however, having learnt by harsh experience with the predecessors of Peter I, wanted to be sure of the guaranteed promises. For this reason they both asked the Tsar to issue the appropriate documents in this matter. The Tsar replied however that: "...his word alone is enough, meaning more than a thousand documents..."⁹ When

⁶ T. Korzon, *Dola i niedola Jana Sobieskiego, 1629-1674*, Warszawa 1923, p. 70.

⁷ Z. Wójcik, *Między traktatem andruszowskim a wojną turecką. Stosunki polsko-rosyjskie 1674-1677*, Wrocław 1976, p. 193.

⁸ S. Załęski, *Jezuici w Polsce*, Lwów 1900, Drukarnia Ludowa, t. III, p. 354.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 354.

the nuncio insisted, the Tsar sent him to Prince Golovin, a member of his entourage, who in turn convinced him that a document of such rank, could only be issued in Moscow and only once the nuncio had put in a written application. Here, however, the nuncio was in a dilemma as how to address the Tsar. Once the application had been submitted, the Tsar deferred the moment of granting approval, and shortly after succeeding in the war against the Turks, revoked all promises he had made regarding Jesuit passage through Russia.¹⁰

The second factor which showed Peter I attitude towards the Jesuits was the war in the north.¹¹ After earlier having compromised himself and having failed to keep his promises, the Tsar, worried about being isolated and also about the new unfavourable balance of power in Europe, decided to renew the severed contact with the Pope and the Society of Jesus.

With the aid of his envoy Golycin as mediator, the Tsar asked the Pope and the Jesuits to forgive him for his earlier misdemeanors. He solemnly swore his good will towards the order and expressed his readiness to yield to many of their demands, allowing Jesuits free passage not only to China and Japan, but also to Armenia, Persia etc.¹² The Tsar wished to cast all shadow of doubt from the minds of the Jesuits, and so started, as states S. Załęski, visiting Jesuit colleges, attending their daily services, important ceremonies and feast days and dining with them. In speeches given during these occasions, he sang the praises of the Society of Jesus which, as he said, he: "... *dearly loved and respected* ..." He raised toasts in honour of Pope Clement XI praising his merits and avowed that his greatest wish once the war in the North was over, was to pay homage to the Pope in Rome.¹³ Over and above this, in Połock on the 13th July 1705, in the presence of the Lithuanian chancellor Radziwiłł and the nuncio Horace Spad as well as many Jesuit fathers, Peter I publicly confessed, promising amendment of his ways and reparation for his sins. When leaving the Jesuit college in Połock after a lengthy stay, he not only urged the Jesuit to travel at will through Russia, but also to take up missionary work in Moscow. He did not, however, issue any documents to back up these promises. It was only as a result of persistent demands made by the Polish envoy, Działyński, that Peter I gave a decree in Grodno on 2nd December 1705, allowing the Jesuits partially free passage through Russia to Asia, and also granted permission to build a church and open Jesuit schools in Moscow.

The German emperor Jozef I, a Jesuit patron, asked the Tsar to grant permission for Jesuits to travel without restriction to Asia, to be fully tolerant of Catholics in Moscow, to allow for the change over of the provisory Jesuit schools into public high schools and to re-establish links with Rome. In reply, the Tsar assured the emperor that he would send Prince Dolgorukii to Rome in

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 354.

¹¹ J. Ochmański, *Dzieje Rosji do roku 1861*, Warszawa 1986, PWN, p. 168.

¹² S. Załęski, *Jezuici w Polsce*, Lwów 1900, Drukarnia Ludowa, t. III, p. 410.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 415.

the character of envoy to discuss these issues. At the same time and quite independently of his assurances, Peter I sent the following statement to Clement XI on 20th October 1706, via General Menzhykow:

"... *As a result of the intercession of His Most Gracious Majesty the Emperor Jozef I ... through his envoy Father Elias Broggio, a member of the Society of Jesus, procurator of the Moscow mission, I hereby announce ... to be open to Missionaries all hitherto closed lands and countries of Moscow, so that They may more safely and quickly by Our help reach the far lands of the Kingdom of China ...*"¹⁴

A year later, on 1st March 1707, the Tsar's envoy Kurakin arrived in Rome to convey to the Peter's wish of converting to Catholicism, and also of his desire for union between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Perhaps the Tsar mentioned something similar to the Jesuits in Moscow, for in June 1707, Father Broggio assured Clement XI of the Tsar's great good will towards the Pope and the Church. Clement XI even thanked the Tsar for his readiness to grant various privileges to the Catholic Church and the Jesuits, and expressed his hope to place his nuncio in Moscow, something which was not to come about during the reign of Peter I. By taking up such a stance, the Tsar undoubtedly gained much support throughout the courts of Europe and in Church circles, as well as with the Pope. Having secured through their protection a stronger position in Europe, and after having with their help defeated the Swedes, in 1709 the Tsar suddenly suspended links with Rome and broke off relations with the Viennese court. In 1718, after being persuaded and pressured by the Orthodox clergy, the Tsar issued a decree banishing the Jesuits from Russia.¹⁵ The Tsar's decree meant an irreversible end to the possibility of the Jesuits accessing Asia via Russia. Once again they had been subjected to the cunningness and duplicity of Moscow's Tsars.

The sole Jesuit who travelled through Russian territory, but from Peking to Europe, and who saw secret trail at first hand, was Father Nicholas Gampriano, according to Jesuit archives.¹⁶ Father Gampriano had the opportunity to undertake this journey in 1727, at the time of the sixth Russian diplomatic mission to Peking. Emperor Kanghi expressed his unequivocal wish that Father Gampriano return together with the Tsar's messengers in the capacity of envoy. He was personally entrusted with conveying important letters from the Emperor to the Pope. The Tsar, fearing conflict with the Emperor of China, was forced to agree to the passage of the Jesuit through Russia. Several months passed, however, before he conceded.

In conclusion it is worth mentioning one further very important fact. Namely, that the Jesuits, in their endeavour to gain permission from the Tsars

¹⁴ Theiner, *Neueste Zustaende der katholische Kirche in Polen und Rusland*, Augsburg 1841, p. 144-122.

¹⁵ S. Załęski, *Jezuici w Polsce*, Lwów 1900, Drukarnia Ludowa, t. III, p. 410.

¹⁶ F. A. Plattner, *Gdy Europa szukała Azji*, Kraków 1975, p. 217.

to take land routes from Europe to Asia via the kingdom of Moscow, quickly realised that they alone would not succeed in gaining the Kremlin's approval for such travel plans. For this reason they began to search for influential patrons amongst the learned, as well as at the royal courts of Europe. The emperor Leopold, for example, interceded on their behalf by sending his envoy Kurtz to the Kremlin with a confidential letter dated 13 November 1684. The Polish king Jan III Sobieski also repeatedly brought up the problem of Jesuit access to Asia during talks with the Tsar. As he believed the Tsar would eventually express his approval, he not only gave Father Avril access to maps of Siberia from his own archives, but also furnished him with information derived from his intelligence sources. The earlier mentioned German emperor Jozef I insisted point-blank in 1706 that the Tsar give his approval for the passage of Jesuits through Russia. Frederyk Augustus, the Princess Zamoyska and many other influential Polish magnates as well as many influential Russians, such as for example Teodor Golovin, field marshal Sheremetiev or the chancellor Prince Golicyn, did the same. The French king, Louis XIV, although not through direct intercession on their behalf at the Kremlin, also aided the Jesuits seeking passage through Russia. He issued diplomatic passports to all Jesuits embarking for Asia. In order to ensure total security during their journey, he appointed Duke Siri Zgorski, a man who was at that time ambassador to Persia for several European countries, his plenipotentiary at the court of the Shah. The Duke was given the task of gaining the Tsar's approval for the Jesuit cause. Despite this, Jesuits travelling in the official retinue were stopped by tsarist authorities. The Jesuit, Father Grimaldi, envoy of Chinese emperor to Moscow and Rome, established ties with many learned men throughout Europe. He was on friendly terms with, amongst others, Leibnitz, a man greatly admired by Peter I. Father Grimaldi judged that the Society of Jesus might profit something in Moscow thanks to the recommendations of Leibnitz. All of these attempts, however, were fruitless. The Tsars definitively refused to give approval for the passage of the Jesuits to Asia.

Many hypotheses may be put forward to explain the tsarist policy towards the Jesuits' plans. Russia probably feared Jesuit influence in Asia, believing that this would represent a threat to Russian interests in eastern Siberia. But the fact remains that it was two Jesuits, Fathers Gerbillon and Pereira, who brought about the signing of the treaty in Nerczyńsk in 1689, thus saving Russia and China a costly war. When it appeared that negotiations may be broken off, the Jesuit fathers, who were acting as translators, put forward a proposal of a compromise which was acceptable to both sides. Russia abandoned her rights to the controversial Amur territories, and China agreed to grant Russia grater trading concessions. Although the Kremlin knew full well what role the Jesuits played in securing the peace, Moscow's policy towards the Society of Jesus remained unchanged.

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