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Agent-operational activities of Soviet special services in the monastic community of the Hlynska pustyn (mid-1950s)

Viacheslav O. Olitskyi
Sumy State Pedagogical University named after A.S. Makarenko
PhD in History, Associate Professor (Ukraine)
email: olitckyi@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000–0001–5518–5127
Scopus Author ID: 57848096400
Researcher ID: AEG-1120-2022

Abstract.

The purpose of the study *is to clarify the features, scale, and consequences of the agent-operational activities of the Soviet special services in the environment of the monastic community of the Hlynska Pustyn in the mid-1950s.* ***The methodological basis of the study*** *is a combination of the principles of historicism, objectivity, and critical analysis of sources, which allowed us to recreate the features of the agent-operational activities of the Soviet special services in the environment of the Hlynska Pustyn. An interdisciplinary approach was used, which integrates the achievements of the history of religion, political history, and the history of special services, as well as a microhistorical perspective, thanks to which a specific monastic community is considered as a reflection of broader processes of state-church relations in a totalitarian society. The study used historical-genetic, historical-comparative, historical-systemic, and prosopographic research methods.* ***The scientific novelty*** *of the article lies in the introduction into scientific circulation and systematic analysis of archival materials of the KGB, which highlight the scale and methods of agent control over the Hlynska Pustyn in the mid-1950s. The double dimension of monastic service in the conditions of a totalitarian state is shown: the preservation of spiritual tradition and forced existence under the constant supervision of Soviet special services.* ***Conclusions****. The main areas of activity of the special services in the environment of the monasticism of the Glynska Hermitage were the documentation of sermons, control over the contacts of the brethren, prevention of the formation of a network of influence among the laity, and systematic recruitment of new informants. The agent network combined spiritual agents from among the brethren and former inhabitants of the monastery and secular agents who operated among pilgrims and the local population, ensuring multi-level control over the internal and external life of the monastery. The constant presence of agents, provocations, and compromising measures created an atmosphere of distrust and psychological pressure, which significantly complicated traditional monastic service and undermined the foundation of community life built on trust and brotherly love. At the same time, the monastery retained its spiritual appeal, remaining a centre of pilgrimage and spiritual guidance.*

Keywords: *Ukrainian Exarchate, Orthodox clergy, monasticism, monastic community, monastery, Soviet special services, KGB, agents.*

Агентурно-оперативна діяльність радянських спецслужб у середовищі чернечої громади Глинської пустині (середина 1950-х років)

В'ячеслав Оліцький
Сумський державний педагогічний університет імені А. С. Макаренка
кандидат історичних наук, доцент (Україна)
email: olitckyi@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5518-5127
Scopus Author ID: 57848096400
Researcher ID: AEG-1120-2022

Анотація.

Метою дослідження *є з'ясування особливостей, масштабів та наслідків агентурно-оперативної діяльності радянських спецслужб у середовищі чернечої громади Глинської пустині у середині 1950-х років.* ***Методологічну основу дослідження*** *становить поєднання принципів історизму, об'єктивності та критичного аналізу джерел, що дозволило відтворити особливості агентурно-оперативної діяльності радянських спецслужб у середовищі чернечої громади Глинської пустині. Використано міждисциплінарний підхід, який інтегрує здобутки історії релігії, політичної історії та історії спецслужб, а також*

мікроісторичну перспективу, завдяки якій конкретна чернеча громада розглядається як відображення ширших процесів державно-церковних відносин у тоталітарному суспільстві. У процесі дослідження застосовано історико-генетичний, історико-порівняльний, історико-системний, просопографічний методи дослідження. ***Наукова новизна*** *статті полягає у введенні до наукового обігу та системному аналізі архівних матеріалів КДБ, що висвітлюють масштаби й методи агентурного контролю за Глинською пустинню у середині 1950-х років. Показано подвійний вимір чернечого служіння в умовах тоталітарної держави: збереження духовної традиції та вимушене існування під постійним наглядом радянських спецслужб.* ***Висновки.*** *Основними напрямами діяльності спецслужб у середовищі чернецтва Глинської пустині були документування проповідей, контроль за контактами братії, недопущення формування мережі впливу серед мирян та систематичне вербування нових інформаторів. Агентурна мережа поєднувала духовних агентів із числа братії та колишніх насельників монастиря і світських агентів, що діяли серед паломників та місцевого населення, забезпечуючи багаторівневий контроль за внутрішнім і зовнішнім життям обителі. Постійна присутність агентури, провокації та компрометаційні заходи формували атмосферу недовіри й психологічного тиску, що суттєво ускладнювало традиційне чернече служіння та підривало основу спільнотного життя, побудованого на довірі й братерській любові. Водночас монастир зберігав духовну привабливість, залишаючись центром паломництва та духовного наставництва.*

Ключові слова: *Український екзархат, православне духовенство, чернецтво, чернеча громада, монастир, радянські спецслужби, КДБ, агентура.*

Problem statement. Research into the peculiarities of the life of Orthodox monastic communities in the post-war period is significant for understanding the specifics of spiritual life under the totalitarian Soviet regime. In the mid-20th century, the USSR proclaimed a course towards the formation of a "new man" and the construction of an atheistic society, which involved a systematic struggle against religion as an ideological competitor. In this context, the authorities perceived monasteries, which embodied the tradition of monastic service and were bearers of spiritual heritage as potential centres of ideological danger. The problem became particularly acute in monastic communities, since monastic life was based on the principles of asceticism, obedience, and spiritual guidance, which were fundamentally at odds with Soviet values. The complexity of monastic service in the post-war years lay not only in official restrictions and material and economic pressure from the state, but also in the pervasive surveillance of the Soviet secret services. The operational and intelligence activities of the KGB created an atmosphere of constant fear, distrust, and suspicion, where any word of a sermon or element of spiritual life could be interpreted as anti-Soviet propaganda. Thus, the relevance of the study lies in the need to understand the dual nature of monastic service in the mid-20th century: on the one hand, the preservation of spiritual tradition and religious identity, and on the other, forced existence under the total control of the state and special services, which significantly complicated both the internal life of monastic communities and their interaction with lay people.

The study aims to clarify the features, scale, and consequences of the agentural and operational activities of the Soviet special services in the monastic community of the Hlynska Pustyn in the mid-1950s.

Analysis of sources and recent studies. The functioning of Orthodox monasteries and monastic communities during the Soviet period has been widely covered in historiography. In the collective monograph "Social Transformations in Ukraine: Late Stalinism and the Khrushchev Era", considerable attention is paid to the political and cultural processes of the 1940s–1960s, among which religious policy and the activities of monasteries are considered important markers of social change. The publication provides a theoretical basis for analysing the Soviet anti-religious campaign and the sociocultural climate in which monastic communities existed (Danylenko, 2015). A separate area of research is explicitly devoted to the Glynska Pustyn. Valuable information is contained in the memoirs of pilgrims collected by G. Pylneva, which reflect the spiritual atmosphere of the monastery and its significance for believers (Pilneva, 1997). A thorough historical overview of the monastery was left by Archimandrite Ioann (Maslov) (Maslov, 1994). A special place is occupied by research on A. Chesnokov and Z. Chesnokov, who analysed the phenomenon of elderhood, showed the role of spiritual mentors in preserving tradition and forming the spiritual authority of the monastery (Chesnokov, Chesnokov, 2013). In modern Ukrainian historiography, the theme of the Hlynska Pustyn is developed by V. Olitskyi, who traces the adaptation strategies of the clergy under Stalinism and analyses the conflict between the monastic community and the Soviet authorities in the late 1950s and early 1960s, introducing new archival materials into scientific circulation (Olitskyi, 2024; Olitskyi, 2025). R. Skakun made a significant contribution to the study of agentural activity, focusing on the formation and functioning of agents in the Ukrainian episcopate (Skakun, 2025). However, there is

a significant gap in the study of the KGB's agentural and operational work among the clergy of the Ukrainian Exarchate, which remains under-researched.

The research was based on documents from the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine, the Central State Archive of Public Associations and Ukrainian Studies, and the State Archive of the Sumy Region.

Presentation of the primary material. Operational and agent work in the church environment in the mid-1950s covered several main areas, one of the most important of which was countering illegal church groups. In the Sumy region, the focus remained on the communities of the Independent Orthodox Church and the Podgornytsia, which had up to 11 underground groups with a total of about 100 people in the region. The development of clergy members of the Russian Orthodox Church also remained important. In total, there were 217 Orthodox churches in the region, in which 217 priests served in mid-1956. About 50% of the priests of the Sumy diocese were over 65 years old, although there was a noticeable trend toward an increase in the number of young clergy. In 1956, two group cases, six form cases, and one preliminary case involving 15 individuals were developed in the region targeting the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church. There were 17 active agents, one resident, and two safe houses. At the same time, preventive measures were taken to improve agent and operational work, and records were purged. During 1956, seven cases were closed, including those against four clergymen (HDA SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832, ark. 204–205; 223–225; DASO, f. R-2196, op. 5, spr. 23, ark. 316).

An important place in the religious life of the region, and accordingly in the agentural and operational work, was occupied by the Nativity of the Mother of God Hlynska Pustyn, which in the mid-1950s occupied a unique place among the Orthodox centres of Left-Bank Ukraine. The charter of the Hlynska Pustyn was restored based on the traditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries and was modelled on the Athonite monasteries. The structure of monastic life retained the features of the pre-revolutionary tradition: worship, communal meals, monastic obedience, and strict adherence to the charter. A distinctive feature of the Hlynska Pustyn was the institution of elders, enshrined in the charter, a special form of spiritual guidance in monasteries based on personal asceticism, deep prayer experience, and the ability to guide both monks and laypeople spiritually. In the post-war years, discipline in the monastery was directly linked to the authority of the elders. Their example – in prayer, fasting, and obedience – became a living interpretation of the rules. In their sermons and instructions, the elders called for spiritual sobriety, endurance in the face of the challenges of the times, and steadfastness in faith, without compromising conscience (Danylenko, 2015, p. 576; Chesnokov, 2013, pp. 196–197).

In addition, the monastery was one of the most economically viable on the Left Bank. Even after reducing its land holdings in the late 1950s, it remained one of the three monasteries in the eastern Ukrainian dioceses that owned the most extensive tracts. Only two monasteries of the eastern dioceses of the Ukrainian Exarchate, including the Hlynska Pustyn monastery, were able to provide the brethren with vegetables and some bread from their own harvests (TsDAHOU, f. 4648, op. 3. spr. 227, ark. 270–271). The primary financial income came from church revenues, which amounted to about 600,000 rubles in the late 1950s. In addition, the monastery received a significant amount of food and industrial parcels from believers (DASO, f. R-2196, op. 7a, spr. 5, ark. 12–13).

In the second half of the 1950s, the monastic community consisted of 65 people: 1 archimandrite, six abbots, 16 hieromonks, 25 monks, seven hierodeacons, and 10 novices. Seven skhimniks served in the Glinsk Desert. Most of the hierodeacons and mantled monks were young men aged 25–30. The vast majority of monks took their vows starting in 1944; by 1958, there were 32 monks. The age structure of the monastic community was as follows: 38 people over 55 years old, seven between 41 and 55 years old, seven between 31 and 40 years old, and eight people under 30 years old (DASO, f. R-2196, op. 7a, spr. 5, ark. 12–13).

One of the main features of the Hlynska Pustyn was mass pilgrimage. Residents of nearby villages came to the monastery, as did pilgrims from Kharkiv, Kursk, Bryansk, and other neighbouring regions. This attests to the monastery's influence on a regional and interregional scale. A distinctive feature of the pilgrimage was its consistency: believers came not only on major holidays but also on weekdays, which ensured the constant presence of lay people in the monastery's life. The spiritual life of the Hlynska Pustyn in the post-war period was formed around the personal communication of the brethren and pilgrims with spiritual mentors. According to eyewitnesses, this communication created the unique atmosphere of the monastery, combining strict monastic discipline with sincere participation in the spiritual needs of every pilgrim who needed it. After the completion of divine services and meals, monks and believers often went to the cells of the elders, where each received a few minutes for confession, advice, or blessing (Pilneva, 1997, pp. 22–28). The KGB regarded this atmosphere as a threat, and the monastery was seen as a potential centre of anti-Soviet activity. This prompted special attention and control of the monastic community. Reports noted that "the monastery is visited by numerous lay people who may be conduits of anti-Soviet propaganda" and that "the monastery environment creates conditions for anti-Soviet agitation" (HAD SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832,

ark. 209–211, 224–225). Such conclusions directly linked the spiritual authority of the monastery's leadership with a potential threat to state ideology, and the spiritual life of the monastery automatically came under suspicion.

In the mid-1950s, the state security agencies in the Sumy region paid particular attention to the Hlynska Pustyn. Unlike parish life, where control was exercised through prevention and selective agent work, the monastery was seen as a potential centre of religious resistance. This led to the formation of the densest agent network here.

The KGB's operational and agent work in the monastic community of the Nativity of the Mother of God in the Hlynska Pustyn was carried out in several directions, among which four main ones can be distinguished. The sermons of the monastery's clergy were actively documented to identify any anti-Soviet manifestations. This primarily meant looking for reasons to bring the brethren to justice, since anti-Soviet manifestations were understood to include purely religious teachings and instructions. Particular attention was paid to Archimandrite Sergius (Gavrilov) and other spiritual authorities who had significant influence among the brethren and the faithful. The second area was the identification of potential contacts between the brethren and underground groups of the IPC and Podgornytskyi. The third direction was to prevent the formation of a network of influence among believers who visited the monastery en masse. The fourth direction involved recruiting new informants from the monastic community and creating conditions for internal decay in the monastic environment. Thus, the main task was to obtain information and neutralise the Hlynska Pustyn spiritual influence (HAD SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832, ark. 209–211).

A 1956 KGB report lists at least ten active agents in or around the monastery. Among them, two types can be distinguished: spiritual agents and secular agents. The group of spiritual agents included individuals who had canonical status in the Orthodox Church or belonged directly to the monastic community. First and foremost, these were members of the brotherhood or former inhabitants of the monastery. Their distinctive feature and principal value lie in their ability to directly access the monastic community's life and influence its internal processes. They formed the core of the agent network, as they could obtain information inaccessible to secular individuals. Agent "Severny," a hierodeacon of the monastery, was an internal informant recruited in December 1956. His distinctive feature was his permanent residence in the monastery and access to everyday and spiritual processes. Agent "Saratovsky," a former novice and seminary student, combined the status of a former monastery inhabitant and seminary student, which made him an informant with double legitimacy. Separately, it is worth mentioning agents such as "Seredy," who operated under the cover of a wandering monk and was used by the Soviet special services to check illegal monastic groups and women's centres associated with the Hlynska Pustyn (HAD SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832, ark. 207–210; 220).

Secular agents were individuals who did not belong to the monastic order but had regular contact with the monastery's brethren, lived near the Glinsk Desert, or maintained ties with individual monks. They monitored pilgrims, the monastery's surroundings, and illegal groups that could come into contact with the brethren. Agent "First," a resident who lived near the monastery, was recruited based on compromising materials. She provided information about the sermons of Archimandrite Sergius (Gavrilov) and the brotherhood's contacts with believers. Agent "Virna" enjoyed authority among believers, gathered information about visitors and supporters of the monastery, and also obtained compromising information on clergymen. Agent "Tsvitkova," a worker at the sugar factory, was involved in working with pilgrims and underground groups. In addition, agents "Arkady," "Golubov," and "Moldavan" operated under the guise of believers who visited the monastery for religious purposes (HAD SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832, ark. 215, 224–225).

The methods of agent work in the Hlynska Pustyn can be divided into several groups: compromise and blackmail, for example, "First," who was recruited due to embezzlement and became dependent on the KGB; introduction of agents from within – "Northern" as a member of the brotherhood had constant access to the life of the monastery; combining external and internal contacts – "Saratovsky" acted as an intermediary between the seminary environment and the brotherhood; control of pilgrimages – "Verna" and "Tsvitkova" monitored lay people who visited the monastery; agent games and "letter measures" – the use of agents for provocations and checks on the connections of the monastic community (HAD SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832, ark. 210, 224–225). The most effective agents were "Persha", "Seversky", "Saratovsky" and "Virna." Thanks to these agents, the state security agencies created conditions for virtually complete control over the monastery and its external connections.

An analysis of KGB operational materials on the Hlynska Pustyn shows that the state security agencies sought to create a multi-layered network of agents. It combined an inner core of spiritual agents with an outer ring of secular agents, allowing for control both within the monastery and from the secular environment. Combining these categories ensured complete control over the monastery and its connections. Spiritual agents were fewer in number but were of strategic importance because they

provided access to the inner life of the monastic community. Their effectiveness lay in documenting moods and sermons. Secular agents formed a more numerous and flexible segment of the network. They ensured control over the monastery's surroundings, connections, and influence on believers. This structure allowed the KGB to exercise multi-level supervision and double-e control and significantly reduced the chances of the brethren remaining unnoticed by the state security services.

Under such conditions, the life of the brotherhood of the Hlynska Pustyn in the mid-1950s unfolded under challenging circumstances: on the one hand, there was the statutory monastic service and spiritual tradition, and on the other, there was constant surveillance and pressure from the KGB. This led to a personal dimension of monasticism, where every decision and every spiritual step took on a double meaning, religious and political. KGB documents show that the monastic environment was perceived as potentially dangerous because of the sermons and influence of the elders (HDA SBU, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2832, ark. 209–211). Every word spoken during a service or spiritual conversation could become grounds for investigation or persecution.

The monks faced a challenge: remaining faithful to tradition when the authorities classified any manifestation of spiritual freedom as hostile agitation. Under constant surveillance, even ordinary monastic practices-reading spiritual literature, communicating with pilgrims, receiving novices-became risky. The network of agents in the monastery created an atmosphere of suspicion. The brethren could not be sure which inhabitants or close lay people were passing information to the state security services. This undermined the traditional principle of monastic community, where trust and brotherly love were supposed to be the basis of life. The monks could not help but know about the arrests and searches carried out after agents' reports in various parts of the country, both among monks and parish clergy. This created psychological pressure that forced the brethren to live in a state of constant alertness. For many, this became a test of faith-could a monk preserve his calling, knowing that his every step could be subject to surveillance?

Under the conditions of agent control, each monk had to make his own choice. Some chose the path of humility and patience, accepting the situation as a test and continuing their monastic service despite the risks. Others tried to avoid excessive activity not to attract the attention of the state security services. There were also cases of cooperation with the authorities, when individual monks or novices became agents under pressure. This range of reactions reflected not only individual character traits but also the level of spiritual maturity. After all, monastic life in such conditions became a constant choice between fidelity to tradition and the desire to avoid persecution. Another dimension was added to the traditional monastic life of humility, prayer, and obedience: the need to serve under the control and pressure of the Soviet secret services. Monks performed divine services knowing that an agent might be standing nearby; they delivered sermons aware that their words were being recorded. All this created a situation where spiritual feats became feats in the political sense too.

Conclusions. In the mid-1950s, the Soviet authorities viewed Orthodox monasteries as potential centres of ideological danger, so the Hlynska Pustyn found itself at the centre of the KGB's agentural and operational work. The main activities of the special services were documenting the clergy's sermons, monitoring the brethren's contacts with underground church groups, preventing the formation of a network of influence among the laity, and systematically recruiting new informants. The agent network combined spiritual agents from among the brethren and former inhabitants of the monastery with secular agents operating among pilgrims and the local population, ensuring multi-level control over the internal and external life of the monastery. The constant presence of agents, provocations, and compromising measures created an atmosphere of mistrust and psychological pressure, which significantly complicated traditional monastic service and undermined the foundation of community life built on trust and brotherly love. At the same time, the monastery retained its spiritual appeal, remaining a centre of pilgrimage and spiritual guidance, which testifies to the resilience of the Orthodox tradition even in the most unfavourable conditions of a totalitarian state. The experience of the monastic community of the Hlynska Pustyn in the 1950s demonstrates the dual dimension of monastic service: the preservation of spiritual identity and, at the same time, forced existence under the systematic control of the special services, which became a characteristic feature of religious life in the Ukrainian SSR during this period.

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