Jesuits and Communism: Introduction

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During the horrendous fighting of the First World War, the Russian Empire was consumed by failure; failure to win victories against the German military, failure to feed its home population, and failure to maintain political stability. In the midst of wartime deprivation and devastation, the Bolshevik Party, led by an exiled Vladimir Lenin, campaigned on promises of “Peace, Bread, Land.” For some of the people of the Russian Empire, the Bolshevik promise to withdraw from the military conflict raging around them was especially promising. For still others, the desire for a re-structuring of all Russian society along Marxist-Communist lines seemed to promise greater social equality for the large masses of the lower social classes. The moderate government of Alexander Kerensky, which refused to withdraw from the war, fell to the Bolshevik Party in October 1917.

As Lenin and his Bolshevik followers attempted to seize power, they unleashed a bloody and protracted Civil War within the empire. The “Reds” led by the Bolsheviks, sought to radically alter Russia to be in keeping with Marxist ideology. The “Whites” led by a mixture of conservatives, fought back, seeking to prevent the Bolshevik reorganization of Russian life. As the rest of the world watched the violence unfold, Lenin led the Bolsheviks to victory. Ultimately, Bolshevism would threaten to spread throughout the world. In response to the rise of communist, socialist, and Popular Front governments and organizations, the Society of Jesus, led by Superior General Włodzimierz Ledóchowski (in office, 1915–42), aimed to combat the atheistic ideology. To Ledóchowski, there was no greater danger to Christian civilization than the communism. He issued instructions to the Jesuits to fight against communism just as the members of the Society had originally fought against the Reformation.

There would be some interesting twists and turns, however, in the Jesuits’ battle against communist ideology. In this special edition, our authors explore the connections between the Jesuits and communism. We will encounter, in Ainur Elmgren’s article, not real life Jesuits, but instead, depictions of Jesuits. These depictions, appearing in newspaper articles, in history textbooks, and in
popular fiction, all pointed to the danger Finnish society faced if they allowed “Jesuitism” to take over. In Beth Griech-Polelle’s article, we encounter a similar theme, although the real presence of some Jesuits in Nazi Germany meant that there were consequences for the Society, particularly when Hitler and other Nazi ideologues targeted the order as treacherous to the German people.

We then move on examine the position taken by Jesuits. At the center, of course, is Superior General Ledóchowski. Philippe Chenaux’s article addresses the role played by Ledóchowski in the fight against communism, including his desire to form a specific secretariat to combat the growing threat of an atheistic system. Connected to Chenaux’s research, we then move on to Marisa P. Trythall’s examination of a Jesuit, the American Edmund Walsh, and his involvement with the Papal Relief Mission to Russia in 1922–23. Walsh was located, so to speak, at the “ground zero” of communism, and his efforts to protect the Roman Catholic Church and Christianity in general were uppermost in his mind during this mission. Back in America, another Jesuit, John LaFarge, would be attempting to formulate a United Front to take on communism in the United States. Charles Gallagher’s article on LaFarge’s efforts illuminates a long-neglected aspect of LaFarge’s career as his efforts to fight communism are often overlooked by historians. Both Walsh’s and LaFarge’s careers would intersect with one another over the issue of fighting against communism, but ultimately Ledóchowski and the pope would be the ones to decide what approach the Society would take in combating the “lies of Communism and atheism, the great heresy of our times, more dangerous probably than any heresy of the past.” What might have astounded men such as LaFarge, Walsh, and Ledóchowski, was that Jesuits were often accused of working in league with communists to disrupt society in order to profit from the ensuing chaos.

In Ainur Elmgren’s article, “The Jesuits of Our Time,” we enter Finland in 1917, on the brink of a civil war led by Finnish socialists against the established order. Although the Jesuits were practically a non-existent component of Finnish society at this time, invoking imagery of “the Jesuits” was politically useful in stirring average people to imagine that a militant, anachronistic organization was attempting to drag Finnish society back into the Middle Ages. Political leaders hurled the charge of “Jesuitism” at Socialists and Social Democrats to imply that both Jesuits and Socialists had similar aims: to destroy the Finnish nation and to disrupt public order.

Elmgren highlights the development of the lasting “anti-Jesuit” imagery since the time of the Counter-Reformation in Finland. Jesuits, in the Protestant propaganda of the time, were associated with desires for global domination, disguising their true intentions by manipulating people to achieve their