23 August 1944 and the Romanian Orthodoxy

In the interwar period the Romanian communist party was a small faction without any political influence, numbering only a few thousand members in 1944. However, from 1944 to 1948 it managed to consolidate political power, supported by the Soviet Union.

A gradual increase of communist presence in Romanian political life began on 23 August 1944 when the leaders of the democratic opposition, acting with the support of King Michael, mounted a coup d’état against Marshall Antonescu and his dictatorial pro-German regime. From this date until 22 November 1944 Romania was ruled by two provisional governments, both led by General Constantin Sănătescu, a well known antifascist, and took part in the war against Germany with Romanian forces advancing through Hungary and Czechoslovakia until the official end of the war in 1945. In the negotiations of 12 September 1944, Romania lost the territories of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union. By 25 October 1944 all pre-war Romanian territory in Transylvania had been recovered by Romanian and Soviet armies. Under the control of the Red Army, the Soviet Union installed its own local officials and refused to return the territory to Romanian administration. Moreover, at the Moscow meeting in October 1944, Churchill and Stalin agreed to 90 per cent Soviet political interest in Romania.

23 August 1944 was not only a historical moment for the Romanian nation state but was also considered an important day for the Romanian Orthodox Church. Among messages addressed to the throne and other political officials, on 24 August 1944, Patriarch Nicodim sent a telegram to King Michael reinforcing the church’s support for his decisions, stating that ‘the Church will be near the Romanian people and its king as always’.

A few months later, on 9 October 1944, during the General Sănătescu government, the patriarch issued an official Pastoral Letter. This letter was the first official document of the church hierarchy publicly expressing support
for the political regime of the Soviet Union whose military forces were present in the country. The Pastoral Letter is one of the most interesting official declarations of the Romanian Orthodox Church in showing how religion combined with politics in praising the new regime.

The Pastoral Letter begins by asserting that Romania suffered under the former dictatorial regime, which ‘suffocated the free thoughts and the feelings of our people’. The letter stated that ‘the dictatorship is something strange for the soul of Romanian people’. Although the former Orthodox patriarch, Miron Cristea, was prime minister of three governments of the dictatorship of King Carol II in 1938–9, the Pastoral Letter noted that ‘the dictatorship is forbidden by the Church’s teachings’. The letter continued:

The day of 23 August 1944 will remain written as one of the most important dates in the history of the Romanian people. […] The historic act of 23 August 1944 has removed the dictatorial regime, which was inappropriate to the tradition of our country. [This day] gave us democratic freedoms. […] These freedoms are precious to us because most of them are the product of our Saviour’s teachings: ‘Render Caesar what is due to Caesar, and render God what is due to God’ (Matthew 22: 21). These words are the basis and the source of individual, political and religious liberties.

Referring to the creation of the Romanian state, the Pastoral Letter added that Romania was a nation state with the help and support of great powers. The armistice between Romania and the Soviet Union demonstrated that Romania was a united country only with the military and political help of the Soviet Union. The USSR’s ‘generosity’ in not conquering Romania ‘imposes us to bind, in a spirit of absolute trust of Soviet Russia and our elder sister in the right faith’. The letter emphasised the main reasons for following the Soviet Union’s policy, briefly presenting the relationship between the hierarchies of the Orthodox churches in these countries. Finally, the letter asserted that ‘the Church has been the mother of the Romanian people, an ethnic mother, because she united colonists with Dacians which led to the birth of the people and the creation of the Romanian states’. From this special position the church had the authority to indicate to the king and the nation the political path to follow, suggesting the need to be closer to the Soviet Union.

This new attitude of the church towards the Soviet Union was due to two main factors. On the one hand, in the war against Germany, Soviet troops occupied Romanian territory, and a declaration such as this letter was aimed at pleasing the Soviet authorities. On the other hand, the Pastoral Letter conformed to the directives of the Soviet High Command of the Southeast European Front. Through the armistice, Romania was under the Allied Control Commission and the religious framework in the Balkans had been set by the so-called ‘Vyshinsky Plan’ which imposed the ‘liquidation of undesirable