

Today's Martyrs

Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom

Meditation – Down the Memory Hole

The memory of the just serves as blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.
- Proverbs 10:7

On December 9, 1924 (some accounts say 1923) unidentified armed men invaded the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow where Patriarch Tikhon lived. They went through the buildings in an apparent attempt to find and kill the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Somehow Tikhon escaped their attention, but they found and killed his attendant, Jacob Polozov. The police later blamed the attack on White (i.e. anti-Communist) agents, and closed the investigation within months without taking any action.

Patriarch Tikhon was in some ways the greatest threat that the Russian Communists faced after they seized power. He was born Vasily Ivanovich Bellavin in 1865. Prior to his election as patriarch he had served as the archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, and had become a U.S. citizen. Under his leadership the church grew from a regional church in Alaska to a church with national reach in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. He met Jacob Polozov at one church in America, and hired him to be his attendant.

When Tikhon returned to Russia in 1907 Polozov travelled with him. Ten years later the Russian Revolution was underway and the church discussed amongst itself whether to reinstate the patriarchate which had been abolished by Tsar Peter the Great. Many bishops and theologians argued against the reinstatement, preferring instead the more collegial leadership of their recent past, but the peasant members of the council pushed for reinstatement in the belief that it was needed to provide some social certainty now that the Tsar was gone. The later view was accepted, and Metropolitan Tikhon was then elected patriarch.

Tikhon did try to keep the church out of politics and near the end of his life he publicly stated that he was not a threat to Soviet power. Nevertheless, he fought the Communists on every issue. They attempted to kill him in 1919, and then put him under house arrest in April 1922. An international outrage followed, in large part thanks to his many friends in North America, and he was released in June 1923. Perhaps his strongest remark against the Communists came after he



Я. А. Полюзов, келейник патриарха Тихона (на фото слева перед патриархом)

Patriarch Tikhon at right wearing the white mitre, Jacob Polozov to the left in tie and open raincoat - courtesy kuz3.pstbi.ru

heard Lenin's Tomb had been accidentally flooded with sewage: the Patriarch said "The balm accords with the relics", a comment that was widely repeated.

All this time Jacob Polozov attended at Tikhon's side, or as often as the government allowed. In the photograph above it is apparent that Polozov's 'attendance' might have included the role of bodyguard. He spent most of 1921 and then 1922 in prison. The first time was the most tragic: his wife Natalia gave birth to a daughter while he was incarcerated, only to see the baby die eight days later due to their strained circumstances. The second time he was released due to a serious illness. When he was killed most Russian Christians hailed him as a martyr who had saved their Patriarch from death, but some felt that Polozov was the real target, and that his murder was meant to shock and weaken the frail Patriarch who so loved the Polozov family. They may have been correct, as Tikhon died of natural causes – as far as it is known – only four months later at age 60.

The title of this meditation concerns the *memory hole*, the Orwellian device used to forget inconvenient truths. The reason for this title is simple: this account of this assassination is believed to be the first in decades to appear in English in print. Even in Russia, few internet accounts have been written about it, basic facts such as the year of the assassination do not agree, and most accounts have disappeared from the web and exist only in cached formats. You have read this story only because a Today's Martyrs researcher accidentally found one piece of it and followed the evidence as far as possible using modern language translation software .

Consider: suppose you just found out that in 1924 fascists attempted to kill the Pope in the Vatican, but only killed the commander of the Swiss Guards, or that anarchists attempted to kill the Archbishop of Canterbury in Lambeth Palace, but only killed his butler. You look but there is no mention of the incident anywhere online. You would be not wrong to believe that at some level you had been deceived by omission.

In this case the deception was begun by Communists, but at some point that ended and it became a deception of inertia, a forgetting by decades of inattention. Other examples exist. Who recalls the fascist attack on Pope Pius XII in August 1941 when a gang of Mussolini's Blackshirts in Rome surrounded his automobile and rocked it while shouting "Death to the Pope!"? Who remembers the day in May 1942 when the Pope was first told of the trains running into and out of Auschwitz and of the smoking chimneys and he "raised his hands to heaven and wept like a child"? Or, perhaps closer to these 1924 events, who remembers the day in March 1918 when Patriarch Shimun XXI Benyamin, the 30 year old leader of the Assyrian Church of the East, was murdered along with his bodyguards as he tried to negotiate protection for his people during the Assyrian genocide?

Our memory is a great blessing. Our forgetfulness is a great peril.

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