

DISINFORMATION AND ECCLESIASTICAL INFILTRATION. THE LONDON RESIDENCY OF THE SECURITATE AGAINST RICHARD WURMBRAND'S PROPAGANDA (1967–1969)

Gabriel Stelian MANEA*

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Abstract: This article reconstructs and analyses the disinformation and counter-intelligence operation devised and implemented by the Romanian Securitate against Pastor Richard Wurmbrand in the United Kingdom between 1967 and 1969. Drawing almost exclusively on unpublished archival documents held at ACNSAS (SIE Fund, files 0004354/II, 0004354/III, and 000687/II), the study examines the response of the London residency of the General Directorate of Foreign Intelligence to Wurmbrand's public activity. A former political prisoner, Wurmbrand had become an international symbol of religious repression behind the Iron Curtain through his memoir *Tortured for Christ* and his testimony before the United States Senate in 1966. The research demonstrates that the strategy adopted by the London residency did not seek direct confrontation with its target, but rather institutional infiltration. The Securitate privileged the mobilisation of credible local actors — Anglican clergymen, academic theologians, officials of religious organisations — in order to generate, in an apparently spontaneous manner, a public discourse favourable to Romania, thereby avoiding any visible association with the Communist state. The concrete instruments employed included the cultivation of Anglican theologian Basil Minchin as an agent of influence, the exploitation of the ecumenical journal *Sobornost* and of the Romanian Orthodox parish publication in London, *Altarul*, as vehicles of counter-propaganda, and the instrumentalisation of organised Anglican clergy visits to Romania. A central role in this operative architecture was played by agent "ION," identified as Father Vintilă Popescu, parish priest of the Romanian Orthodox church in London, who functioned simultaneously as a privileged intelligence source and as a vector of influence within British ecclesiastical circles. Through his institutional relationships, Popescu succeeded in transforming *Altarul* into an instrument for neutralising Wurmbrand's accusations, lending it the legitimacy of an autonomous ecclesiastical discourse. Despite its sophistication, the operation proved to be of limited long-term effectiveness: Wurmbrand continued his activity without major obstacles, and his books remained international bestsellers.

* "Ovidius" University of Constanța, Romania. gabriel-stelian.manea@365.univ-ovidius.ro;

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Introduction

The present article aims to reconstruct and analyse the mechanisms through which the Romanian Securitate conceived and implemented, in the second half of the 1960s, a systematic operation to counter the public activity of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand in the United Kingdom. The undertaking situates itself within an expanding historiographical field — that of studies devoted to Communist propaganda and disinformation in the Western sphere — while also contributing to the understanding of the concrete modalities through which the intelligence services of the Bucharest regime acted against the anticommunist religious diaspora.

The research draws almost exclusively on unpublished or insufficiently utilised archival documents held at the Archive of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (ACNSAS), principally from the SIE Fund, files 0004354/II, 0004354/III, and 000687/II. The documentary corpus comprises classified telegrams of the London residency of the General Directorate of Foreign Intelligence, informative notes, operative reports, and intercepted correspondence, drafted between 1967 and 1969. Their restricted character and operative nature confer upon them a particular evidentiary value, inasmuch as they reflect, in an unmediated fashion, the internal logic of the intelligence services, the objectives pursued, and the instruments mobilised. Where archival documents have been corroborated with contemporary public sources — American Senate hearings, British ecclesiastical publications, or memorialistic writings — this is explicitly signalled in the critical apparatus.

The work is organised around a chronological narrative thread, thematically articulated. The first section reconstructs the context that triggered the Securitate's interest in Wurmbrand: his testimony before the United States Senate in May 1966, the impact of the volume *Tortured for Christ*, and the pastor's arrival in England in 1967. The subsequent sections trace the operative response of the London residency across two complementary registers — diplomatic and propagandistic — analysing in turn the mobilisation of Anglican clergymen sympathetic to Romania, the cultivation of the theologian Basil Minchin as an agent of influence, and the use of the journal *Sobornost* and of the publication of the Romanian Orthodox parish in London, *Altarul*, as vehicles of counter-propaganda. The article concludes with an analysis of the central role played by the agent "ION", identified with Father Vintilă Popescu, the parish priest of the Romanian Orthodox church in London, as the principal source of intelligence and vector of influence within British ecclesiastical circles.

The article pursues three principal objectives. In the first place, to document and describe with archival precision a disinformation and influence operation conducted by the Securitate in the West — an operation which, despite its significance in terms of scope and sophistication, has until now remained outside the attention of specialist historiography. In the second place, to demonstrate that the strategy adopted by the London residency was not one of direct confrontation, but rather one of institutional infiltration: the Securitate privileged the use of credible local actors — clergymen, theologians, journalists — in order to generate, in an apparently spontaneous manner, a public discourse favourable to Romania, thereby avoiding any visible association with the Communist state. In the third place, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the religious policy of the Ceaușescu regime and ecclesiastical diplomacy, illustrating the manner in which the Romanian Orthodox Church and its diaspora institutions were instrumentalised as levers of external propaganda.

Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda. Richard Wurmbrand versus the Securitate

"I show to you the tortured body of my country, of my fatherland, and of my church," Richard Wurmbrand told the American senators during his testimony before the United States Congress, after Senator Thomas J. Dodd had asked him to unbutton his shirt and expose the marks of the torture he had endured in Romania's Communist prisons. In the oppressive silence of the chamber, the scars upon the pastor's body acquired a significance that transcended their physical dimension: they became living testimony to the violence, fear, and systematic persecution that marked the existence of believers behind the Iron Curtain. The impact of his words extended far beyond the precincts of the American Senate, penetrating the conscience of a Western world that was only beginning to apprehend the full extent of religious repression in Eastern Europe. From that moment, Richard Wurmbrand ceased to be merely a former political prisoner or a pastor who had survived Communist dungeons, becoming one of the most uncomfortable and most dangerous voices for the Bucharest regime instead.

One of the most dramatic moments of the 1966 Senate hearing is the scene in which Wurmbrand publicly exposes the scars inflicted by the torture he suffered in Romania's Communist prisons. At the request of Senator Thomas J. Dodd, the pastor unbuttons his clothing and displays the marks of his wounds, describing them as the symbolic expression of the "tortured body" of the Church and of Romanian society under the domination of the Communist regime. He recounts that some of these scars originated from knife cuts administered during interrogations, with the purpose of compelling him to

formulate accusations against other clergymen and religious leaders.¹ The gesture carried a powerful symbolic and mediatic charge, transforming the pastor's individual testimony into a visible and incontestable representation of the religious repression exercised by the Communist regime upon believers in Romania.

On 6 May 1966, the Senate hearing entitled *Communist Exploitation of Religion* was convened before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate. This constitutes an essential source for understanding the mechanisms through which the Communist regime in Romania curtailed and repressed religious freedom during the first two postwar decades. The testimony of the Romanian Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand reveals the transformation of religion into a domain strictly controlled by the state, in which the practice of faith was tolerated only within the limits accepted by the Communist party. The document offers a direct perspective on the persecutions directed against the clergy and believers, on the systematic use of torture, and on the infiltration of religious institutions by the authorities.

Wurmbrand declared that the violation of religious rights had begun with the suppression of the clergy's freedom to preach independently. In Communist Romania, "nobody can preach in our country except he has a license from the Government." His own preaching licence had been revoked after only one week of activity, as the authorities had interpreted certain biblical references as veiled attacks upon the regime. As a consequence, authentic religious activity was driven underground, and the pastor described the formation of an "underground church"² that operated conspiratorially, resorting to pseudonyms and clandestine meetings in order to evade the surveillance of the political police.

Wurmbrand insisted upon the systematic character of the repression directed against believers and the clergy. Recounting his experiences of detention, he described complete isolation, physical and psychological torture, as well as deliberate attempts to bring about the moral destruction of religious prisoners, whose stated purpose was "to make us mad." The testimony did not shy away from descriptions of the tortures inflicted upon Christian clergymen, which the author interpreted as acts of premeditated desecration of the faith. One episode of extreme brutality recounts the humiliation of a Catholic priest,

¹ *Communist Exploitation of Religion: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, Eighty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Testimony of Rev. Richard Wurmbrand*, May 6, 1966, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 8-10.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

compelled to celebrate the liturgy using excrement and urine.³ Such practices demonstrate that the repression did not pursue the elimination of political opposition exclusively, but aimed equally at the symbolic destruction of religion as such.

Another fundamental dimension of the violation of religious freedom was the use of "brainwashing" techniques. Wurmbrand described the administration of drugs and uninterrupted sessions of ideological propaganda, designed to erode individual will and destroy religious faith. Prisoners were compelled to listen for hours on end to slogans such as "Communism is good" and "Christianity is dead."⁴ According to the testimony, these methods sought to provoke apostasy and to liquidate every form of spiritual resistance. The pastor acknowledges that, under their prolonged effect, he himself came temporarily to believe that "Christianity is dead."

The regime's strategy was one of institutional subordination of the churches. According to Wurmbrand, the Communist authorities promoted into leadership positions clergymen willing to collaborate with the state or vulnerable to blackmail. He maintained that "the leadership of churches is dominated by the central committee of an avowed atheistic power."⁵ In this context, religion was instrumentalised for propagandistic purposes, and sermons were transformed into pro-Communist ideological vehicles. Wurmbrand cited the example of Orthodox priests who identified the peace of Christ with "socialist countries" and condemned "American imperialists."⁶

The testimony also insisted upon the selective character of the religious freedom tolerated by the regime. Churches remained open, but only insofar as the clergy avoided criticism of the state. Wurmbrand encapsulates this situation through the formulation: "In Rumania you are allowed to say as much as you like that God is good. You are not allowed to say that the Devil is bad."⁷ Thus, religious freedom existed only in a formal sense, whilst any denunciation of state atheism or Communist repression could lead to arrest.

The persecutions had an interconfessional dimension. According to Wurmbrand's declarations, the persecutions affected Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Pentecostals, rabbis, and Muslim leaders. Particularly grave was the situation of the Catholic Church, whose episcopal elites had been almost entirely eliminated: "Nearly all Catholic bishops died in prison."⁸ Furthermore, no autonomous religious structures existed: there was

³ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 5. It is most probable that Wurmbrand was also referring to Greek Catholic bishops.

no Bible society, no independent religious publications, and no functioning Sunday schools.

Richard Wurmbrand's testimony was one of the most powerful and disturbing sources concerning the violation of religious rights in Communist Romania. Beyond the mere restriction of the freedom of worship, it revealed the regime's ambition to completely subordinate ecclesiastical institutions, to break every form of spiritual resistance, and to transform religion into an obedient instrument of political propaganda. The pastor's declarations delineate the image of a state that tolerated faith only insofar as it relinquished its critical voice and consented to serve the ideological interests of the party. Thus, Wurmbrand's testimony brought to light the profound contrast between the official discourse of "religious freedom" promoted by the Romanian authorities and the reality of a systematic persecution directed against the clergy and believers.

Born into a Jewish family, Richard Wurmbrand converted to Christianity in 1936, a choice that was to mark his entire existence under the Communist regime in Romania. Sentenced twice for his religious faith, he spent nearly nine years in Romanian prisons, three of which were served in complete isolation in an underground cell. Only a few years before he managed to leave Romania, a group of Norwegian Christians raised the sum of ten thousand dollars and, by bribing Communist officials, obtained passports for Wurmbrand and his wife. After a period spent in Europe, fearing the long reach of the Romanian Securitate, the pastor took refuge in the United States, where he began to bear witness to his experiences in detention. Imprisoned between 1948–1956 and again between 1959–1964 on charges of "crimes against humanity,"⁹ Wurmbrand transformed his suffering into a public testimony of great impact through the autobiographical volume *Tortured for Christ*,¹⁰ which rapidly became an international bestseller.

Richard Wurmbrand's testimony before the American Senate, the international success of the volume *Tortured for Christ*, as well as his numerous conferences, interviews, and public appearances, transformed the former Romanian pastor into one of the most uncomfortable voices of the anticommunist exile. His accounts of the tortures in Romanian prisons, of religious persecution, and of the control exercised by the Communist regime over the Church severely damaged Romania's external image at a moment when the Bucharest authorities were endeavouring to promote in the West the image of a state more autonomous and more liberal than the other regimes within the Soviet bloc. Through the emotional impact of his speeches and through the

⁹ Lucian N. Leustean, *Orthodoxy and the Cold War. Religion and Political Power in Romania, 1947–65*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

¹⁰ Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Bartlesville: The Voice of the Martyrs, Inc., 1967).

credibility conferred by his own scars, Wurmbrand became an international symbol of religious repression in Eastern Europe. From the perspective of the Securitate and of official propaganda, his declarations were regarded as acts of "hostile propaganda," designed to compromise the regime's foreign policy and to fuel Western campaigns against socialist Romania. Consequently, the Communist authorities classified him as an extremely dangerous element, and his public activity was carefully monitored and systematically combated through operations of disinformation, defamation, and propaganda.

It comes as no surprise that when Wurmbrand arrived in England in 1967 to convey the same message, the Securitate residency in London became alarmed and began transmitting periodic reports to the General Directorate of Foreign Intelligence. As a communication dated 3 July informed, the pastor was scheduled to lecture in England until October 1967 and to launch a book as well, adding that he "delivers hostile conferences about the tortures he suffered in the country, the lack of religious freedoms, and the situation of religious denominations in Romania." The case was all the more serious given that Ion Rațiu, the leader of the Romanian émigré community in England, had begun to circulate the text of Wurmbrand's testimony before the American Senate committee.¹¹ The sole ground for optimism was that, according to information provided by the agent "Ion" — none other than Father Vintilă Popescu, the parish priest of the Romanian church in London — the Anglican Church "expressed indignation and promised to take a stance," on the grounds that Wurmbrand's accusations did not correspond with its own findings regarding the situation of religious denominations in Romania. Furthermore, the BBC had not agreed to broadcast the incriminating testimonies.¹²

According to the information obtained by Vintilă Popescu and transmitted to the residency, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, when challenged from the floor during a public gathering at which he was presenting a report on Patriarch Justinian's visit to England in 1966, "took a stance against the slanders directed at Romanians." He characterised them as unfounded, invoking his own visit to Romania in 1965¹³, during which he had observed nothing of a nature to confirm the accusations, and concluded by affirming that "nothing will be able to affect the attitude of friendship between the two churches." The incident produced evident discomfort within the Anglican Church, which concluded that the public was being influenced by Wurmbrand's propaganda. As a consequence, the Archbishop had issued

¹¹ Arhiva Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității (ACNSAS) Archive of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives-București, *Fond SIE*, file 0004354/III, 155.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gabriel Stelian Manea, "A Privileged Relationship. The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Anglican Church In The 1960s", in *Historical Yearbook* XV, 2018, 103-122.

instructions for the immediate dispatch of an official letter of apology to Patriarch Justinian and for a representative of Lambeth Palace to visit the Romanian ambassador in London. At the same time, in order to counter the anti-Romanian propaganda, Ramsey suggested the publication of an article in the *Church Times* and the distribution of written materials within ecclesiastical circles.¹⁴

Towards the end of 1967, Wurmbrand's activities had become increasingly intense and alarming, not only for the Romanian authorities but also for the Anglican Church, which was confronted with a growing number of requests from its own clergy regarding the institution's official position on the accusations put forward. The responses emanating from Lambeth Palace were, however, confused and at times evasive. On some occasions they did not contest the incriminating assertions directed at Romania, contenting themselves with underlining that these were not of a nature to improve relations between the Anglican Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church. On other occasions, through the voice of Michael Moore, deputy head of the Foreign Section of the Anglican Church and a former student in Romania, the thesis was advanced — without any supporting evidence — that Wurmbrand was under the influence of the American far right.¹⁵ In this context, the London residency of the General Directorate of Foreign Intelligence reported that it was undertaking counter-propaganda measures: the distribution of the Romanian parish magazine in London, *Altarul*, the organisation of a cocktail reception at the Embassy featuring the projection of documentary films recording the reciprocal visits of Archbishop Michael Ramsey to Romania and of Patriarch Justinian to England, as well as the commissioning of an article from the Anglican theologian Basil Minchin, who had recently returned from a visit to Romania and was the leader of the association "The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius."

And indeed, Minchin wrote such an article — in fact a review of Wurmbrand's book *Tortured for Christ* — published in the journal *Sobornost* in March 1968, and subsequently to be reproduced in the Romanian parish magazine in London in the same year's issue. In general, the review oscillated between an acknowledgement of the work's documentary merits and a contestation of its ideological foundations. Wurmbrand was described as a Romanian Jew converted to evangelical Christianity, who had endured two periods of detention in Communist Romania — eight and a half years and five and a half years respectively — before being released in 1964. He had subsequently testified before a subcommittee of the American Senate, and his writings, including the reviewed volume, had circulated widely in the West. Minchin acknowledged that Wurmbrand's autobiography of suffering was

¹⁴ ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file 0004354/III, 157-158.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

credible in its broad outlines, considering that the author's uncompromising nature — which perceived Christianity and Communism as irreconcilable — constituted in itself a plausible explanation for the repression to which he had been subjected. The reviewer's principal objection concerned the Manichaean character of Wurmbrand's analysis. The latter divided ecclesiastical reality into two rigid categories: the "underground Church," heroic and authentic, and the "official Church," whose hierarchy was classified as renegade. Minchin considered that this binary schema did not withstand critical scrutiny, inasmuch as it failed to account for the moral complexity of collaborationism under conditions of political oppression. The analogy proposed with resistance and collaboration during the Second World War was employed to illustrate the difficulty of pronouncing absolute judgements regarding the conduct of those who chose accommodation with the regime in order to protect their communities. Another point of vulnerability identified was the use of sources. Although Wurmbrand levelled general accusations at the Romanian Communists, his concrete examples of the persecution of Christians derived principally from the USSR, which undermined his authority as a direct witness to the situation in Romania. The sole nominal accusation was directed against Archbishop Nikodim, characterised as a "Bolshevik archbishop" — a characterisation the reviewer deemed excessively simplistic. Basil Minchin offered an alternative perspective on the relationship between Church and state in Romania, grounded in direct observation: churches and monasteries full of worshippers, clergymen circulating freely in public, a relatively open atmosphere towards contact with foreigners. He also invoked the example of Yugoslavia, where the Communist Party had declared that party membership was not incompatible with the practice of religion, as an argument for the thesis that Communist regimes evolve and reconfigure their attitudes towards religion. The reviewer therefore did not deny the reality of the sufferings described by Wurmbrand, but contested the normative relevance of his model for Christians living under Communist regimes. He considered that the promotion in the West of Wurmbrand's combative stance impeded the prospects of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Communists. Invoking the Christian precedent of the Edict of Milan — obtained not through rebellion but through steadfast witness — the reviewer implicitly advocated a political theology of patience and dialogue, in place of systematic confrontation with state power.¹⁶ The residency reserved one hundred copies of the issue of *Sobornost* for targeted distribution among Romanian émigrés in England.¹⁷ An operative letter from March 1968 contains a nominal list of ninety individuals in Great Britain and the United States, marked with the indicators "YES"/"NO," representing the

¹⁶ Ibid., 177-183.

¹⁷ Ibid., 204.

intended distribution network. The document attests to the Securitate's systematic efforts to counter the propagandistic impact of Wurmbrand's writings within the Western Romanian diaspora.¹⁸

The effort to counter Wurmbrand's "hostile propaganda" was also being sabotaged — or at least delayed — by the Patriarchate and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This at least was the view of the residency in February 1968, when it transmitted to the General Directorate of Foreign Intelligence that Father Vintilă Popescu had requested materials about the evangelical pastor's activity as far back as December, in order to distribute them within Anglican ecclesiastical circles, but had received nothing even two months later, being compelled to press the matter repeatedly. The delay in the publication of the London parish magazine was likewise attributed to the same institutions, given that the materials had been requested as early as September 1967. Under these circumstances, the residency considered the direct intervention of the Securitate indispensable, inasmuch as "the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Patriarchate do not pay due attention to such actions."¹⁹ In the same vein, other solutions were being sought to counter the accusations directed at the Romanian regime. Father Vintilă had learned of the manuscript of a work entitled "Travel Impressions from Romania," written by the Anglican priest Christopher Louis of Newcastle following a visit to Romania in June 1967. The work addressed touristic aspects, church life, and the freedom of religious denominations, including a conversation the author had held with students of the Lutheran Institute in Sibiu — an institution associated with Wurmbrand's activity. The manuscript had been submitted to an English publisher and was at the negotiation stage for publication. The residency's report assessed that Louis's work could constitute an instrument for combating Wurmbrand's propaganda, noting that the statements were made by a foreigner, thereby conferring upon them greater credibility. Upon the work's publication, the residency proposed that it be widely disseminated.²⁰

Under these circumstances, the three-month tour that Wurmbrand was to undertake in England beginning in April 1968 was certainly of a nature to cause concern. The tour comprised book launches and conferences in several cities, at conference centres and churches, continuing his "hostile propaganda."²¹ In the course of this tour, on 9 April 1968, Wurmbrand delivered a public lecture in the hall of St. Helena's School in Norwood, in the presence of approximately five hundred persons, under the auspices of St. Emanuel's Church. The event was presided over by Kenneth Lewis, Conservative Member of Parliament for the constituency of Rutland and

¹⁸ Ibid., 196–202.

¹⁹ Ibid., 192.

²⁰ Ibid., 193–194.

²¹ ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file 000687/II, 356.

Stamford and warden of the "Commonwealth and Continental Church Society." The address concerned religious persecution in Communist states, including direct attacks upon Archbishop Ramsey and Patriarch Justinian. Furthermore, the launch of the volume *In God's Underground* on 8 April 1968 was favourably received in the British press — the *Sunday Times*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Sunday Express* — and in the denominational publication *The Church Times*, indicating a significant media profile for the author. Wurmbrand's accusations also reached the Christian Students' Association at the University of Cambridge, where the Reverend D. Watson employed arguments drawn from the work *Tortured for Christ* to formulate critical comparisons regarding the situation of the Church in Romania and in other socialist states, the book being described as "a bestseller."²²

All of these developments necessitated a response from the residency — a response that illustrates the degree of institutional sophistication of the neutralisation operations conceived by the Securitate within the Western sphere. The proposals formulated targeted two distinct yet complementary registers: the diplomatic and the propagandistic. On the diplomatic register, it was proposed that the British ambassador, Chadwick, be urgently summoned through official channels to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, with the purpose of being informed that the actions of Wurmbrand and of the Member of Parliament Kenneth Lewis were of a nature to affect Romanian-British bilateral relations. The argument invoked was not an ideological one, but rather pragmatic and economic: aware of the British side's interest in developing its exports to Romania, the residency anticipated that such an allusion would have been received as a warning signal with concrete commercial consequences, prompting the Foreign Office to exert informal pressure upon the actors involved. On the propagandistic register, the document proposed the initiation of a discrediting campaign against Wurmbrand through the theological journal *Sobornost* — a British publication of ecumenical orientation, perceived as a credible vehicle within Anglophone academic and ecclesiastical circles. The strategy stipulated that compromising materials concerning Wurmbrand's activity in Romania were to be furnished to the journal through a covert source, presented as originating from the Romanian Patriarchate, thereby conferring upon them an appearance of ecclesiastical legitimacy.²³ This indirect approach illustrates a recurring tactic of Communist intelligence services: the infiltration of Western public discourse through autonomous institutional channels, with the purpose of avoiding direct association with the Romanian state and of maximising the credibility of the message.

²² ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file 0004354/III, 206-208.

²³ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

The efforts to combat Wurmbrand continued, returning to the support provided by Basil Minchin and concretely illustrating the implementation of the strategy of infiltrating the British publishing sphere through local intermediaries. A classified telegram dated 8 June 1968 reported the appearance, in the May issue of *The Church Union*, of an article signed by Basil Minchin, entitled "Communists Restore Monasteries." The text, drafted in an apologetic register with respect to the religious policy of the Romanian state, drew upon the author's personal impressions from a visit to Romania, describing the free participation in services of persons from all social categories and the absence of any visible coercive pressure on the part of the authorities. The article generated a negative reaction among Wurmbrand's supporters: one Janios A. Brown of Glasgow addressed a letter of protest to the editorial board, grounded in arguments drawn from the volumes *Tortured for Christ* and *In God's Underground*. The editorial board had not yet reached a decision regarding the publication of the letter, but Minchin had already prepared a detailed response, intended to counter both Wurmbrand's propaganda and Brown's arguments. The document also reveals the operative dimension of the relationship between the residency and Minchin. The latter is characterised as "the only English theologian who has taken a public stance" against Wurmbrand, his motivation being linked to a prior conflict with Wurmbrand, to the influence of his visits to Romania, and to his recent removal from the position of secretary of the journal *Sobornost* — the very same publication envisaged as a vehicle of counter-propaganda in the telegram of April. The document concludes with the residency's explicit commitment to "continue cultivating Minchin's closeness," thereby confirming that he was regarded as a useful agent of influence, managed through non-coercive means.²⁴

Another component of the strategy to counter Wurmbrand's propaganda rested upon the mobilisation of Anglican clergymen with direct experience in Romania. Canon John Satterthwaite, together with a group of Anglican priests who had recently visited Romania, were well placed to contribute to the discrediting of Wurmbrand's claims regarding the absence of religious freedoms, through the sheer authority of personal testimony. Satterthwaite intended to intervene publicly at the Lambeth Conference, anticipating a renewed round of attacks upon Archbishop Ramsey and the situation of religious denominations in Romania, and to take an explicit stance, arguing on the basis of his own findings in the field. The operative relevance was further underscored by the mention of letters of thanks transmitted by Satterthwaite and Doreen Berry of the BBC — who had accompanied the former to Romania — to "Comrade Dogaru" and to the Patriarch, gestures that signal the existence of direct channels of communication between them and the Romanian authorities. In the same register figured an article published on 14

²⁴ Ibid., 211-212.

June in the *Church Times*, which described a visit to the monasteries of Moldavia and the activity of religious establishments, constituting thus another example of counter-propaganda mediated through sources enjoying ecclesiastical credibility within the British sphere.²⁵ The episode illustrates a recurring tactic of the residency: the instrumentalisation of organised visits to Romania in order to generate, in an apparently spontaneous and independent manner, public testimonies favourable to the religious policy of the Romanian state.

A central role in the activity of the London residency was played by the agent "ION," identified as Father Vintilă Popescu, parish priest of the Romanian Orthodox church in London, who constituted the principal source of intelligence in the field and at the same time an active vector of influence.²⁶ By virtue of his institutional position, he enjoyed privileged access to both British ecclesiastical circles and the Romanian émigré milieu, enabling him to monitor closely Wurmbrand's public and editorial appearances and to report promptly to the residency. It was likewise through him that the relationship with Basil Minchin was cultivated — the only British theologian willing to take a public stance against Wurmbrand's propaganda — with the influence exercised over the latter representing one of the most effective counter-measures at the network's disposal. Last but not least, "ION" ensured that the parish publication was systematically employed as a platform for combating Wurmbrand's accusations, thereby conferring upon the Securitate's counter-propaganda the legitimate appearance of an autonomous ecclesiastical discourse, independent of any state interference.

Indeed, Vintilă Popescu's contribution to the entire operation was substantial and significant, as evidenced by a letter addressed to him on 13 March 1969 by the Reverend Bernard J. Tidball — Secretary for Europe and Latin America of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The letter reveals the nature of the relationship between Tidball and Popescu, situated at the intersection of institutional collaboration and personal contact. Tidball expressed his appreciation for the parish publication, the journal *Altarul*, explicitly mentioning the articles signed by Basil Minchin and John Satterthwaite as useful instruments for Bible Society personnel in countering Wurmbrand's propaganda among the British public. He likewise requested a new batch of fifty copies of the journal for distribution within the organisation's field network, arguing that these would enable staff to respond more effectively to the difficult questions generated by readers of Wurmbrand's works. The document also addressed the question of printing a Romanian Orthodox Bible and of obtaining import licences for Scriptures destined for Protestant communities in Romania — Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists — which

²⁵ ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file 000687/II, 388.

²⁶ ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file 0004354/II, 150.

Tidball regarded as a means of demonstrating the generosity of the Orthodox Church and of the Romanian state towards religious minorities, thereby countering Wurmbrand's narrative.²⁷ Vintilă Popescu had succeeded in building functional relationships with representatives of prestigious British religious institutions, transforming the parish journal into an instrument of influence whose circulation and legitimacy extended far beyond the strictly delimited framework of the Romanian Orthodox community in London.

Conclusions

The Wurmbrand case, reconstructed through the lens of the Romanian Securitate's archival documents, offers a privileged window onto the manner in which a Communist regime could conceive and implement sophisticated influence operations within the Western democratic sphere. Far from being an improvised reaction, the counter-offensive of the London residency proved to be a planned, diversified, and adaptable operation, constructed upon a fundamental principle: that of autonomous plausibility. Messages favourable to Romania had to appear to emanate from the genuine convictions of independent British actors — Anglican clergymen, university theologians, officials of religious organisations — whose credibility was guaranteed precisely by their apparent independence from the Romanian state.

The central role in this operative architecture was played by the agent "ION," Father Vintilă Popescu, whose institutional position afforded him simultaneous access to the Romanian émigré community and to British ecclesiastical circles. The parish journal, *Altarul*, functioned as a platform for neutralising Wurmbrand's accusations, enjoying a legitimacy that extended far beyond the strictly delimited framework of the London Orthodox community, thereby illustrating the manner in which a religious institution could be transformed into an instrument of an intelligence service without its British interlocutors perceiving this dimension.

Nevertheless, the operation proved to be of limited long-term effectiveness. Despite the residency's sustained efforts, Wurmbrand continued his activity without major obstacles, his books remained international bestsellers, and the organisation he founded became one of the most influential advocacy platforms for religious persecution in the Communist world. This confirms that influence operations, however sophisticated, encounter structural limits when confronted with a personal testimony of indisputable authenticity. The Wurmbrand dossier remains, in essence, a case study in the narrative power of individual testimony and in the limits encountered by any authoritarian regime when it attempts to suppress it.

²⁷ ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file 0004354/III, 216-217.