

# **Survival: The Russian Orthodox Church**

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Published

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2007

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**Preface**

The following paper was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in Independent Study Modern Eastern Europe, a Graduate level course, at Millersville University, fall 2007. If anyone would like to use it in their research please email me.

John Keegan.

December 2007

## Introduction

The Russian Orthodox Church was a vital part of Russian culture, and remained so even after considerable efforts on the part of the Bolsheviks to secularize Russian society beginning in 1917. From 1917 to 1945, the Orthodox Church survived near extinction by means of resistance, acquiescence to and support of the Soviet state immediately before and during the Great Patriotic War. Additionally, the Church was assisted in its struggle for survival by the Bolsheviks lack of understanding of Orthodoxy's importance to the masses. Believers resisted any change in their traditional way of life regardless of its origin.

Marxist-Leninist doctrine held that, in essence, religion was a tool of the state used to oppress the proletariat, and only by abandoning religion and its illusion of happiness would the masses achieve genuine happiness. As Karl Marx stated in "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* February 1844:

... [Religion] is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.<sup>1</sup>

Lenin expanded on the theme; he called it the cornerstone of Marxist worldview on religion. "All modern religions and Churches, all religious organizations, Marxism always regards as organs of bourgeois reaction serving to defend exploitation and to stupefy the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx , "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* February 1844, [http://www3.baylor.edu/~Scott\\_Moore/texts/Marx\\_Contr\\_Crit.html](http://www3.baylor.edu/~Scott_Moore/texts/Marx_Contr_Crit.html) (accessed November 26, 2007)

working class.”<sup>2</sup> Clearly, such views made the Bolshevik Revolution incompatible with Russian Orthodoxy.

Only weeks, after the Bolsheviks took power, Lenin personally drafted a Decree on the separation of the church from the state and the school from the church. It had instantaneous impact in Moscow and other places under Bolshevik control. In the Baikal Region the Decree of separation of School from Church February 26, 1918 stated, “Religious education is the private concern of parents and families”; therefore, the government stopped allocating funds for the subject of religion.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the Constitution of the Soviet State 1918, in Article 2 Chapter 5 separated church from state “securing to the workers real freedom of conscience” and according to every citizen, “the right of religious and anti-religious propaganda”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Article 4 Chapter 13 denied monks and clergy of any denomination the right to vote.<sup>5</sup> Then, systematically Lenin’s state deprived the Church of its real estate, legal status as a person, and the right to acquire property in the future.<sup>6</sup> As the above actions suggest, the Bolshevik government directed its attack against the institution of the Orthodox Church and not individual believers.

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<sup>2</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works vol 15* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987): 371-372

<sup>3</sup> Decree of the Committee of Soviet Organizations of the Baikal Region on the Separation of School and Church, Felix Corley, ed., *Religion in the Soviet Union: an Archival Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Constitution of the R.S.F.S.R. (1918) Article 2 Chapter 5  
<http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/constitution/1918/article2.htm> (accessed September 17, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Constitution of the R.S.F.S.R. (1918) Article 4 Chapter 13  
<http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/constitution/1918/article4.htm> (accessed September 17, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> Dmitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime 1917-1982*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984): 31.

## **Resistance**

This effort to raise the proletariat to a higher level of consciousness and behavior by secularizing society could not be imposed by laws and decrees alone, even backed by coercion.<sup>7</sup> However, the Bolsheviks lacked a clear plan to deal with religion. Marxist ideology assumed that revolution would take place in an industrialized nation, thus the working class would be secularized. However, the Bolshevik revolution took place in Russia, which was still mostly rural, agrarian, and religious.<sup>8</sup> The Bolshevik government found itself unprepared for the incendiary reaction of parishioners to its attempts to implement the decree on the nationalization of Church property of 1918. Aside from authorized confiscation attempts, there were unauthorized inept attacks on clergy and places of worship. For example, militant atheists opened burial vaults in nationalized monasteries showing the decayed remains of saints to believers. In the wake of such attacks organized efforts to confiscate Church property, did not proceed smoothly.

At a monastery in Nizhnii Novgorod province in April 1918:

Nuns literally blocked the entry of a commissar. When the Red Guard forced their way in, they found the property of local merchants hidden in the monastery warehouse. As officials...conducted the inventory prescribed by law, nuns sounded an Alarm, which mobilized the local population. A shot from the crowd wounded a Red Guard, and the shooter was killed on the spot.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to such physical resistance, Orthodox priests openly preached against the Bolshevik government. Yakov Znamensky priest of the Nerchinsk church used his Palm Sunday sermon to protest the persecution of the church by the Bolshevik government.

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<sup>7</sup> William Husband, "Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance, 1917-1932." *Journal of Modern History* 70.1 (1998): 75.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998): 23

<sup>9</sup> Husband, 80-81

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Officials had removed all the gold and vessels, thus the parishioners had nothing from which to take communion, and they had removed the frames from the icons. Zmamensky called upon parishioners to defend the Orthodox faith.<sup>10</sup> Zmamensky was arrested and jailed the same day.

These were not isolated incidents; they were representative of the hostility of the religious faithful. Violence was not the only form of resistance, but it was the most documented. Incidents of violent resistance to the confiscation of church valuables continued until 1939. Extremely bitter confrontations took place during the famine of 1921-22. One particularly violent confrontation took place on Wednesday, March 15, 1922. On the preceding Thursday March 9, following the Central Executive Committee for the All-Russian Congress of Soviets directive of the seizure of church valuables, the executive committee of the district soviet in the textile-manufacturing center of Shuia negotiated the surrender of the property. However, by Sunday, March 12, parishioners reconsidered their position. A minority, opposed to any negotiations with the state, went so far as an attempt to block the election of representatives to meet with a commission from the soviet the next day, which was unsuccessful.

At the end of Monday's, March 13, church service the opposition took a step. A gang lingered in the church after the service and intimidated the members of the commission into delaying surrender of the property until Wednesday. Upon leaving the officials were pushed, punched, and cursed by a crowd of parishioners. By Wednesday, the stage was set for bloodshed. The clergy had gathered a larger crowd including a considerable number of women and children. Parishioners became increasingly hostile, even as six mounted police tried to control them. That having failed, at least one person in the crowd greeted Red Army reinforcements with gunfire, and parishioners threateningly encircled the soldiers. In the aftermath, an unknown number of

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<sup>10</sup> Felix Corley, 20 Decree of the Nerchinsk Extraordinary Investigation Commission on the arrest of the priest Yakov Zmamensky for a Counter-revolutionary Speech April 28, 1918

parishioners were killed. Four Red Army soldiers were beaten, one severely. That night, Soviet authorities arrested four church members, and later that month the property was surrendered without further incident.<sup>11</sup>

Civil disobedience reached Smolensk in the Urals, on Friday, March 17, Bulatov Chairman of the executive committee of the district soviet sent a coded telegram to Moscow in which he explained:

The attempt to achieve practical removal of valuables from Smolensk cathedral was not successful. Day and night, the crowd of [believers] remains in the cathedral and does not allow the commission to set to work.

All talks with representatives of the [believers] lead to nothing....<sup>12</sup>

At no time before the mid to late 1930s did the Bolsheviks control the situation. They maintained that the clergy organized united resistance against the Soviet state. During the mid 1920s, Soviet officials in Nizhnii Novgorod and other locations encountered religious groups successfully circulating anti-Soviet political materials. According to party officials, legal organizations served as fronts for oppositional activities.<sup>13</sup>

As stated above, violence was not the only means the faithful used to resist the Soviet state. Soviet law also provided means of resistance. Supporters of Orthodoxy, superior in numbers to atheists, infiltrated anti-religious education groups in Novgorod province, and replaced the Bolshevik activity with a close reading of religious texts. Additionally, the masses knew how to petition for redress of grievances. In one instance, during the Civil War, workers in Vitebsk produced “scores of signatures demanding the speedy trial and release of the priest of the Pokrov church.” Believers quickly recognize the potential to regain control of their parishes provided in the 1918 law on the separation of church and state. A provision in the law made the transfer of nationalized

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<sup>11</sup> Husband, 81-82

<sup>12</sup> Felix Corley, 26 Coded Telegram sent by Bulatov Chairman of the executive committee of the district soviet to the Moscow GPU March 17, 1922

<sup>13</sup> Husband, 86

Church property to registered communes legal. One Moscow parish in 1918, following the provision to the letter, inventoried every single piece of church property from icons to carpeting including measurements. In many cases, the language of petitions and state decrees were practically identical, and soviet officials frequently returned churches to their parishioners.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, local soviet authorities sometimes outflanked parishioners. If, for example, the church was not functioning, was not historically significant, and local authorities demonstrated an economic use for the property parishioners found it difficult to regain the property. At other times local authorities disregarded legality to achieve their ends. Over 200 railroad workers in Babaevo raised money to build a new church in 1919. When the local authorities found out, they arrested the construction committee and confiscated the money. Faced with such illegal activity from local officials, believers turned to the Supreme Soviet and its chairman Mikhail Kalinin. His reputation as a sympathetic figure to which the wronged could turn was well known among the fateful. They sent numerous petitions to Kalinin through the Supreme Soviet Commission on Religious Issues in the hope of overturning the decisions of local authorities. Both sides, of course, tried to influence Kalinin and the central authorities.

In a January 1929 petition to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, parishioners described the closing of the village church in Verovka. They made clear that local officials used legal and illegal tactics to close the church. Local atheists took the first steps to close the church, and the parishioners countered with commune registration to regain it. However, after only a fraction of parishioners signed the registration book, the leader of the local party organization confiscated it. Angry parishioners sent representatives to the local administrative department, but they were turned away. By April 25, the head of the regional soviet executive committee officially informed the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 87-88



clergyman and the church elder their church would be closed the following morning. At 5:00 am, a group of parishioners went to the administrative department to protest what they viewed as the illegal closing of their church. However, within an hour the village militia, the local Communist Union of Youth, and the party secretary ransacked the church, and made off with all the church valuables.<sup>15</sup>

That was not the end of the story, in a last desperate effort to regain their church from atheists and prevent them from turning it into a movie house; parishioners from Verovka and other villages appeared at the church just four days later. A crowd of thousands drove out the invaders. According to parishioners, the riot that ensued took on a generational dimension. Communist youths beat mothers and mothers fought back, brother turned against brother, and fathers opposed sons. However according to local officials, they had collected more than fifteen thousand signatures in favor of closing two churches in the area, and on April 24 the district soviet executive committee gave its approval by telegram. Furthermore, the crowd that appeared at the church on April 26 was no more than twenty to thirty women. The thousands described by parishioners protesting on April 30 were reduced by local officials to 150. Central government officials did not attempt to reconcile such differing accounts from their position and after the fact. They decided the church would remain closed, and local officials were investigated for allowing any incident to occur.<sup>16</sup> From 1922 to 1939, believers continued to use violence and Soviet law as well as other means to resist atheism.

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<sup>15</sup> Husband, 89

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 90

## **The Living Church**

Having no clear plan to secularize society, the Bolsheviks had to take advantage of any opportunity that presented itself. In March 1922, during the campaign to confiscate Church valuables a schism in Orthodoxy presented an opportunity. Leon Trotsky viewed the schism as evidence that the “proletarian revolution had finally reached the Church.” This struggle between Renovationists and the Patriarchal Church was one to reform Orthodoxy. The Renovationists hoped not only to end the conflict with Soviet authorities, but also to implement fundamental reforms some of which were conservative, while others represented the radical departure from cannon and custom.<sup>17</sup> The struggle began after Patriarch Tikhon’s message opposing the surrender of Church valuables, Dean Vvedenskii and eleven other clergy countered the Patriarch’s message urging believers to surrender them. Additionally, Father Kalinovskii wrote refusal to give up such treasures was disobedience to Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Accepting Trotsky’s view, Soviet leaders seized the opportunity to assist pro-Soviet clergy, and punish their enemies. Publicly supporting the Renovationists, for they truly identified with the suffering masses and wished to protect them from the violence of Church leaders who were defiantly hostile to the government, on May 9, 1922, Patriarch Tikhon was arrested. Three days later a group of clergy led by Father Kalinovskii and Dean Vvedenskii visited Tikhon and according to a statement issued after their meeting, the group placed responsibility on Tikhon for the instability of the Church. They accused him having consistently followed a counterrevolutionary policy, which had led to the arrests of church leaders placing them, in some cases, under sentence of death. Additionally, by opposing the confiscation of church valuables, he had undermined

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory L Freeze “Counter-reformation in the Russian Orthodoxy: Popular Response to Religious Innovation, 1922-1925,” *Slavic Review* 54.2 (1995): 305.

<sup>18</sup> John S. Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State 1917-1950*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953): 130.

church authority with believers. The only way authority could be restored was by the temporary removal of the Patriarch from ecclesiastical affairs, and the convening of an All-Russian church convention. After much discussion, Tikhon signed a renunciation of his authority.<sup>19</sup>

Tikhon's arrest caused great international protest, and Soviet authorities held him for over a year while they decided whether to put him on trial. In an April 10 1923 recommendation to Stalin, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs urged that the Politburo not condemn Tikhon to death:

The facts have shown how much damage we brought on ourselves by the execution of Budkiewicz. In America, Senator Borah and his supporters were prepared form a committee to conduct education to revive relations with Russia, but in view of the most unfavorable situation created by the execution of Budkiewicz they decided to delay this work for a time and not formed a committee....

Furthermore, the recommendation argued England would probably use the execution against the Soviets. While in the case Budkiewicz, there was the possibility of linking him with Polish espionage activity to alleviate some negative reaction:

In the case of Tikhon, this does not exist. All the other countries view his sentence as nothing more than naked religious persecution.... The pronouncing of the death sentence in the case of Tikhon will worsen much further our international position in all our relationships.<sup>20</sup>

The recommendation concluded that a death sentence imposed, and then rescinded would give the impression of the Soviets giving in to international pressure, which would weaken their position. Therefore, such a sentence should not be imposed.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>20</sup> Felix Corley, 36-37 To Comr. Stalin, Secretary of the CC of the RCP April 10, 1923

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The Politburo agreed with the recommendation and Tikhon was offered a deal, if he met, certain conditions he would be freed and restored to church activity. Protocol number 24 June 12, 1923 stated those six conditions:

He must make a special statement in which he repents of his crimes committed against Soviet Power and the toiling masses of peasants and expresses a loyal current attitude port Soviet Power; that he recognizes as just that he be called to trial for these crimes; that he openly and sharply renounce all counter-revolutionary organizations... both secular and religious.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, Tikhon was to take a negative stance toward the machinations of the Catholic clergy as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Patriarch of Constantinople. Furthermore, he had to accept certain Church reforms such as the new calendar.

Tikhon agreed to make the statement and he was released in June 1923. However, even before the Patriarch's release the Renovationists encountered fierce opposition from believers, and once Tikhon returned to lead a separate patriarchal church the defections were massive. Parishioners, profoundly dissatisfied and hostile toward the church authorities of the Living Church, led these defections. While the political motives of the Renovationists were part of believers' opposition, parishioners' focus was rejection of religious reforms, especially the calendar.

The Renovationists immediate problem in March 1922 was the restoration of church-state relations. Having disposed of the Patriarch, the Renovationists quickly professed their loyalty to the Soviet government as well as the social revolution that it allegedly represented. However, it was clear that the Bolsheviks only purpose in supporting the Renovationists was to help bring about destruction of the Church. Their

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<sup>21</sup> Felix Corley, 54 Protocol No. 24 June 12, 1923

second problem was ecclesiastical reform. The Renovationists wanted to reform church administration, and the status and role of the parish clergy. Additionally, Renovationists wanted to do away with the monasteries, improve the lot of parish priests by allowing widowed priests to remarry and remain in service, and allow them to wear secular clothing, cut their hair, and shave. These reforms were intended to put the clergy's interests above all else.<sup>22</sup>

The Renovationists also planned religious reforms. That is, changes to religious practice in observance. The purpose of these reforms was to make the liturgy more understandable to parishioners. Thus, the Renovationists replaced Church Slavic with Russian and opened the center doors of the iconostasis so parishioners heard and saw holy rites. The final reform that Renovationists implemented was adopting the new Georgian calendar and abandoning the pre revolutionary Julian calendar. The intent of adopting the Georgian calendar was to bring the Church into modern times, and satisfy a major demand of the Soviet government. However, the shifting of all major religious holidays by thirteen days, bringing the Russian Church into line with the state meant abandoning the traditional way of life and the rest of the Eastern Church.<sup>23</sup>

From the start, the Renovationists' reforms encountered vehement opposition from parishioners. Parishioners made their discontent clear by leaving the churches empty. It was clear that the source of parishioners' discontent was liturgical reform and the adoption of the Georgian calendar. "The Renovationist leadership, which initially attributed opposition to counterrevolution eventually, conceded that the dominant factor had been popular opposition to its religious reforms...." Typically, a parish discussed Renovationists' reforms and voted to continue performing the liturgy as it had always been performed.<sup>24</sup> The Renovationists viewed parishioners' attachment to the old ways

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<sup>22</sup> Freeze, 311-312.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 317.

with condescension, which revealed their profound misunderstanding of popular Orthodoxy. Believers simply wanted to pray and be saved in the same way their fathers, grandfathers, and Old Believers had done. Furthermore, from the parishioners' point of view, the Renovationists lacked the authority to make liturgical changes. The reforms were initiated immediately after Renovationists achieved power in May 1922, a full year before convening the second (revisionist) church council. The second All-Russian Church Council failed to include significant representation of the entire church, even including the followers of Tikhon, thus it lacked any vestige of legitimacy in the eyes of a fateful.<sup>25</sup>

As vehemently opposed as believers were to liturgical reform, they were far more opposed to abandoning the Julian calendar. Parishioners objected to the disruption of religious daily life and ritual, which the Georgian calendar represented. Thus, the Renovationists found parishes in full-scale revolt. For example, in Saratov diocese, both clergy and parishioners declared the calendar reform an unacceptable violation of centuries-old church practice, the destruction of church service rules, and the entire order of liturgical services. The believers would not accept the new calendar, for it was contradictory to their way of life.<sup>26</sup>

Parish priests were caught between Renovationist authorities and parishioners. On the one hand, if the parish priest did not implement the Georgian calendar, he would lose his position. On the other hand, if the parish priest performed services according to the Georgian calendar, parishioners threatened retribution and expulsion from the parish. Even Tikhon's advocacy of the Georgian calendar after his release from custody did nothing to aid the adoption of the Georgian calendar. Given the Renovationists' commitment to reform the liturgy and the calendar, and the backing of the Soviet state, the Renovationists were still unable to prevail largely because of parish autonomy and

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<sup>25</sup> Freeze, 318.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 321

believer authority. This was one unintended result of the Bolsheviks denial of the Church's legal status, thus the responsibility for the use and upkeep of the local church transferred to parish councils, voluntary associations of believers. That denial of legal status to the Church changed the whole power structure of the Orthodox Church, before the revolution power originated from the top down and afterward it flowed from the bottom up.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, the massive repression of bishops and priests, the economic and administrative collapse rendered the Patriarchal and Living Churches unable to respond to demands by local parishes. Many priests and bishops were absent from their posts because they were either on the run from authorities or imprisoned. Those that were not lacked the infrastructure to do their jobs, thus local clergy and parishioners rejected the Living Church and governed themselves. The "deinstitutionalization of the Church left ecclesiastical authorities powerless to impose reform or controlled parish communities. The state had abetted... parish power and rendered control from above all but impossible."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the Renovationists were unable to inform parishioners of their reforms, for the Church had lost access to the press and important link to the faithful as well as the clergy. The Bolsheviks had confiscated all Church presses, and forbade the publication of virtually all its periodicals. The state "deliberately denied the clergy the right to publish, hoping to sow discord and confusion."<sup>29</sup> Many parishioners were ignorant of Tikhon's resignation as well as of the Living Church. Without a regular press, the Living Church could not convince parishioners to accept reforms where it could not coerce them.

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<sup>27</sup> Freeze, 322-323, 327, 330.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 334

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 335

### **League of the Militant Godless**

While the Living Church and other Soviet efforts did interfere with the stability of the Orthodox Church, those efforts did not change the fundamental beliefs of the people. Thus, in 1925, the government launched a broadly based anti-religious propaganda campaign. The group given responsibility for the campaign was the League of the Militant Godless.<sup>30</sup> From the beginning, the League was unstable; there was an open struggle for leadership of the anti-religious campaign as well as debates over how atheistic society would be achieved.<sup>31</sup> One of the more divisive issues was membership of former priests. There were two views on this issue. One put forth by Iaroslavskii a party intellectual and leader of the League of the Militant Godless, was societal transformation from religious to secular must proceed without alienation of the peasant workers. The workers must be educated through religious propaganda. During this process, it would be explained to the worker what religion was, and how it harmed believers. Arbitrarily closing churches and arresting priests alienated the population and slowed cultural transformation.<sup>32</sup>

This approach required trained cadres with some knowledge of Orthodox history and other religions and mythology, in addition to science and technology. The only people available were former Orthodox clergy. Party cadres were of questionable quality poorly educated, many did not understand the ideology motivating their cause. Their behavior was brutal often destructive and counterproductive, and usually at odds with the stated purpose of the League and the explicit directions from Moscow.<sup>33</sup> Former priests,

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Peris, "Commissars in Red Cassocks: Former Priests in the League of the Militant Godless," *Slavic Review* 54.2 (1995): 341.

<sup>31</sup> Peris *Storming the Heavens*, 47

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 50

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 9.



in contrast, had skills that were in short supply to the Bolsheviks: literacy, public speaking skills, an understanding of rural life, and an understanding of Orthodoxy.

However, there were those who disagreed. Kostelovskaia was delegated to the Anti-religious Commission from the Moscow party organization in December 1922; from then until 1926 she and several Moscow colleagues were in conflict with Iaroslavskii. Her anti-intellectual view held Orthodoxy "was a direct manifestation of the exploitation of Russia and warranted immediate intervention closing churches and rid the landscape of clergy."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Party cadres were sufficient for anti-religious work, for priests could not change their allegiance through disavowing their Holy Orders or through years of dedicated service.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks did not have enough activists knowledgeable enough about religion to combat it effectively.

The lack of knowledge caused the Bolsheviks to utilize former priests, and there were priests who were willing not only to renounce their past but also to engage in work that denied it on a daily basis. This was a much greater transformation than was required of any other former priests in any other secular position. Those clergy who assumed leadership positions in the League were disillusioned with the Orthodox Church before the revolution.<sup>36</sup> However, for priests in the lower level of the League material survival was a major motivation for joining. Even with former priests in the League, it never had a sufficient number of cadres to be effective. The Communist Party was well aware of the League's needs for skilled propagandists.

Despite the growing need for cadres after 1925 as the League expanded, central government authorities were reluctant to use former priests as anti-religious propagandists.<sup>37</sup> In July 1927, the League's deputy chairman Anton Loginov

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Peris, "Commissars in Red Cassocks" 354.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 344.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 355

reprimanded a local party official for arranging the visit of a prominent former clergyman, he angrily said:

The central committee had no sympathy towards priest defrocking himself or herself and offering their services for Godlessness. They might be permitted to conduct Godless work in the most exceptional cases. It would be sad if the party of the proletariat were compelled to come running to the service of such former people.

Iaroslavskii also spoke of using former clergy only in exceptional cases. However, on the local level the League regularly employed former clergy, and in many cases clergy lasted through the purge of Soviet and party bureaucrats in the spring and summer of 1929 and the beginning of the general movement against specialists in all fields.<sup>38</sup>

As the above suggests, Bolshevik actions were not sufficient to achieve their goals. The Communist Party created the League to spread anti-religious propaganda, and thus assist in secularizing society. However, at no time in its history did the League of the Militant Godless have sufficient cadres or the support of the Party to carry out its task. In Iaroslavl', Pskov, and elsewhere, the Communist Party created the League, but the Party was not consistent. Resolutions directing local party committees to assist the League were followed by periods of indifference or neglect. Local party committees where the League's fate was decided gave, as much assistance as they could before more pressing concerns and limited resources required them to shift their attention elsewhere. That debilitating inconsistency not only kept the League from doing its job but it also characterized the Party's attention to anti-religious work.

That inattention led to recriminations. In Iaroslavl', at a meeting of the Third District Party in August 1927, League activist Nikolai Bakhvalov complained:

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 356.

The relation of Party organizations to the question of the anti-religious propaganda is bad: they completely ignore League cells and Party leadership was absent... There is almost no attention from Party cells.<sup>39</sup>

When League leaders ask for help from party officials more often than not, no help was given. In March 1927, the League's leader in Iaroslavl' requested assistance from Party and union officials, he was told that "the organization is voluntary and working in it is also voluntary." The Communist Party created the League as an open, voluntary organization hoping to attract nonparty members. While the Party provided the League's leadership, Communists consider themselves atheist by virtue of their membership in the Party. Belonging to the League was useless and working for it was even more so.

Thus, participation in the League and oversight of its activities with only important to the Party when anti-religious matters were a high priority, and other times the league's activities and needs were largely ignored. When failure occurred, blame came from the top down. In January 1929, the Iaroslavl' League invoked a higher party level to criticize lower ones: "Despite a series of the most important resolutions by the provincial Party's bureau on the strengthening and broadening of the anti-religious work by local Party organizations, the latter has done extremely little to execute these directives. Appropriate help is not rendered to local League organizations, which work extremely poorly without the Party's assistance."<sup>40</sup>

The Party in Pskov also blamed its lower level organizations in early 1927 the Pskov provincial Party complained, "Despite repeated decisions and resolutions, Party committees are not providing sufficient leadership and assistance to the League's work." The central Party was heard from in a front-page editorial in Pravda on Christmas 1928, charging, "It does not occur to some Party members that anti-religious is propaganda a

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<sup>39</sup> Peris *Storming the Heavens*, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 152.

Party obligation just like all other most important Party in responsibilities."<sup>41</sup> This pattern continued throughout the League's existence until it ended its activities in June 1941.

The League of the Militant Godless demonstrates that the Bolsheviks had no clear plan to deal with religion. The League never had sufficient cadres or Party support, even with former clergy in its ranks, to be successful. At best, Party support was sporadic, its directives unclear, and most of the time not followed. Furthermore, the League's propaganda was mostly a negative assault on religion rather than focusing on the benefits of atheism. It focused on the symbols of religion clergy, churches, holidays, and ignored its fundamental emotional appeal. Most of the time, the League's propaganda had little to do with religion or atheism.<sup>42</sup> It is no surprise that by the mid 1930s the League's own statistics indicated that some fifty seven percent of the Soviet population remained believers.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Great Patriotic War**

By 1939, the above combined tactics along with Stalin's Great Purge drove the Orthodox Church to virtual nonexistence. Only about 2000 churches remained open as compared with a pre-revolutionary 46,000. Four Bishops remained at liberty thousands of clergy and believers were in labor camp. However, the Second World War brought the Church back from the edge of extinction. Well before the Germans attacked Russia in June 1941, Stalin saw the Church's usefulness.<sup>44</sup>

The partitioning of Poland in 1939 gave Stalin the important areas of Ukraine and Belorussia and eventually the Baltic states. The acquisition of this territory and its four million citizens with an active church caused a problem for the Soviet government. The

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 153

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Walters, "Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483 (1986):139.

<sup>44</sup> Wassilij Alexeev and Theofanis G. Stavrou, *The Great Revival: The Russian Church Under German Occupation* (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1976): 43.

Church could be used to assimilate the new citizens into the Soviet Union. Stalin realized that the destruction of the remaining Orthodox clergy including Metropolitan Sergii was unwise. When NAZI Germany invaded in June 1941, the leaders of the Orthodox Church immediately came to the defense of mother Russia, and Stalin welcomed the assistance. Thus, he stopped the anti-religious campaign, and anti-religious propaganda. The League of the Militant Godless was closed in 1941, and the remains of the Living Church faded away.

Meanwhile, Metropolitan Sergii delivered his appeal to the nation on the same day as the attack. He wrote, "We, the residents of Russia had been cherishing the hope that the blaze of war which has engulfed nearly the whole global would spare us... Our Orthodox Church has always shared in the destinies of this nation.... Together with it, she has borne both trials and successes. Neither shall she abandoned her people today she is giving this impending national struggle heavenly blessing."<sup>45</sup> Sergii reminded the nation of her past victories that were inspired by their sense of duty to the nation and to their faith. He urged clergy not to remain observers, and not to give aid to the enemy.

Even with Metropolitan Sergii's patriotic message in June, he was dispatched soon after to the remote town of Ulyanovsk, but with the tide of war turning in 1942-43, he was eager to get back to Moscow:

The leaders of the church centers... have recently expressed a great dissatisfaction about remaining evacuated for so long Metropolitan Sergii is even faced with the danger of being removed from his leadership position of the church because of the fact that Metropolitan Nikolai, being in Moscow, is not only in de facto control of affairs in a Moscow... but is also a member of the Extraordinary state commission for Revelations an

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<sup>45</sup> Pospelovsky, 195.

investigation of German atrocities and receives far and representatives  
and correspondents on church questions.<sup>46</sup>

Metropolitan Sergii was allowed to return to Moscow sometime before September 4, 1943.

By May 14, 1942, the Red Army Command of the Karelia Front opened the churches:

Attached to the military administration of the Eastern Karelia is a department of education which, through the local and district administrations exercises control and direction over schools and religious establishments. At disposal of the department of education is a group of priests who are serving population. In some of the biggest places, settlement churches have been opened. Priests serving and Finish units have also been provided with the opportunity to serve that civilian population.<sup>47</sup>

While a few churches were opening in the countryside, Stalin was very slow and cautious in changing his policy toward the Church. Another concession to the Church on the home front was permission to hold the traditional candlelight processions around churches on the night of Easter eve in 1942 despite the danger from Germany air raids and lifting the curfew that night.<sup>48</sup>

In January 1943, Metropolitan Sergii took an important step toward the de facto legalization of the Church. Sergii had been making charity collections for defense; he sent Stalin a telegram asking permission for the church to open a bank account in her own name to deposit the collections for defense being made in all churches across the country. Stalin granted the request and thanked the Church on behalf of the Red Army

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<sup>46</sup> Felix Corley, 138 to Comrade Shcherbakov July 3, 1943

<sup>47</sup> Felix Corley, 133 to the ACP May 14, 1942 I

<sup>48</sup> Pospelovsky, 199.

for all her efforts.<sup>49</sup> With one telegram, Metropolitan Sergii restored the Church's legal status as a person, for a bank account in the Church's name automatically conferred that status.

On September 4, 1943, Metropolitan Sergii and two bishops met in the Kremlin with Stalin. At that meeting, the foreseeable future for the Orthodox Church was decided. It lasted nearly two hours. Stalin said the government knew of the patriotic work they had conducted in the churches in the first days of the war, and the government had received many letters from both the front and the home front welcoming the position adopted by the church in relation to the state. Stalin then asked if they had any pressing questions. Metropolitan Sergii asked Stalin, since there were no long-lasting difficulties to justify the absence of a Church council in the Soviet Union, if the government would allow the council to meet. Stalin agreed. The next major issue was the release of a few hierarchies who were detained in camps and prisons. Stalin told them to draw up a list and he would look at it.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, in a two-hour meeting, Stalin restored the Orthodox Church, hierarchies would be able to meet in council, have control of the Church finances, reintegrate the Renovationists, and elect a new Patriarch.<sup>51</sup> Days after the Kremlin meeting the Church was able to hold a council at which Metropolitan Sergii was elected Patriarch, but he died less than a year later in May 1944. Additionally, the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church was created to ensuring the links between the government of the Soviet Union and the Orthodox Church.

As the existence of the council suggests the Church was allowed to function under state supervision. The number of clergy grew steadily, churches reopened, as did theological schools and monasteries, and the church was once again allowed to publish

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>50</sup> Felix Corley, 141, 143 Document 89 September 4, 1943

<sup>51</sup> Felix Corley, 147 Document 90 October 16, 1943

an official journal.<sup>52</sup> While, the situation of the Orthodox Church had improved from 1941-1945, the Church did not have its pre-revolutionary freedom. The Church would remain in that state until after Stalin's death in 1953.

### **Conclusion**

The Russian Orthodox Church survived from 1917 to 1945 primarily because believers resisted, with violence when necessary, any change to their traditional way of life. During the confiscation of Church valuables, parishioners opposed the state. Many times that opposition turned violent. When the Living Church tried to reform Orthodoxy by adopting the Georgian calendar and other liturgical reforms parishioners simply ignore them. If their parish priest tried to implement Renovationist reforms, parishioners expelled him from the parish. The Soviet state did not understand Orthodoxy's importance to the masses. Their main propaganda effort spearheaded by the League of the Militant Godless was ineffective due to infighting and a lack of direction. It was not until the war that the state recognized the value of the Church to the war effort, and restored it to something close to its former position. The survival of the Orthodox Church would seem to make the opposite of Marxist-Leninist doctrine true, only by maintaining their traditional way of life will people be able to achieve happiness.

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<sup>52</sup> Walters, 139.



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