

Monasticism in the Soviet Union

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Before the Revolution of 1917, there was perhaps no country in Europe where monasticism was still as popular and revered as it was in Russia. Every year thousands of people took to the roads on pilgrimages to the various ancient monastic centres – the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, the Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius at Zagorsk, the northern island monastery of Solovki, all of which had hundreds of monks. In 1917, there were 1,025 Orthodox monasteries and convents on the territory of the Russian Empire. By 1920, when the Soviet government had been in power for three years, and was already zealously carrying out a policy of official atheism, the number of monasteries and convents had been reduced to 352. During the next 40 years, 283 monastic communities were dissolved, mostly by forcible means; the monastery buildings were turned into museums or concert halls, or simply left as ruins; the monks and nuns were driven away or imprisoned. The monastery island of Solovki was turned into a prison camp for priests, monks and nuns. Solzhenitsyn gives a detailed account of this process in the second volume of the *Gulag Archipelago*. Almost all monasteries were closed by 1939 but some were later reopened.

In 1958, after Stalin had been dead for five years, there were still 69 Orthodox monasteries and convents in the Soviet Union according to official figures. This was a small number for a country of 250 million people. Yugoslavia has 68 monasteries and 84 convents; Romania has 95 monastic communities; both these are much smaller countries. However, after the anti-religious campaign of the 1960s, the number of monasteries was again drastically reduced, as were the numbers of churches and theological colleges.

Today there are six to ten Christian monasteries, two Buddhist monasteries, and 10 to 15 convents left in the Soviet Union. The Christian monasteries are all Orthodox; there are no official Catholic monasteries or convents in the USSR, although there are over four million Catholics. However, it is thought there may be secret monastic communities – both Orthodox and Catholic; the numbers of these are unknown, but they are certainly mentioned in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*

Nos. 4 and 9 where secret "nuns" are said to have been dismissed from their jobs.

The government campaign in the '60s against the monasteries was one of the most brutal and vicious pages in the entire anti-religious "struggle" of those years. Monks and nuns were subjected (in the Soviet press) to open libel of the most shameless kind. It was asserted that "in St. Cyprian's Monastery ten monks were suffering from venereal diseases", that "in pools near convents, in wells and toilets, the bodies of new-born babies have been found, begotten by the 'holy fathers' from the 'brides of Christ' "; that in the Tsyganesti monastery (Moldavia) one of the monks had raped another monk's daughter. "Open money-grabbing and theft, parasitism and vagrancy, cynical egotism and unconcealed debauchery: these are what characterize the life of the 'holy monks' who preach love for one's neighbour, cleanliness, sinlessness."¹

Most of the closures of monasteries in recent years have been carried out with brute force, in the face of fierce opposition from believers. One of the worst examples of deliberate affront to the feelings of religious believers, was the closure of the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, visited by 100,000 pilgrims yearly, whose monks (about 100) were evicted forcibly in 1960, and the monastery was made into a museum. Another ancient monastery closed at this time was Optina Pustyn, Dostoevsky's model for the monastery in the *Brothers Karamazov*, which has now been made into a training school for mechanics.²

The closure of convents, especially, was described by the Soviet press as the "liberation" of its inmates, "forced" to pray, read church books, and confess their sins. Now they too can read Soviet books, join the Komsomol and work on collective farms. 102 former nuns from the Rechulsk convent are now working in the Frunze collective farm, 35 nuns from the Varzashsk convent also work on a collective farm and the 104 former nuns of Tabor monastery have been organized into a carpet-making factory. The former abbess Mother Tavifa, is said to have run away with "the convent funds".³

As the Soviet law on religion contains no specific clauses referring to monasticism, no legal subterfuge is necessary to disband them: monasteries are, in this sense, completely at the mercy of the Soviet government. Those that remain are kept in existence only by the devotion of the Orthodox faithful, and the support of public opinion abroad.

This was demonstrated in the case of the Pochaev Monastery of the Assumption which almost met the same fate as the Kiev Monastery of the Caves.⁴ In 1959, several of the monastery buildings were taken over by the authorities and turned into clubs and clinics. A hostel for pilgrims was closed (see photographs).

In the early 1960s, many of the 142 monks, including the Abbot, were arrested on various charges and imprisoned in other provinces; after they

had served their terms of imprisonment they were refused residence permits in the Pochaev area. Other monks were forcibly sent to mental hospitals. By 1962, only 36 monks remained, although these continued to hold services for the thousands of pilgrims who continued to visit the monastery. Throughout the years 1962 to 1966, the local KGB carried out a campaign of terror and assault against the monks and returning monks living "illegally" in the district.

A particular target for such assaults were the pilgrims and especially the so-called "*chernichki*", women who were not officially nuns, but lived a monastic form of life in the outside world. Such unofficial "nuns" were often to be found among the pilgrims and were singled out by the KGB for brutal treatment; many were beaten and raped.

However, the Pochaev Monastery achieved a great deal of publicity abroad; a long document written by the Spiritual Council of Pochaev Monastery was published by the *samizdat* journal *Phoenix 66*, edited by Yury Galanskov. This document described the events at Pochaev Monastery, and was widely published in the West. It was perhaps due to this publicity that the Soviet authorities decided to keep the monastery open. Accounts of church feast days in the Pochaev Monastery, attended by many clergy and worshippers, were ostentatiously published in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*.⁵ However, many of the monks who were deported to other provinces have not been allowed to return. In August 1967, two monks wrote to the Patriarch of Constantinople, asking him to accept them in a monastery on Mount Athos, as they were not being allowed to return to Pochaev, or enter any other monastery.

The show-place of Russian monasticism is, of course, the Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius at Zagorsk. This is the centre of Orthodox Church life, a tourist attraction; it includes the largest of three Orthodox seminaries in the USSR. There is a constant stream of novices from the seminary; it is from these that the future Orthodox hierarchy will come, as all Orthodox bishops must be monks. (Married clergy remain as parish priests.) There are about 90 monks here at present, half of them ordained priests. Monastic life here is, in a sense, privileged: apart from the limitations placed by the authorities on the number of novices, there is little interference here with the daily rituals of monasticism – indeed, services and prayers are almost all performed in public, with huge crowds of believers in attendance.

The Monastery of the Assumption in Odessa is the official summer residence of the Patriarch and, as such, is also somewhat select and privileged; it is more secluded from the outside world than other monasteries, but has very strong links with the Odessa seminary.

The Pskov Monastery of the Caves (see *Documents* pp. 45-48), which now has about 60 monks, is the third of Russia's large monasteries. About 30,000 pilgrims visit the Pskov monastery on Church feast days. It is 500

years old; there are cave-churches and catacombs beneath the buildings where many of the monks are buried. It is famous for preserving the structure and discipline of pre-revolutionary monasteries. After the war, the Abbot was tried for collaborating with the Germans, and recent official propaganda has accused all the monks of being traitors to the Soviet regime.⁶ Anatoli Levitin has written an article on the Pskov monastery, in which he gives biographical details of the monks. The late Abbot, Archimandrite Alipi, was a labourer on building sites, and a soldier during the war, before becoming a monk. He believes in hard work for everyone and has no interest in intellectual argument. He is a real Russian and very close to the people. It would be impossible to imagine anyone with a greater understanding of their life. The other monks include a former railwayman, a collective farm worker, a shoe-maker, and a goods manager; all these are former soldiers. "They have not come here to rest"; says Levitin, "but to live in a manner pleasing to God" (see photographs).

The Monastery of the Assumption at Zhirovitsy, in the district of Minsk, has been subjected to many attacks by the authorities, but is still apparently functioning. Archbishop Yermogen of Kaluga was confined there after his enforced retirement and is still there, as far as is known. The monastery buildings are also being used by nuns, who were transferred there after the closure of the Grodno and Polotsk convents. This is against strict monastic rules, but the authorities refuse to give the nuns a separate building. The local regional executive committee, led by the chairman, S. T. Kobyak, has been trying to confiscate monastery bells, buildings and kitchen-gardens. Local parishioners and pilgrims appealed to them to leave the monastery alone but they replied "We're communists – we'll do whatever we like".⁷

The sixth Russian Orthodox monastery in the USSR is the Monastery of the Holy Spirit at Vilnius. Like the Monastery of the Assumption at Zhirovitsy, it is forced to share a building with a community of nuns. The existence of two Orthodox monastic communities in an almost completely Catholic country (Lithuania) is somewhat ironic when no Catholic monasteries are allowed.

The community of nuns at Zhirovitsy is the only female monastic community on Russian soil (RSFSR). The other Orthodox convents are all in non-Russian areas of the Soviet Union: there is one convent in each of the Baltic countries, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia; one in Moldavia, and six in the Ukraine.

The Convent of the Assumption in Estonia is at Pühtitsa, which means "Holy Mountain" in Estonian; the Mother of God was said to have appeared there to some Estonian shepherds. There are 150 nuns, including lay sisters; they live in cells and work on the neighbouring state farm. There are a number of churches and chapels in the convent grounds. The Mother Superior is Abbess Varvara Trofimova, who entered the convent in 1952.

The Trinity-St. Sergius Convent in Riga, Latvia, also contains a number of churches and chapels. The Abbess is Mother Zinaida Baranova. This convent contains a "skit", or "pustyn", the so-called "Wilderness of the Transfiguration" (a "pustyn" is an isolated cloister within a monastic community, which has a small number of inmates and practises a stricter, more ascetic way of life than the monastic community as a whole).

The largest of the convents in the Ukraine, and indeed, in the USSR as a whole, is the Pokrovsky Convent in Kiev, which has 200-250 nuns. Hundreds of women wanting to become novices were on the convent's waiting list at one time, but since 1960 the authorities have given permission for hardly any novices to be accepted. In the 1960s, a number of nuns were transferred to Orthodox convents in Israel, in order to reduce the number of nuns even further. The Mother Superior is Mother Yelikonida. The convent is famous for its icon-painting workshop. There is also a second, smaller convent in Kiev – the Florovsky Convent, which contains the ancient Ascension Cathedral. The Abbess is Reverend Mother Agnesa.

The Rozhdestvensky Convent in Odessa diocese, near the village of Aleksandrovka, was founded in 1924 as a monastery, and reorganized as a convent in 1934. It is remarkable for being the only officially-functioning convent founded since the Soviet regime was established. The present Mother Superior, the Abbess Alevtina, was one of the first novices. The church was renovated in 1969, and visited by the Patriarch in 1971. There are over 40 nuns; they work on a nearby collective farm as well as participating in convent services. There is no electric light in the churches; this is consciously done to assist prayer by the light of candles. The nuns are of five different nationalities – Russian, Ukrainian, Moldavian, Gagauz and Bulgarian – and services are held in Church Slavonic, Moldavian and Gagauz. The number of nationalities is probably due to some of the nuns having been transferred from convents closed in Moldavia. The only monastic community left in Moldavia is the Zhabsky Convent of the Ascension on the right bank of the River Dniester, where the Abbess is Reverend Mother Serafima. Very little is also known about the Pokrovsky Convent at Krasnogorsk in Cherkassy district; the Abbess there is Reverend Mother Ilariya.

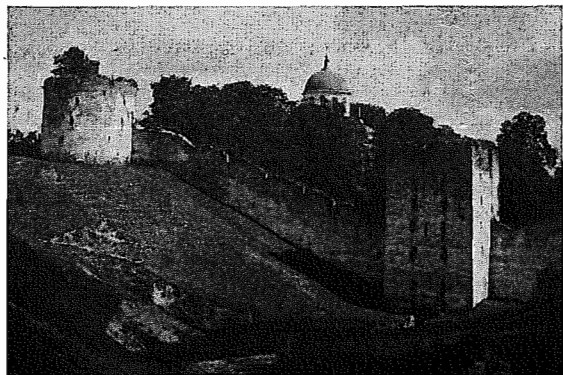
The Convent of St. Nicholas in Mukachevo, in the Carpathian foothills, was renovated in 1970. The Abbess is Reverend Mother Afanasiya. There are 120 nuns. The former Abbess, Reverend Mother Paraskeva, died in 1967 and is still famous for her holy manner of dying and the testament she left behind her, which was read at her funeral service: "I can no longer speak to you with my lips and voice, as before, because I no longer have breath or voice. But I speak to you with this poor letter. The temple of my body has been destroyed and given to the earth according to the word of the Lord 'Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return'. But I look for the resurrection of the dead and I hope to inherit the age to come. My hope and salvation is Jesus Christ, my Lord and God. I have gone away



Pilgrims flocking to the Pochaev Monastery in the Ukraine which continues to be a living spiritual centre (see *Monasticism in the Soviet Union* p.28).

Right The early sixteenth century bell-tower at the Pskov Monastery of the Caves.

Within these walls stands the Pskov Monastery of the Caves (see *Documents* pp. 45-48) which is a flourishing religious community.

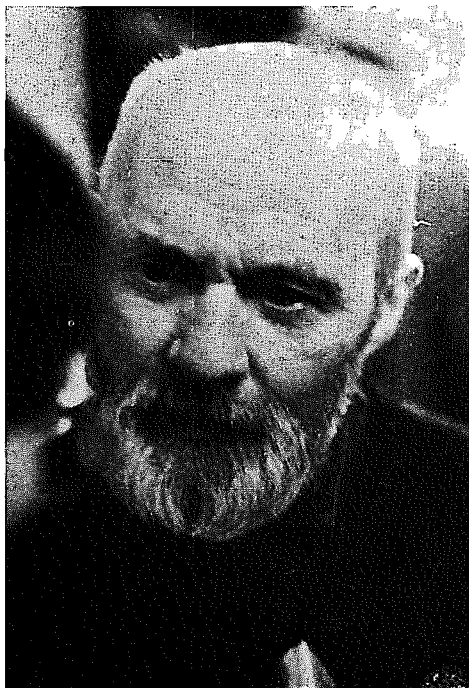




Fr. Vasili Romanyuk, now seriously ill in prison, is the subject of an appeal printed on p. 48.



Fr. Vasili Romanyuk is seen here officiating at an Orthodox wedding in the Ukraine.



Fr. Sergi Zheludkov, a Russian Orthodox priest, in December 1975 wrote an appeal to Andrei Sakharov on behalf of the imprisoned priest, Fr. Vasili Romanyuk: "On 9 December Fr. Vasili will be 50 years old. He has already served two years in prison, and is now in his second year of imprisonment in a particularly 'strict regime' camp where he is doing harmful work (glass dust is settling on his lungs). In August this year he declared a hunger-strike, asking once more for a review of his case, for the return of a prayer-book which had been taken away from him and for permission to have a Bible. . . I recall my acquaintance with Fr. Vasili's family with feelings of delight and deep sadness."

from you on a long road, and I am walking along a road unknown to me . . . But the time of Christ's second coming is approaching, . . . May God grant that we shall meet then."⁸

The Trinity Convent in Korets, Rovno region, has two choirs which are renowned for their singing. The Abbess is Reverend Mother Natalya. The nuns divide their activity between Church work – making liturgical vestments, – and working on the land in a neighbouring collective farm.

The only monastic communities in the USSR, other than those mentioned above, are in Georgia and Armenia. There are six Armenian Gregorian monasteries, four in Echmiadzin, the Gegard monastery in Erevan, and the Khatch (Holy Cross) monastery in eastern Armenia. The Georgian Orthodox Church has no monasteries, but it does have four convents. One of these at Mtskheta has only 11 nuns and no novices. There is also a seminary at Mtskheta. There are also two Buddhist monasteries, the Ivolginsky monastery (with 30 monks) near Ulan Ude, and the Aginsky monastery (with 20 monks) near Chita. Neither community is allowed to accept novices but Soviet Buddhists have reportedly been applying as novices to the Mongolian Buddhist monastery at Ulan Bator. These monastic communities, which still survive despite the persecutions and vilifications directed against them by an atheist State, are still in danger. Monasticism is not countenanced as an institution by the Soviet authorities and those wishing to become monks or nuns attract the full wrath of the State. Anatoli Levitin admits that a great many Soviet people find the idea of monasticism abhorrent: "I wrote the word 'monasticism' and shuddered involuntarily, thinking what an anachronism it sounds in the ears of the man in the street. 'Monasticism? That's something horrible. When did it arise and when did it die out?' Any average person today would ask this question."

In such circumstances, when the wish to become a monk brings such unpleasantness and persecution in its wake, why should any Soviet citizen still want to join a monastic community? Anatoli Levitin, in *Monasticism and the Modern World*, recalls that it was always difficult for those who entered monasteries to leave the world: St. Alexi, the man of God, left his family and young wife to enter a monastery, despite his father's entreaties and those of his family. Levitin compares this to the fervour of the nineteenth-century revolutionaries who sacrificed their family life for their ideals. The monk is called to be a light to the world by his exemplary life. This is the social role of monasticism. "Restraint and purity demonstrate to the profligate that debauchery is not a norm, but an abnormality; renunciation and voluntary poverty teach scorn of riches; self-denial is the best weapon against egotism. Thus monasticism is a healthy weapon against selfishness, banality and uncleanness. Naturally, however, the role of monasticism is not exhausted by this. For monasticism is a holy mystery". By "a holy mystery", Levitin means a miracle, which demands active participation on the part of man, through faith; by this miracle

human nature becomes superhuman and angelic. This is why monks are called "soldiers of Christ". "We firmly believe", says Levitin, "in the coming of a new wave of monasticism in the Russian Church. The future of Russia is with the ardent and zealous young people of our country who, despite opposition, are every day attaining to the faith. New monks will come from among them – zealous warriors for Christ's cause. They will transform the Church of Christ and the land of Russia."¹⁰

¹ *Nauka i Religia*, No. 9, 1961, pp. 22-31.

² Michael Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, London, 1969, pp. 97-116.

³ *Nauka i Religia* No. 9, 1961.

⁴ *Patriarch and Prophets*, pp. 97-116.

⁵ No. 11, 1965; No. 12, 1966; No. 11, 1967.

⁶ G. Gerodnik, *The Truth about the Pskov Monastery of the Caves*, Moscow, 1963.

⁷ *Patriarch and Prophets*, p. 176.

⁸ From an account given to a visitor, translated by the latter. Original Russian unavailable.

⁹ A. Levitin, *Monasticism and the Modern World in Zashchita Very v SSSR*, Paris, 1966.

¹⁰ *Zashchita Very v SSSR*, p. 30-31.

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