

German Intelligence: Religious Revival in Soviet Territory

WASSILIJ ALEXEEV and KEITH ARMES

The Church was given a new lease of life in German-occupied areas of the USSR during the war. Glimpses of this rebirth are given in some hitherto unpublished German intelligence reports. These reports were despatched regularly by four Action Groups (*Einsatzgruppen*) which were responsible for intelligence and counter-espionage as well as for the liquidation of Jews, Soviet officials, saboteurs and "asocial" elements in accordance with Hitler's personal orders. A typical report includes information from several Action Groups on the military, administrative and economic situation in their respective areas as well as on the actions of the Action Group units themselves. Over 90 of the Action Group reports also contain information on church life.

The Action Groups were set up in May 1941 by SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German security police, for service in the occupied Soviet territories after the planned invasion of the USSR by the Axis powers. The powers of the Action Groups were later enhanced by a further directive issued by Hitler in July 1941 which made Himmler, Heydrich's superior as Reichsführer SS and head of all the German police, responsible for police security in the newly occupied territories.¹

The intelligence reports were despatched by each Action Group to the Reich SS Security Department in Berlin where staff under Gruppenführer Heinrich Müller, head of the Gestapo, consolidated and filed the reports, at first daily and subsequently at fortnightly intervals. Between June 1941 and May 1943 altogether 250 consolidated Action Group reports were prepared in Berlin. At the end of the war the Reich SS Security Department archives were captured by the US Army and eventually transferred to the Departmental Records Branch, Department of the Army, Alexandria, Virginia, where they have been stored since then.²

The reports which contain information about church life provide data on the re-opening of churches, attendance at services, availability of priests, and the attitude of the population to religion. A number of the

reports discuss ecclesiastical politics in relation to German policies towards the Churches in the Ukraine and Belorussia.³

The extracts now being published (see *Documents* pp. 31-37) provide a picture of the rebirth of church life in German-occupied territory during the war.⁴ The reports have been translated literally without editing in order to reflect accurately the language of the professional intelligence officers who compiled them.

How objective and reliable is the information in these reports? First, when the material from the Action Group reports was correlated with many interviews of Russian Orthodox clergy (in W. Alexeev's archive) and other contemporary German documents as well as with non-German historical sources, in almost every case the accuracy of the reports was confirmed. Second, a number of the reports contain explicit criticism of Reich policy in the occupied territories. Third, the material shows the depth of Christian faith among the population, whereas the ideology of the SS was profoundly anti-Christian.

Hitler intended to destroy the Christian Churches after the victorious conclusion of the war. Before then official church *Ostpolitik* was based on three principles: "depolitization," "derussification," and "atomization". First, the churches in the East were to be prevented from playing any political role. They were to be permitted to function, but no official support was to be given to them by the Reich (although in practice this principle conflicted with the principle of derussification) and in Belorussia and the Ukraine nationalist church movements received German aid. Financially the churches were to depend entirely on the donations of the faithful. Second, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which Hitler saw as an important factor in Great Russian national consciousness, was to be reduced to the minimum by restricting the Church to the Great Russian areas and unofficially promoting autocephalous Orthodox Churches in Belorussia and the Ukraine. Third, no religious organizations were to be permitted with a jurisdiction extending beyond the area of an administrative *Generalbezirk* (corresponding approximately to an eparchy).

But the Reich's official policy failed.⁵ The reasons emerge from the Action Group reports. The Wehrmacht in its advance assisted the resurgence of religious life and the attitude of the military government to the Church was generally sympathetic. A great number of the churches which had been closed under Soviet administration were reopened and refurbished, and church attendance was high everywhere. The eagerness of the population to baptize children, even those well beyond the normal age, is remarkable. Moreover, despite the attempts by the *Reichskommissariat* of the Ukraine and the *Generalkommissariat* of Belorussia to promote autocephalous Churches at the expense of Russian Orthodoxy, the separatist Churches had only a limited following. In the Ukraine the

Autonomous Ukrainian Church remained dominant and in Belorussia the new Autocephalous Church became decidedly Great Russian in sentiment.⁶ In the Baltic region Exarch Sergi (Voskresensky) was largely successful in upholding the interests of Russian Orthodoxy while conducting a mission in the Pskov area which attracted great popular support.⁷ Ultimately the change in Stalin's religious policy, in conjunction with Axis military defeat, led to a reversal of German religious *Ostpolitik*: in the spring of 1944 the Reich came out in official support of the Belorussian and Ukrainian Autocephalous Churches. But by this time it was far too late for Berlin to win the psychological victory, foreseen by the Foreign Ministry and many Wehrmacht officers, through overt German assistance to the Church.⁸

Stalin's new policy reflected not only a determination to exploit popular sympathy for the Church in the areas under Soviet control in the interests of the war effort, but also an awareness of the religious revival in the territories under German administration. The reports of the Action Groups on the attitude of the partisans to the Church indicate that the Soviet government found it expedient to make concessions to the religious sentiments of the population. The great vitality displayed by the Russian Orthodox Church in the absence of Soviet administrative and ideological restraints may well have had a crucial influence on the Concordat with the Church made by Stalin in September 1943. The German intelligence reports provide convincing evidence of the extent of this religious resurgence over an area inhabited by one third of the Soviet population.

¹ For the history of the Action Groups, see Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head. The Story of Hitler's SS*, London, 1969, pp. 354-369; Gerald Reitlinger, *The SS Alibi of a Nation: 1922-1945*, London, 1956, pp. 180-186; Helmut Krausnick et al., *Anatomy of the SS State*, New York, 1968, pp. 60-66, 179-180, 528-529; Charles Wighton, *Heydrich. Hitler's Most Evil Henchman*, Philadelphia, 1962, pp. 218-223, 226-227; Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo. Instrument of Tyranny*, New York, 1956, pp. 164-183; Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945. A Study of Occupation Policies*, London, 1957, pp. 29, 73; Richard Grunberger, *Hitler's SS*, London, 1970, pp. 81-82.

² The reports are available in microfilm through the Committee for the Study of War Documents, American Historical Association, Washington, D.C.

³ See Wassilij Alexeev and Theofanis Stavrou, *The Great Revival: The Russian Church under German Occupation*, Minneapolis, 1976.

⁴ The Action Group reports have been previously cited in Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945*, p. 487, and in Harvey Fireside, *Icon and Swastika. The Russian Orthodox Church under Nazi and Soviet Control*, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, pp. 133-134, 141, 145, 150, 156.

⁵ On official German policy, see Chapter II of *The Great Revival: The Russian Church under German Occupation* by Wassilij Alexeev and Theofanis Stavrou; also Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945*, pp. 472-481. In one oft-quoted conversation in April 1942 Hitler spoke of the desirability of each (Russian) village having its own sect. (See *Adolf Hitler: Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944. With an Introductory Essay on the Mind of Adolf Hitler* by H. R. Trevor-Roper, London, 1953, p. 424). Hitler outlined further his views on the Church in the course of a conversation the following month with Reichsminister Alfred Rosenberg, Minister for the Occu-

ped Eastern Territories, about the projected proclamation of religious freedom in the occupied areas. (See Alfred Rosenberg, "Vermerk über eine Unterredung mit dem Führer im Führer-hauptquartier am 8.5.42," Document 1520-PS, *Trial of the Major War Criminals*, Nuremberg, International Military Tribunal, 1947-49, XXVII, 286-287.)

⁶ See Chapters IV and V of *The Great Revival* by Wassilij Alexeev and Theofanis Stavrou; also Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945*, pp. 481-488.

⁷ For Exarch Sergi's activities and eventual fate, see Chapter III of *The Great Revival*; also Wassilij Alexeev's article, "Le drame de l'exarque Serge Voskresenskij et l'élection du patriarche de Moscou à la lumière des documents confidentiels allemands," *Irénikon*, 30, 1957, pp. 189-202. Exarch Sergi expounded his policy in a detailed memorandum of November 1941 to the German authorities, *Denkschrift betreffend die Lage der Orthodoxen Kirche im Ostland* (*Memorandum on the Position of the Orthodox Church in Ostland*) English translation in *Eastern Churches Review*, Autumn 1974, pp. 135-161.

⁸ See Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945*, p. 478.

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