

The Russian Orthodox Church

1927-1945

Repression and Revival

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Active resistance to Soviet power by the Russian Orthodox Church continued for ten years after the Revolution. In 1927 (29 July) the *Locum Tenens*, Metropolitan Sergi (Stragorodsky) issued a Declaration of loyalty, containing a sentence which was unacceptable to many believers: "The Soviet Union is our civil homeland, whose joys and successes are our joys and successes . . ."¹ Those who disapproved of the Declaration considered that the Church and the atheist State could not have any interests in common, and as a result they went underground. Thus the Orthodox Church in the USSR in the 1930s became divided into three branches: the Moscow Patriarchate with Metropolitan Sergi as its official head, the so-called Living Church* created at the beginning of the 1920s, and various branches of the Russian Orthodox Church which went underground as a result of the 1927 Declaration. In addition, there existed a Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, known as the "self-consecrators", which ceased to exist in the 1930s.² The Living Church, too, died gradually and was eventually liquidated after the Russian Orthodox Church's Council (*Sobor*) of 1943. The underground church, the so-called Catacomb Church, exists to this day but we lack detailed information about its activity. Many believers considered that in addition to the unacceptability of Metropolitan Sergi's 1927 Declaration from a moral point of view, his capitulation would not bring any material benefits to the Church. Later events have demonstrated the truth of this.

The decrees of 1929 (the Law on Religious Associations) put all religious believers and the Church in an even more difficult position. The number of open (i.e. functioning) churches decreased considerably, and by 1939 the situation was catastrophic. Paul Anderson in his book on the Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR, gives the following data from official Soviet statistics: in 1917 there were 46,457 Orthodox churches, 50,960 Orthodox priests, and 130 bishops. In contrast, by 1941 there were only 4,225 churches, 5,665 priests, and 28 bishops.³ Anderson took this infor-

* See "The Living Church 1922-1946" by Philip Walters in *RCL*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 235-41. *Ed.*

mation from an official Soviet publication, *Soviet War News* (22 August 1941) and from the journal *Bezbozhnik* (*The Godless*, January 1935). He pointed out that these statistics included data relating to the Living Church, which still existed at that time and to which the majority of surviving bishops belonged. The difference between the number of churches before and after the Revolution would be even greater if the figures included pre-revolutionary churches in private houses, as well as those belonging to educational or military institutions. It should also be remembered that by 1941 vast areas of Poland had been incorporated into the USSR – areas in which there were approximately 1,200 Orthodox churches – as well as the Baltic republics with approximately 300 Orthodox churches.⁴

In view of these facts one can assume that the number of open churches in the USSR at the beginning of 1939 was only approximately 2,700, i.e. no more than six per cent of the pre-revolutionary figure. As for the number of bishops belonging to Metropolitan Sergi's jurisdiction, only four remained, according to our estimate, who were to any degree active.⁵ These four bishops could be considered active because they presided over their dioceses as ruling bishops.

Information from interviews with a number of people who visited Metropolitan Sergi before the Second World War reveals the difficult situation in which he was placed at that time. He lived in Yelokhovo, a district of Moscow, in a small apartment consisting of four rooms. His attendant would not stay with him during the night for fear of being arrested with the Metropolitan and two nuns who took care of him slept out of earshot in the attic. So the elderly Metropolitan remained alone at night with no one available to help him should he have a heart attack.

The situation of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the end of the 1930s was a tragic paradox: the Catacomb Church, which refused to recognize Metropolitan Sergi as the true head of the Church and went underground, in a sense saved the official Church from complete destruction because the Soviet authorities were afraid to force the entire Russian Church underground through ruthless suppression and so to lose control over it. This situation was confirmed by Metropolitan Sergi (Voskresensky), Exarch of the Baltic states (a close friend of the *Locum Tenens*, Metropolitan Sergi Stragorodsky) in a memorandum submitted to the German authorities in 1941.⁶

The degradation of the Orthodox Church did not stem from a drop in the number of believers. Emelyan Yaroslavsky, head of the Union of the Militant Godless, flippantly remarked that according to his information two thirds of the urban population and one third of the rural population who were over 16 considered themselves to be atheists. This would mean that in the middle of the 1930s 57 per cent of the population remained

believers.⁷ It is significant that the results of the 1937 population Census, which included a question about religious affiliation, were suppressed and that the new Census of 1939 did not include this particular question.

The Russian Orthodox Church's situation changed with the outbreak of war. In the territory occupied by the USSR after the partition of Poland between Hitler and Stalin in 1939, there were four million Orthodox, approximately 1,200 parishes with their own churches, a theological seminary in Kremenets and four Orthodox bishops.⁸ This meant that the number of ruling bishops in the USSR was doubled and that the number of open churches increased by 40 per cent of the pre-war figure. Soviet citizens were only permitted to enter the newly acquired territory with special permission. Metropolitan Sergi (Voskresensky), however, a bishop of the Moscow Patriarchate, appeared in the territory of former Poland as head of the Orthodox churches in the annexed territories almost immediately. The seminary was closed but the believers and the clergy were subjected to limited persecution compared with Soviet standards. This could only be explained by the Soviet Union's fear of strong opposition from the population which they could not risk provoking in the face of the German military threat. A similar situation was created after the occupation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate were obviously considered by the Soviet authorities to be politically reliable.

In 1941 Hitler invaded the USSR. During the first phase of the war the Reich armies occupied a significant part of European Russia with a population of approximately 80 million. Undoubtedly, were he to win the war Hitler planned to eliminate all traces of Christianity, including, of course, the Eastern Orthodox Church which he rightly considered to be the principal spiritual force in Russia. However, when Germany invaded the USSR the German army had not yet received any orders on its policy towards the churches. As a result, the German army acted with considerable tolerance towards the revival of religious life in the territories which it occupied.⁹

When the German authorities understood the importance of the religious revival, Alfred Rosenberg, head of the *Ostministerium*, formulated the principles for German policy on religion in Russia during a meeting with Hitler on 8 May 1942. According to these principles religious organizations larger than a diocese were forbidden and the Russian Orthodox Church in Belorussia, the Ukraine and in the remaining occupied territories which were not purely Russian was not to be rebuilt. This policy, however, was never carried out. Belorussian and Ukrainian dioceses formed one Belorussian and two Ukrainian Churches. Bessarabia was put under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church and its territory was increased by the inclusion of part of the Ukraine. The division of the Church according to nationality completely failed in

Belorussia and was only partly successful in the Ukraine. According to the Germans, Orthodox priests created a truly Russian Church under the guise of the Belorussian Church. In the Ukraine there was a split between two rival Orthodox jurisdictions, the pro-Russian "autonomous church" and the anti-Russian "autocephalous church", with the pro-Russian church absorbing the majority of the population. In the north the Exarch of the Baltic states, Metropolitan Sergi (Voskresensky), succeeded in sending a mission from Estonia and Latvia to the areas around Pskov and Novgorod. The effects of its work spread as far as Leningrad. The members of this mission found only one or two functioning churches in the area around Pskov and Novgorod and yet managed to open approximately 300 churches which had been closed by the communists. In addition they baptized almost all the children and teenagers in the area. In Belorussia during the German occupation the number of churches which were re-opened amounted to 30 per cent of the number open before the Revolution. As in the case of the Pskov Mission, in this area too, many children and teenagers were baptized, sometimes 150-200 at a time. In some dioceses the number of churches which were re-opened amounted to almost 50 per cent of the pre-revolutionary figure. For example, in the Kievan diocese 1,710 churches were functioning before the Revolution, whereas in 1941 only a few remained open. After 1941 about 700 churches were opened: 410 were pro-Russian (belonging to the "autonomous church") and 298 were anti-Russian (belonging to the "autocephalous church"). According to German estimates for 18 October 1941, 95 per cent of Ukrainians were believers, of whom 55 per cent belonged to the pro-Russian "autonomous church" and 40 per cent to the "autocephalous church".¹⁰

The religious revival which took place in the German-occupied territories, where often the local population opened churches on the day the German army arrived, had no parallel in the areas of the USSR which remained under Soviet rule. No opportunities like those given to the churches in the occupied zones were offered by the Soviet authorities, although Metropolitan Sergi declared his Church's loyalty to the Soviet government when he issued a patriotic appeal to the faithful on the outbreak of war. Metropolitan Sergi's action did not win him the trust of the communist authorities. During the German advance towards Moscow he was evacuated in a hurry, although sick with a high fever, to Ulyanovsk where no accommodation had been prepared for him. Nevertheless, the Soviet authorities did at least stop closing churches and a few were even re-opened. For example, in *Patriarkh Sergi i ego dukhovnoe nasledstvo* (*Patriarch Sergi and his spiritual heritage*, p. 240 - see footnote 1) the text of a request from Metropolitan Sergi to a priest, Fr Smirnov, is quoted: the priest was asked to collect the keys of the church at Poldamasovo, to organize a *dvadtsatka* (group of 20 believers) and to serve that parish as priest.

Apart from the opening of a few churches, only two new bishops were consecrated during 1942.¹¹ In the same year one can find only 11 names of bishops who had any connection with Metropolitan Sergi, and there is no indication that these bishops were in any way active in their dioceses. The situation changed only after Stalin received Metropolitan Sergi on 4 September 1943. Four days later, on 8 September 1943, a Council of 19 bishops elected Metropolitan Sergi Patriarch of Russia. A report (22 pages) on this Council in the first issue of *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* mentions the election of the Patriarch and the creation of a Synod of Bishops, but gives no information about church activities, about the re-opening of churches and the restoration of dioceses. It does report, however, that the Council approved an address to the Soviet government which expressed the Church's gratitude to Stalin for his positive and sympathetic attitude towards the needs of the Church. The Council also approved an appeal, which was entirely political, to all Christians of the world, and a proclamation which condemned "traitors to the faith and our native land". This latter document stated: "Like unto Judas who destroyed his soul and whose body was punished in an extreme way here on this earth, so also these traitors are preparing for themselves an eternal punishment; they will not avoid Cain's fate here on earth."¹² Stalin is known to have regarded all Soviet prisoners-of-war as traitors. But did the Moscow Patriarchate intend to include them in its condemnation? As far as can be established, this proclamation remained a propaganda document and served as payment for concessions from the government.

Permission to consecrate new bishops was one of the most important concessions granted to the Church. While only 19 bishops had taken part in the 1943 Council, 46 bishops attended the Council which took place in 1945. During the 17 months between the two Councils 21 new bishops were consecrated.* *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, published regularly from September 1943, provides information on the composition of the new episcopate. When the Living Church ceased to exist, the seven bishops who formerly belonged to this Church became members of the Moscow Patriarchate. Five were accepted as bishops and two were re-consecrated. Three former bishops who had been inactive received dioceses. Of the 46 bishops who attended the 1945 Council, one came from the United States. Among the 21 newly consecrated bishops 13 were elderly former priests with only a seminary training and no more than four were graduates of pre-revolutionary theological academies. Four of the bishops had received a secular education. The average age of the new bishops was 57.¹³

Before the Revolution there were 130 bishops. After the Revolution, because so many were arrested, probably several hundred new bishops

* During this period Patriarch Sergi died (15 May 1944). Metropolitan Alexi of Leningrad became *Locum Tenens*.

were consecrated to replace them. What became of the arrested? The question still awaits an answer. At any rate, by 1943 when it became possible to reconstruct the Moscow Patriarchate, it was necessary to consecrate several widowed priests† from among the clergy who had survived the persecution of previous years. Out of 21 newly consecrated bishops, 14 were sent to areas formerly occupied by the Germans, six were sent to European Russia, while only one was sent to the Ural Mountains area (Sverdlovsk). This demonstrates that the spiritual revival was strongest in the German-occupied territories, considerably less strong in other parts of European Russia, and almost negligible in the Asiatic part of Russia.

For all the concessions which the Russian Orthodox Church received during and after the Second World War, the Moscow Patriarchate was obliged to pay the price of complete subordination to the atheistic government of the USSR and to participate in its foreign policy. In this way the Soviet government, while unable to arrest the spontaneous religious revival, did everything possible to contain it within the tightly-controlled body of the Moscow Patriarchate, which has become a tool of the Soviet government in the attainment of its political goals.

† In normal circumstances only monks can be consecrated bishop in the Orthodox Church. *Ed.*

¹ *Patriarkh Sergi i ego dukhovnoe nasledstvo*, Moscow, "Izd. Moskovskoi patriarkhii", 1947, p. 61.

² Friedrich Heyer, *Die orthodoxe Kirche in der Ukraine von 1917 bis 1945*, Cologne, Rudolf Muller, 1953, pp. 108-9.

³ Paul B. Anderson, *L'Eglise et la nation en Russie soviétique*, Paris, Calmann-Levy, 1946, p. 192.

⁴ Wassilij Alexeev and Theofanis G. Stavrou: *The Great Revival: the Russian Church under German Occupation*, Minneapolis, Minn., Burgess Publishing Co., 1976, pp. 46-7.

⁵ Heyer, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁶ Wassilij Alexeev, *Russian Orthodox Bishops in the Soviet Union 1941-1953*, New York, Research Program on the USSR, 1954, pp. 84-5.

"The Orthodox Church under German Occupation: an unpublished memorandum by the Exarch of the Baltic area, Metropolitan Sergi." Introduction by Wassilij Alexeev. Translation from German by Keith Armes. Oxford. *Eastern Churches Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Clarendon Press, 1974.

⁷ *The Great Revival*, p. 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-4. See also "German Intelligence: Religious Revival in Soviet Territory" by Wassilij Alexeev and Keith Armes, *RCL*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 27-37 and No. 2 pp. 109-16.

¹⁰ *The Great Revival*, pp. 147-84.³

¹¹ *Russian Orthodox Bishops in the Soviet Union, 1941-1953*, pp. 6-15.

¹² *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, No. 1, September 1943, p. 16.

¹³ *Russian Orthodox Bishops in the Soviet Union, 1941-1953*, pp. 15-24.