

The Russian Orthodox Church 1945 – 1959

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The year 1943 marked a turning-point in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR. That year Stalin met leading Orthodox hierarchs and soon after a new tolerant policy towards the Church¹ was adopted by the State. The Church was allowed to elect a Patriarch in 1943: Metropolitan Sergi was chosen but died the following year. His successor Alexi was enthroned after a magnificent Church Council (*Sobor*), held early in 1945 and attended by Orthodox dignitaries from home and abroad. The Council adopted a "Statute on the Administration of the Russian Orthodox Church" which laid down new rules for church administration at all levels. In September 1943 the government set up a Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church under G. G. Karpov, a layman, to deal directly with the church hierarchy.² The 1929 Law on Religious Associations was still in force, but the State now chose to interpret it leniently. By 1945 government measures implied that the Church now enjoyed the rights of juridical personality³: in August of that year a government decree gave the Church the right to acquire some kinds of property. For their part, leading church spokesmen expressed fulsome admiration for Stalin and his works. No doubt some such compromise was necessary for the Church to survive as an institution, but nevertheless, as priests suddenly became privileged members of society and the Church grew visibly rich, some misgivings were felt by those who feared for the integrity of the faith.⁴

Why did the State become more tolerant towards the Church? In the first place, anti-religious activity in the USSR is always subordinate to more pressing political issues. The demands of post-war recovery led the government to try to avoid alienating believers, who probably made up at least a quarter of the population⁵; and then from 1953 to about 1957 the Soviet leadership was preoccupied with recurrent crises in the power struggle which followed the death of Stalin. Furthermore, in one important area of activity—that of foreign relations—the State found that the Church could be of positive service.

The Church tried to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's and unto God what was God's. In practice this policy meant that the Church was

allowed considerable freedom in organizing its internal affairs as long as it gave positive support to all the political policies of the State. The two leading personalities in the Church during the 1950s were Patriarch Alexi and Metropolitan Nikolai of Krutitsy and Kolomna, who was in charge of foreign relations.⁶ Both men were astute politicians, and both have been criticized for their alleged subservience to the demands of the State; both, however, were men of considerable spiritual integrity. Alexi was at the same time apparently a genuine patriot and a conservative by nature, and found that he could satisfy most of the State's conditions for co-operation with a clear conscience.⁷ A recent émigré who lived through the period in question has characterized the post-war arrangement as that of "a conservative Church in a conservative State".⁸

One of the more tangible benefits of the State's new policy for the faithful was the re-opening of churches after the War. Accurate figures are hard to establish, but it seems that the number of functioning churches rose to a maximum of half the pre-Revolutionary total of some 50,000.⁹ Most experts think that the opening of churches reflected a genuine religious revival amongst the population. This revival was further boosted by the political confusion in the years after the death of Stalin (1953) and—especially amongst the intelligentsia and the young—by the ideological disillusionment which followed the exposure of Stalin's crimes by Khrushchev in 1956. Even local authorities were often sympathetic to believers and turned a blind eye to their activities.

But there are other possible reasons for the re-opening of churches. Firstly, the government aimed at ending religious fragmentation and creating one centralized body which it could easily control. Thus the Church was guided by the State to consolidate its hold over the faithful in Russia: it undertook a campaign to build up its own prestige which led to improvements in the liturgy and also to the provision of more churches.¹⁰ Secondly, Stalin may have encouraged the building of churches as a token fulfilment of the widespread expectation that after the War all kinds of political liberties would be forthcoming.¹¹

The first theological schools since the 1920s were opened in Moscow in 1944 and Leningrad in 1945. They were re-organized in 1946 to provide a seminary and an academy in each city.¹² Over the next two years at least six more seminaries were opened in various parts of the USSR.¹³ Extension courses and correspondence courses were established for candidates unable to attend the theological schools. Although the average total number of students attending these schools annually has been estimated at about 1,500, the number of graduates was inadequate to meet the growing demand for priests in the parishes. It should, however, be borne in mind that the theological schools began to set higher and higher standards for themselves—examinations were introduced in 1945—and a high proportion of candidates were turned away.¹⁴

In return for these indulgences, the Church was ready to support the foreign policies of the State. Between 1945 and 1948 the USSR took advantage of a wave of pro-Soviet feeling in the West to extend its control over what are now the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. The Church's brief was to extend simultaneously its own control over the Orthodox Churches of Europe and the Near East. This meant challenging the control of the traditional Orthodox leader, the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Patriarch Alexi left for Jerusalem and the Near East in May 1945, pointedly excluding the Ecumenical Patriarch from his itinerary. At the same time, other hierarchs had been visiting the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe. The Bulgarian, Romanian and Serbian Churches quickly accepted Moscow's leadership, and a Moscow nominee was appointed head of the Church in Albania. The small Orthodox Church in Hungary was taken over. The Orthodox Churches in Poland and Czechoslovakia were granted autocephaly by Moscow in 1948 and 1951 respectively, although this gift was traditionally the exclusive right of the Ecumenical Patriarch.¹⁵ The Moscow Patriarchate also attempted to assert its control over the Orthodox Churches in Western Europe and America. Metropolitan Nikolai visited Great Britain and France in 1945. He made a favourable impression and succeeded in winning the Churches in France back temporarily to Moscow's jurisdiction; but they subsequently reverted to the Ecumenical Patriarch.¹⁶ A delegation to the USA also had initial success, but negotiations with the Orthodox Church in America were handled clumsily and this venture too met with ultimate failure. Part of the problem was that after 1948 western suspicion of Soviet political intentions was increasing again.¹⁷

As a practical demonstration of the primacy of the Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR over the Ecumenical Patriarch, Alexi planned a pan-Orthodox conference to be held in Moscow in 1947.¹⁸ Such gatherings were traditionally convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch, who understandably took a dim view of Alexi's initiative. When invitations were issued the Churches in Constantinople, Greece and Cyprus sent their apologies. Patriarch Alexi therefore invited world Orthodox leaders to a different function, to be held in Moscow in July 1948: the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Russian autocephaly. He added that there would be a conference afterwards. These events duly took place; but they were only partially successful in their universal aim,¹⁹ and the subjects discussed and conclusions announced at the conference—including attacks on Protestantism, the Vatican and the ecumenical movement in western Churches—too obviously reflected Soviet political preoccupations. The 1948 celebration marked the end of Moscow's bid for primacy in the Orthodox world.

Relations between the Soviet government and the Vatican had been cool since the 1920s,²⁰ and both during and after the Second World War the Patriarchate played its part in attacking the Catholic Church for allegedly

supporting the Fascists and working against world peace. While consolidating its hold over the countries of Eastern Europe after the War, the Soviet government became ever more determined to sever all ties between Catholics in those countries and the Vatican. At this time the Ukrainian Uniate Church was forcibly united with the Russian Orthodox Church, despite protests from Rome.²¹

In 1948 the USSR reached the limit of its post-war expansion in Europe, and the Church began to fear that the State might no longer find her useful. However, a new field was opening up where the Church could be of use to the State, in propaganda rather than in direct political activity: namely, in promoting the concept of "peace" as a peculiarly Soviet aim in the post-war world, while at the same time branding the capitalist countries as warmongers.²² The Soviet government participated in the peace movement which was initiated in Poland in 1948, and several organizations were founded—the most famous being the World Peace Council—which promoted the interests of Soviet policy in this sphere. The Church lent active support: in 1949 Metropolitan Nikolai was elected a permanent member of the committee of the World Peace Council; and in 1952 the Moscow Patriarchate convened a meeting of representatives of all religious groups in the USSR in the cause of peace.

The peace movement came into its own in 1950 with the outbreak of the Korean War, which it construed as a blatant case of American aggression. The Church echoed the outrage expressed by the Soviet government at American conduct. At the same time, however, the peace movement was already losing credibility in the West: the headquarters of the World Peace Council were expelled from Paris in 1950 and from Vienna in 1955 on the grounds of the Council's political bias. When the Korean War ended, the immediate *raison d'être* of the peace movement disappeared, and it fell into rapid decline from the mid-1950s.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, Soviet foreign policy became more subtle.²³ The chauvinist dichotomy between black and white, between western capitalists and Soviet communists, was no longer emphasized with such vigour. The foreign policy of the Church also increased correspondingly in flexibility. Soviet anti-Vatican propaganda had almost ceased by 1956, and in 1958 the accession of Pope John XXIII signalled the start of more positive relations. Political détente was reflected in the changing tone of church pronouncements on Catholicism. Relations between the Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate also improved, and in 1957 communion between the two was restored. The following year world Orthodox leaders attended celebrations in Moscow to mark the 40th anniversary of the restoration of the Moscow Patriarchate, and Patriarch Alexi's deference on this occasion towards the Ecumenical Patriarchate stood in marked contrast to his attitude in 1948. In 1961 the Russian Church participated in a pan-Orthodox conference held on the island of

Rhodes. Relations between the Russian Church and the ecumenical movement in the shape of the World Council of Churches improved as well: in 1948 the Russian Church had turned down an invitation to join the WCC, but after the Second Assembly of the WCC in 1954, contact was resumed, and the Russian Church actually joined in 1961. Renewed efforts were made under Khrushchev to promote the concept of "peace", but with more subtlety than under Stalin. Here again the Church could be of use to the State. A specifically Christian movement for peace was launched in Prague in 1958, and the Russian Church fully supported it.²³

The Soviet government thus saw fit to enlist the support of the Church for its political aims, but it never became reconciled to the existence within the Soviet Union of religion as a worldview. Anti-religious activity by the State varied in intensity throughout the period under consideration, but it was never allowed to subside entirely.²⁴

Active propaganda was resumed as early as 1944. It now took the form not of anti-religious propaganda as such, but of scientific education directed against "ignorance, superstition and prejudice". Religion was no longer described as "reactionary"—the Church had after all proved its patriotism during the War—but as "anti-scientific". Although by 1947 this propaganda was beginning to assume a more specifically anti-religious form, under Stalin the government did not re-introduce general administrative measures against the Church.²⁵ In 1950 the Soviet press called for more serious anti-religious work, but at the same time warned against offending individual believers. The year 1954 saw a brief but violent burst of anti-religious activity, later known as the "Hundred Days Campaign",²⁶ but after that the Church enjoyed four years of extensive toleration, until the post-war period of church-state co-operation was brought to a decisive end by the 1959-1964 anti-religious campaign under Khrushchev. Early victims of this harsh campaign were the relatively tolerant G. G. Karpov, replaced in 1960 by V. A. Kuroyedov; and Metropolitan Nikolai, who was released from all his duties in 1960 and died in obscure circumstances the following year. A new era in church-state relations began. It is ironic that when the Church was doing most to promote the Soviet image abroad, its very existence in the USSR again came under serious threat.

²³The word "Church" throughout this article refers only to the Russian Orthodox Church. The following books and articles provide basic information on this period: Wassilij Alexeev, *Russian Orthodox Bishops in the Soviet Union 1941-1953* (in Russian), New York (Research Program of the USSR), 1954; Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "Church-State Relations in the USSR", in M. Hayward and W. C. Fletcher, *Religion and the Soviet State*, London, 1969, pp. 71-104; Michael Bourdeaux, *Opium of the People: the Christian Religion in the USSR*, London, 1965; J. S. Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State, 1917-1950*, Gloucester, Mass., 1965; William C. Fletcher, *Nikolai: Portrait of a Dilemma*, New York and London, 1968; W. C. Fletcher, *Religion and Soviet Foreign Policy 1945-1970*, OUP, 1973; Georgi (Igumen), "Dukhovnye uchebnye zavedeniya v SSSR", in *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov v SSSR* (q. v.), pp. 195-227; W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, London, 1961; Dimitry Konstantinow, *The Crown of Thorns: Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR 1917-1967*, Zaria, London,

Canada, 1979; Prot. D. Konstantinow, "Tserkovnaya politika Moskovskoi Patriarkhii", in *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov v SSSR* (q. v.), pp. 146-94; A. E. Levitin-Krasnov, *Ruk tvoikh zhar (1941-1956)*, Tel-Aviv, 1979; Otto Luchterhandt, *Der Sowjetstaat und die Russisch-Orthodoxe Kirche*, Cologne, 1976; (Anon.), "Opisaniye Arkhiereiskogo sobora 1961 g.", mid-1960s, *Arkhiv Samizdata*, No. 701, 41 pp.; *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov v SSSR*, Munich, 1960; Rev. A. Shmeman (Schmemmann), "Bogoslovskaya shkola v SSSR", *Vestnik*, Munich (Institute for the Study of the USSR), 1957, No. 1, pp. 82-100; Petr Sokolov, "Put Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Rossii-SSSR (1917-1961)", in *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov v SSSR* (q. v.), pp. 8-112; M. Spinka, *The Church in Soviet Russia*, New York and OUP, 1956; William B. Stroyen, *Communist Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church 1943-1962*, Washington DC, 1967; Nikita Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, New York, 1967; B. V. Talantov, "Sergievshchina ili prisposoblenchestvo k ateizmu (Irodova zakvaska)", August 1967, *Arkhiv Samizdata*, No. 745, 7 pp.

²The setting up of this Council was an ambiguous move. On the one hand it implied state recognition of the Church as a legal entity; on the other it meant that the State was now able to control the Church, thus violating the spirit of the 1918 decree on the separation of Church and State.

³These rights were not however embodied in law until 1975. See Walter Sawatsky, "The New Soviet Law on Religion", *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 4-10.

⁴"Opisaniye Arkhiereiskogo sobora 1961 g.", *Arkhiv Samizdata*, No. 701, pp. 8-10. The émigré Orthodox writer A. E. Levitin-Krasnov claims that while the hierarchs did not represent the aspirations of the believing masses, they were not all simply government agents. As for parish priests, he states that of the three attached to any Moscow church, only one would be an agent of the security forces. A. E. Levitin-Krasnov, *Ruk tvoikh zhar*, pp. 196, 205.

⁵D. Konstantinow, *The Crown of Thorns*, p. 30.

⁶A most useful study of the personality and activities of Metropolitan Nikolai is W. C. Fletcher, *Nikolai: Portrait of a Dilemma*. This book also gives a survey of the Church's foreign relations during the period under consideration. For studies of Patriarch Alexi and Metropolitan Nikolai, see also A. E. Levitin-Krasnov, *Ruk tvoikh zhar*, pp. 196-203; A. Krasnov-Levitin (same person), *Likhie gody 1925-1941*, YMCA-Press, Paris, 1977, pp. 79-85.

⁷A. E. Levitin-Krasnov, *Ruk tvoikh zhar*, pp. 196-7.

⁸*ibid.*, p. 197. The conservatism of the official Church has been one of the factors impelling dissent amongst those believers who want their Church to draw more vigorous conclusions from its *de jure* separation from the State. One of the earliest and best-known pleas of this kind from believers is the open letter of Fr N. Eshliman and Fr G. Yakunin, "To His Holiness the Most Holy Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, Alexi" (1965), extensive extracts in Michael Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, London, 1969, pp. 194-223.

⁹Estimates for the number of churches open in 1939 range from under 100 to over 4,000. For a presentation of these divergent figures, see W. C. Fletcher, "Backwards from Reactionism: the De-Modernization of the Russian Orthodox Church", in Dennis J. Dunn (ed.), *Religion and Modernization in the Soviet Union*, Boulder, Colorado, 1977, pp. 217 and 235 (footnote 21). According to official sources, there were 16,000 functioning churches (or parishes?) by 1945, and 22,000 parishes by 1948; Konstantinow gives the number of churches in 1957 as 22,000 (J. S. Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State, 1917-1950*, p. 305; D. Konstantinow, *The Crown of Thorns*, pp. 36, 248; N. Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, p. 291). Estimates for the number of monastic institutions vary widely. Konstantinow quotes a figure of 69 for 1958, but points out that all but one of these were in the western territories of the USSR which had changed hands during the War (D. Konstantinow, *The Crown of Thorns*, pp. 254-5). According to the Patriarchate, there were 35,000 priests by 1956 (*ibid.*, p. 36), but some authorities doubt this on the grounds that the theological schools could not have produced so many priests in the time available. For the number of bishops, see N. Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, p. 139. He estimates that the number rose from six or seven in 1939 to a record figure (for the Soviet period) of 74 in 1949.

¹⁰B. V. Talantov, "Sergievshchina ili prisposoblenchestvo k ateizmu", *Arkhiv Samizdata*, No. 745, pp. 4-5.

¹¹D. Konstantinov, "Tserkovnaya politika Moskovskoi Patriarkhii", *op. cit.*, pp. 162-3.

¹²The theological academy provides a higher level of training than the seminary. On the academic level of the staff in Moscow and Leningrad, see N. Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, p. 133. The curriculum of the theological schools in the USSR was, and still is, strongly traditional. There was of course no provision for the discussion of Orthodoxy vis-a-vis modern social and political realities. What is more, Russian Orthodox thought in the USSR was entirely isolated from theological developments in the West until 1955, when delegates from the USSR for the first time took part in an international theological conference. It has been suggested that this isolation was in some ways more dangerous for the health of the Church than any persecution (A. Shmeman, "Bogoslovskaya shkola v SSSR", *op. cit.*, p. 99).

¹³This was apparently the original minimum plan, which in fact became a maximum. See N. Struve, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁴Levitin entered the Moscow Academy in 1945 and recounts his experiences in *Ruk tvoikh zhar*, pp. 162-6.

¹⁵The close link between the State's foreign policies and the Church can be seen in the further development of the Patriarchate's relations with the Serbian Church, which were severed in 1948 when President Tito of Yugoslavia broke politically with Moscow, and were restored in 1957 after Khrushchev was reconciled with Tito's regime. The only real failure of Moscow's policy in Eastern Europe was Finland, where the Orthodox Church confirmed its allegiance to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1957. Moscow dropped further attempts to win it back, because by then the Cold War had set in, the West was suspicious of Soviet intentions, and there was no possibility of further Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe.

¹⁶Fletcher supposes that the Soviet Ministry of the Interior took over the French negotiations after Nikolai's successful overture, and mismanaged the affair. W. C. Fletcher, *Nikolai: Portrait of a Dilemma*, p. 82.

¹⁷For the unsuccessful efforts of the Patriarchate in South America, see D. Konstantinov, "Tserkovnaya politika Moskovskoi Patriarkhii", *op. cit.*, pp. 182-3.

¹⁸The intention was evidently to declare the gathering an Ecumenical Council: the seventh and latest of these had taken place in the eighth century. As theoretical justification for his bid for Moscow's supremacy, Patriarch Alexi may have had in mind the medieval doctrine of "Moscow the Third Rome", which put forward the thesis that after the fall of Rome to the barbarians, and then the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, it became Moscow's destiny to lead the Orthodox world.

¹⁹The delegates from Constantinople and Greece came only for the celebration and refused to take part in the conference; Jerusalem and Alexandria were not represented. Only the Churches under Moscow's control participated fully.

²⁰See Dennis J. Dunn, *The Catholic Church and the Soviet Government, 1939-1949*, New York, 1977, and *Détente and Papal-Communist Relations, 1962-1978*, Boulder, Colorado, 1979.

²¹For the history of the Uniates in the USSR, see Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "The Catacomb Church: Ukrainian Greek Catholics in the USSR", *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 4-12.

²²Obviously "peace" as a general aim could be supported by the Church without hypocrisy; but the Church's attacks on the allegedly aggressive capitalists were frequently marked by excessive belligerence.

²³This was construed in the West as an attempt to set up an eastern-bloc counterpart to the WCC, and the latter was cool towards it.

²⁴For an attempt to define four stages in anti-religious activity in the late 1940s and the 1950s, see N. Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, pp. 93-4.

²⁵Levitin, however, states that the first arrests of priests after the War took place in 1948 (*Ruk tvoikh zhar*, p. 215).

²⁶This campaign was connected with the power struggle between Malenkov and Khrushchev, although which of the two was responsible for it remains unclear. Khrushchev put a stop to it in November 1954.

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