

Book Review

Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905–1946, by Edward E. Roslof. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. xviii + 259 pp. ISBN 0-25334-128-0.

The attempt in the 1920s to set up a Christian Socialist church under the protection of the Soviet regime was a key development in the turbulent twentieth-century history of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is a story, however, that neither the Communist Party nor the church has wanted to tell. Up to the present the most important source has been a long *samizdat* account, part history, part memoir, written in the 1960s by two participants, Anatoli Levitin and Vadim Shavrov, and later published in the west. (A. Krasnov-Levitin, *Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkovnoi smuty*, Küssnacht: Glaube in der Zweiten Welt, 1977 (3 volumes)). *Red Priests* is the first fully-developed historical study of the schism, and also the first to use Soviet archives systematically.

Both the attempt and its failure grew out of aspirations present in the church already before the 1917 revolution. In 1905 nearly all bishops, when asked in a questionnaire, proved to be dissatisfied with the position of the church under the tsars, and we can safely assume that many other clergymen shared their views. But they differed among themselves about what structure would be preferable. Some thought the most important thing was to restore the patriarchate and thus give the church as a whole some independence *vis-à-vis* the state. Others put their emphasis on the renewal of individual parishes, which meant that the white clergy would occupy the key position inside a reformed church. Yet others recommended reforming the liturgy and conducting it in the modern Russian language to make it more accessible to ordinary people, especially those who might convert to Orthodoxy.

All these tendencies were represented among the ‘renovationists’, who tried to take the church over in 1922. The immediate crisis which propelled them to the fore was the famine in the Volga region. The Bolsheviks demanded that the church surrender its valuables to finance famine relief. Patriarch Tikhon recommended that the church should give up objects not required for divine service, but should retain control over its own famine relief programme. The GPU retaliated by arresting him and preparing a trial for counter-revolutionary activity. The renovationists, for their part, formed their own organisation and demanded that the church cooperate completely with the government’s plans. In the course of a few months, with the aid of the secular power, they took over many parishes and mounted a coup d’état at the very top, supplanting Tikhon with a ‘Higher Church Administration’.

Then, however, at the height of their apparent power, the Bolsheviks suddenly ceased to support them: instead the GPU released Tikhon and allowed him to resume some of his responsibilities. The reasons for this change of policy have never been clear, but Roslof’s archive work throws new light on them. It seems certain that the regime never intended to sponsor a ‘Christian Socialist’ church. Its aim was merely to create a rival which would split the existing church from within. By summer 1923 the renovationists had already

achieved that. But they had not managed to heal their own internal disagreements, which remained roughly what they had been as long ago as 1905. Nor had they succeeded in generating much popular support. It turned out that the majority of ordinary believers were not attracted by a rational, modern faith which spurned relics and downplayed icons. They did not want services in vernacular Russian and decidedly rejected such innovations as the Gregorian calendar, which 'missed out' thirteen days, and so slighted certain saints. Besides, they distrusted an ecclesiastical organisation which seemed to be in the pocket of the secret policy. 'Renovationist priests are commissars in cassocks', declared a parish council in Leningrad *oblast*. 'They betray the people. They don't believe in God; they burn icons and rob churches.' (p. 147).

The renovationists responded to the sudden loss of regime favour by curtailing their own more radical objectives. They did, though, as Roslof shows, stick with their main aim of creating a church which would propagate socialism as the twentieth-century version of Christianity and continue to seek a *modus vivendi* with the regime. In the latter respect they were soon outflanked by the Orthodox Church itself. After Tikhon's death his putative successor Sergi issued a declaration of loyalty to the regime (or at least to the 'Soviet homeland', not quite the same thing). The Soviet state pocketed his concession, but did not reward him. During the 1930s both Orthodox and renovationist parishes suffered more or less equally. Many of the churches of both denominations were closed, their bells were melted down for the five-year plan and their priests were arrested, regardless of which branch they belonged to.

The Second World War offered new opportunities for all religious movements, but by that time the renovationists were so weak that they were unable to revive. The Orthodox Church by that state in any case enjoyed a huge advantage in having popular support among patriotic believers. Renovationist priests who wanted to return to the patriarchal church had to undergo a ceremony of repentance, renounce any marriage they had contracted and promise to break all relations with their former colleagues. The last renovationist parish, led by the colourful Fr Aleksandr Vvedensky, staggered on till 1946, but with his death reverted to the patriarchal church.

Perhaps the most fateful heritage of the renovationist project is that right up to the present day, as Archpriest Nikolai Balashov wrote in a book on liturgical reform published in 2001, ordinary believers continue to associate any proposed change in the church with 'schism, treachery and betrayal' (p. 204). Roslof's study performs a notable service in offering us a more detailed and fully substantiated account of why this happened than we have had before.

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- Besier, G., Boyens, A. and Lindemann, G. *Nationaler Protestantismus und Ökumenische Bewegung: Kirchliches Handeln im Kalten Krieg (1945–1990)* (Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1999). 1074 pp. €43. ISBN 3-42810-032-8.
- Chumachenko, T.A. (ed. and trans. Edward E. Roslof), *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years* (Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 2002). 235 pp. \$23.95. ISBN 0-7656-0749-2
- Dordzhiyeva, G., *Buddiiskaya tserkov' v Kalmykii v kontse XIX – pervoi polovine XX veka* (Moscow, Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2001). 181 pp.
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- Shkarovsky, M.V., *Natsistkaya Germaniya i Pravoslavnyaya Tserkov' (Natsistkaya politika v otnošenii Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi i religioznoye vozrozhdeniye na okkupirovannoi territorii SSSR)* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo Krutitskogo Patriarshego Podvor'ya, 2002). 523 pp. ISBN 5-78730-035-5.