

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Revolution of 1917

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By the beginning of the 20th century the Orthodox Church in Russia in large part had lost its power in the eyes of the regime; its influence on the people and the authorities had been weakened during the previous historical period, after the government authorities took over control of church life in Russia (the Tsar was the head of the Orthodox Church). As a result, from the beginning of the 19th century, Russian Orthodoxy could not withstand the invasion of the *theomachist* (meaning militant atheist; literally, “battle against the gods”) ideologies. The reason for the forthcoming revolutionary catastrophe in Russia was the erosion of spirituality in society.

The lower strata of Russian society still preserved faith in their way of life, but it was largely formal or grassroots. Some parts of society realized the prospect of an impending catastrophe; there were some attempts to summon church strengths to normalise the situation in the Church. However, passivism and conservatism prevailed among both the Church hierarchy and the government authorities.

The February Revolution of 1917 [that toppled the monarchy which was replaced by a provisional government] found the Church in a period of reform of its inner life. The situation in society necessitated social changes. The Church also needed to make certain reforms. For that reason the February Revolution was welcomed by both the Russian clergy and literati; they hoped that the new authorities would stop traditional government interference in the affairs of the Church. That optimism, however, kept them from realising the existential threat to the Church that was posed by the revolutionary movement. The Communist revolution of 1917 was, in the parlance of our time, a successful adventure of international terrorists led by Lenin, who seized power in the

world's largest country, and began an experiment in the transformation of its society. The key element in that social experiment was the policy of active atheism that led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Christians.

The opposition of the Orthodox believers to communism began after the persecutions were heaped upon the Church. But even during the Civil War, the people and their spiritual leaders had not fully realised the infernal nature of communism. Initially the Church failed to make a proper assessment of the new regime that as early as in 1918 planned the complete destruction of the Church. The majority of church leaders considered the Bolsheviks as bandits, usurpers, and persecutors of the Church, but not as an anti-Christian force that was systematically preparing the annihilation of the Church and causing a world-wide disaster.

Although the nature of Communism had been apparent in the teachings of its founders and in its inhumane practice, only some solitary denunciatory voices were raised in the Church. Archpriest V.A. Vostokov called Communism "an anti-Christian movement," and "an evil anti-Christian manifestation." He blamed the Russian intelligentsia, including clerical sympathisers, for spreading that "infection." He called for a nationwide penance for "our connivance at developing evil teachings and violence in our country."

For the first time, in his pastoral letter of January 19, 1918, the newly restored head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Tikhon (1865–1925) condemned the murderous atrocities: "Come to your senses, you madmen, stop your crimson crimes. Indeed, what you are carrying out are not only atrocities, this is devilry; you are ripe for the fire of Gehenna in your afterlife, and for violent anathemas against your descendants in this mortal life.... We pronounce an anathema upon you.... We implore all of you, faithful sons of Christ's Orthodox Church, not to enter into any relations with such fiends: 'Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.' (1 Corinthians 5:13)." Here the revolutionary rampage is confirmed as being truly *Satan's deeds*.

In his later pastoral letters Patriarch Tikhon defined the new regime as the rule of Caesar, bred by the powers of the world, while the regime of state-sanctioned atheism had already characterised

itself as radically theomachist. At the end of 1917, the Bolsheviks seized the landed estates, educational institutions and other property of the Church.

The leader of the Russian revolution, Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), is known as a theorist and practitioner of theomachy. On January 20, 1918, Lenin signed the decree “On Separation of Church and State, and of Church from Schools.” It states, “No church or religious society has the right to own any property. They have no right to be a legal entity.... All properties of the church and of religious societies existing in Russia are declared to be national wealth.”

At the beginning of 1919, on a personal commission from Lenin, the relics of the Saints were opened up and thrown out all over Russia. All the property of the Church, liturgical books and holy vessels were confiscated; since then the faithful might only be provided with them “for temporary use.” The Church and its hierarchy were no more recognised by the state, all the religious educational establishments were closed, and anti-religious persecutions began.

On May 30, 1919, Lenin wrote a note to the Organisation Bureau of the Central Committee, in which he insisted on expelling from the party all religious people. He also insisted on “removing ecclesiastic books from sale to *Glavbum* [the committee for the paper industry that was set up after companies were nationalised] as a recyclable paper material.” From that moment, severe anti-religious censorship started. To destroy the Church they used as an excuse the famine which the Bolsheviks had caused in the Volga region. “Priests must be arrested as counterrevolutionaries and saboteurs; they must be mercilessly shot on the spot everywhere, as many as possible. Churches should be closed. Church premises should be sealed off, and made into storage facilities.” (Lenin, May 1, 1919, in a message to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of *Cheka*, the post-revolutionary secret police force). Lenin disliked religious holidays so much that, in connection with the celebration of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker’s Day on December 25, 1919, he pointed out: “It’s absurd to live with ‘Nikola’ (St. Nicholas’ Day); we need to raise the whole *Cheka* (The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Speculation, and

Sabotage) to execute by shooting all those who take a day off from work to celebrate 'Nikola.'" In 1920, Dzerzhinsky in his letter to Lacis insisted that without the help of the *Cheka* it would be impossible to overcome the priests. Henceforth punitive control agencies took the lead in atheist and anti-theist fight against religion in the Soviet Union.

The majority of the hierarchy of the Church were committed to stopping the massacre of the Civil War and to preserving the existence of the Church; therefore they didn't thunder publicly against the satanical nature of the Bolshevist regime. Rather, they sought a compromise just when the regime's measures were in blatant contradiction with Christian faith and devotion. Thus society failed to perceive the true nature of the power that had descended upon the Church and Russia. During that satanical rule, trying to appease it with compromises and eulogies would not make the preservation of the Church possible. That common misconception about the nature of Communism became the major cause of the weakening, disintegration and destruction of the spiritual forces in Russia. Orthodox Christians and church leaders developed a kind of ambiguous, compromising attitude toward the regime of state-sanctioned atheism. For the first time ever there appeared attempts by church leaders to take a conciliatory position towards the Bolshevist regime (to save the Church organization). These compromising attempts did not result in a relaxation of persecutions. During the Civil War about 30 bishops, thousands of priests and tens of thousands of laypeople were killed.

During periods of a "softening" of internal, as well as of economic policy, the Communist regime successively continued its persecution of the Church. Since the Spring of 1922, they carried out a campaign for the seizure of valuables belonging to the Church. In a confidential letter to Molotov [Lenin's trusted aide, and Secretary to the Central Committee of the Party] for the members of the Politburo on March 19, 1922, Lenin insisted on undertaking the harshest repressions against practicing Christians. It is worth quoting this document, unprecedented in its atrocity, perfidy, and diabolical ingenuity extensively.

For us, on the other hand, precisely at the present moment we are presented with an exceptionally favourable, even unique, opportunity when we can in 99 out of 100 chances utterly defeat our enemy with complete success and guarantee for ourselves the position we require for decades. Now and only now, when people are being eaten in famine-stricken areas, and hundreds, if not thousands, of corpses lie on the roads, we can (and therefore must) pursue the removal of church property with the most frenzied and ruthless energy, and not hesitate to put down the least opposition. Now and only now, the vast majority of peasants will either be on our side, or at least will not be in a position to support to any decisive degree this handful of Black Hundreds [an anti-revolutionary movement representing conservative intellectuals, monarchists, clergy and landowners] clergy and reactionary urban petty bourgeoisie, who are willing and able to attempt to oppose this Soviet decree with a policy of force.

We must pursue the removal of church property by any means necessary in order to secure for ourselves a fund of several hundred million gold roubles (do not forget the immense wealth of some monasteries and other church properties). Without this fund any government work in general, any economic build-up in particular, and any upholding of soviet principles in Genoa [referring to the Genoa Conference of 1922, which had the goal of working out economic and political relations between Europe and Soviet Russia, as well as international economic reconstruction] especially, is completely unthinkable. In order to get our hands on this fund of several hundred million gold roubles (and perhaps even several hundred billion), we must do whatever is necessary. But to do this successfully is possible only now. All considerations indicate that later on we may fail to do this. For no other time, besides that of desperate famine, will give us such a mood among the general mass of peasants that would ensure us the sympathy of this group, or, at least, would

ensure us of the neutralization of this group in the sense that victory in the struggle for the removal of church property unquestionably and completely will be on our side.

One clever writer on statecraft correctly said that if it is necessary for the realization of a well-known political goal to perform a series of brutal actions, then it is necessary to do them in the most energetic manner and in the shortest time, because masses of people will not tolerate the protracted use of brutality. This observation in particular is further strengthened because harsh measures against a reactionary clergy will be politically impractical, possibly even extremely dangerous as a result of the international situation in which we in Russia, in all probability, will find ourselves, or may find ourselves, after Genoa. Now victory over the reactionary clergy is completely assured to us. In addition, it will be more difficult for the major part of our foreign adversaries among the Russian émigrés abroad, i.e., the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Milyukovites [Left Wing Cadet Party], to fight against us if we, precisely at this time, precisely in connection with the famine, suppress the reactionary clergy with the utmost haste and ruthlessness.

Therefore, I come to the indisputable conclusion that we must precisely now smash the Black Hundreds clergy most decisively and ruthlessly and put down all resistance with such brutality that they will not forget it for several decades.

The campaign itself for carrying out this plan I envision in the following manner:

Only Comrade Kalinin [the titular head of state of Soviet Russia] should appear officially in regard to any measures taken—never and under no circumstance must Comrade Trotsky [communist theorist and powerful orator, commissar for foreign affairs and leader of the Red Army] write anything for the press or in any other way appear before the public.

The telegram already issued in the name of the Politburo about the temporary suspension of removals must not be rescinded. It is useful for us because it gives our adversary the impression that we are vacillating, that he has succeeded in confusing us (our adversary, of course, will quickly find out about this secret telegram precisely because it is secret).

Send to Shuia [where a campaign was launched against the clergy after a bloody incident] one of the most energetic, clear-headed, and capable members of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee [VtsIK] or some other representative of the central government (one is better than several), giving him verbal instructions through one of the members of the Politburo. The instructions must come down to this, that in Shuia he must arrest more, if possible, but not less than several dozen representatives of the local clergy, the local petty bourgeoisie, and the local bourgeoisie on suspicion of direct or indirect participation in the forcible resistance to the decree of the VTsIK on the removal of property of value from churches. Immediately upon completion of this task, he must return to Moscow and personally deliver a report to the full session of the Politburo or to two specially authorized members of the Politburo. On the basis of this report, the Politburo will give a detailed directive to the judicial authorities, also verbal, that the trial of the insurrectionists from Shuia, for opposing aid to the starving, should be carried out in utmost haste and should end not other than with the shooting of the very largest number of the most influential and dangerous of the Black Hundreds in Shuia, and, if possible, not only in this city but even in Moscow and several other ecclesiastical centres.

I think that it is advisable for us not to touch Patriarch Tikhon himself, even though he undoubtedly headed this whole revolt of slave-holders. Concerning him, the State

Political Administration [GPU, the secret police of the Soviet Union from 1923—1934, replacing the Cheka] must be given a secret directive that precisely at this time all communications of this personage must be monitored and their contents disclosed in all possible accuracy and detail. Require Dzerzhinsky and Unschlicht personally to report to the Politburo about this weekly.

At the party congress arrange a secret meeting of all or almost all delegates to discuss this matter jointly with the chief workers of the GPU, the People's Commissariat of Justice [NKIu], and the Revolutionary Tribunal. At this meeting pass a secret resolution of the congress that the removal of property of value, especially from the very richest estates, monasteries, and churches, must be carried out with ruthless resolution, leaving nothing in doubt, and in the very shortest time. The greater the number of representatives of the reactionary clergy and the reactionary bourgeoisie that we succeed in shooting on this occasion the better, because this "audience" must precisely now be taught a lesson in such a way that they will not dare to think about any resistance whatsoever for several decades." (Lenin)

The result was that Lenin initiated the most mass and murderous persecutions and annihilation of believers and introduced the regime of state atheism. The tone of his public rhetoric to the Church and religion indicates his addiction to the mania of theomachy.

In May 1922, upon an initiative of Lenin, the Politburo passed a resolution: "Issue a directive to the Moscow Tribunal: 1. Bring Tikhon up before court. 2. Enforce the supreme measure of punishment to the priests." Patriarch Tikhon was arrested and came under severe pressure; thousands of bishops, priests and laymen were executed by shooting, thousands of churches were closed. A lot of Christians who opposed the destruction of the Church were sent to concentration camps.

Those who showed servility were left in peace for a while. In the midst of the savage repressions, the authorities tried to split the hierarchy of the Church, recruiting their proxy allies in the episcopate, initiating *Renovationism*—a kind of Protestantism on Orthodox grounds, supporting a Gregorian Temporary High Church Council. The *Renovationists*, who adored Lenin as a “*fighter for greater social justice*,” keeping ahead of each other in declarations of loyalty and denunciations of their stout-hearted fellows, were in some temporary favour with the atheistic authorities. The period of thaw, not depending on the level of loyalty, differs from the period of total assault when all foreign to the ideology were destroyed. The difference was in a “complex” approach and selective destruction.

In 1922, for the planning and co-ordination of anti-religious activities, the Commission on the Separation of Church and State was established. In 1928-1929 it was called the Anti-Religious Commission. This authority, presided over by Emelian Yaroslavsky, tightly controlled activities of all the religious organisations of the country. Since 1929 everything regarding religious policy issues was given into the hands of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Party because one of the main goals of the regime of state atheism was the anti-religious indoctrination of the people. At the beginning of 1929 the Central Committee circulated a confidential instruction: “On Measures for an Increase in Anti-Religious Activities,” in which struggle against religion was as important as political class struggle.

In addition to the establishment of the anti-religious state authorities, the religion-hating regime launched a campaign of widespread public anti-Christian propaganda. Since December, 1922 the newspaper “Bezbozhnik” (“The Atheist”) had been published. Its irreplaceable editor was E.M. Yaroslavsky (his real name was Gubelman, Miney Izrailevich)—the ideologist and the guiding hand of the anti-religious policy of the USSR and the chairman of “The Union of Militant Atheists.” Since 1923 societies of militant atheists were established nationwide; in April, 1925 at the Congress of the friends of “Bezbozhnik,” the newspaper of the Union of Atheists of the USSR (the name was changed to the Union of Militant Atheists in 1929) was established. The main slogans of that Union of Atheists were “through theomachy to Communism”

and “the Struggle against religion is a struggle for Socialism). Millions of atheists volunteered in the struggle against “religious intoxication.” Under the circumstances, at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia, the Church showed the world the profession of faith of the hundreds of thousands of new martyrs – similar to the profession of faith shown during the persecutions of the Roman Empire, that became the foundation of the Universal Church. Up to the present time Orthodox Christians in Russia are sure that the profession of faith of the new martyrs of the 20th century saved both Russia and the Church. They survived the epoch of persecution in the underground, and entered into the period of its renaissance.

At the same time a valuable lesson was taught to the whole world: in Russia for the first time ever openly theomachist, totally *evil-possessed* forces took power. The Russian Orthodox Church preserved the unique experience of surviving in this theomachist environment. The number of saint martyrs and confessors who appeared in Russia in the 20th century is estimated to be in the tens of thousands (the data base of new martyrs now has 31,000 names, and the work has not yet been completed). Up to the end of 2004, the Russian Orthodox Church has beatified 1,420 of new martyrs, and this process continues unabated.

The Russian Orthodox Church has predominantly become the Church of the New Martyrs of Russia. At the end of the second century a Christian apologist Tertullian said these words that have become proverbial: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” The 20th century sowed this seed in the land of Russia, and our goal is to deliver it to human hearts today.