

## SOVIET-STATE AND CHURCH. HISTORY AND HERITAGE

### 1. Lost possibilities?

The famous western historian Walter Kolarz, who for many years dedicated his energies to studying the interaction between Soviet communism and religion, once speculated on the possibility of an ideological "modus vivendi" between religion and Marxism-Leninism. He predicted that in the future the Soviet belief system would make a historical revision of ideology and believed that Russian communist leaders would change their concept of tolerance towards religions.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Russian history offers many possibilities for historical speculation. We may state with good reason that the supposed Soviet civil peace with religion and nationalism could have changed the course of history. We may also speculate, for example, on whether the continuation of the NEP policy or Stalin's fall from power would have inevitably brought about the decline of the Soviet system. Was the Soviet totalitarian system capable of overhauling itself? Or, in the case of Stalin's fall and a continued NEP, could the Bolshevik regime have been able to tolerate competing world-views, active political opposition, national minorities and, in particular, the challenge of "other" religions? Moreover, could the "Jehovah" of Bolshevism have been able to tolerate any truths other than his own? Or was doctrinal intolerance and bigotry an inseparable part of Bolshevism?

At this point we know what really happened. The reality proved different from what Kolarz predicted and the ruling Soviet regime was too intoxicated with power to reform itself. Understandably enough, Kolarz could not see that the bearers of Leninist ideology would be incapable of reversing their doctrines. Even M.S. Gorbachev always remained a dedicated communist. We western historians seem to forget that despite Gorbachev's eloquent talk of perestroika, he was not willing to give up one *iota* of his principles. For example, when he sought a conciliation with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and other religions, he did so in order to gain assistance for his own political objectives.

In actuality, during his reign relations between the communist state and religious organizations seemed to improve with the liberal reforms. However, perestroika and "democratic" reforms proved to be only a brief interlude. They simply constituted a "kerenskiad" period which clearly demonstrated that there was no real possibility of reforming the communist totalitarian state without shaking the roots of the communist autocracy itself.

In the end the regime was even too "lazy" to attempt to modify its ideology. Perhaps this was the reason for the rapid collapse of the "Gorbachevian" style of communism. Communist leaders were unable to renew their ideology. At the same time the *nomenklatura* together with ordinary people was losing its faith in communism. This process of decaying ideology indicated that Soviet communism seemed to require a special type of naive belief that the possibility of creating *The New Man, Homo Sovieticus* did really exist. When this belief system collapsed in the minds of the Soviet leaders, it was apparent that the Soviet Union could not survive. Revealingly, Gorbachev, the final inheritor of the Leninist Empire, after the unsuccessful "coup" in August 1991 was anxious to see himself as a Nordic Social-Democrat, styling himself as the Olof Palme of Russia.

### 2. Present situation

In the contemporary situation old traditional beliefs are growing from the ashes of the Soviet system. In general, we may state that the ROC is stronger than ever and enjoys enormous respect among the Russians. The representatives of Russian democracy, former communists, "putschists" and fascists all take a benevolent attitude towards the national church of the Russians. Undoubtedly, the ROC has a crucial role to play in the process of possible political stabilization in Russia, and along with religion in general may be a major force in the stable development of Russian civil society.

However, the Soviet era still casts long shadows; the Russian Orthodox Church suffers from the

burden of totalitarian "diseases". It appears that the ROC is stigmatized by its "collaboration" with the former KGB. Moreover, the church is inherently afraid of all reforms; it seems fear the establishment of new relations with its own people.

### 3. History and heritage

In summing up the development of Soviet religious policy we see how there were two competing factors affecting it. On the one hand, the ideological confrontation between Marxism and religion together with the historical background of the Bolshevik Party made relations between religious organizations and the Soviet rulers more uneasy.

On the other hand, the general political situation and sudden turns in the power struggle inside the ruling party were still more influential. When confronted by political reality the communist regime was able to push aside their ideology and historical aversions.

During the Civil War period the principle of "isolating the church" was the main objective of Bolshevik religious policy. In accordance with this religious policy line and the idea that the Civil War was only a "transition period", we may note that during the first years following the revolution there was a vacillation in Bolshevik religious policy; there was hardly any co-ordination between different state and party organs in this matter. The justifications for this "isolation policy" were almost identical to the explanations of early Soviet nationality policy. After the revolution the Bolsheviks utilized national feelings as a means of establishing their power in eastern areas of the state and even to spread the Soviet system in the East. Consequently, Jews and Moslems in the Soviet East were given the possibility of furthering their religious life by local communists.<sup>2</sup>

After adopting the NEP policy in 1921, the Soviet leadership had more time to concentrate on its internal "enemies", such as the remnants of the political opposition: the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks (both of which had been virtually destroyed as functioning parties) as well as the ROC. As a result of this political situation, the "religious NEP" was delayed almost two years. During this early NEP period (1921-1923) L.D. Trotsky was chiefly in charge of implementing Soviet religious policy and under his leadership the regime turned from its "isolation policy" to the principle of "divide and rule".

The years of the "high-NEP" represented a brief breathing-spell for religious organizations and for the sectarian movement.<sup>3</sup> The regime also sought reconciliation with Catholics and the liberal implementation of nationality policy during the years of 1924-1927 demonstrates that the party was temporarily seeking civil peace. In any event, this breathing-spell was quite short in duration. The open protest of ardent communists such as M.M. Kostelovskya and the religious policy debate in 1926 bear clear witness to this. At the same time the "high-NEP" reached its peak at the 15th Party Congress in 1927.

Stalin finally won the fight for supreme leadership in 1929 and established his own personal cult above that of Lenin. By utilizing the fervour of the younger generation in the party Stalin was able to turn the struggle for power to his favour. The *Komsomols* were eagerly contemplating the desirability of a new civil war and thus the Stalinist leadership was able to utilize their pent-up frustration. The list of enemies in this civil war also included religious organizations. Subsequently, the moderate wing of the regime was silenced and the triumph of Stalin's Cultural Revolution was complete after 1929.

The antireligious battle greatly intensified during the Cultural Revolution. In religious policy the moderate "culturalists" attempted to stress the importance of peaceful antireligious policies but time was on the side of the hardline "interventionists", who favoured more resolute measures towards religion. In practice, earlier commissions were liquidated and their responsibilities transferred to the new "Cult-Commission" under the authority of the Presidium of the VTsIK. The new Stalinist administration would now have less difficulties in controlling Soviet religious policy.

The Cultural Revolution, and the coming of the Stalinist dictatorship, was only a prologue to the Great Terror of the 1930s when all of Russian society would suffer from waves of organized state violence. Not only the ROC and other religious organizations, but members of the regime were also to become victims of Stalinist terror. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1930s it was obvious that terror against the ROC was gradually easing at the same time as Stalin began to place greater stress on national values

and the importance of the Russian past. The logical outcome of this development was the informal concordat concluded in 1943, in the midst of the war against Nazi-Germany. The ROC was again able to attain a semi-legal position in the Soviet system,

This period of civil peace did not continue during Khrushchev's period of leadership. This is a paradox of Post-Stalinism. On the one hand, Khrushchev wanted to dismantle the Stalinist system and emphasized that this could be done by returning to the original tenets of Leninism. The III Party Programme in 1961 declared that the Soviet system would surpass capitalism by the 1980s and would achieve total communism. Consequently, the CPSU wanted to intensify the fight against the remnants of the old capitalist society, i.e. religion. The organized persecution of religion was later modified during the Brezhnev era but relations with religious organizations still remained traumatic.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of the short period of perestroika Soviet legislation began to respond to the Gorbachevian political reforms and the last Soviet parliament enacted a law (in 1990) concerning religion which guaranteed genuine religious freedom. This was a kind of reversed "separation decree". For the first time in Soviet history a law decreed that the state would support neither religious nor atheistic propaganda.

#### 4. Dangers and Perspectives

Firstly, the post-communist Orthodox Church bears the hallmarks of collaboration with the Soviet system. The historical parallel between the 1917 and contemporary situations is surprisingly familiar. Before the October Revolution the ROC was unable to act independently, it was chained to the rotten imperial system.

In the contemporary situation the members of the Holy Synod have been silent concerning their activities during the Soviet era. The same leaders who were praising the Soviet system are now responsible for leading the ROC. They have been unable to begin any real discussion about the hidden skeletons in the closet; the members of the Holy Synod and the Patriarch himself have not offered any credible explanation of their past: How were they able to maintain their offices at the same time the state was persecuting believers?

According to the so-called Furov Reports<sup>5</sup> all members of the clergy were obliged to collaborate with officials. According to some claims all important members of the clergy (the Patriarch and Synod) actively collaborated with the KGB and even had their own codenames. The dissidents protesting against this order, e.g., Gleb Jakunin, were harassed during the Soviet era and, surprisingly enough, they are even persecuted today. At the end of 1994 the Holy Synod brusquely disordained Jakunin because of his political activities as a member of Parliament. This act violates Orthodox canonical order and practices.

Secondly, the ROC is intrinsically afraid of introducing any real reforms. It is difficult to see the wisdom of the present Synod in not adopting any liturgical reforms (to use Russian in its liturgy). Thus it becomes impossible for the Church to establish major ties to the population. To an outsider this fear of using Russian in the liturgy is absurd, as we may judge for ourselves. A famous clergyman, the late Ioann of Petersburg, once said that "Russian is a language of thieves and prostitutes".

Thirdly, because of this servile attitude towards the state and its conservative attitudes substantial antagonism exists between the church and the young intelligentsia. The church is not investing in its members but in its buildings. The official Orthodox hierarchy is working more and more inside the framework of a state church.

A similar submissive position of the Orthodox Church proved to be fatal to the ROC during the October revolution in 1917. The Marxists and intelligentsia were anti-autocratic and anticlerical. They criticized both the "rotten" state and the "decayed" church. In this way Bolshevik ideology became the *credo* of the Marxist *City of God*. Consequently, the Bolshevik "religious ideology" developed as a comprehensive "religion-like" Marxist theory of human nature and the world, which included a system of beliefs, attitudes, norms and social practices concerning religion. It became a secular religion replacing the old one.

Finally, there are also some rare exceptions. For example, Father Georgy Kochetkov, who works in the parish of the Icon of Vladimir of the Meeting of the Mother of God in Moscow, uses the Russian

language in the liturgy and in his teaching of the catechism. His parish is extremely popular and he has established his own "university" for people who are interested in Orthodox theology. Perhaps "green" Russian civil society also needs pace-setters such as him.

<sup>1</sup> W. Kolarz. *Religion in the Soviet Union*. MacMillan. London, 1961, pp. 480-483.

<sup>2</sup> Arto Luukkanen. *The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917-1929*. *Studia Historica* 48. Helsinki. 1994. pp. 230-238.

<sup>3</sup> Alekseev, Valery Arkadevich. *Illyuzii i dogmij*. Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literaturij. Moskva. 1991. p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> Sabrina Petra Ramet. "Religious Policy in the Era of Gorbachev". In Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.). *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Oppenheim. "Are The Furov's Reports Authentic?". In Geoffrey Hoskin (ed.). *Church, Nation, and State in Russia and Ukraine*. MacMillan in Association with SSEES. London. pp. 291-311.