

God's counter-revolution: faith in the Soviet Union



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Shortly after the Russian Civil War, Leon Trotsky, the People's Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs, sent a vexed note to the Soviet Politburo: "There is a church outside my window. Out of 10 passers-by ... at least seven, if not eight, cross themselves when they walk past. And many of those who walk past are Red Army soldiers."

The Russian Revolution led to the most sustained attack on Christian belief in the history of the Church. As a bastion of the old autocracy, the Russian Orthodox Church was a central target of the Bolshevik apocalypse. Years later, Alexander Yakovlev, the Soviet politician and one of the architects of the perestroika reforms, calculated that 300,000 clergy had been killed during the Soviet era – almost a hundred times the number of martyrs of the early Christian persecutions. Between 1918 and 1919, leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were slaughtered in scenes of graphic cruelty: shot, drowned, or buried alive. Metropolitan Veniamin of St Petersburg, in line to succeed the patriarch, was turned into a pillar of ice: he was doused with cold water and left in the freezing cold.

Yet Christianity survived. Not only Trotsky but Lenin himself came to see the paradox of violence. We find Lenin at the Eighth and 10th Congresses of the Russian Communist Party (in 1919 and 1921) urging that "we must give absolutely no offence to religion", since to offend "the religious susceptibilities of believers" leads only to "the strengthening of religious fanatics". Education would do the work. Thus began a cycle of hatred and puzzled esteem that would continue until the Soviet regime's collapse in 1991.

Survival assumed many forms. One of the assumptions behind the Bolshevik persecution was that "the Church" was the Church – that a decimated leadership would inevitably mean a destroyed religion. But the martyrdom of prominent believers not only emboldened men and women of faith, it served to empower the laity, by passing authority from the bishops to the parishes. A side effect was what one historian has called a "parish revival" in the 1920s, and a resurgence of subterranean sects, such as the Old Believers and a number of Protestant groups.

Bolshevik policies also played into the ecclesiastical politics of the old regime, taking the strain off long-persecuted groups, such as the Lutherans and the Mennonites. And there were subtle affinities. Some of the revolutionaries had once shared bunk space with persecuted believers in exile, and maintained an unspoken sympathy for dissident believers. Some evangelicals shared socialist goals.

All this changed with Stalin and the Great Terror. The 1930s saw the effective disappearance of the Russian Orthodox Church as a national institution and the criminalisation of religious faith. The story is bleak. A handful of luminous prison narratives have, perhaps understandably, misrepresented the mentality of those years as one of bubbling resistance and heroic defiance. But these accounts remain exceptions to the rule of terror, distrust and silent acquiescence. As one historian has recently written: “The real power and lasting legacy of the Stalinist system were neither in the structures of the state, nor in the cult of the leader, but in the Stalinism that entered into all of us.” Yakovlev later recalled the atmosphere of fear and dissimulation that reigned long after Stalin’s death: “We thought one thing, said another, and did a third.”

Stalin said that “writers are the engineers of the human soul”. But terror, as the dissident poet Irina Ratushinskaya observed, destroyed minds as well as bodies, creating what she described as a sub-humanity: “a new anthropological type”. In a dictionary of the post-war period, the Russian word for mercy – *miloserdiye* – was listed as “obsolete”. The revolution had eaten into the language.

The Christian task had to be one of deep repair: a reconstruction of personhood. It required critique and construction in almost equal measure. The physical resilience of figures such as Ratushinskaya and the religious and human rights activist Alexander Ogorodnikov in the prison camps was almost always anchored to an articulate theology of resistance. Faith was doubt in the USSR, registering in brave appraisals of the limits of Soviet power. It was as if Christians such as Ratushinskaya could see beyond the mythology of the revolution and the febrile energies of the KGB, laughing – often literally – at the hubris of the Soviet experiment.

Another key figure in the post-war religious renaissance, Father Aleksandr Men, discovered his vocation when he saw a giant image of Stalin projected over Red Square in 1947, deciding at that moment to commit his life to a rival narrative of redemption. Men was a generous and collaborative thinker, who eschewed the “world hating” tradition of Orthodox theology, finding in Dostoevsky’s character of Father Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a model of irenic dissent. By exploring the *longue durée* of religious history, and recovering some of the treasures of Russian literature, figures such as Men placed quiet question marks behind the imperious claims of the state. They began to demystify the Soviet regime as a temporary victor – rather as Marx had demystified the Church. But this was no triumphalist spirituality; it was open, undogmatic and fluid in expression, finding a home in the arts quite as often as the churches.

My favourite example of this “new Christianity” is Boris Pasternak’s novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, which was published in Italy in 1957 and thereafter smuggled into the USSR. Zhivago’s mentor, “Uncle Kolia”, was a defrocked priest who preached a gospel of humanity based on the example of Christ. Being “true to Christ” meant more than telling the truth and loving your neighbour. It was a way of seeing: a new perspective from which all life became holy, all human interaction “immortal”. It was, according to Uncle Kolia, in this affirmation of the ordinary that Christianity found its subversive potential. When Christ came – humble, provincial, “emphatically human” – Kolia insisted, “at that moment gods and nations ceased to be and [hu]man[ity] came into being”.

A later scene finds the book’s heroine, Lara, in church, as a priest mumbles through the Beatitudes. Suddenly the meaning was clear: “Happy are the downtrodden. They have something to tell about themselves. They have everything before them. That was what He thought. That was Christ’s

judgment.”

Michel Foucault once said that the best way to challenge a discourse is not head-on, but from the side. The power of Pasternak’s critique was that it contained sympathy and awe, as well as caustic dissent. The revolution had set about “reshaping” humanity but it had forgotten about the individual life. It laboured for justice, at the expense of truth. It was, for Pasternak, a failed eschatology: a theory of progress that did not understand the human materials with which it was working. Christianity emerges not as an “answer” or a sharper theory of progress but as a doctrine of life. Its wisdom, as *Zhivago* saw it, was that “you must live, you cannot always be making preparations for living”. Faith was an “inward music”, not an apocalyptic schedule.

This new Christianity was comfortable on the margins. It recognised no concept of the secular. A Church “above politics”, said Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, is a tool of the state. In such a spirit, Christian and non-believing human rights activists formed partnerships of sacrifice and mutual esteem, finding a common language in “conscience”. And writers continued the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, defending the individual against the system, and invoking the Orthodox concept of the “holy fool” to say things that otherwise could not be said.

Leningrad’s underground literary scene of the 1970s and 1980s was awash with spiritual themes and metaphysical exuberance, finding in Christ a confrère and collaborator in playful dissent. Soviet literature was “pure physics” and thudding utility, wrote one observer, but people “wanted something ‘meta-’, a different dimension”. Religious poetry, explained the poet Elena Shvarts, was a kind of “holy madness”, “the pearl of an unreasonable thought”. It was also a form of resistance to the Soviet state. There was, wrote Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a “hidden glasnost” in the poetry readings of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years.

In the 1980s, ideas that were previously confined to underground, or samizdat, literature burst into the Soviet press: words like “conscience”, “repentance” and “mercy” reappeared. When a Soviet writer restated the Marxist wisdom that morality is determined by the science of economics, Yevtushenko countered: “The culture of conscience has no need of scientific diplomas.”

This was typical of an openness to moral and religious questions that was re-emerging, and an echo of the elusive, numinous Christianity of Uncle Kolia. As Yakovlev admitted, in his own brusque way: all that stuff about conscience and free will, it turns out, “is not a tale told by idiots”. Happy are the downtrodden: they have a story to tell.

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See also: Don’t mention the Revolution: in Russia neither church nor state are marking the events of 1917 by Konstantin Von Eggert

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