

THE RUSSIAN CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST - NEW DEVELOPMENTS

By Walter Zander

The involvement of Imperial Russia in the Middle East up to the outbreak of the First World War was of a different nature from that of the Western Powers in the same period. The Western nations at that time aimed, first and foremost, at commercial penetration and political or colonial control; and in the wake of these efforts undertook missionary and educational activities. For Russia, on the contrary, the issue was fundamentally religious. Her interest, in the first instance, centred on the fate of the Eastern Christians within the Ottoman Empire, and she aimed at their liberation from Islamic rule.

There was, of course, the urge for territorial expansion, and in particular for the conquest of Constantinople, but this, too, was seen in religious terms, and the conquest was to culminate in the rededication of the Hagia Sophia as the Cathedral of Divine Wisdom. "Sooner or later Constantinople must be ours," Dostoyevsky had proclaimed; but he had added: "it is not the famous harbour nor the way to the sea and oceans, nor even the awakening of the Slav peoples... We Russians are indispensable for Christendom in its entirety and for the future of Orthodoxy on Earth."

Constantinople, however, in the Russian mind did not stand alone. It included, as it were, the Holy Land; and the Holy Land in some mystical way was claimed as an extension of Holy Russia. "Palestine," Solovyov wrote, "is our native land in which we do not recognise ourselves as foreigners. Our people, instinctively and enthusiastically, claim the Holy Land as their own as much as Holy Russia," and this conviction was shared by the Russian peasant-pilgrims who until 1914 annually in their thousands flocked to Jerusalem and saw in their pilgrimage the crown and fulfilment of their lives.

Many centuries earlier, in the days of the Crusades, the Western world had been inspired by similar ideas. In the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban had called on the faithful "to bring succour to the Christian brethren dwelling in the East. For the Turks have conquered them in battle and are holding Jerusalem, the Holy City, captive." Bernard of Clairvaux had described the mystical significance of the liberation of the Holy Land, and other preachers such as Stephen of Bourbon, had claimed that the Holy Land belonged to the Christians, not only because Christendom was now the "true Israel" but because "Christ bought it for us by his blood."

When in the beginning of the 16th century both Constantinople and Jerusalem were firmly in Turkish hands, the West gave up the hope of reconquest. At the same time

its religious attitudes began to change. Men no longer felt that the liberation of the Holy Grave was essential for their salvation. The Holy Land for the West became part of the Levant and its interest in the region shifted from the religious sphere to trade and commerce. The numerous Treaties (Capitulations) which the Western Powers concluded with the Ottoman Empire during the following centuries dealt almost entirely with things secular. Only gradually some clauses were included which stipulated the rights of visits to the Holy Places and the protection of Catholic Orders established in the country. But, in fact, pilgrimages from the West in the era of Voltaire practically ceased to exist; and when in the days of the Romantic period they began again on a small scale, the new pilgrims in the words of H.W.V. Temperley "were often only travellers who went to write books and to paint pictures. The Holy Places to them had become objects of sentiment rather than of devotion."

For the Russians the fall of Constantinople to the Turks had a very different meaning. They saw in its fall a Divine Punishment of the Byzantines because they had considered in the Council of Florence the submission of the Orthodox Church to Rome. They believed therefore that the heritage of Constantinople and the leadership of Orthodoxy had passed to them. They saw in Moscow the Third Rome which carried the responsibility for the ultimate future of Christendom, and thus gradually the hope arose in Russia for the reconquest of the Holy Land, a hope which had been abandoned by the West after the Crusades.

The Russian approach to the European parts of the Ottoman Empire and to Syria and Palestine had been largely based on Russian solidarity with the Orthodox Christians among the local populations. In the Balkans these Christians formed the majority and many of them, such as the Bulgarians or Serbs, were Slavs. In the Middle East the situation was more complicated. Christians were only a minority and the Orthodox were divided between the Arab laity and the Greeks who formed the higher clergy, and administered the income and estate of the Church. The Russians from the beginning supported the Arabs, providing education, money for their churches and political help. This naturally created difficulties with the Greek ecclesiastic authorities who viewed the Russian activities with suspicion, and it touched on issues of the hierarchical order of the Church.

The first period of Russian penetration into the Middle East began in the middle of the 19th century. Mehmed Ali had risen against the Turkish rule and occupied Palestine and Syria. The Christian powers showed a profound interest in

the region. The question of the internationalisation of the Holy Places was raised for the first time. Shaftesbury suggested to support “the return of the Hebrews into the land of their fathers”, and there were great activities in the religious sphere. The first Anglican Bishop arrived in Jerusalem. The Latin Patriarch, who since the end of the Crusades had resided in Rome, returned to the Holy City, and so did the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem who for generations had held his office in Constantinople. At this period Russia, too, appeared on the scene and took the first steps to secure her presence.

The story of the Russian involvement in the Middle East as told by Derek Hopwood in his new book, *“The Russian Presence in Palestine and Syria from 1843 till 1914, Church and Politics in the Near East*”*, based on Russian and Arabic sources and a large literature in Western languages, is a very valuable contribution to the understanding of this important period. Mr Hopwood gives the background of the events, both in Russia and the Middle East, describes the personalities and organisations involved, the complex relationships between the Russians, the Arabs and the Greeks, the internal difficulties between the Church and political leadership in Russia and supplies a full account of the nature and extent of the Russian religious and educational activities.

The First World War brought this period to an end. But after less than a generation the interest re-awakened and a new era of Russian penetration of the Middle East began, in which the Church again is taking an essential part. Already during the War Stalin had allowed the election of a new Patriarch of Moscow and in 1945 the Patriarch was enthroned in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

When in 1948 Jerusalem was divided the “Russian compound” containing the buildings of the Church Mission and the Cathedral were in the Israeli part of the city. They were taken over by the Moscow Patriarchate and it soon became customary for the Soviet diplomatic mission in Israel, and even for the Soviet Ambassador himself, to attend the religious services in the Russian Cathedral and to take part in the subsequent receptions. The Soviet Consulate established a special Department for Ecclesiastical Affairs. A new Russian Chapel was built on the shore of Lake Tiberias, and at the request of Moscow the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem broke off ecclesiastical relations with the dissident communities of White Russian émigrés who lived in Jordan under his jurisdiction.

In 1960 the Patriarch of Moscow visited again the Middle East, including Athens and Constantinople, and bestowed special privileges on the Russian Church Mission in Jerusalem. In 1966 Metropolitan Nikodem, the President of the Department of External Ecclesiastical Affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate, who himself had been head of the Russian Church Mission in Jerusalem some years earlier,

visited Jerusalem with a group of pilgrims from Mount Athos and declared that large numbers of Russian Orthodox would like to see the Holy Land, and expressed the hope that pilgrimages from Russia would in future considerably increase.

Whilst these activities were more or less of a local nature, the attention of the Russian Church turned soon to matters of universal significance. The dominant movement in contemporary Christendom concerns the reunion of the Churches. It reached its first fulfilment at the meeting of Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, in Jerusalem 1964. Following this meeting, the Pope and the Patriarch felt that their Churches should prepare a theological dialogue with a view to ultimate reunion. A Conference of the Orthodox Churches was held accordingly in Rhodes towards the end of 1964, but opinions about the proposed dialogue with the Roman Church were divided. Constantinople felt that contacts should be taken up as soon as possible; others were of the opinion that conversations should be postponed for the time being, and a third group, consisting of the Slavonic Churches, under the leadership of Moscow, wished to move even more cautiously. In recent months this attitude has changed radically.

In February 1970 the Patriarchate of Moscow informed the Church of Greece that it had decided to come into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The notification said that the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church had instructed all its clergy, inside and outside the Soviet Union, to administer all the sacraments to Roman Catholics. This went far beyond anything which either the Roman Catholic Church or the Ecumenical Patriarch on behalf of the Orthodox had ever suggested; and created almost a sensation.

The Orthodox Church of Greece objected to the “hasty and unilateral decision of Moscow in a matter which requires detailed study and a unanimous resolution of all Orthodox Churches” (*Le Monde*, February 28, 1970). A spokesman of the Vatican, according to *The Times* (February 20, 1970), “completely excluded for the time being the possibility in view of the theological obstacles.”

Moreover, the restoration of communion between the churches, he added, would be such a great historic event that it would warrant an official announcement to the world from both sides. However, the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras himself a few months later declared that he rejoiced in the decision of the Moscow Patriarchate, although he had not been officially informed about it. The initiative in the matter of reunion had passed to Moscow.

There is another field in which the Moscow Patriarchate recently took the lead among all other Orthodox Churches.

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In December 1969 it was announced in New York that the Moscow Patriarchate had agreed to grant full independence to the Russian Orthodox Church in America. Russian Orthodox Christians had first entered America via the Aleutian Islands at the end of the 18th century. The congregation had grown throughout the 19th century, and other Orthodox, such as Greek, Serb and Bulgarian immigrants, had formed similar communities which were in contact with their Mother Churches.

In 1919, as a result of the revolutionary situation in Russia, the Russian diocese in America proclaimed its "temporary self-government," and in the 50 years of its *de facto* independence, it grew into a well organised Metropolitan District consisting of eight dioceses, seminaries, a network of Church schools and planned missionary activities. The Orthodox faith had become the faith of hundreds of thousands of native Americans who naturally were anxious to establish a local Orthodox Church independent from the Mother Church abroad.

In 1946 the "Metropolita" had asked the Moscow Patriarchate for independence or autocephaly. But Moscow insisted on some form of subordination. Now, unexpectedly, the Moscow Patriarchate is ready to renounce this claim. This may have far-reaching consequences. All in all the number of Orthodox Christians of different national groups in America amounts to about four million. All of them are under the jurisdiction of their Mother Churches and ultimately under the supreme leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Independence for the Russian Orthodox might therefore lead to similar demands from the other Orthodox communities, and ultimately to the formation of a Universal Orthodox Church of America.

The Ecumenical Patriarch claimed that according to canonical rules Moscow could not grant independence to the Russian Orthodox in America, and on January 8, 1970, addressed a formal protest to the Moscow Patriarchate: "If the Holy Church of Russia", he wrote, "in spite of our brotherly entreaty should proceed with the realisation of the proposal to announce the autocephaly of the Russian Orthodox Metropolia in America, then this Throne will not recognise this action... will label this Church as uncanonical and... take any other action needed to secure canonical order."

In spite of these entreaties, however, Metropolitan Nikodem on behalf of the Moscow Patriarch announced in New York in March 1970 that negotiations towards independence were continuing. He even took the opportunity to proclaim at a press conference at the United Nations, addressing Christendom as a whole, that "the alienation of the youth from the Churches and the ecclesiastical hierarchy which is characteristic of the Western world, does not exist in the Soviet Union, that the number of believers there does not decrease and that, on the contrary, more and more people

beyond the age of thirty take an interest in the Church and religion."

Whilst the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate is thus increasing, the position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople is becoming more and more precarious. At the end of the First World War the number of Orthodox Christians in Turkey had amounted to about 8 millions. After the great exchange of populations in 1922, only 50,000 Orthodox Greeks remained. The Treaty of Lausanne stipulated that the Patriarchate would stay in Istanbul as long as the number of Greek Orthodox of Turkish nationality amounted to at least 20,000. Today their number has shrunk to 30,000 or less and the Patriarchate finds itself under strong pressure. At the end of May 1970 Right-Wing Turkish students publicly burned a cross as they demonstrated in front of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul and demanded its expulsion. The *Greek Herald* of New York wrote that "the hope of preserving the Patriarchate in Constantinople - a city which has lost its Greek and Christian character - is based on 'romanticism'." The future of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul has therefore become doubtful.

Some have suggested that in case of emergency the Ecumenical Patriarchate may move to Athens, but there may be strong pressure from Orthodox Slavs, and possibly others, to choose Moscow instead of Athens. More than twenty years ago voices were raised among Orthodox Slavs in the Balkans that demanded a revision of the statute of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. They claimed that the Patriarchs of Constantinople had never been in the fullest sense of the word impartial, and had been "more Greek than Ecumenic". They insisted that in future the high office of the Patriarch should be open not only to Greeks but to all Orthodox without regard to their nationality and proposed that the seat of the Patriarch should be transferred to Moscow.

No one will doubt the influence and the power of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Orthodox world today. But is power a basis for hierarchical dignity? An answer to this question may be found in the circumstances in which the ancient Patriarchates had been created. Jerusalem, undoubtedly, was selected for religious reasons, but it was always called "the last and the smallest" of the Patriarchates. Byzantium-Constantinople was chosen because it was the capital of the later Roman Empire. Alexandria and Antioch had been the most important cities in Egypt and Syria, and the organisation of the Church followed that made by Diocletian for the Empire.

About Rome, East and West are divided. The Roman Catholic Church bases the primacy of Rome on the person of St Peter. The Orthodox, however, doubt whether St Peter ever was in Rome and claim that, in any case, he was the Bishop of Antioch, and the honour connected with him would belong to that city and not to Rome. But, lastly, they

point out that according to the resolutions of the early Councils of the Church, pre-eminence was given to the Bishops of Rome only because the city was the capital of the Empire without any reference being made to the person of St. Peter. To the Orthodox mind it would, therefore, not appear impossible that supreme Ecumenical dignity should be granted to Moscow as the greatest and most powerful city of the Orthodox world. This would indeed be the fulfilment of the vision of Moscow as the Third Rome.

In Jerusalem, where all divisions reveal themselves with great clarity, the Russian Orthodox Church today is divided. The Cathedral is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Moscow. The convents, monasteries and churches in the old city and the other parts belonging to Jordan are under the jurisdiction of the numerically small White Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia (the synod of the Russian bishops in exile) headed by Metropolitan Filaret with its centre in New York.

In 1968 the Moscow Patriarch asked the Israel Government to transfer the assets of the Exile Church to his jurisdiction. Today some of the White Russians in Jerusalem seem to hope that the deterioration of the relations between Israel and the Soviet Union may make it possible for Israel to transfer to them the assets claimed by Moscow. In May 1970 Metropolitan Filaret of the Exile Synod visited Jerusalem and was received by the Israel Minister of Religions and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. No statements were issued on these meetings.

Orthodox Christendom today is in a state of transformation, and the reunion of the Churches may ultimately depend on the reconciliation between Rome and Moscow.