

# THE RUSSIAN CHURCH AND THE JEWS

By Walter Zander

IT IS SIGNIFICANT that the emancipation of the Jews on the continent of Europe has been mainly brought about at times of religious decline. This is equally true of the French and the Russian revolutions. In Russia, the Orthodox Church had allied itself so much with the Tsarist régime that it became nearly identified with the forces of reaction and oppression; and the demand of political and social equality for all was left to the secular powers. Accordingly the anti-religious measures of the revolution in the beginning were directed chiefly against the established Church, whilst other groups, such as Roman Catholics, Baptists and Jews were not equally affected. When later on, however, the conflict between State and religion sharpened, it extended equally to all confessional groups, and Christians and Jews alike suffered the same fate.

THE GREAT MAJORITY of Russian Jews had been by no means friendly to the Communists. Many of them belonged to the class of middlemen, shopkeepers and agents, which was to be eliminated by the Revolution. A large number of them were Zionists, and therefore more interested in the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine than in a Revolution in Russia. Moreover the religiously orthodox elements were deterred by the official atheism. But gradually opposition vanished. The comradeship, created by the social Revolution, exerted a profound attraction on all Soviet nations, and Gentiles and Jews united for the establishment of the new society. This new society was based not so much on a common past, but on the common aim which was to be realized in the future. Church and Synagogue played no leading part in this development, but the revolutionary forces themselves - in spite of their proclaimed atheism - were largely nourished by ancient messianic and prophetic longings; and there was a sincere desire to create a universal communion in which there would be "neither Jew nor Greek". This development, combined with the social and economic transformation of the country, worked towards dissolution of the Jewish community.

During the last years before the war, however, new trends became apparent. Russian history came to be recognized again as an unbroken entity. Great men of Russia's past - not only artists, writers and musicians, but statesmen, Tsars and even Saints - Peter the Great and Alexander Nevsky, were reinstated as heroes of the Russian nation; and the Soviet State began to sink its roots into the old traditions of the people. The war brought this development to a climax throughout the Union. Hitler's invasion and his march on Moscow revived the memories of Napoleonic days. Russia became again the "Holy Motherland" which had survived innumerable storms. The Mongols, Tartars, Swedes and

French, had come and disappeared again. Seen from this perspective, the onslaught of the Nazis became only one of many links in a great chain; and, ultimately, all these assaults had led to greater glory and renaissance of "Eternal Russia".

In this connection the rise of the Church was of paramount importance. As early as 1934, a change of policy towards religion had become apparent. Anti-religious mock-processions were forbidden, the children of the clergy were re-admitted to the higher schools and priests themselves were re-franchised. But there were other more dramatic changes. When in 1936 the Kamerny Theatre in Moscow produced *The Knights* by Borodine, in which a modern librettist had ridiculed Russia's Christianization by Prince Vladimir, further performances were suppressed by the Government.\* The derision of an event sacred to Russian history had become incompatible with the spirit of the new time. The Central Art Committee issued a statement that Christianity had been one of the main factors of Russia's civilization, and the Journal of the Militant Atheist League declared: "The Christianization of Russia by Prince Vladimir certainly was a progressive act. Christianity struggled against slavery and blood feuds, it favoured the advance of culture and laid the foundation of Russian art and literature". Christianity was thus recognized as a historic event equally beneficial to the world and to Russia; and when in the war the Orthodox Church identified itself with the struggle of the people, the new recognition of the Church found its visible expression in the solemn re-election of a Patriarch of Moscow and all-Russia. This recognition by the State is, however, only one side of the development, and it can well be assumed that the change of the Government's attitude is in itself a recognition of the inherent strength of the Christian Community in the country. History shows that hitherto Christianity has survived all periods of attack. How should that be different in Russia whose whole history for a thousand years has been imbued by religion! Even the leader of the godless movement estimated in 1937 that, in spite of all anti-religious activities, in the towns about one-third and on the land about two-thirds of the adults were still believers. It would be by no means surprising if now - a generation after the establishment of the atheistic society - the trend was moving in the opposite direction, and if among the younger generation an increasing number should be attracted again by the daring adventures of spiritual experience.

THE EFFECT OF these developments on the Jewish situation must be profound. Already the general revival of national and traditional forces in the years before the war had its parallel within the Jewish sphere. The Yiddish Theatre in Moscow turned to the production of historic plays with

\* See N.S. Timasheff, *Religion in Soviet Russia*, London. 1943.

subjects taken from ancient Jewish past; and the Jews began again to speak in public of their "age of civilization". The catastrophe which the Nazis brought upon the Jewish world has increased the Jewish consciousness everywhere and particularly in the east of Europe where most of the horrors have been committed. The national and spiritual development in the Soviet Union - with its tendency towards historical tradition - is likely to intensify the consciousness of their own destiny among the Jews. It will, therefore, counteract the trend to dissolution which in the first years of the revolution seemed overpowering. The knowledge of the rebirth of Jewish life in Palestine will, furthermore, strengthen this development.

The rise of national and religious forces is bound to affect the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. For years their common ground had been the secular society of the future. Now increasing stress is laid on the past. The history of Jews and Russians is, however, not identical, and both groups have different backgrounds and experiences. It will need, therefore, a creative statesmanship to avoid their drifting apart.

Faced by a rising Christianity, the Jews have apparently the choice between three ways. Those who are nearest to Russian life may become Christians, and thus integrate with the great civilization in which they live. Others may remain or become atheists, detached from their own religious roots without being joined to the spiritual foundations of the surrounding world. A last group, however, will rally round those who, through all the vicissitudes of the last decades, have maintained the light of traditional Judaism; and although it is not easy to regain a lost tradition, this group will represent the core of Jewish strength.

THE INFLUENCE OF the Eastern Church is not limited to Russia. Since in the 15th century, Constantinople fell to the Turks, Russia has considered herself the heir of the Byzantine Empire and the Tsar was conceived as the protector of the Christians and their Holy Places against the Moslem world. This was expressed in many wars against the Turks; and the question of the Holy Places played even a part at the outbreak of the Crimean war. To the Russians the "Eastern question" was by no means limited to the

acquisition of a great harbour and the access to the seas. "it is not even the union and re-awakening of the Slav peoples," wrote Dostoevski in 1877. "Our task lies infinitely deeper. We Russians are indispensable for Christendom in its entirety in the East and for the future of Orthodoxy on earth and its union. In one word this fateful Eastern question contains nearly the whole of our destiny. It contains all our tasks, above all our only way into the future of world history."

When after the Franco-Prussian war European history began to centre round the German danger, such thoughts receded into the background. But a constant stream of Russian Christian pilgrims kept the light burning. Whoever has seen these Russian pilgrims in Jerusalem, wrote Laurence Oliphant, a British consular official in 1880, knows which spiritual forces are here involved. Thirty years later, Stephen Graham described how a thousand Russian peasants, after endless wanderings, went to Jerusalem to pray at the Holy Places and to bathe in the Jordan. "They feel", he added, "that when they have been in Jerusalem the serious occupations of their life are all ended". The revolution interrupted this development. But in January 1945 the Patriarchs of Antiochia and Alexandria and Archbishop Athenegor of Jerusalem were received with great honours in Moscow where they took part in the election of the new Patriarch of Moscow and all-Russia. A few months later the newly elected Patriarch went to Palestine himself and took repossession of all sanctuaries which Russia had ever had in the Holy Land. It appears certain that with the war at an end, the Russian Christian pilgrims will return, and the rise of Eastern Christianity can deeply influence the Middle East.

Of all changes within the Soviet Union the religious re-awakening is likely to have the greatest significance. It is the culmination of the national revival. Christianity, as manifested in the particular form of Eastern Orthodoxy, has given to the Russian people that sense of mission and destiny in which every nation must believe if it wants to survive. For centuries Russia has seen the ultimate purpose of her existence in the Christian salvation of the world, a salvation of which in her opinion neither Rome nor the Protestant Churches were capable. It is in this sphere that the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union will ultimately have to be faced.