

Putin helps end long Russian church rift: Exile church returns to the fold

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The Russian Orthodox Church and an émigré church that broke ties in 1927 over a Russian church leader's declaration of loyalty to the Soviet state have officially reunited at a ceremony in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

"Church divisions are being overcome, and the confrontation in society inherited from the times of the revolution is being beaten back," said Patriarch Alexsy II of the Russian Orthodox Church after the signing of an act of canonical union May 17. This was followed by his first joint liturgy with Metropolitan Laurus of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR).

The event, attended by Russian president Vladimir Putin and a crowd of worshipers that included émigré pilgrims from around the world, was hailed as a symbolic and spiritual end to the Russian civil war that broke out after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Speaking at the Moscow cathedral, which was dynamited on Stalin's orders in 1931 and rebuilt in the 1990s, Putin called church unity "a paramount condition for the restoration of the lost unity of the entire Russian world, one of the spiritual foundations of which was always the Orthodox faith."

The New York-based ROCOR, with 400 parishes spread from Europe to Australia, was created by émigrés who fled Russia with the White Army, which battled the Bolsheviks in the Russian civil war.

Inside Russia, the Orthodox Church endured brutal repression in the early 1920s. Hoping to stave off complete destruction, the church's acting leader, Metropolitan Sergius, stated in an encyclical that the church would not oppose the state. Nonetheless, another wave of bloody suppression followed in the 1930s, when Josef Stalin was the supreme leader.

The church in exile remained staunchly monarchist and anticommunist, asserting that the KGB, the Soviet secret service, controlled the Moscow Patriarchate. The ROCOR statutes declared that it would not reunite with Moscow until the fall of “the godless regime.”

In a twist of fate, Putin, a former lieutenant colonel in the KGB, played a key role in bringing the churches together. Reportedly a practicing member of the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin broke the ice by meeting in 2003 with Metropolitan Laurus in New York and conveying an invitation to him to visit Russia. *-Ecumenical News International*