

Russian renewal: The complex face of Orthodoxy

by [Michael Bourdeaux](#) in the [Apr 04, 2001](#) issue

When he became president of Russia last year, Vladimir Putin disclosed that “when I was serving in the KGB in Germany, I always wore a cross under my shirt.” Whether or not one believes this astonishing claim, there is no doubt that Putin embraces the Russian Orthodox Church as a partner in his blueprint for a strong new Russia. On his first Easter Sunday in office he declared, “The widespread celebration of Easter is visible proof of the rebirth of the spiritual foundations of our society. I believe that together with the church we will achieve the spiritual revival of a strong, prospering Russia in the 21st century.”

A democratic mandate brought Putin into office, though there were accusations of vote-rigging. He rode a wave of popular support for his “solution” to the problem of Chechnya’s attempted secession, a solution that might well have earned him the title—not in current usage—of the “butcher of Grozny.” In that conflict, the Moscow Patriarchate stressed the duty of all young Russian males to serve in the army—thus not falling far short of implicitly condoning genocide.

The Orthodox Church’s long history of validating state policy goes back to the Czarist period. Though the church consistently backed the state under communism, it clearly did so under duress and the threat of increased persecution. The accession of Mikhail Gorbachev 16 years ago freed the church from coercion. Its current alliance with Putin is voluntary.

This chorus of church and state now has new words. The Czarist national anthem proclaimed, “Powerful and sovereign, reign for glory, reign for terror to enemies, Orthodox Czar, God save the Czar!” The new Russian national anthem (to the old Soviet tune) goes, “You are unique in the world, inimitable, native land protected by God!” The author of the new words is the same Sergei Mikhalkov, now 87, who 60 years ago to the same tune wrote the words glorifying Stalin, words later adapted again as, “O Party of Lenin, the strength of the people, to communism’s triumph

lead us on!”

How did the new harmony between church and state come about? No one could have predicted this development when believers first threw off their shackles during Gorbachev's *perestroika*. In April 1988 Gorbachev summoned the senior bishops of the Orthodox Church to the Kremlin to discuss their role in his reconstruction policy. As an inducement, he offered them the opportunity more fully to celebrate the millennium of the 988 baptism of Prince Vladimir.

The ensuing June days were intoxicating. The news media vied with each other to laud the achievements of Russian Christianity. But church leaders were unprepared for these new opportunities. There were neither books, buildings nor teachers to take advantage of the situation.

Gorbachev's second promise to the church leadership was to prepare a new law on religion. Experts outside as well as inside the Soviet Union were consulted. The new law, passed in September 1990, represented a total reversal of fortunes not only for the Russian Orthodox Church but for all other religious creeds. It gave believers virtually complete religious liberty. Stalin's nefarious 1929 law, which had completely subjugated the churches, was abolished, along with the dreaded Council for Religious Affairs, the arm of the KGB which had "supervised" the lives of believers. The U.S. had provided Russia with the model for a true separation of church and state, such as Russia had never known. And the Orthodox Church was given all the freedom it needed to rebuild its shattered institutions.

But it was not long before sentiments and policies changed. The Soviet Union was inundated with foreign evangelists and missionaries commanding technological resources unimaginable to a church just emerging from captivity. People began to blame the liberality of the 1990 law for the onslaught of foreign missionaries. The Moscow patriarch lobbied behind the scenes for the reintroduction of controls. During the ensuing debate, the old communists sensed an opportunity to reverse Gorbachev's policy and regain lost jobs in the offices which monitored religious activities. President Bill Clinton and Pope John Paul II both intervened with President Boris Yeltsin in 1997 when they saw drafts of a new law which threatened to negate the freedoms of the non-Orthodox and move toward reestablishing Orthodoxy as the state religion.

Eventually Yeltsin signed a new law which, while maintaining a theoretical separation of church and state, protected the Russian Orthodox Church and, surprisingly, the other “traditional” religions of Russia—Islam, Judaism and Buddhism—from the supposedly foreign incursions of the Protestant and Catholic churches. The fact that there have been Protestants in Russia since the 17th century and Catholics for even longer made for confusion and the probability of bureaucratic intrusion. The law did not provide grounds for banning the incursion of foreign missionaries, though that had obviously been one of its key intentions. The hated provision of mandatory registration was reestablished, with advantage conferred on those bodies which had legally existed during the Brezhnev period. This discriminates not only against such groups as the Salvation Army and the Jehovah’s Witnesses but even against the Catholics, whose only official presence at that time had been one church in Moscow. While all this was going on, Yeltsin was appearing in church at major festival times and inviting Patriarch Alexsy II to bless the great occasions of state.

Putin has no interest in revising this law. A move to repeal it will arise only if enforcement becomes brutal. Until then, we can expect messy and confused local wrangles about registration, about the return of former church property and about the presence of foreign missionaries.

The Orthodox Church’s willingness to enlist the state on its behalf, and in turn to offer sacral endorsement of the state’s policies, has deep psychological and historical roots. It is impossible for the outsider to understand the depth of the humiliation endured by the church during the 70 years of its captivity under communism. After exerting influence on state affairs under Czarist rule, the church found itself overnight banished from public life, its property confiscated, its worship repressed, and its role in the educational system ended. Most of its hierarchy, as well as thousands of parish clergy, monks and nuns lost their liberty, and many lost their lives. Only those willing to submit to the state survived.

The KGB archives, opened fleetingly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, proved what many Russians had known but few in the West had believed: that the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were often forced to carry out the specific instructions of the more nefarious organs of state. Only those who toed the line were appointed to positions of authority. Many of the best priests could not even secure places in the three theological seminaries. “Spiritual formation,” therefore, included being malleable enough to become, if not a KGB agent, someone ready to do the

state's bidding. When the reversal of fortune came in 1997, the urge to recapture the privileges of an established church was overwhelming.

Putin needs the church to legitimate his policies. Yeltsin had struggled at personal cost to free himself from his communist past, and he fought on the front line of democracy. Putin has no such record. Therefore his embrace of the church in general and of its hierarchy in particular is part of a self-protective policy to accord himself added legitimacy.

The character of the present patriarch of Moscow, Alexsy II, reflects this convoluted church history. He was born in free Estonia in 1929, the son of a Russian mother and an aristocratic Estonian father. He saw his country suffer successively under the Red Army, the Germans and then the Soviets again. After the war the only way he could enter a theological seminary was by suppressing his nationality and any anticommunist tendencies which his experiences might have bred. When he was in his 30s the authorities recognized that his political compliance made him an ideal candidate for bishop in an area where nationalism could (and one day would) cause unrest. His reward for helping to pacify Estonia was the license to travel extensively abroad to further ecumenical contacts (Soviet style), and his elevation to metropolitan of Leningrad and eventually patriarch in 1990, the next-to-last year of Soviet power.

KGB material in the Estonian archives leaves no doubt about the patriarch's connections with the KGB. It even gives a specific date for his recruitment: February 28, 1958. He received the code name "Drozdov." The Estonian document, signed by a Colonel I. P. Karpov, head of the KGB in the republic, states: "During the period of collaboration with the organs of the KGB 'Drozdov' positively recommended himself. During secret rendezvous he was punctilious, energetic and convivial. He is well-orientated in theoretical questions of theology and the international situation. He has a willing attitude to the fulfillment of our tasks and has already provided materials deserving attention."

Other aspects of the Orthodox hierarchy are also a cause for concern. The church has always been extremely reluctant to accord any legitimacy to the views of its most forward-looking theologian, Alexander Men, known as the "apostle of church *perestroika*." Men was murdered in 1990, before his books were widely available in Russia. After his death the bishop in Yekaterinburg ordered the burning of his books, along with those of the American theologians Alexander Schmemmann and John

Meyendorff. (A hopeful sign that the church is changing, however, is that a group of clergy petitioned successfully for the bishop's removal, and the new bishop welcomes contact with the West.)

The late Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg was an ultranationalist whose writings were explicitly anti-Semitic. Alexsy never censured him beyond saying that he did not share his views. In Moscow, Father Georgi Kochetkov was removed from his parish for attempting to introduce a translation of the Slavonic liturgy into modern Russian. Another Moscow priest lost his parish for making it a center for the city's most disadvantaged people.

Yet the Moscow Patriarchate is not the whole of the church, nor is it even typical. I was reminded of this last year when I visited Smolensk, one of the most ancient Russian cities. Smolensk embraced Christianity in the 11th century, while Moscow was still a village. As a guardian of Russia's western flank, the city has witnessed the passage of many armies. Napoleon was defeated here in 1812, and Germany ravaged it in 1941. In its indomitable spirit it encapsulates the essence of Russia, and it is now being extensively restored and rebuilt.

Not one of the city's ancient churches was left unscathed by the long years of official atheism. Nothing that one would recognize as normal religious life remained. In the huge area covered by the Smolensk diocese, only 25 churches maintained some semblance of a regular pattern of worship.

But now almost all of Smolensk's churches are being restored. More than 100 have reopened, including some in Kaliningrad, in the section of the Smolensk diocese lying beyond Belarus and Lithuania—a region cut off from the rest of Russia. In the Soviet period, Kaliningrad's communists prided themselves on having established a model atheist city. Now it is full of new churches—Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran.

The rebuilding visible everywhere in Smolensk is typical of Russia's provincial cities. Despite economic deprivation, civic pride is driving reconstruction, and the Russian Orthodox Church is playing a large part in the rebuilding. Smolensk is untypical of the provinces only insofar as it provides the most direct link between them and the Moscow Patriarchate. Its bishop, Metropolitan Kirill, is the second most influential figure in the church hierarchy. He divides his time between Smolensk and Moscow, and his responsibility as head of the Department of Foreign Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate frequently takes him abroad. Though ecumenical relations have

suffered a severe blow under his leadership, he is superbly successful as a diocesan bishop.

Starting in the Gorbachev period, Kirill established close relations with the Smolensk civic authorities, which gave him a head start in his rebuilding program. He was the first bishop to receive back a substantial swathe of ecclesiastical buildings, including the episcopal palace and administrative buildings adjacent to the cathedral.

Kirill has also established a theological seminary for catechists, nurses and choir trainers in part of the administrative complex. All except one or two students are female, and they are all developing extraordinary talents under the energetic guidance of a nun, Mother Ioanna, from whom goodness and efficiency flow in equally generous measure. This is happening in a church which is not exactly known for the contribution it has made to the feminist cause—and under the watchful eye of a bishop whose conservatism has caused much disappointment on the international front.

A mile away, visible on top of a hill, is the seminary for training priests. Some 100 young men live in cramped conditions while their building is gradually being restored. Their library may be among the best of any Russian seminary—though it would pale beside its equivalent in, say, a deprived African country.

Metropolitan Kirill invited the BBC to do a broadcast from Smolensk on the Sunday before Christmas 1999, and I was asked to take part. Though there was, of course, a measure of self-promotion in Kirill's invitation, the reception we received was not only warm but professional and cooperative. No one asked to see our script or to listen to any of the taped material before transmission. The radio broadcast, a worship service, demonstrated the authenticity and energy of the religious life in the provincial diocese most closely under the protection of the central authorities. One has to encounter the religious energies in Smolensk as well as the political concerns in Moscow to begin to grasp today's Russian Orthodox Church.

Given the links that the church's current leaders had with the KGB, one can understand why the patriarchate's policymakers are finding it difficult to come to terms with the church's activities during the Soviet period. The worst injustice has been the church's inability to recognize the sacrifice of the martyrs under Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev and even Brezhnev. Many of these martyrs had opposed the patriarchate's policy of accommodation with the Soviet regime. Thousands gave

their lives for their stand.

The most notable center of opposition was the Solovki monastery-prison on an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean which had become virtually a death camp for the clergy and intellectuals of Czarist Russia. It prompted Alexander Solzhenitsyn's title, *The Gulag Archipelago*, for his history of the Soviet prison-camp system, which was dispersed around the U.S.S.R. like a land-bound archipelago. The most significant opposition to the church's compromise with the state in the Stalin years were the letters signed in 1927 by 17 bishops incarcerated in the Solovki prison. These letters called on the government to renounce its systematic persecution of believers, and denounced the collaborationists who claimed that the state's goals and interests were identical with those of the church.

To this day the Moscow Patriarchate (which did not exist at the time of the declaration) has never acknowledged the text or even printed it for study. Lawrence Uzzell, the director of Oxford's Keston Institute, which specializes in the study of religion in Russia, recently called on the Orthodox Church to undertake a study of the document. The possibility that his words may be heeded was suggested by the church's decision in 2000 to canonize six men who had signed the letters.

The church building is probably more essential in the Orthodox than in any other Christian tradition. This fact makes the extensive rebuilding of churches and the opening of new theological seminaries in the Russian provinces especially notable. Two thirds of the 68 dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church, many themselves newly created or reestablished after a gap of 80 years, now have their own theological schools, and in every region churches devastated in the Soviet period are being rebuilt.

At one end of the spectrum is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, criticized by many for its grandiosity and expense; visible from inside the Kremlin, it replaces its predecessor, destroyed by Stalin in the 1930s. At the other end is a church in the village of Gridino, about 90 miles southeast of Moscow. Here a 70-year-old woman saw a vision of "three angels, as pretty as princesses, shining in their white raiment and lighting up my kitchen. They told me to build a church." As she trekked through the offices of administrative officialdom, Olga Fedorovna was often called mad. But she persisted, finally received permission to build the church, and then had another vision in which the angels told her where to build it. She collected donations for the bricks and mortar, but the breakthrough came when "three newly rich businessmen

donated the bricks that had been destined to build their second homes in the country." The church now stands in modest splendor.

In 1995 I had an unforgettable vision of the new life of the Orthodox Church. I was in the Russian Arctic, sailing across the White Sea through a dense fog. When the fog cleared, a magnificent sight appeared on the skyline: the Solovki Monastery seemed to rise from the depths of the waters, like the Invisible City of Kitezh of Russian legend, sunk by God to escape destruction by the Tatars. According to the legend, it arises to the surface once a year, its packed churches offering songs of praise to the savior.

The vision dispelled when we arrived at the quayside. Many of the horrors of the former prison were still visible, though the reconstruction of the monastery had begun. This ruin housing the bare and fractured bones of once magnificent churches could never again become the place of pilgrimage, inspiration and learning it once had been, I thought. But the restoration has steadily progressed and may yet return it to its former glory.

Last summer I visited the Tolga Convent, on the Volga near Yaroslavl in Central Russia. Here the rebuilding of another former prison (a boys' reformatory) is proceeding at an amazing pace. Every vista is magnificent, every encounter with the nuns a torrent of warm words explaining how the convent is revitalizing the whole countryside—not only providing work, but also spreading Christian enlightenment and education. I remembered that the great Danilov Monastery in Moscow, formerly also a juvenile prison, was restored just in time to host the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia in June 1988.

Before the end of the Gorbachev years, many bishops began to make plans for the daunting task of rebuilding seminary life. The strides they have made over the past ten years have been impressive. A useful benchmark is the remarkable ecumenical venture by the Roman Catholic agency, Aid to the Church in Need. In 1992 its founder, the Dutch Norbertine monk Werenfried van Straaten, already 79 years old, had a vision which challenged him to support the Russian Orthodox Church. His advisers settled on helping Russian Orthodox theological education as the most effective focus for this new outreach. Of the 46 theological academies, seminaries and schools in Russia, Aid to the Church in Need is now helping 26 financially.

In the Crimean city of Yalta I visited an Orthodox junior school taking pupils up to the age of ten. Here they receive a grounding in the faith from dedicated teachers. The parents want their children's Christian education prolonged through the equivalent of their high school years, which at present is financially impossible. Similar initiatives exist in Russia.

Clergy introducing innovative programs have been heavily scrutinized by the patriarchate, especially in Moscow. But even here some clergy who are daring to be more innovative are retaining their posts. Last July, in the central Moscow church of St. Cosmas and Damian, I helped organize a unique event: a tour of Russia by an English Episcopal cathedral choir. Georgi Chistyakov, one of the remarkable clergy associated with this church, invited the Exeter Cathedral Choir (boys and men, clad in scarlet cassocks) to sing a concert. The occasion was informal but also deeply spiritual. Benches to seat the audience appeared (no Orthodox churches in Russia have seats). Georgi gave a short theological reflection about the words of each selection the choir sang. A Russian radio broadcast of the concert described the choir as made up of "small English gentlemen or cardinals."

Some—perhaps most—of the graduates from the new theological seminaries are as conservative as the bishops or rectors who selected them for training, but theirs is not the only mind-set in the provincial dioceses. In 2000 I had only two opportunities for protracted conversations with young clergy, in places far distant and different from each other. Both of the men wished to see urgent reforms in the life of the church, one in its theology, the other in its order, which lays down an unbridgeable divide between married (parochial) and celibate (monastic) clergy. Individuals must decide this issue for all time before ordination; it can never be reconsidered (except in cases where the wife dies).

The far north of European Russia is showing strong signs of a religious revival in which the laity are playing a leading role, according to two researchers at Keston Institute, Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin. The regions they name are Karelia (formerly part of Finland), Arkhangelsk (on the White Sea, the southern extremity of the Arctic Ocean), the Komi Republic (the next area to the east) and Novgorod (further south, adjacent to St. Petersburg). This is especially remarkable because church life here was even more devastated by communism than it was in central Russia. When I toured Petrozavodsk (capital of Karelia) in the company of Father Nikolai Ozolin a few years ago, he told me that in that whole vast region only four of the formerly 400 churches, mostly wooden, had survived for worship by the

beginning of the Gorbachev period.

Generalizing about the region, Filatov and Lunkin write of a rare phenomenon in the Orthodox Church: its “cooperation with the intelligentsia, university teachers, writers, artists and museum staff and widespread involvement of teachers in the work of Sunday schools. The atmosphere in these regions, where culture and education have always enjoyed pride of place, and also the attitude of the diocesan leadership help to reduce the barrier between the intelligentsia and the church.”

A building firm run by a believer, Yevgeni Kuzkin, supports a religious and educational center in Petrozavodsk, where he participates in the selection of teaching staff. The courses themselves are run by the church, with significant participation by the diocesan bishop. Would-be catechists can study for three years, during which time they can explore their vocation for the priesthood. There is a lively interchange with secular institutes of higher education.

Ozolin, who was born and studied in Paris, brings his knowledge of the rest of Europe to Russia’s far north. He has set up an educational project in conjunction with the directors of the Kizhi museum, a remarkable collection of ancient wooden churches on an island accessible from Petrozavodsk. He also works with Aid to the Church in Need, advising the charity on the distribution of its aid over this huge and deprived region. Ozolin and others also receive help from neighboring Finland, where the Lutherans (as well as the small Orthodox community) care intensely about Karelia. It may be the most ecumenical region in the whole of Russia.

In Arkhangelsk a businessman, Dmitri Zenchenko, supports the church-sponsored Children’s Aid Foundation and the Medicines for Children program. A mathematician in Syktyvkar (capital of the Komi Republic), Yuri Yekishev, has revived the Boy Scout movement with the help of the church.

The rebirth of monastic life is of special significance throughout these northern regions. A new generation of monks is involving itself widely in educational and social projects, as well as spiritual counseling for the many visiting pilgrims, just as monks did in medieval Russia. As monastic communities pushed further north, partly to avoid the press of the crowds they attracted, they opened up the economy of new regions. People flocked to follow them, creating new work in field and forest to support both themselves and the monastic communities.

Despite the problems confronting the Russian Orthodox Church today, and the issues that cloud its past, many positive things are happening. Perhaps, through them, it will find the confidence to embark on a new era, in which it engages with society at all levels and cooperates with its friends around the world.