Solidarity with the Serbs: For Russian Orthodox, it's an east-west war

by Andrei Zolotov in the May 19, 1999 issue

Carrying icons and church banners alongside hand-written slogans, several thousand Orthodox Christians marched on May 9 down Moscow's central Tverskaya Ulitsa, at a distance from the communist-dominated columns which led the rally. "Russia, give help to Serbia!," "NATO is the new fascism," "Clinton=Hitler" was written on their posters.

The profound indignation over what most Russians see as NATO's military aggression against Yugoslavia gave a new meaning to the Day of Victory over Nazi Germany, the national holiday which is marked across the political and social spectrum with a mix of pride and grief over the 27 million lives the Soviet Union lost in World War II. During that war, Hitler's threat forged an alliance between the Soviet Union and the U.S. At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been persecuted to near extinction by Lenin and Stalin, emerged once again as a major patriotic force and source of national consolidation.

Today, it is the war of Washington-led NATO against a fellow Slav country of the Orthodox tradition that has consolidated Russian society and made new global frontiers visible. In this new reality, where the divisions between East and West are seen not only in political and military but also in spiritual terms, and the boundary is strikingly similar to the dividing line between Eastern and Western Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church again has a large role to play.

"The flame of war has ignited in Europe again," said Patriarch Alexsy II in his televised address on May 9, after describing World War II as a "spiritual battle in which the devil struggled with God." "We have to do all to extinguish [the flame of the Balkan war], not to let it grow," he said.

"Kosovo with its 1,500 churches and monasteries is the holiest place for Serbs," said Yakov Vedyapin, 28, a businessman, who marched with his wife and two toddlers in the religious column on V-Day. For him, Orthodox Christianity is "the spiritual axis"

around which Russians, just like Serbs, will eventually be united. Hence NATO's actions are seen as an assault on the Orthodox civilization and an attempt to undermine the Serb people by tearing away its spiritual center.

"I think the West doesn't really care about ethnic Albanians," Vedyapin said. "Yugoslavia is the test ground for those mechanisms of war which could be used against any country, including Russia."

Like most public voices in the country, the Russian Orthodox Church condemned NATO's attacks against Yugoslavia as "cynical" and "barbaric" from the outset, and not only in the statements of Patriarch Alexsy II. Young church members took part in the spontaneous protests outside the U.S. Embassy. Special prayer services "for the suffering people of Serbia" and "for the deliverance from the NATO adversary" were held in many monasteries and parishes. Donations have been streaming into a special bank account which the Moscow Patriarchate established for humanitarian aid to Yugoslavia. During the first weeks of bombings, many Russian politicians and media also spoke about "Orthodox solidarity."

According to last month's poll by the independent Public Opinion Fund, 55 percent of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox, compared to 50 percent in 1997 and 34 percent in 1991. But the number of practicing believers is much smaller and does not exceed 5 percent of the population, priests say. When Moscow police reported that more people attended Easter services this year than last year, some observers attributed the rise partly to the war in Yugoslavia.

The same poll by POF showed that 51 percent of Russians believe Russian-U.S. relations "worsened" during the past year and that Russians' negative reaction to NATO's actions differ very little among the social groups.

Although crippled by 80 years of official Soviet atheism and plagued by internal divisions and allegations of corruption, the Russian Orthodox Church has emerged over the past ten years as one of the most trusted national institutions, to which many look for moral guidance and as a source of the country's postcommunist identity.

When Patriarch Alexsy made his high-profile trip to Belgrade on April 20, his moral assessment of the Balkan crisis conveyed the essence of Russia's frustration with the new world order. He addressed tens of thousands of people who gathered, clutching candles, for the memorial service he held along with his host, Serbian

Patriarch Pavle.

"Yes, we have become witnesses to an action of glaring lawlessness as a handful of powerful and rich countries, who dare consider themselves the measure of good and evil, is trampling upon the will of the people who wish to live differently," Patriarch Alexsy said. "Bombs and missiles are pouring down on this land not because they seek to defend anyone. The NATO military action has a different goal—the goal to destroy the postwar order, which was paid for by a severe bloodshed, and to impose upon people an order alien to them and based on the dictates of brute force."

But unlike some other Orthodox leaders and members of his church back home, Alexsy also urged Serbs to respect the rights of ethnic Albanians and facilitate the return of refugees. "Only peace with justice can be enduring," he said. "Therefore, I ask and beseech you today to do everything to let the nations know the kindness of your hearts, so that old Kosovo, this historical and sacred land for the Serbian people, may no longer be defiled by fratricide. Help the peaceful and well-intentioned people who have left their homes to return there. Then nobody will be able to rebuke you for sinful actions in an attempt to justify one's own sin."

The patriarch's negotiations with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and moderate ethnic Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova were obviously coordinated with the Russian government. The church leader met with the Russian prime minister, foreign minister and President Boris Yeltsin's special envoy on the Balkans prior to and after his trip to Belgrade, and he later said he discussed the issue of international presence in Kosovo during his talks with Milosevic.

To the dislike of many in his flock, who feel that the whole world is helping Kosovar Albanians while viewing Serbs as villains rather than victims, the patriarch also insisted that Russian humanitarian aid be distributed among all refugees, regardless of ethnic identity.

In countries of the Byzantine Christian tradition, Orthodox churches view themselves as nation builders whose fate is forever tied with that of their peoples. They have a history of standing up to aggression, occupation and persecution, whether from the Muslim East or Christian West, and forging something of a fortress mentality, in which the Orthodox Church is seen as the last bastion of unchanged Christianity dating back to the early church. Orthodox relations with the state aspire to the Byzantine empire's ideal of symphonia or harmony between church and state, which

is different from Western concepts of a state church or of the separation of church and state. Orthodox emphasize humility and obedience rather than individual rights, which are seen as a form of pride, and they are highly critical of secular humanism, which they see as having corrupted most Western churches.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the war in Yugoslavia is seen by Russian Orthodox as a religious war. But it is often perceived in somewhat eschatological terms. Adding to this feeling was the arrogant way in which NATO brushed off the plea from Orthodox, Roman Catholic and some Protestant leaders for a ceasefire at Easter. A report was widely circulated by Russian media that some missiles targeted at Yugoslavia were marked "Happy Easter."

"All the godless West is up in arms against the small Orthodox Serbia," Archimandrite Alipy Kastalsky, a monk of St. Sergius-Holy Trinity Monastery, is quoted as saying in the right-wing nationalist Orthodox newspaper *Radonezh*. Such a statement is rather extreme, said priest Maxim Kozlov, an associate professor of Moscow Theological Seminary and dean of Moscow University's St. Tatiana Church. But he too sees a spiritual undercurrent in this war. "One can sense an antinomy between the spirit of secular humanist civilization and the Orthodox Church, which does not fit into it. The talk of a united European or U.S.-European civilization is quite premature," Kozlov said.

Sergei Chapnin, editor of the Metaphrasis religious news and analysis service, said that despite Patriarch Alexsy's emphasis on the plight of Kosovars, this issue is largely absent from the Russian Orthodox discussion of the crisis.

"The problem of humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo is not realized among the Orthodox," Chapnin said. "On the one hand, we support the Serbian church and people, and on the other hand, we cannot separate Milosevic from them. The Caesar's Kingdom distorts our image of this war."

The Balkan war is certain to complicate the already strained relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and Christian churches in the West. Although the Moscow Patriarchate remains in contact with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and other Western Christian bodies, it has already had to postpone a round of consultations with Rome, citing NATO's use of bases in Italy for the bombing of Yugoslavia. News that some Protestant churches in the U.S. and Germany back the attacks on Yugoslavia could create a new wave of rejection toward Western

missionaries.

"If they support the bombings and speak in favor of the strong over the weak, it is impossible to believe that they preach the gospel sincerely," Chapnin said.