

# Russian Orthodox Church rises to save empire in 'time of troubles'

by Luba George

On Oct. 13, hundreds of Russians gathered to attend the first church service held at a cathedral inside the Kremlin walls since 1918. The location was the Kremlin's historic Uspensky Cathedral, where many of Russia's czars were crowned and Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) leaders are buried. The event was not merely of great symbolic importance, but marked a political turning point. It signified that the Russian Church has moved to the center stage of public life and has vastly augmented the increased stature it attained last year through the church-state celebrations of the millennium of Russian Orthodoxy. The service celebrated the 400th anniversary of the Moscow Patriarchate and the canonization in 1589 of Patriarch Iov, Moscow's first patriarch, and Patriarch Tikhon, the first patriarch to head the Moscow Patriarchate after it was reconstituted under the Bolsheviks (1918-25).

The March 1989 elections to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies underscored the church's greatly increased role in society. For the first time in history, the Soviet parliament includes as deputies Russian Orthodox Church leaders, including Patriarch Pimen and nearly all the members of the church's executive, the Holy Synod.

The Soviet state's decision to continually raise the prestige of the Russian Church and strengthen its institutional role in society, is a necessity for a state confronted with a profound systemic crisis. In times of great crises, as in the U.S.S.R. today, with extremely strong centrifugal forces at work in the Baltic, Ukraine, the Transcaucasus, and the Muslim-populated areas, the state has to turn to the church if it is to have any hope of recreating a new form of reconsolidated central rule over the unruly domains of the Russian Empire.

The canonization of Patriarch Tikhon exemplified this policy. Tikhon symbolized for the church and for Russia the cardinal principle that the worst sins in a "Time of Troubles" are schisms and splits dividing the Russian Church and the Motherland. It was on that basis, to keep the Russian Empire intact, that he backed the Bolsheviks, despite his dislike for the Communist system and in spite of the fact that the Bolsheviks conducted a wholesale slaughter of the church's

leaders and clergy. According to Soviet church historian S. Korolev, "by 1919, 320,000 [Orthodox] priests had already been killed."

## The ROC's changing image

The first turning point in church-state relations occurred last year, the year of the millennium celebrations, when state decisions were taken allowing the church to re-acquire its lost possessions and properties—seized by the Bolsheviks—as well as to engage in charitable activities. These decisions are totally transforming the structure of the church.

Being allowed to engage in charitable activities has meant that for the first time since 1917, the ROC has acquired independent wealth, apart from state budget subsidies. Bank accounts established for the restoration of church properties and charitable funds are bringing in millions of rubles to the church annually from supporters at home and abroad. In turn, the church's image is being enhanced by its contributing money—aside from the traditional contributions to state "peace" funds—toward the Soviet Cultural Foundation (initiated by Raisa Gorbachova), the Lenin Children's Fund, the Afghan War Veterans' Fund, and the Charity and Health Funds to help the poor and unemployed.

In an interview with the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura* published on June 15, Metropolitan Pitirim of Volokolamsk and Yuriev elaborated on the growing influence of the church in Russian society: "The church is becoming an equal partner in public life on a quite responsible level. This presents us with new conditions and creates new models of relations. . . . Many of the U.S.S.R.'s economic problems . . . including ecological ones, are the direct result of immorality."

## 'Josephite' revival

The state revival of the church is being accompanied by a church revival of the teachings of the historic tendency in Russian Orthodoxy known as "Josephitism" (Iosifyanstvo), founded by St. Josef of Volokolamsk (1440-1515). The significance of this, in the words of the Moscow Patriarchate: "Josef of Volokolamsk stands at the source of ecclesio-social movement of Josephites who spoke out for *state unification*

of Russian lands and in whose midst there rose the idea Moscow the Third Rome . . . St. Josef defended the economic program of increasing monastic properties as an indispensable condition for the wide participation of the church in the public life of the state [emphasis added],” (*Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, no. 1, 1989).

In the 15th century, the Josephites, whose monasteries possessed rich lands, peasants, and great material resources, promoted the monastic ideal of achieving salvation through “social labor” (organizing the poor and suffering)—a view that clashed with the extreme hesychastic tradition, which held the belief that personal salvation can only be achieved through asceticism and denial of worldly things. The Josephites joined with the czarist state to purge society of the Trans-Volga hermits along with the “reformers” and “cosmopolitans” of their day, called the “Judaizers.” The victory over their opponents provided the basis for Moscow’s adoption in final form of the Byzantine doctrine of the church-state concordat, and with it, the idea of “Moscow, the Third and Final Rome.”

Since the opening of the famous Danilov Monastery in 1983, the state, especially under Gorbachov, has restored to the church dozens of seminaries, monasteries, and thousands of churches.

Furthermore, Metropolitan Pitirim, often cited as a likely contender to succeed the 78-year old ailing Patriarch Pimen, has led the campaign to revive the Josef Volotsky Monastery, built in 1479, to “its traditional sense . . . as a center of monastic achievement and spiritual life and of culture and social service.” The monastery, regarded as the second most important center in Russian Church history after Zagorsk, is being lavishly restored, thanks to a Soviet-West German agreement concluded during Gorbachov’s visit to West Germany in June this year. Gorbachov was accompanied by a large ROC delegation led by Metropolitan Pitirim.

One current case of a Josephite social action program: Metropolitan Pitirim has launched a program to help physically rehabilitate the “Afghantsi,” Soviet war veterans, by arranging for them to lease land for farming in Volokolamsk. In Moscow, the patriarchate, under Pitirim’s direction, is co-sponsoring with state authorities a rehabilitation center for the Soviet war veterans injured in Afghanistan.

## **Pamyat and the church**

The Russian Orthodox Church, together with other non-party Russian institutions, are crucial to the crisis-ridden Soviet state at a time where even the Communist Party organ *Pravda* on Oct. 16 had to admit that “the crisis of confidence” and “loss of authority” in the party are at an all-time high.

Earlier this year the ROC openly joined hands with Pamyat and other extreme Russian chauvinist organizations to found the Union of the Spiritual Revival of the Fatherland. The aim of the organization is to fill the vacuum in the “crisis-ridden state” being created by the people’s total distrust of

the Bolshevik leadership and its system. Metropolitan Pitirim sits at the Union’s Council with one of the U.S.S.R.’s most rabid anti-Semites and Russian chauvinists, Mikhail Antonov. The Union’s founding declaration called on all Russians to fight against “rootless cosmopolitanism, spiritual impoverishment, moral decline, drunkenness, drug addiction, prostitution, the increase in suicide attempts, [and] crime. . . . We will rekindle the fires of patriotism in our heart . . . we will return to a true spirituality and culture, and we will reject ‘pseudo-culture,’ which lacks roots among the people. We will defend and elevate the sacred notions of our native land and people.”

## **In times of famine**

Russia is faced with extreme food and consumer goods shortages. Already, the church has begun to set up a far-flung network of alms houses and refuges for the millions of poor and the homeless, providing them with hospitals and food. Such activities are rooted in the past. During the great famine of 1601-03, during the succession crisis that resulted in the Romanov dynasty, for example, Russian monks from the St. Sergius Monastery helped the people survive the crisis by supplying Moscow markets with great quantities of bread at low prices, thereby reducing the prohibitively high prices.

This is evident in the church’s attitude today toward the cooperatives. Echoing Gorbachov’s new tough law hitting high cooperative prices, and riding the wave of popular hatred of the cooperatives, the church is attacking them for practicing the “sin of usury.”

## **‘Spiritual revival’ for ROC only**

For the U.S.S.R.’s slavic population—Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians—the current “spiritual revival” is strictly for the ROC and no other competing religions. The Ukrainian Uniate (Greek Catholic) and Ukrainian Orthodox churches continue to be banned. In February 1989, right before Gorbachov visited the Ukraine, the Ukrainian authorities consigned 430 formerly closed churches to the ROC and allowed them to be reopened for worship. Representatives of the banned Ukrainian Catholic Church said an estimated three-quarters of these churches had belonged to the Ukrainian Catholic Church before it was forcibly abolished in 1946 and taken over by the ROC.

The church restoration has now been extended into the Kremlin itself. The service in the Uspensky Cathedral asserted the emergence of a church-state “Third Rome” stratagem. Uspensky was the cathedral where Ivan the Terrible was crowned. Soon thereafter, Czar Ivan launched his series of wars to attempt the realization of the Josephites’ “Moscow the Third Rome” doctrine of conquest.

Will today’s “neo-Josephites” be able to recreate out of the wreckage of the present crisis a new centralized autocracy, and with it revive a new messianic “Third Rome” Muscovite world domination drive?