The history of reform in the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1920s turned out to be a history of the Renovationist Schism. It happened not because of the Church's inherent inability to reform itself, but because, as it would turn out, the timing of these reforms was the most unfavorable, and their means were politically and morally wrong.

The idea of Church reform was first voiced in the nineteenth century by the Slavophiles who rediscovered the theological and spiritual potential of Eastern Orthodoxy, and suggested updating the life of the Orthodox Church by restoring what they considered to be its unadulterated structure and government. Aleksei Khomiakov, the leader of the Slavophiles, identified sobornost' (conciliarity)¹ as a distinctive characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy and called for its restoration. Vladimir Solov'ev, who emerged as a successor to the Slavophiles,² wrote eloquently on the need for Church reform. He especially criticized what he called the caesaropapism of the Church. Solov'ev's ideas became influential among the Russian intelligentsia as well as in theological academies at the turn of the century.

Even though the clergy itself did not voice any request for Church reform throughout the nineteenth century, the clerical estate constituted a perfect environment for the nurturing of an army of radicals and revolutionaries. Let us not forget that Lenin's ideological predecessor Chernyshevskii was a priest's son and his successor Stalin was a former seminarian.

¹ Sobornost' is the Russian translation of the notion of catholicity. Khomiakov theologically developed it as the concept which conveys the idea of unity expressed in plurality, the plenitude that is manifested in its every part. As this concept was developed further in Russian Orthodox theology it came to mean an entity possessing an "integral wholeness," which allows it to expand indefinitely without betraying its nature.

² Cf. ch. 5, "Solov'ev i slavianofil'stvov" and ff. in Evgenii Trubetskoi, Mirosozerisanie Vladimira Solov'eva (Moscow: Put', 1913), I, 59-73.
After the reforms of Peter the Great and Catherine II’s secularization of Church land, the Russian clergy became a humiliated class, sandwiched between the state and the people, underpaid and mistreated by both. The entire clergy, used by the government for state purposes, mistrusted by the people, treated by the nobility with disrespect, was itself divided by a social gap between white (parish) and black (monastic) clergy. Whereas only monks were promoted to the highest positions in education, Church institutions and the Church hierarchy, parish clergy had to support their large families on donations from an impoverished peasantry. Almost until the end of the nineteenth century, clergy children were secluded within the framework of the Church educational system and often had to follow their fathers’ profession without inner inclination. All of these grievances together with proposals for reform began to be voiced at the turn of the century by both parish clergy and the episcopate. The bishops came out with reformatory ideas in their response to the poll initiated by Pobedonostsev, the Procurator of the Holy Synod. He had mistaken their silence during his two decades of iron rule for political and ecclesiastical conservatism, and hoped that such a poll would support his ultra-conservative policy. Contrary to his expectations, the majority of the episcopate advocated Church reforms, many of them in a radical fashion. The bishops wished to bring the Church life closer to the people and the Church government and parish organization into agreement with the requirements of Orthodox Canon law. The bishops claimed that the whole inner structure of the Church was twisted under the Russian autocratic monarchy. Bishops questioned the very synodal form of Church government as uncanonical and called for the convocation of a national Church council. The status of the Church under the tutelage of the Orthodox state came to be labeled as the “Babylonian captivity.”


5. “We all are serfs, by centuries of humiliation beaten into obedience,” commented once Tikhon Belavin, then the Metropolitan of Moscow and a future Patriarch, expressing the self-awareness of Russian clergy. Soborny Razum” (1918), p. 19. Quoted from Anatolii Levitin, Vadim Shavrov, Ocherki po istorii