Editorial

Unfinished Business from the Sacred Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow, 1917–18

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Over the past five years, the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) has precipitated many scholarly conferences and publications. Then during 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation has generated similar output, even if the historical importance of Luther nailing his theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg—if, indeed, he ever did so—has been greatly overstated. Despite the current penchant for anniversaries, however, the centenary of another occasion of major importance for one of the world’s largest Churches—and one that definitely took place—has been almost entirely ignored.

On 15 August 1917, the first Sacred Council of the Russian Orthodox Church for 250 years opened with a solemn liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral within the Kremlin. The Moscow Council convened at a time of tumultuous political upheaval. Following the February Revolution, which was sparked by mass demonstrations in Petrograd (now St Petersburg) and brought about the mutiny of the army, Tsar Nicholas II had abdicated and a Provisional Government, allied with the Duma which was the lower legislative house, had assumed office. The new government sought to control the Church by replacing members of its Holy Synod, and revolutionary fervour disrupted numerous parishes as the established order, at once social and ecclesiastical, was called into question.

The Provisional Government wished to promote the Council as a democratizing event within the Church. Hence it was politically and ecclesiologically important that a majority of the Council’s 564 members were laypeople.
However, during the first of four sessions the Socialist October Revolution took place. The Winter Palace was occupied and the Provisional Government, which had installed itself there, surrendered. The Bolshevik faction around Lenin, which rapidly asserted itself over the other Socialist groupings, used its power to nationalize monastic and church land, grant equal rights to all religions, nationalize and secularize the education system, and decree the replacement of church marriage with civil marriage. In January 1918, during the first week of the Council’s second session, its former president Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev was murdered by Red Army soldiers in front of his own monks, and many other clergy were martyred with similar barbarity.

The Council’s definitions and decrees were published soon after it ceased work on 7 September 1918, but were not reprinted until 1994. They were unavailable in a Western language until an Italian translation appeared in 2003. Hyacinthe Destivelle also translated them into French and included them as a large appendix to his 2006 study of the Council. A decade later they are at last available in English in a translation of Destivelle’s excellent volume.

The decrees of the Council were tremendously important for the Church. During the first session, far-reaching institutional changes in central governance were mandated and a conciliar structure was established. Excepting the newly-installed Patriarch and the Metropolitan of Kiev, the eleven other bishops on the Holy Synod were subject to election and rotation. Moreover, the Supreme Council comprised three bishops from the Holy Synod, five clergy, a monk and six laypeople. Moving to the local level, the functions and composition of diocesan assemblies, diocesan councils, deaneries and deanery councils were all defined in detail, with similar principles operating to those centrally. Diocesan assembly members, being clergy and laypeople in equal numbers, were to be elected for three years, and the diocesan council included

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