The Renovationist Schism in the Russian Orthodox Church*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze the factors which led to the appearance of the schismatic Renovationist movement during the 1920s within the Russian Orthodox Church, and to the movement's degeneration into a GPU operation abandoned by its “masters” once it had served its purpose and lost its usefulness.

Sources, Origins and Development of Renovationism

There were several major sources of internal conflict and frustration within the post-Petrine Orthodox Church in Russia. The most traumatic was the loss of her Patriarchal-conciliar basis and autonomy. Instead, Peter turned the Church into a department of state headed in practice by an Ober-Prokuror, a bureaucrat appointed by the tsar to control the Holy Synod. The participating bishops were Ober-Prokuror’s de-facto subordinates, whose decisions could be overruled by him since he represented the autocrat. Moreover, while the vernacular Russian replaced Church-Slavic as the official language of the state, Church Slavic was retained for the Church by Peter’s order. As the Russian language grew and developed, the linguistic cleavage between religious and secular culture of the nation increased. The clergy turned into a social estate, as the network of junior and secondary seminaries (eparkhial’-nye uchilishcha and seminarii) and the academies (graduate seminaries) became educational institutions reserved exclusively for clerical offspring. Their educational standards were high, but the schools remained static and fell increasingly outside the mainstream of national education. The language of instruction was Latin at least until the 1840s. Church Slavic (the liturgical language), Russian, and Greek were relegated to secondary positions in this educational system.

The fact that the seminaries were the only schools accessible to priests’

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sons, including even irreligious young people and those aiming at secular careers, meant that they lacked the spirit of true divinity schools. Atheism, nihilism, and revolutionary radicalism were rampant in schools which were supposed to prepare pastors for the nation. Of the more than 2,000 annual graduates of the seminaries in the early 1900s only some 600 took ordination.¹

The other source of internal frustration was the system of academic monasticism which had nothing to do with the genuine Orthodox monastic traditions of contemplation, prayer, other-worldliness, and piety. Academic monasticism was borrowed by the Kiev Theological Academy in the seventeenth century from the Roman Catholics. As theological schools based on the Latin model spread to the rest of Russia, so did the institution.² These "monks" were those students in the graduate academies who sought tonsure only in order to pursue episcopal careers; i.e., their motivation for tonsure was in direct opposition to the real purpose of monasticism. The dissatisfaction among the married clergy, as well as among those theologians who refused tonsure, was directed not so much against the genuine monasticism of humility and seclusion, as against academic monasticism, more often than not career oriented.

No sooner did the climate of freedom of the Great Reforms of the 1860s permit hopes and discussions of Church reforms, than this antimonastic bias emerged, reflected in numerous publications of the time. Fr. Georges Florovsky calls this anti-monasticism "Protestantism of the Eastern Rite."³ The Church's most dedicated clergy and laity took every opportunity to appeal to the monarch to allow the Church autonomy and a conciliar-patriarchal structure again.⁴ These hopes, renewed by the secular reforms of Alexander II, were quashed, however, by the appointment in 1865 of Count Dmitrii A. Tolstoi, an agnostic overtly hostile to the Church, as Ober-Prokuror of the Synod. While he had busied himself depriving the higher clergy of the last vestiges of real power and the clergy offspring of the right to enter any schools but the seminaries, his successor, Pobedonostsev, applied all pressure he could to suppress any Church reform in the bud.

The ferment within the Church and society, nevertheless, continued. The promise of religious toleration contained in the Imperial ukaz of 12 Decem-

2. Ibid., pp. 340-41.
3. Ibid., p. 340.
4. A. Molchanovskii, "Dva proyekta vosstanovleniia patriarshestva v Rossi v XVIII veke," Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii [hereafter ZhMP], No. 12 (Dec. 1944), pp. 52-57. See also Robert Nichols and Theofanis Stavrou, eds., Russian Orthodoxy Under the Old Regime (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1979), especially the articles by Donald Treadgold, Nichols, and Gregory Freeze.