

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION OF 1917

BY STEPHANIE MERINOFF

Stephanie Merinoff is a junior at Brandeis University pursuing a double major in History and Classics. Stephanie wrote the following paper in Spring, 2013 for her Twentieth Century Russia class. While she studies primarily the ancient and medieval periods, this paper was inspired by her interest in how religion and religious institutions have shaped the course of history. Stephanie enjoyed writing this paper immensely and extends her gratitude towards Professor Gregory L. Freeze at Brandeis University for his guidance in the writing process.

In the decades before 1917 the Russian Orthodox Church experienced a gradual decline in its privilege and power. Although it still claimed the allegiance of approximately 115-125 million parishioners, the Church found the autocracy increasingly disposed to sacrifice the special interests of the Orthodox Church in an effort to mollify the non-Orthodox in this multi-confessional empire.¹ The Revolution of 1905 signaled a sharp decline in the Church's status: the Manifesto on Freedom of Religious Conscience (April 17, 1905) in effect abolished the privileged status of the Orthodox Church. Determined to regain their advantaged status, the majority of parish clergy and even many bishops joined the liberation movement and demanded far-reaching reforms throughout society and also within the Church itself. While a minority continued to be loyal to the ancient regime, a growing number concluded that only a reformed Church could combat the threat of secularization. Priests, whose political attitudes ranged from moderate to radical left-wing, sought to mobilize pious laity by creating parish brotherhoods, publishing journal articles, reviving evangelism, and supporting the social and economic demands of their flock.² Many clergy also sought to refurbish the Church, primarily by transferring power from imperious bishops to the parish clergy and parishioners. The autocracy did all it could to prevent such reform, thereby making the clergy only more discontented and further alienating them from the old regime.

The February Revolution appeared to represent an opportunity for the Church to regain its traditional place in Russian society. With the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty, the Church believed that the new

¹ Mikhail V. Shkarovskii, "The Russian Orthodox Church," in *The Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution 1914-1921*, ed. Edward Acton, Vladimir Iu. Cherniaev, and William G. Rosenberg (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 416.

² *Ibid.*, 416.

Provisional Government would endorse its demands for reform and pave the way for a national Church Council to address the main problems that had accumulated over the decades. Although most clergy (bishops as well as priests) welcomed the February Revolution, they had multiple visions of the reforms that the Church should pursue. Moderate members of the clergy sought only to restore the Church's privilege in Russian society. They primarily wanted to procure support for the Church, especially financial, and restore the traditional authority of bishops in addition to reestablishing the Church's sovereignty in all affairs through the convocation of Church councils.³ Left-wing clergy members sought to 'laicize' the Church and transfer power from the clergy to the parishioners themselves. There were two left-wing factions within the Church – liberals and radicals. The liberal clergy envisaged a greater role for the parish clergy. They primarily wanted to grant greater autonomy to local dioceses in decision-making processes.⁴ Radical clergy members not only wanted to increase the power of parishioners in diocesan affairs but in the parish itself. Their primary goals for reform included curbing the power of the Holy Synod, assembling Church councils, and allowing parishes to elect their own priests.

There were three visions clergy members held for reforming the Church. The 'moderate restorationist vision' was to restore the Church's privileged position, chiefly by providing more support for the Church, particularly financial, and by restoring the bishops' traditional authority. Some moderates even wanted to reestablish the patriarchate; a supreme clerical office that had been abolished in 1700 by Peter the Great, although emphasizing that it would be delimited in its role in Church administration.⁵ The moderate clergy did not desire to abolish the monarchy. Instead, they wished to create reform within the existing marriage of Church and State. Even in the last months of the old regime, moderate clergy supported the autocracy and opposed enemies of the tsar.⁶ Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev summed up this attitude as in 1917 he said: "We are Orthodox Christians, members of a monarchical state, to the bottom of our souls loving our tsars.... The waves of party strife must not undermine love and respect for the ruling house."⁷ The moderate restorationist faction, although its dreams did

³ Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ John Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State 1917-1950I* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1953), 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10, taken from R.S.F.S.R., *Sobr. Uzak.*, No. 2, 1936.

not come to fruition, represented an important number of clergy, both priests and bishops, on the eve of revolution in 1917.

A more liberal program envisaged a greater role for the parish clergy. Liberal clergy sought to increase the independence of local dioceses in decision-making processes.⁸ They rejected the monarchy, denouncing it as “harmful for both Church and people” and promoted increasing popular participation in the Church and curtailing the influence of the upper clergy.⁹ The liberal clergy eventually organized an All-Russian Congress of Clergy and Laity in Moscow in June of 1917. The congress lasted ten days and 1,200 elected delegates were present. Historian Gregory Freeze writes that the Congress “impell[ed] diocesan assembles not only to include lay representatives but informing their determination to purge reactionary bishops, countenance church reform, and address social issues.”¹⁰ The Congress represented the strength of the liberal clergy, which surpassed that of the moderate restorationist vision and remained dominant in April and May of 1917. However, as tensions between the clergy and parish grew throughout 1917, the prevailing liberal vision held by clergy for Church reform would, like its moderate counterparts, lose purchase.

A third, radical vision sought to give power to parishioners, not only in diocesan affairs, but also in the parish itself. In its most extreme form this radical program sought to allow parishioners to elect priests, control the parish budget, and regulate precisely how a given village celebrated specific religious rights.¹¹ In the wake of the February Revolution, which seemed to emphasize the power of the common people, this “democratic” vision thus found a role inside the Church itself. The idea of “parish power” developed and became widespread. Historian Dimitry Pospelovsky writes that “after the fall of the monarchy, the more radical representatives began to oppose the idea of a patriarch as monarchic, preferring a popularly elected synod made up of bishops, the lower clergy and laymen – all with equal voting rights.”¹² Additionally, radical members of the clergy were also responsible for great numbers of priests being exiled from their parishes by parishioners, and “reactionary” bishops losing their

⁸ Roslof, *Red Priests*, 4.

⁹ Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State*, 14.

¹⁰ Gregory L. Freeze, “Diocesan Assembles in 1917: Revolution in the Church,” *Tserkov’ I Revoliutsiia* (2014), 11.

¹¹ Curtiss, *The Russian Church and Soviet State*, 14.

¹² Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime 1917-1982 vol. I* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 28.

positions.¹³ The radical push for equal voting rights in particular represented the parish power movement in that radicals believed a simple believer, perhaps even illiterate, held the same amount of authority as a parish priest. This idea of parish power, along with other radical ideas, would become very controversial as 1917 progressed.

Most clergy, whether moderate or radical, strongly supported Russia's cause in World War I. This was driven largely by patriotism for the newly evolving Russian State as well as support for fellow Orthodox believers in the Balkans. The Orthodox Church supported the Provisional Government and preached for the safety of Russian soldiers fighting overseas and the continuation of the Provisional Government's success.¹⁴ However, the question of material support for the Church was important. The clergy wanted the Provisional Government to provide salaries and thereby to reduce their dependence on the local parish. Given the outbreak of World War I, however, and the increasingly radical mindset of those in government, the Provisional Government increasingly decreased its support of the Orthodox Church and eventually would stop providing the Church with government subsidies.¹⁵

A related issue was the Church's property: the substantial real estate of the Church was an important source of income for the clergy and for Church institutions, such as the seminary and parish school. Radical representatives of the clergy became more vocal about democratic reform within Russian society and advocated the allocation of land to the peasants, labor rights for workers, and a decreased clerical role in government.¹⁶ Given this and the growing support of Russian society to nationalize both schools and land holdings, the Orthodox Church would lose significant income in the form of land and privilege as the revolution continued.

Both the issues of parish power and patriotism became increasingly controversial in 1917. In the case of parish power, it meant that simple believers, even illiterates, asserted authority over the parish priests. Moderate clergy and increasingly more liberal clergy members found this "laicization" contradictory to Church canon and tradition. Priests had many years of seminary training and the exclusive right (through ordination) to perform religious sacraments. Common parishioners did not. Yet, after the February Revolution, parish laity

¹³ Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ Shkarovskii, "The Russian Orthodox Church", 419.

¹⁶ Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime*, 28.

increasingly voiced their demands for greater involvement in Church affairs.¹⁷ Bishop Sergii of Finland remarked on this, commenting: “the Orthodox faith at the present time finds itself under great danger from every kind of pressure, attacks, and limitations,” for now the “propagation of non-Orthodox and non-Christian beliefs and simple disbelief, although rather strong before, has now begun to boldly, proudly, and with far greater threat and power (especially sectarianism and Uniates).”¹⁸ The issue of parish power escalated in the summer of 1917 as parishioners continued to expel disliked priests and bishops and asserted control over their local church.¹⁹ The parishioners’ demands were not new, however, and with a weakened Church, they became more effective in gaining control over Church administration. It should be noted, that despite the Church’s objections, parish power, fed by the rise of anticlericalism propagated by the radical laity and the Bolshevik party, eventually became dominant.

The war itself became a critical issue in 1917, especially as antiwar sentiment mounted. Having suffered monumental defeat in World War I, with 1.7 million casualties, the Russian people withdrew their support for the war effort. However, the Orthodox Church in 1917 had not. As a result, the Orthodox Church lost a great amount of popular support.²⁰ The Orthodox Church supported the war because the Russian army supported the Church. The Church often directly aided the Russian army. For instance, on May 9, General Alexeev, Commander in Chief of the Russian army, requested three Petrograd priests visit the front lines to raise morale among the soldiers.²¹ Additionally, the leaders of the Russian army agreed with the Church’s emphasis on discipline and the falseness of the Bolsheviks as General Alexeev requested the former points be included in the priests’ sermons to the soldiers on the front.²² The Church’s support of the war and more specifically the Russian army is logical given that the Church is supposed to be the spiritual and moral authority of Russian society and there was a strong push by moderate clergymen to restore the Church’s status and privilege, as well as gain material support. However, the Church’s support of the Great War caused them to lose support among the majority of the Russian populace, which contributed to the growing

¹⁷ Roslof, *Red Priests*, 13.

¹⁸ Freeze, “Diocesan Assemblies in 1917”, 33. From GARF, f. r-4652, op. 1, d. 3, l. 214 (memorandum quoted in Synodal resolution of 5.7.1917).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²¹ Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

agency of the parish power movement and anticlerical ideology.

Finally, property was a factor: many land-hungry parishioners demanded that the church's substantial landholdings be nationalized and transferred to the people. Additionally, radical churchmen began meeting together in Petrograd after the tsar's abdication in March 1917. They formed the Union of Democratic Clergy and Laity and were devoted to supporting the people in opposing the restoration of the monarchy, creating a democratic government in Russia, and reforming the Church with the goal of separating it from the State.²³ The primary way to separate the Church from the State was to nationalize its landholdings and parochial schools. The Union of Democratic Clergy and Laity supported this, favoring a socialist economic policy that gave peasants and workers control over land and industry.²⁴ The Orthodox Church rejected the idea of confiscating Church lands, claiming that clergy needed the lands for support as a significant portion of their income stemmed from them.²⁵ At the last meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Clergy and Laity, liberal churchmen also condemned the confiscation of church and private lands, arguing that all agrarian matters should be dealt with by the Constituent Assembly.²⁶ The debate on the confiscation of Church property would continue, however, until November 8, 1917 after the Bolsheviks seized power when Lenin issued a 'Decree on Land' that announced the nationalization of all land, including those held by the Orthodox Church and monasteries, crippling the Church economically.²⁷

The relations between priests and parishioners grew increasingly problematic by the summer of 1917. Anti-religious attitudes were spreading throughout Russia from the top of society, the government and the intelligentsia, to the masses of laborers and even some peasants who were previously believers. As mentioned in the above section, parishioners chose to assert their control over their local church and engaged in practices such as expelling disliked parish priests and in some cases bishops.²⁸ However, in the summer of 1917, parishioners' behavior escalated as they pressed their claims further against the Church. Parishioners claimed control of Church lands and withdrew their monetary support for the Church. The former had a significant impact on the Church as the Church's main source of income came from their lands and from donations given by believers. The Church rebelled against this treatment

²³ Freeze, "Diocesan Assemblies in 1917", 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵ Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State*, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁸ Freeze, "Diocesan Assemblies in 1917", 34.

with a decree to the Synod on June 20. The Church demanded new legislature stating that the Church's land and monetary support were necessary to the survival of the Church and could not be taken away by parishioners or local state authorities. However, the Church did not receive responses from the government or believers championing the Church's cause. Instead, there was silence. As Gregory Freeze writes, "while the conservative clergy (above all, monastics) fought back, the revolutionary tide had plainly come to threaten the very edifice of institutional Orthodoxy."²⁹

As a result of the increasingly aggressive claims made by parishioners, the clergy became dismayed. The clergy's mentality changed as liberal churchmen realized that in order to ensure the survival of the Church, they needed to assert their traditional role in society, which had been the agenda of the moderate clergymen since the beginning of the revolution. The Church asserted the claim it made to the Synod on June 20 by advocating in speeches and ecclesiastical writings its right to possess parish lands and to demand the material support they required to support Church infrastructure. However, the parish power movement only gained more force among the laity who continued to assert their right to control the Church on the local level. This was compounded by the increasing aggressiveness of the lower ranking clergy who exploited the chaos in the Church caused by the parish power movement to press their own demands such as increased income and land holdings.³⁰ While there were attempts made by the clergy, such as the unionization of expelled parish priests and increased attempts to gain support for the Church in the provinces, none of these pro-Church movements gained enough traction to combat the growing anticlericalism among parishioners. Gregory Freeze quotes A. Gloriov as he says, "with good reason, many of the clergy came to the conclusion that 'since the time of the revolution the legal position of priests has changed not for the better, but for the worse: the clergy has ridden itself of arbitrariness and despotism from above, but now is subjected to pressure, and sometimes arbitrariness, from below.'"³¹

The Orthodox Church was defenseless against the onslaught waged by the parishioners. Church and State were separated and there were few secular authorities present in the provinces to help stop the physical expulsion of priests or the seizing of Church lands.

²⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid., 39. From A. Gloriov, "Pastyrskii soiuз," *Vladimirskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, 1917, no. 24/25 (30.6.1917): 245.

Furthermore, if there were any secular authorities present, they were usually radical and would look the other way. Church funds evaporated as their properties became fewer and their material support dwindled. Additionally, inflation in the Russian economy devalued the remaining funds the Church had saved.³² The Church could not communicate its plight with others because local Soviets controlled the typographies, claiming the revolution was more important than Church affairs. The Orthodox Church administration became increasingly powerless and less able to withstand the attacks wielded by parishioners. The moderate restorationist visions of restoring Church authority became more popular, but at the same time, less feasible. After 1917, the survival of Orthodoxy would require a new liberal vision that restored the authority of the Church and rebuilt its infrastructure, but also included laity and parishes in Church affairs and decision-making.

Historian Dimitry Pospelovsky eloquently describes the crisis the Church was facing at the beginning of the 1917 revolution.

Lacking a canonical administration (a patriarch) and the traditional conciliar system...the Church as an institution entered the revolution divided and uninformed about the ideas and feelings of her own lower clergy and parishioners... at such a decisive moment of general collapse the Church lacked the organizational mechanism of a self-ruling institution. And it was common knowledge to every responsible churchman that the old monarchic establishment was to blame for this sorry state of affairs.³³

The February Revolution provided the Orthodox Church with the opportunity to restore its traditional authority in Russian society that it lost under the reign of Nicholas II and to institute reforms long denied to the Church. However, the clergy was divided in regards to how to best achieve this goal. Moderate restorationists, liberals, and radicals argued over the degree to which the Church should be involved in government and what the role of the laity should be in the Church. As the revolution continued and anticlericalism spread and members of Russian society, including members of the clergy, became more radical in their ideas, the Church suffered a wave of attacks by parishioners asserting their control over their local churches and church lands. The Church responded with increased propagation of their

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

³³ Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime*, 25.

struggles, however, this proved futile. As the Bolsheviks came to power, the new regime waged war against the Church, separating Church from State and removing its rights to own property, educate children in parochial schools, and eliminated the Church's avenues for material support. The Church was helpless to the growing strength of the parish power movement. However, many scholars argue, as does Pospelovsky that in the face of the attacks the Church endured from the new regime, "the new responsibility granted to the parish councils and the security of priests' tenure... saved the Church from disintegration in the years of the practically total collapse of the central church administration caused by the cited state legislation, by periodical arrests of bishops and by the proliferation of schismatic groups."³⁴ Indeed, Gregory Freeze also offers a similar opinion claiming "parish power would ironically became the main bastion of Orthodoxy, with "parish power" becoming the key to the survival and defense of the faith."³⁵ Despite the turbulence the Orthodox Church faced in the months after the February Revolution, the increased freedom acquired by the Church gave it the stamina to withstand attacks on the Church by the Bolsheviks in the early part of the twentieth century and continue as an institution in Russia.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

³⁵ Freeze, "Diocesan Assemblies in 1917", 41.