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RUSSIAN ORTHODOX MONASTERIES' RESPONSE TO THE RELICS EXPOSING CAMPAIGN, 1917-1922

By Jennifer Wynot

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Aside from passing laws weakening church power, the Soviet authorities sought to discredit the Church in the eyes of the people. The most dramatic and effective method was to expose “relic frauds” in the monasteries. Orthodoxy places great emphasis on preserving the bodies or parts of the bodies of saints. When a church is consecrated, the bones of one or more saints are placed in a hole in the altar, as a reminder that the Christian Church was built on the bones of its martyrs. Some monasteries have the entire bodies of saints lying in glass covered caskets in their cathedrals. One manifestation of a person’s saintliness is that his or her body is “incorrupt” after death--in other words, it does not decay. The most famous saints whose bodies lie in monasteries in Russia are St. Sergius of Radonezh in HolyTrinity-St. Sergius Lavra in Sergeev Posad, and St. Amvrosii in Optina Pustyn. Many pilgrims continue to come to these monasteries to pray to these saints and to seek miracles.¹

The Bolsheviks viewed these practices as superstitious and barbaric. They believed those “relics” that people came from all over the country to venerate were in reality made of wax or some other fraudulent material, and that the monasteries used these “incorrupt” saints as a way to trick ignorant peasants out of their money. They therefore engaged in a campaign to prove that monasteries were deceiving the people. They instructed officials to go to various monasteries, exhume relics, and perform tests to determine whether or not the relics were actually human bones. The Bolsheviks realized the average Russian believer would protest this act; therefore, they gave careful instructions to local officials not to conduct these exposures on days when churches were crowded. Rather, they preferred to have a select group of people present. This group included representatives from the provincial Soviet committees, the Communist Party, and workers= and peasants= organizations. Doctors were also to be present to examine the relics and sign the necessary paperwork. Most importantly, the monastics themselves were forced to carry out the actual process of “exposing” the relics. They were also compelled to sign the affidavit to prevent believers from accusing the Soviets of sacrilege. The presence of monastics and clergy also added legitimacy to the entire proceedings.²

1For more on the Orthodox understanding of sainthood, see Vladimir Demshuk, *Russian Sainthood and Canonization* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1978).

2See letter of 8 March, 1919 from the NARKOMIUST to the Yaroslavskii Liquidation Committee outlining conditions under which exhumations should take place. The letter stressed the presence of

These exposures were photographed, and atheist publications such as *Revoliutsiia i Tserkov* and later *Bezbozhnik* were filled with many lurid accounts of so-called relics being discovered to be made of wax and animal bone. An article in *Bezbozhnik* describes the relics of Rasnianski monastery in Kharkhov. The author asserts that the abbot would instruct the other monks to go out to meat shops and bring back bones of pigs, sheep, and cows to use as relics. The “relics” were to be taken to Moscow for laboratory tests to prove the monks’ duplicity.³

The entire relics-exposing campaign lasted for two years, from 23 October 1918 to 1 December 1920. In all of Russia, there were a total of 65 instances of relic inspection. At a Sovnarkom meeting in June 1920, the council expressed satisfaction with the progress of the anti-relic fraud campaign, and vowed to “fully liquidate the cult of dead bodies.” However, the committee acknowledged that the anti-relic campaign came at a cost of great violence: protests generally greeted any attempts of the authorities to carry out these exposures. In Perm *guberniia* alone, from June to December of 1918, 10 proto-priests, 41 priests, 5 deacons, and 36 monastics were killed while defending their monasteries.⁴

There are many accounts of monks and nuns being tried in court for relic fraud, two of which will be examined here. Both cases were tried in the Moscow People’s Court, although the first incident actually took place in Smolensk *guberniia*. On June 22, 1920, the People’s Court announced a verdict in the case against Abbess Serafima of the Vladimir-Ekaterina monastery and hieromonk Dosifei Zhidkov of Donskoi monastery on charges of religious blackmail and counterrevolutionary activity. Although these two individuals stood trial, the minutes of the proceedings make it apparent that Patriarch Tikhon and Bishop Nazari were the real people on trial. Throughout the trial, the judges consistently made reference to the church’s attempt to gain economic influence over the workers and peasants, the “dark, ignorant masses.” According to one witness for the prosecution, Evdokia Volkova, after the government nationalized the land of the Vladimir-Ekaterina monastery, Abbess Serafima became desperate for money. She decided to bring in fake relics and a fake miracle-working icon in hopes of attracting more people. Volkova testified that Abbess Serafima said “after the appearance of the relics in the monastery, many pilgrims will come.” She therefore ordered Volkova to go to Moscow and to receive this “miraculous” icon and relics from Patriarch Tikhon. Hieromonk Dosifei along with Bishop Nazari met her as representatives of the Patriarch.

Although the judges found Dosifei and Serafima guilty and referred to them constantly as “sly” and “exploiters”, they repeatedly stated that the two were committing these crimes under the direction and at the behest of Patriarch Tikhon and Bishop Nazari. In a final summing up, the court declared that “the real culprits are Tikhon and Nazari...they bear full blame for the actions of Serafima

doctors, Party members and worker and peasant organizations, and warned that the “uncoverings” must not occur during services. GARF, f. A-353, op 2, d. 690, l. 22.

3F. Kovalev, “Documents and Evidence about Relics,” *Bezbozhnik* (April 1926), No. 7, p. 7.

4A.N. Kashevarov, *Gosudarstvo i Tserkov: iz istorii vzaimootnoshenii sovietskoi vlasti i russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi* (St. Petersburg, 1995), pp. 73, 80.

and Dosifei.” Accordingly, the sentence it handed down reflected some leniency. Abbess Serafima was sentenced to ten years hard labor, but in deference to her age, the sentence was commuted to one year working at the Department of Social Security. The court sentenced hieromonk Dosifei to five years hard labor; however, because of his proletarian background “he is not considered dangerous to the Republic.” He was granted amnesty, and was sent to work at the Bureau of Compulsory Labor “without depriving him of freedom.” The Court also stated that it would pursue the case against Patriarch Tikhon and Bishop Nazari. The court further ruled that the “relics” would be transferred to a monastery and that brochures entitled “The Suffering of the Vilenski Martyrs” would be confiscated and destroyed and that all pictures of the royal family would be removed from the nuns’ cells. The fact that the nuns had pictures of the recently executed royal family was probably the real basis for counterrevolutionary charges.⁵

The second case occurred in October 1920, also in the Moscow People’s Court. Olga Mazinova, Vasilisa Griaznova and Abbess Alefina of Paul Posad monastery in Moscow guberniia were accused of “constructing a cult factory and exploiting the working masses with religious superstition.” Griaznova and Mazinova were laywomen who, according to the court, organized a women’s society in which they “spent large sums of money, received from the workers, to sustain their believers and other parasites.” The two women were also accused of conspiring to spread propaganda concerning fake relics among the population. The punishment which the court gave in this case was more severe than the previous one. Griaznova and Labzina were both deprived of their citizenship and sentenced to ten years hard labor. Like abbess Serafima, abbess Alefina was spared hard labor due to her age (she was eighty-six). However, she was still considered “a dangerous element to society” because she had “lived most of her life as a parasite on the body of the people.” She was instead sent to a charity house where she would live out her days and do some light work. The monastery would be confiscated and turned into a museum.⁶

These two cases illustrate the differing Bolshevik policy toward religion, particularly during the civil war years. Although both cases were tried in the same court five months apart, the verdicts differed greatly. In the first case, the leniency of the court is explained by its desire to incriminate and eventually arrest Patriarch Tikhon and Bishop Nazari. In the second case, the accused faced the same charges, but excepting the elderly abbess, the nuns were sentenced to hard labor. Several explanations may account for the difference in punishment in both of these cases. The lack of a direct mention of the Patriarch or another bishop does not suggest another possible target for the court to focus on. The court doubtless had to prove to the people and to its higher superiors that it was firm in the fight against religion, and therefore, these nuns had to be made an example. The social status of the accused also indicates a reason for the harsher sentence. Labzina and Griaznova were both described as “former merchants’ wives.” This would put them in a higher socioeconomic sphere than the workers and

5GARF, f. A-353, op 4, d. 384, l. 24-25.

6GARF, f. A-353, op 4, d. 392, l. 70-70ob.

peasants whose interests the Bolsheviks professed to defend and who composed the People=s Court. Moreover, these women had started a factory within the monastery, indicating a taste for capitalism. Leaving aside Bolshevik anti-capitalist rhetoric, Russians traditionally have exhibited mistrust of innovation and accumulation of wealth. The fact that the persons involved in these enterprises were women also could reflect a gender bias on the part of the judges. Another explanation could be simple arbitrariness on the part of the court.

Resistance to the Bolsheviks

There were many acts of violent resistance to the Bolsheviks' anti-religious campaign, with various degrees of success. One explosive event occurred in 1919, when the Bolsheviks attempted to remove the body of St. Sergius of Radonezh from Holy Trinity Lavra to an antireligious museum. When the authorities tried to "expose" the relics, they were met with great resistance from the local population. Sergei Volkov, then a seminary student, witnessed the scene. Despite attempts at secrecy, news spread that the Bolsheviks were coming to examine and possibly take away the relics of St. Sergius, one of Russia's most famous and beloved saints. At the beginning of Great Lent, the faithful gathered in the *trapeza* (refectory) chapel. One of the monks, Archimandrite Kronid, addressed the crowd, calling on them to defend "not monks, but a holy place, the place where St. Sergius walked." The Bolsheviks, afraid of possible violence, confiscated the keys to all of the churches and the bell tower, fearing the monks would sound the alarm bell summoning the laity. They forbade people to enter the Lavra by the main gate, and surrounded the monastery with Red Army soldiers. The soldiers had instructions to shoot if they met with resistance. On the day of the relic exposure, the square near the monastery filled with people, mainly women. They strained at the gates, pushing the guards. Eventually, they broke through the barriers, and surged through the monastery gates. The guards fired into the air, but no one was killed.⁷

The Bolsheviks' determination to remove the body of St. Sergius provoked an angry letter from Patriarch Tikhon to the Council of People's Commissars. He quoted the Bolsheviks' own laws against them, claiming that "the intention to remove the relics of St. Sergius affect our religious conscience and appears as an invasion of the civil power in internal life and the belief of the church. This action contradicts both the decree of separation of church and state, and the repeated statements from high central officials about freedom of religious expression and assurances that there will be no order to remove religious objects from churches."⁸ The relics were not removed.

One of the most newsworthy and violent acts of protest occurred on January 19/February 1, 1918 when Alexandra Kollontai, the Commissar of State Welfare, ordered Kronstadt marines to enter the Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg and confiscate the property for use as an asylum for the

⁷Sergei Volkov, *Poslednie u Troitse* (Moscow, 1995), 212-213.

⁸Statement of Patriarch Tikhon, 28 August 1920, in M.E. Gubonin, *Aktyi Sviateishego Tikhona, Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vsia Rossia*, (Moscow: St. Tikhon Institute, 1994), 167.

homeless and war invalids. This Lavra occupies a very important place in Russian culture and history. Russia's most famous medieval hero, Prince Alexander Nevsky, is buried there. People came from thousands of miles to visit this monastery. Therefore, it was a symbol both to Communists and to Orthodox believers. The Communists viewed it as a symbol of the old Russia they wished to destroy, and therefore the confiscation of it would send a powerful message that Communism had overcome the backwardness of Old Russia.

For the Orthodox, Alexander Nevsky Lavra was a symbol of their faith, and of all the old values and traditions the Bolsheviks were attacking. Therefore, when the soldiers arrived, the monks were determined not to easily surrender. The head of the Lavra, Bishop Prokopii, refused to surrender the monastery's belongings. The Red Guards promptly arrested him. The monks rang the church bells in alarm, calling over 2000 people who lived nearby. Fighting broke out between the people defending the Lavra, mostly women, and the Red Guards. During the riots, a priest, Fr. Skipetrov, was shot and killed. One interesting aspect of this incident was the behavior of soldiers living in the vicinity of the Lavra. The bells brought them to the Lavra, where some of them sided with the Red Guards, but others defended the Lavra against their fellow soldiers. The Red Guards were forced to leave the Lavra without accomplishing their mission.⁹

The Bolsheviks did not expect the extreme violence that accompanied the attempts to nationalize church property, and many did not agree with Kollontai's order. V.D. Bonch-Bruевич, a scientist and a friend of Lenin's who was also an expert on sectarians, publicly stated that he was not an enemy of the Church, and that he would "give his protection to the announced church demonstration which might arise out of this incident."¹⁰ In a surprisingly candid newspaper account, the leaders at the Smolny in Petrograd (the Bolshevik headquarters) admitted they had not foreseen how "Madame Alexandra Kollontai's decree would make such an impression on the population of Petrograd. Especially unexpected was the attitude of the soldiers toward the church that is being separated from the state."¹¹ They gave no other reference to the behavior of the soldiers, but this incident in the heart of Red Petrograd¹² illustrated to the Bolsheviks that eradicating the influence of religion from people's lives would be more difficult than they had envisioned.

Lenin's death on January 21, 1924 provided the Soviets with another attempt to lessen the power of the Church over the people. At Joseph Stalin's urging and with the support of the "God-builders" such as Anatoly Lunarcharski, Lenin's body was embalmed and put on display in a mausoleum constructed for that purpose in Red Square. Such a procedure was directly at odds with Lenin's own wishes regarding his burial and with the wishes of his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya.

⁹*Russkaia Vedomosti*, January 25, 1918

¹⁰Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief* (Helsinki: SHS, 1994), 70.

¹¹*Russkaia Vedomosti*, January 23, 1918.

¹²The city of St. Petersburg has undergone several name changes throughout the twentieth century. In August 1914, it was christened Petrograd in a patriotic reaction against the "Germanic" name of St. Petersburg. In 1924, shortly after V.I Lenin's death, the city was renamed Leningrad in his honor. In 1991, after the breakup of the Soviet Union it received its original name back.

However, the God-builders were victorious, and Lenin became the first “Soviet saint.”¹³ The purpose for this cult of Lenin is obvious: to create a secular alternative to the Orthodox Church. Knowing that the centuries-old tradition of venerating saints in Russia would not be eliminated, they decided to replace the traditional Orthodox saints with a Soviet one. Generations of Soviet schoolchildren made pilgrimages to Lenin’s tomb to remember the father of the Soviet Union, and it was always the centerpiece of the traditional May Day parades. However, Lenin’s new position as a relic did not replace the deep reverence the Russian faithful held for their saints, and the belief in holy relics and their power remains to this day.

The controversy over relics in Russia is not unique to the Bolsheviks. During the time of Peter the Great and his Spiritual Regulation, there were many accusations of monks and nuns, as well as clergy, making fraudulent claims of miraculous icons and relics.¹⁴ Those accused were placed on trial and if found guilty, punished accordingly. However, there are some major differences when comparing those cases of relic exposure to the cases in the 1920s. The major difference is the motivation of the accusers and the nature of the trials. These trials occurred in ecclesiastical courts, where the issue never was the legitimacy of relics in general. The concern of the clerics responsible was to prove whether or not the particular relics in question were legitimate. The motivation was to preserve the integrity of relics in the Orthodox Church. Strict standards were used to determine if a relic was genuine. In the cases of relic exposure during the 1920s, the atheistic government was trying to convince the population that the Church in general was fraudulent, and relics and miraculous icons did not exist. The motivation of these cases was to de-legitimize the Orthodox Church in general.

The debate over relics is only part of the story of Russian monasticism during the civil war years, but an examination of the relic-exposing campaign provides us with crucial information as to the methods of resistance that monks and nuns used to defend not only monasticism, but Orthodoxy. Patriarch Tikhon’s letter to the Council of People’s Commissars using the Bolsheviks’ laws to successfully prevent St. Sergius’ relics from being moved illustrates how the Orthodox hierarchy quickly learned to work within the system. The violent outbursts at Holy Trinity Lavra and at Alexander Nevsky Lavra also show that the Bolsheviks had severely underestimated the emotional hold that religion had on the general population, including among Red Army soldiers. Although not

13For more about the attempts of the Communist Party to create its own religion, see Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *Red Apocalypse: The Religious Evolution of Soviet Communism* (New York: University Press of America, 1996). For more on the cult of Lenin, see Nina Tumarkhin, *Lenin Lives!* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983 Lenin (Gottingen: Muster-Schmidt, 1996); Trevor Smith, *Lenin for Sale: the rise and fall of the personality cult of V.I Lenin in Soviet Russia* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1996)); Zbarskii, I.B. and Samuel Hutchinson, *Lenin’s Embalmers* (London: Harvill Press, 1998); Olga Velikanova, *Making of an Idol: on uses of Lenin* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1996).

14For more on cases of relic exposure in early modern Russia, see Eve Levin, "False Miracles and Unattested Dead Bodies: Investigations into Popular Cults in Early Modern Russia," in *Official Religion and Lived Religion in the Early Modern World*, ed. James Tracy, forthcoming, Cambridge University Press.

always successful in counteracting the Bolsheviks' efforts to eradicate the relics, monks and nuns still learned valuable lessons about methods of adaptation in an increasingly dangerous world.