

Minnesota Mediterranean and East European  
Monographs

# THE GATES OF HELL

*The Great Sobor  
of the  
Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1918*

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*A Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* Supplement

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

## INTRODUCTION

AT THE BEGINNING of the twentieth century the Russian Orthodox Church was administered by regulations that had been established nearly two hundred years earlier by Peter the Great. These regulations had abolished the Russian patriarchate and replaced it with a synod of bishops called the Holy Governing Synod. Peter's intention was not to improve the administration of the church, but to make it conform to his own administrative structure. The new synod was placed under an Ober-prokurator (director general) appointed by the tsar.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Ober-prokurator was Konstantin Pobedonostsev, who carried Peter's principle to its extreme conclusion by placing the church administration firmly under the control of the tsar. Perhaps in reaction to that control or perhaps because Russia was entering a new era, the Russian Church began to entertain thoughts of reform.

In 1905 Russian political unrest turned to revolution. To slow the tide of change, Tsar Nicholas II offered the Russian people a limited constitution and a *duma* (parliament). He also promised the Russian Church a national *sobor* (council), that would have the authority to effect administrative reforms within the church. Pobedonostsev resigned in protest over these promises. The tsar did give the people a constitution and established the Duma but delayed the promised *sobor* even though the church had completed preparations for the event.<sup>1</sup>

During 1913, when the Romanov dynasty observed its tercentenary, the Russian Church expected the tsar to memorialize that anniversary by keeping his promise to call a national *sobor*. In anticipation of that expectation, the Holy Synod "authorized the formation of a pre-*sobor* conference" to prepare for an All-Russian *sobor*. However, contrary to their expectations, the tsar never authorized the Holy Synod to call the *sobor*. The call for a national *sobor* was continually delayed until the tsar was overthrown in March 1917.<sup>2</sup>

In April the Holy Synod announced its intention to call a national *sobor*. The synod also formed a Pre-*sobor* Council to prepare an agenda and a plan for

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see James Cunningham, *A Vanquished Hope: The Movement for Church Renewal in Russia, 1905-1906* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See chap. 1 below.

calling the sobor. That council was able to build on the work of the 1906 Pre-sobor Commission and the 1912-13 Pre-sobor Conference.<sup>3</sup>

Once it received the call to the “Holy Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church,” the church’s organizational structure allowed it to move with surprising speed. The methods used to select the delegates were strikingly similar to those used by political parties in the United States, except that the Russian Church completed the selection process more quickly.

The call to select delegates was issued on 4 July 1917. On 23 July the parishes selected delegates to the deanery conventions which met on 30 July. These in turn selected delegates to the diocesan conventions, which met on 8 August. The delegates to the national sobor were selected at the diocesan conventions. The delegates were selected by secret ballots at all three levels. At the parish level all adult members, including women, could vote, but only males could be selected as delegates. Session 1 of the Holy Sobor met on 15 August 1917, only six weeks after the call was issued.

The Provisional government abolished the office of Ober-prokurator and placed its responsibilities under the jurisdiction of the newly established Ministry of Denominations. Anton V. Kartashev was appointed minister and on 15 August addressed Session 1 of the sobor. He made it very clear that while the Provisional Government had declared freedom of religion and the separation of church and state, the Russian Orthodox Church was not yet separated from the Provisional Government. He emphasized two paragraphs from the Provisional Government’s proclamation of 11 August which stated that:

1. It is granted to the National Sobor of the All-Russian Church, convening in Moscow, this fifteenth of August, to work out and present for the consideration of the Provisional Government a legal proposal on the new structure for the free, self-administration of the Russian Church.
2. Until such a legal proposal on the new structure of the higher church administration has been accepted by the government, all the regulations of internal church administration exercised by the Holy Synod and established by it remain in effect.

Tikhon Belavin, metropolitan (archbishop and future patriarch) of Moscow and Kolomenskoe, also recognized the close bond between the church and the state. In his address to the sobor, he proclaimed that the Believers in Moscow expect the sobor to perform common labor in the reconstruction of civil life as well.”

While it was set on making the final determination concerning the reorganization of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Provisional Government was

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 2.

also resolute on separating the church from the state. The state's position was made clear to a delegation from the sobor that met with government officials in early October 1917. Led by Archbishop Kirill Smirnov, the delegation protested the Provisional Government's seizure of church schools, their assets, and supporting property which the Provisional Government had nationalized by decree on 20 June 1917. The government had also seized all the church's extensive property not used directly for church activities.

As part of its nationalization of education, the Provisional Government ruled that religion would not be taught in elementary schools. Alexander Kerensky, the prime minister of the Provisional Government, made it clear to the delegation that the confiscation of church property and exclusion of the church's role from education were essential to the separation of church and state.<sup>4</sup> Later discussions in the sobor left no doubt that the Russian Orthodox Church did not welcome the separation.<sup>5</sup>

The reestablishment of the patriarchate was perhaps the most important question facing the sobor. The question, ultimately resolved in the affirmative, was not a foregone conclusion. The recommendation to reestablish the patriarchate which had been shaped in the Commission for Higher Ecclesiastical Administration (Commission II) was presented to the sobor on 11 October 1917.

The minority of the delegates opposing the reestablishment of the patriarchate was large and articulate. The church hierarchy and the less educated lay members favored it, while seminary professors and the more educated lay leaders opposed it. The debate was extensive, and even after it was evident that a majority would favor reestablishment, there were members who wanted discussion to continue.

The arguments favoring the patriarchate generally suggested that in troubled times the people needed a recognized leader, one who would be able to negotiate effectively with the government to protect church interests. Those who opposed the patriarchate argued that an autocratic leader would threaten the popular ideal of sobornost (conciliarity). Sobornost was not a clearly defined ideal. Certainly, it meant that the highest authority in the Russian Church would be a council that would regularly convene, probably every three years. But there was also general agreement that sobornost should extend to the council of bishops and other representative bodies that would govern the church between national sobors. An authoritarian patriarch would undermine that concept of sobornost.

Speakers who generally argued that the patriarchate was compatible with sobornost also often indicated that only a national sobor had greater authority than the patriarch, hinting that the relationship between the patriarch and the bishops

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> See chap. 7.

would not necessarily be characterized by sobornost. Some speakers suggested that a sobor would be called by the patriarch only when he felt it was necessary, suggesting that the patriarch would even be able to circumvent that limit to his authority. In relation to a council of bishops, one advocate of the patriarchate, Father Petr M. Volkov, begged “the sobor to reestablish the patriarchate and to subordinate the Synod of Bishops to the patriarch’s authority.”

In the long debate over the patriarchate, Archimandrite Matthei, rector of the Perm diocese seminary, identified the most serious problem facing the church: “It was not only the intelligentsia who were turning away from the church; recent events indicated the falling away of the lower classes as well, possibly the majority of the people, at a time when there was no shining strength which could reverse that development.”<sup>6</sup> While he may have been wrong to think that a patriarch could reverse these trends, Matthei articulated a fundamental problem facing the church, one which other sobor members apparently failed to recognize. Some members would continue to argue that since the church represented one hundred million people, it should not yield to a hostile government.

On 25 October 1917, the Bolsheviki, led by Vladimir Lenin, stormed the Winter Palace in Petrograd and overthrew the Provisional Government. On Saturday, 28 October, the sobor met for Session 31. Before the session, Metropolitan Tikhon sang a special *Te Deum* during which the sobor prayed for stability of government. Evidently the delegates recognized the gravity of the change in government.<sup>7</sup>

The shock of the Bolshevik coup encouraged the sobor to end its deliberations over establishing the patriarchate. Those who opposed the establishment attempted to delay the vote by arguing that the sobor had not even spelled out the patriarch’s role. Nevertheless, the sobor voted to end debate and with minor amendments, accepted the recommendation of the Commission on Supreme Ecclesiastical Administration to establish the patriarchate.

The debate then turned to the method of electing the patriarch. The sobor settled on a combination of election and selection by lot. In the balloting Metropolitan Antonii Khrapovitskii was the most popular, with Metropolitan Arsenii Stadnitskii being second, and Metropolitan Tikhon Belavin coming in third. Lots were drawn and Tikhon won.

In the sessions that followed the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd, the sobor’s deliberations were often interrupted with reports of clashes between Provisional Government soldiers and Bolshevik forces in Moscow. Immediately following the coup, Kadet forces loyal to the Provisional Government and occupying the Kremlin were about to be defeated by the Bolsheviki, a likelihood of which the sobor was aware. While the sobor itself met in a cathedral just outside the

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<sup>6</sup> See chap. 4.

<sup>7</sup> See chap. 5.

Kremlin, the sobor commissions used church facilities within the Kremlin walls. Aside from consideration of their own safety, the sobor was also concerned about the welfare of the holy places within the Kremlin. Metropolitan Platon was assigned the task of meeting with the Bolshevik leaders in an attempt to safeguard these places, and accompanied by peasant members of the sobor, Platon, though an admirable negotiator, was unable to forestall the attack on the Kremlin and the resulting extensive damage.

Father Stefan V. Nezhintsev, a delegate from Vladivostok, suggested that the sobor should form and lead a militia, as Patriarch Hermogen had done during the Time of Troubles in the early seventeenth century. Although some other sobor members were sympathetic to Nezhintsev's suggestion, none were willing to follow his advice.

While preparing for the enthronement of the new patriarch, the sobor debated the relationship between the sobor and the secular authority, relationships within the church, as well as the relationship of the church with those outside of it. While historians have often overlooked the relationship between the church and the Provisional Government, the sobor regularly recorded the government's transgressions against the church; it was the Provisional Government that confiscated the church's income producing property, its schools, and financial reserves, including teachers' retirement funds.

The Provisional Government secularized Russia's educational system; the teaching of religion was no longer allowed in the early grades. Furthermore it was forbidden to mention the government in the liturgy, for priests to promote candidates for election to the Constituent Assembly, and, in fact, for church personnel to even mention those elections.<sup>8</sup> As minister of denominations, Anton V. Kartashev symbolized the government's anti-Orthodox policy. It was understandable then that sobor members reacted with mixed emotions when Kartashev was arrested by the Bolsheviks and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. When arguing for a patriarchate rather than a ministry or Ober-prokurator to represent the church, Archpriest Pavel V. Lakhotskii noted the satisfaction with which the news of Kartashev's incarceration had been received, although many were sympathetic with his plight.<sup>9</sup>

The sobor did not recognize the Bolsheviks as a government. So, Metropolitan Platon regularly defended his negotiations with them claiming that he was dealing with those who had physical control over the Kremlin and were in charge of local affairs.<sup>10</sup> The sobor had consistently placed its hope on the Constituent Assembly as the future representative of legitimate government in Russia, a hope

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<sup>8</sup> See chaps. 1-5 passim.

<sup>9</sup> See chap. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 6.

crushed by Lenin when he dissolved the Constituent Assembly shortly after it convened in January 1918.

The aftermath of the Bolshevik takeover in Moscow presented a more immediate problem for the sobor. Many soldiers, both Kadets and Bolsheviks, had been killed in the week-long battles. All those who died in the battle for the Kremlin had been buried by the Kremlin wall, but none had received proper Christian burial. The sobor was reluctant to accept responsibility to conduct such services which normally were the responsibility of a local pastor. Furthermore, it was irreconcilably divided as to who should receive a Christian burial. Among the dead were atheist Communists, Jews, and people of other religions as well as Orthodox.

Metropolitan Antonii Khrapovitskii, generally a conservative leader, spoke for many members when he indicated his willingness to officiate at services for any of the fallen, Kadets or Bolsheviks. Others indicated that they would be willing to officiate at services for the fallen even when the fallen included Jews and, as Metropolitan Arsenii Stadnitskii suggested, "it would be appropriate to pray for any Mohammedans buried there as well." The opponents of such a liberal spirit of Christianity argued that only Orthodox Christians should receive Orthodox services. The sobor resolved the issue by agreeing that clerical delegates could participate in the services on a voluntary basis. Although it would not officially sponsor the services, the sobor would not hold a session during that time.

At the 11 November session, the sobor adopted a letter to the Russian people. The letter contained a strong public attack on the Bolsheviks without naming them: "Divine Wrath is still being poured out upon us. We can expect that, because of new transgressions, His righteous anger will even increase." The encyclical listed the many transgressions of the Bolsheviks including the destruction of the sacred places in the Kremlin and the general destruction of churches around the country. The letter was clearly encouraging the Russian people to oppose the Bolsheviks. Members of the sobor regularly argued that since there were one hundred million Russian Orthodox, the church had the power to stand up to a hostile government, Provisional or Bolshevik. Seldom, however, did members of the sobor recognize the extent to which the church had alienated itself from the Russian people, or the extent to which the Bolsheviks had exploited that alienation.

In an effort to clarify their position on the relationship between the church and state, on 15 November, the sobor opened debate on its Bill of Rights, a charter outlining the legal relationship of the church to the state. This charter was being drafted explicitly for the future Constituent Assembly which the sobor expected would represent the Russian state. The debate was guided by the traditional concept of *symphonia* (cooperation between church and state), which, certainly most discussants agreed, had not been characteristic of church-state relations in Russia since the reforms of Peter the Great over two hundred years earlier. The

debate provided a telling picture of the church leaders' perceptions of the proper relationship of the church to the state. The overwhelming majority of the delegates agreed that, no matter which government was established in Russia, the Orthodox Church should have a legal relationship with it.<sup>11</sup>

While most discussants absolutely rejected the separation of the church from the state, Nikolai D. Kuznetsov, attorney from Moscow, wondered how the sobor could "formulate a projected law on the relation of the church to the state, at a time when no such state existed." The lengthy debate on symphonia was eerily incongruous against the backdrop of Bolshevik control of the state. It would also have been incongruous under the auspices of the Provisional Government because the Provisional Government had publicly announced and demonstrated its support for the separation of the church and state. Certainly the sobor had no reason to expect the Constituent Assembly to adopt a different principle.

Regardless of the political outcome, discussions at the sobor indicated that the members expected the government to provide a privileged position for the Orthodox faith in relation to other religions. The sobor expected the government to: (1) support financially the Orthodox Church—ostensibly to compensate the church for keeping the vital statistics (births, deaths, and marriages) for the state; (2) protect church property and grant it tax exempt status; (3) enforce church laws against blasphemy as well as offenses such as insulting a priest; (4) require religious education in the elementary grades of public schools; and (5) agree that the "head of the government," the "minister of denominations," and the "minister of education" be Orthodox.

Kuznetsov was the only person to point out that the sobor was ignoring reality. He consistently argued that the sobor did not understand the nature of contemporary governments. It was not only the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks which would ignore the sobor's demands. Western governments in general separated the affairs of the church and state. The sobor should have no reason to expect the Constituent Assembly to act differently and would be wasting its time trying to draft the basis for a working relationship, even in the area of education which both the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks would take away from the church.

In the eyes of many Russian Church historians, Kuznetsov was a compromiser, working with the government against the interests of the church, but Kuznetsov was a much more complex person. Although it is true that in the 1920s he was to be one of the organizers of the Living Church movement that would replace the established Orthodox Church,<sup>12</sup> during the sobor Kuznetsov also demonstrated a genuine concern for the spiritual mission of the church. In the area

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> See chap. 19.



of marriage, he argued that the church should not allow mixed marriages because the spiritual dimension of Orthodox marriage could not be experienced by only one spouse.<sup>13</sup> On the issue of metrical books (official records on vital statistics) he favored government acceptance of the church's record keeping. Metrical books were necessary for a well run state, but many countries in Europe, including Russia, had traditionally left the recording of those details to the church. Secular states increasingly kept their own records. Kuznetsov argued that the church's registering of those milestones of life served as a subliminal reminder to everyone that there is a spiritual dimension to birth, marriage, and death.

Kuznetsov also held a complex position on church schools, arguing that these should be state accredited. "Lack of accreditation would lead to a reduction in the number of Russians who would be instructed in the religious and moral principles which were so important for the good of the Russian people and all government." However, he did not think the sobor could demand that the state require Orthodox religious education in state schools.

The spirit of the times was striving to turn the Russian state school onto a non-religious path. . . . To insist on raising Orthodox children in an Orthodox spirit in state schools under those circumstances would mean to act outside of time and space, and to propose a law to that effect would be to propose a law for a future time that was unknown to the present sobor.

He argued that even if the state were to require religious instruction in public schools, it would not be "in the spirit of the Orthodox Church," because education "in the spirit of the Orthodox Church" could not be legislated; that phrase, therefore, should be stricken from Paragraph 19 of the Bill of Rights. While he believed that the spiritual nature of the church could not be threatened by a secular state, Kuznetsov also recognized that in many areas the church could complement the state to the advantage of both institutions.

The sobor finished its discussion on church-state relations on 17 November 1917. The original agenda for the sobor had called for the completion of the draft on the structure of the higher church administration before the patriarch was selected. But as noted earlier, uncertain times had prompted the sobor to select a patriarch earlier than originally planned. In fact, the sobor had only been able to introduce the draft document on higher church administration as drafted by the Commission on Higher Ecclesiastical Administration before the patriarch was enthroned on 21 November 1917.

This original draft granted considerable authority to the patriarch. In regard to the decisions made by the Synod of Bishops or the Higher Ecclesiastical Council, the patriarch was empowered to

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<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 8.

veto any decision or to postpone its implementation. If he finds the decision is harmful to the church, he has the right to cancel it and postpone the matter until the next Council, or if it is urgent, he may make the decision himself and then either convene an emergency Council or report the matter to the next Council.<sup>14</sup>

In the final version, approved by the sobor after pointed debate, the patriarch's authority appeared to be greatly reduced. Paragraph 18 stated that "all matters are to be submitted by the patriarch to the Synod of Bishops and the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council." Furthermore the patriarch was denied the "right to veto any business or postpone any decisions."

However, section 3 of the same paragraph practically reversed the severe limitations to patriarchal authority delineated by the first two sections. It suggested that "if the patriarch found any decision harmful to the church," he would "have the right to cancel it and postpone the matter until the next sobor or, if urgent, make the decision himself."<sup>15</sup> Obviously, on issues very important to a patriarch, he could wield significant power.

The sobor met for Session 65, the final, of the first sitting on 9 December 1917. Secretary Shein read a petition, which had been signed by 50 members and recommended by the Sobor Council (the sobor's executive body). The petition asked the Constituent Assembly to annul the Provisional Government's action that had stripped the church of its parish school system and placed it under the Ministry of Education. The sobor approved the petition.<sup>16</sup>

The members of the sobor had not yet reconciled themselves to the Bolshevik takeover. They also had unrealistic expectations of favorable treatment from the Constituent Assembly. It was not likely that the assembly would have reversed the Provisional Government's secularization of Russia's educational system.

When the sobor reconvened for its second sitting, Session 66, on Saturday, 20 January 1918, the mood was very different. The delegates knew that they would be dealing with the Bolsheviks, the only government in Russia. Only two weeks earlier, 5 January, the Constituent Assembly had convened, but the following morning Soviet troops had dispersed its members; the assembly had made no further attempts to meet.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Vladimir S. Tolstoy, "The Sacred Council of the Russian Orthodox Church: Moscow, 1917-18" (United States Naval Academy, 1983), 180; chap. 10 below.

<sup>15</sup>Tolstoy, "Sacred Council," 186.

<sup>16</sup>Government Archives of the Russian Federation (hereafter GARF), f. 3431, op. 1, d. 4, l. 291; see below, chap. 10.

<sup>17</sup>Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 528.

In preparation for reconvening the Holy Sobor, Patriarch Tikhon drafted an encyclical to the Russian people. Although the encyclical contained a scathing attack on the Bolsheviks, there was tacit recognition that they were the only secular authority in Russia. The sobor was asked to approve this encyclical before it was released to the Russian people. The sobor did so, after favorably debating its contents while reviewing the current situation in Russia.<sup>18</sup>

There was a tragicomical dimension to the patriarch's encyclical. A portion of it addressed to the Bolshevik leaders declared: "Madmen, recover your senses. Cease your bloody vengeance. Your reward will be the fires of Gehenna in the afterlife and the dreadful condemnation of future generations in this earthly life." Tikhon followed this condemnation with the order: "By the authority given us by God we forbid you to participate in the Eucharist. We anathematize you." Surely the Bolshevik leaders, of whom many were avowed atheists, would have scoffed at an order denying them the Eucharist.

Before the sobor had convened for its second sitting, the Bolsheviks had expropriated the Alexander Nevsky Lavra in Petrograd—although they could not take immediate possession—as well as the Synodal Press. The Alexander Nevsky Lavra was one of the primary monasteries in the Russian Church, and the printing press was a large complex that included its own electrical power plant. These major losses to the church foreshadowed the Bolshevik government's confiscation of the church's remaining property.

However, the response from the sobor again was tragically out of touch with the times. Prince Evgenii Nikolaevich Trubetskoi advocated excommunication of Mademoiselle Aleksandra Kollontai (commissar for the Ministry of State Welfare) and all those involved in expropriating the Alexander Nevsky Lavra. Furthermore, the prince recommended wide circulation of the document of excommunication. Prince Trubetskoi's attitude and recommendations for excommunication were widely shared by the members of the sobor. While fearful, they seemed not to recognize that the traditionally awesome power of the church was already gone. This fear of powerlessness also exposed an underlying conservative philosophy held by some of the members of the sobor.

Father Vladimir Ignatievich Vostokov, priest of the Ufa Cathedral, addressed the "root cause of the terror." He suggested that the Bolshevik terror was six decades in the making. That would have dated the beginning of the "breakdown" to the reforms of Alexander II in the 1860s. Vostokov identified the enemy as socialism fostered by "international Masonic organizations." He argued that "socialism was inherently antichristian and bore with it the trauma of muzzling by the antichrist." When Vostokov charged that, "Russians had lost their tsar and fallen under the power of the Jews," voices from among the members

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<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 11.

erupted, shouting “true, true.” Metropolitan Stadnitskii, chairing the session, found it necessary to gavel them back to order. But clearly Vostokov’s conservative hostility to socialism and his antisemitism had strong support among a subgroup of the members of the sobor.

Many of the issues debated by the sobor divided members along liberal and conservative lines. During the last week in January the sobor debated diocesan structure and methods for appointing bishops. The proposals from the Commission on Diocesan Administration (III) advocated a democratic structure. A diocesan assembly that would include a significant portion of laymen would be elected by the church members. Bishops would also be selected by similar elections.

The conservative members argued that only bishops could select bishops. Bishop Theodor of Volokolamsk summarized his lengthy argument by announcing that “if they introduced the methods and manners of civilian life into the life of the church, it would be at their own peril. The church, guided by the Holy Spirit, was by its very nature different from civilian life.”<sup>19</sup> Theodor also commented that the delegates had recently observed how the “domination of numbers, manipulated by a small minority of people, had worked in civil life.” He concluded with the threat that “if they adopted the formula worked out by Commission III, he would not sign when the time came to swear acceptance of the decisions of the sobor.” Nevertheless, over a period of several days, the sobor did adopt paragraph after paragraph that democratized the diocesan assembly and the selection of the bishop.

The sobor’s Commission on Parishes also favored democratizing parish structure to the extent that it even recommended that the parish priest be selected by the members of the parish. The sobor overturned that recommendation, however, and the final statement read: “The clergy will not be elected by the parishes but will be chosen and nominated by the bishop.”<sup>20</sup>

On 24 January 1918, the sobor faced the possibility of being forcibly disbanded. To prepare for that possibility, the sobor adopted a resolution that “all members of the sobor retain their full authority until such time as it would be able to resume its deliberations on other premises or in another city,”<sup>21</sup> suggesting that the sobor continued to view the Bolshevik takeover as temporary. It is obvious, however, that the sobor did recognize that even a temporary Bolshevik regime had the potential to do great damage to the church.

On the preceding day, 23 January, the Council of People’s Commissars, chaired by Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin), issued a “Decree . . . concerning the separa-

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<sup>19</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 12.

<sup>20</sup> See chap. 16.

<sup>21</sup> See chap. 12.

tion of the church from the state, and schools from the church.”<sup>22</sup> The delegates were devastated and enraged by the decree. The sobor responded with a lengthy proclamation to the Russian people which was to be read in every church. The proclamation angrily attacked the Bolsheviks “currently wielding power”:

To fulfill their satanic scheme the People’s Commissars now has issued a decree in which they have separated the church from the state and legalized an open persecution of the Orthodox Church, . . . . Not abhorring deceitfulness, these enemies of Christ falsely expect to achieve their aims under the guise of being zealots for total religious freedom.<sup>23</sup>

For the next several days, the sobor’s agenda called for discussion of a charter for diocesan organization, but a considerable amount of time was also spent discussing the relationship between the church and the state. This discussion was necessary because the new Bolshevik government had created a revolutionary environment which completely destroyed the old relationship. During the discussions, however, no delegate seemed to demonstrate an understanding of the new revolutionary environment.

Even the type of church and state separation practiced in the United States would not have been acceptable to the vast majority of delegates. But they were now facing a revolutionary government that not only demanded the separation of the church, but also claimed that all property belonged to the state. That meant that the church could no longer own property. The Provisional Government had nationalized church schools and the income property of the church, but the Bolshevik concept of property included the church buildings themselves as well as the monasteries and the Synodal Press. Eventually, it would also become clear that the Bolsheviks considered the gold, silver, and jewels of the Eucharistic vessels and even the icon covers to be public property.

The sobor members realized the magnitude of the Bolshevik decree on the separation, and as they visualized the nature of the church, the decree meant the destruction of the church. No delegate argued that a church could exist without property and without power, but that was the only type of church that would be able to exist within the parameters tolerated by the Bolsheviks. While the concept of a church without property was popular among some western denominations, the Russian Orthodox Church had long before rejected that concept when it condemned Nil Sorskii and his “non-possessors” at a church council in 1503.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The full text is reproduced below, chap. 12, n. 12.

<sup>23</sup> See chap. 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar’* (St. Petersburg, 1897), s.v. “Nil’ Sorskii”; Dimitry Pospelovsky also mentions a Union for Church Renovation that presented a memorandum on church reform to Metropolitan Antonii Vadkovskii in 1905 (*The Russian Church under*

It was not until several decades after the Great Sobor of 1917-18 that the Russian emigre theologian, Nikolai Afanas'ev, defined a church structure that could have been applied to the Russian Orthodox Church and, perhaps, survive Bolshevik rule. In Afanas'ev's church, authority came from the people, not from above, and property was not necessary for the church's survival.<sup>25</sup>

This alternative view of church structure was not one of the perspectives debated in the sobor, though the 1920s Living Church schism did support a structure closely resembling the structure later advocated by Afanas'ev. One of the active participants in the sobor debates, Kuznetsov, became a founding leader in that church schism.

Kuznetsov, a lawyer, argued that "the relations between church and state did not depend on the personal opinions of those in power, but on state law."<sup>26</sup> Hence, he argued that the sobor could not legally replace the Holy Governing Synod because the synod was the legal organization that owned the church's property. He argued that the sobor should not "confuse government with the transitory personalities who made up the regime, which currently held power and was acting against the church."

Unable to break from its traditional view of the Russian Orthodox Church as a property owner with rights and privileges to be protected by the state, the sobor formulated a church structure that was in direct conflict with the parameters allowed by the Bolsheviks. Prince Evgenii Trubetskoi probably spoke for the overwhelming majority of the members when he said that "they could only hope that, after the passing of the Bolsheviks, there would emerge a legal government they would be able to recognize."

Indeed, the Bolshevik intrusion on the affairs of the church was felt by the sobor daily. The Synodal Press in Petrograd had been taken over by the Bolsheviks several weeks earlier, but the Synodal Press in Moscow, with the support of its workers, was still serving the sobor. The workers, however, refused to publish Patriarch Tikhon's encyclical that so severely attacked the Bolshevik party and its leadership. The encyclical contained such bitter invective against the Bolsheviks and their leaders that if the press had attempted to publish it, the press would almost certainly have been confiscated by the People's Commissars, and the workers most certainly would have lost their jobs. The sobor's representatives did

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*the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984], 1:47).

<sup>25</sup> Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Theology in the Russian Diaspora: Church, Fathers, Eucharist in Nikolai Afanas'ev (1893-1966)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 13.

not seem to recognize that likelihood and continued to pressure the workers to publish the encyclical.<sup>27</sup>

On Saturday, 3 February 1918, the debate in the sobor was interrupted by what was to frequently mar its sessions later in the summer. At 12:10 P.M. Patriarch Tikhon entered the hall and announced that Metropolitan Vladimir Bogoiavlenskii had been murdered in Kiev by the Bolsheviks.

To a remarkable extent, however, the sobor continued its work of restructuring the church with minimal reference to government intrusion and a week later gave its final approval to diocesan organization. Then the sobor turned to a major issue that had divided the Russian Church for two hundred years, that of the *Starobriadtsy* (old believers). Not all of the Old Believers were schismatics; some of them had been reunited with the Russian Orthodox Church and were called “*Edinoverie*.” These Edinoverie were represented in the sobor. Though united with the Orthodox Church, they were not integrated into the church. They still worshiped in the old manner in churches with old style architecture and maintained a separate identity.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the Edinoverie, there were several other branches of the Old Believers who were not in communion with the Orthodox, namely, the *Bezpopovtsy* (without priests) and the Belokrinitsa or Austrian Old Believers. The Belokrinitsa Old Believers got their name because they had gone to a Greek Catholic monastery in Belokrinitsa, Austria, where several of their leaders were ordained as bishops. Thus the two major factions of the Old Believers were divided between those who had neither priests nor hierarchy and those who had both priests and a hierarchy.

On the theory that having their own separate hierarchy would enable the Edinoverie to serve as a catalyst to reunite the other Old Believer factions with the Orthodox Church, the sobor Commission on Edinoverie and Starobriadchestvo (X), recommended that the sobor establish a separate hierarchy for them. This position was rejected by several delegates who suggested that a separate hierarchy for the Edinoverie would, at the very least, create non-canonical overlapping jurisdictions, but would probably lead to a new schism which would then have its own hierarchy. The sobor finally agreed that “United Old Believers’ parishes in Orthodox dioceses . . . are to be administered by a special vicar bishop for United Old Believers.”

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<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 14.

<sup>28</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 16.

The Great Russian Sobor met for its third and final sitting from 6 (Julian calendar) (19 [Gregorian calendar]) July 1918 to 7 (20) September 1918.<sup>29</sup> The opening of the third sitting coincided with the executions of Nicholas II and his family by the Bolsheviks at Ekaterinburg on the night of 3 (16) July. When Session 120 of the sobor opened on 6 (19) July, Patriarch Tikhon served a *panikhida* (memorial) for the “murdered sovereign Nicholas II.”

There was a certain irony in serving the *panikhida*. While he was tsar, Nicholas had been the nemesis of church reform. He refused to call a church sobor. The call for the sobor that was sitting at that moment was made possible only because the tsar had been pressured into abdicating a year and a half earlier. Several of the leaders of the sobor had been mistreated by the tsar during the Rasputin Affair. The sobor was in the process of reconstructing itself without the tsar as its head, yet the sobor paused to memorialize this private citizen as if he were a “murdered sovereign.”

The Russian Church leaders faced further problems because the patriarch had served a *panikhida* memorializing Nicholas. Nicholas and his family had been executed by the Bolsheviks, who at that moment were in control of the Russian government, but who were still facing a strong challenge for that control by forces sympathetic to the deposed tsar. Any sympathy for the memory of the tsar could be viewed as support for the forces that had supported him, i.e., the White Armies who at that very time were attempting to overthrow the Bolsheviks.

The patriarch did not limit his public show of respect for the fallen tsar to the *panikhida*. The following Sunday, 8 July, during his sermon at the Kazan Cathedral in Moscow, the patriarch said that “murdering the tsar was like murdering the head of the church.”

From the perspective of the Bolshevik leaders, the patriarch could not have made more overt statements identifying the Russian Orthodox Church with the fallen tsar. Previously (January 1918), the patriarch had attracted the attention of the Bolshevik leaders with his encyclical that condemned them so openly. Even though they could have distanced themselves from the patriarch’s encyclical by doing nothing, the sobor delegates overwhelmingly supported the patriarch’s encyclical just as they had provided the setting for the *panikhida* for the former tsar.

The Lockhart Affair also got the attention of the Bolsheviks. During the summer of 1918, Bruce Lockhart, a British agent in Russia, made contact with a number of influential Russians and tried to gain their support for the forces—backed by Britain, France, and the United States—who were attempting to overthrow the Bolshevik government. Lockhart contacted Patriarch Tikhon, and Tikhon responded. While his response may have been ambiguous, the Bolsheviks,

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<sup>29</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other references on this topic reflect material discussed in chapter 17.



with some justification, interpreted that response as supportive of Lockhart's project.

Certainly, the Bolsheviks would be watching the Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders very closely as they claimed to have the support of over one hundred million Russians, and, certainly, the patriarch's activities on the four occasions already mentioned—the encyclical anathematizing the Bolsheviks, the memorial service for the former tsar, the sermon associating the tsar with the church, and the Lockhart Affair—could convince the Bolsheviks that the church, and especially its leader, Patriarch Tikhon, were inimical to Bolshevik leadership.

It may be debatable that the actions of the church brought on the persecution that followed, but there can be no doubt that the persecution did follow, and whenever the secretary or the presider announced the murder of a priest or bishop throughout the duration of the sobor, the delegates responded by singing "Rest with the Saints." That hymn was sung many times during those last three months.

Between the intervals of singing "Rest with the Saints," the delegates continued their task on the reorganization of the church and several other issues. Two controversial issues still relatively current were the women's role in the church and the relationship of the Russian Church with the church in Ukraine. In the statement on "The Position of Women in the Life of the church," women were given several new rights. Among them were the right to participate and vote in parish and diocesan committees, the right to be employed as elders, and "the right to fill the role of psalmist with all its rights and obligations, but without inclusion among the clergy."<sup>30</sup>

Apparently the draft had been adopted earlier and, according to procedure, the approved version had been sent to the Editing Commission to be placed into the proper format for publication. Normally the commission would edit the work and forward the edited version to the sobor. Usually it would receive final approval, generally without discussion. In the case of the document on women, the Editing Commission evidently had gone beyond its role as editor. The commission members felt that the new roles granted to women violated church canons and asked the sobor to reconsider the document.

The document was again discussed by the sobor on 11 July 1918, with Archpriest Petr A. Mirtov, the chair of the Commission on Church Discipline, defending the document and the chair of the Editing Commission challenging it. The document was again sent to the Editing Commission, essentially in its original form, and on 6 and 7 September 1918, the final version, including the expanded role for women, was passed, apparently without further discussion.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (St. Petersburg; hereafter, RGIA), f. 833, op. 1, d. (ed.khran.) 59; below, chap. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Below, chap. 17; chap. 18.

Recent direction of the church on that issue seems to reflect the spirit of the Editing Commission rather than the spirit of the sobor in interpreting that expanded role of women. In 1984 a church historian, who described the sobor's action wrote: "Also, in exceptional situations women are to be allowed to serve as psalmists and readers on a par with men, but without the status of members of the clergy."<sup>32</sup> There was no evidence that the sobor implied that women should be psalmists only "in exceptional situations."

Another recent direction of the Russian Church that relates to the sobor is the Ukrainian Church issue of autocephaly. The dynamics of the relationship between the Russian Church and the church in Ukraine in 1918 has been very closely mirrored in Russian-Ukrainian Church relations in the 1990s.

The sobor had begun discussions on the question of autocephaly for the church in Ukraine during its first sitting in the fall of 1917. The sobor sent Vladimir, metropolitan of Kiev, back to Kiev to investigate the growing drive for the autocephaly for the Ukrainian Church. While there he was murdered by the Bolsheviks. The sobor replaced Vladimir with Metropolitan Antonii Khrapovitskii, one of the cochairs of the sobor and the recipient of the highest number of votes for patriarch. Antonii went to Kiev during the recess between the second and third sitting of the sobor and then reported that he would be unable to return for the final sitting.<sup>33</sup>

During the discussion on the Ukrainian Church, one delegate complained that Metropolitan Antonii, in Kiev, "was maintaining a profound silence."<sup>34</sup> The sobor recognized that Ukraine had organized a powerful movement for political independence, and that many who supported political independence for Ukraine also supported autocephaly for the Ukrainian Church.

The sobor appeared to be sensitive to Ukrainian sentiments during much of the debate and seemed to be developing a position toward autonomy and near autocephaly for Ukraine. These discussions suggested a sympathetic response to the proposal that Ukraine be granted its own church organization headed by its own sobor with its own supreme ecclesiastical administration. This structure would tie the Russian and Ukrainian Church through a shared patriarchate. "Bishop Ilarion summed up the opinion of several speakers when he noted that it was essential for the Ukrainian Church to maintain union with the Russian Church through the person of the patriarch."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982*, 1:35.

<sup>33</sup> See chap. 17.

<sup>34</sup> See chap. 18.

<sup>35</sup> RGIA, f. 833, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 117-33; below, chap. 18.

The final statement on Ukraine adopted by the sobor provided substantially less autonomy than the discussions had suggested. While it recognized that Ukraine was “organized as an ecclesiastical region with a special status on the basis of autonomy,” the document also stated that “the autonomy of the Ukrainian Church is limited to local church matters: administrative, educational, missionary, charitable, monastic, economic, court in certain instances, and marriage, but does not extend to matters of a general church significance.”<sup>36</sup> The autonomy of the Ukrainian Church was virtually identical to the autonomy granted to any other diocese in the Russian Orthodox Church.

The long awaited Great Sobor with the task of church reconstruction independent of the tsar was coming to an end. Session 170, the last session of the Great Sobor of the Russian Church, opened at 10:00 A.M. on 7 September 1918 in the cathedral. It was a working session, not a ceremonial session as one might have expected. Patriarch Tikhon presided over the remaining 134 delegates who were present, thirty-two of them bishops. The minutes indicate that the sobor acted on sixty-six items, many of them major, including final passage of the document on women’s role in the church, the Ukrainian Church regulations, and instructions regarding circumstances for the self-sufficiency of the dioceses.<sup>37</sup>

Secretary Shein read a list of those who had died or been killed as of 7 September for their devotion to the faith and the church. The delegates responded by singing “Rest with the Saints.” Kuznetsov, who would later become a leader in the Living Church movement, gave a report on his committee’s dealing with the Council of People’s Commissars. He was interrupted by shouts of “Out of Order.”<sup>38</sup>

Patriarch Tikhon gave the closing speech at the last session of the last sitting of the Great Sobor. The business session ended at 2:45 P.M. followed by the sobor’s vocal rendition of the Te Deum. The patriarch left the sobor at 3:15 P.M. The stenographic minutes were signed by Arsenii Stadnitskii, cochair of the sobor, and Vasilii Shein, secretary of the sobor.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See chap. 18.

<sup>37</sup> GARF, f. 3431, op. 1, d. 6, ll. 177-80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*