

Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution 1905-1946*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003. 259 pp. + selected bibliography

Edward E. Roslof's authoritative volume *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* examines the response of Orthodox adherents to the Soviet regime's attempts to split the patriarchal Russian Orthodox Church and undermine the episcopate's authority by supporting the Living Church (*Zhivaia Tserkov'*), or Renovationist Church in the 1920s and 1930s. 'Red priests' was the pejorative term applied to Renovationist clergy; they were neither white (married) nor black (celibate), traditional categories dividing and defining Orthodox priests, but red, a reference to their support for the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks' major strategy against religion in the 1920s was to support the Living Church, an Orthodox schismatic sect which promoted loyalty to both Orthodox Christianity and the Soviet regime. The rise and fall of the Living Church has received scant attention in English-language literature on both Soviet religious policy and on Russian Orthodoxy in the post-Revolutionary decades.

Support for church reform at the turn of the nineteenth century provided the impetus for attempts to reconcile Orthodox belief with Bolshevik ideology. After Patriarch Tikhon was imprisoned, two metropolitans set up a provisional ecclesiastical administration. They purged the hierarchy of bishops hostile to the regime, consecrated their own bishops, declared Tikhon deposed, and sent some prelates into exile. Orthodox clergy and laity, who refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Living Church were persecuted. A large number of parishes joined the schismatics; during the national church council of May 1923 Renovationists claimed control of nearly 70 per cent of parishes in the Soviet Union.

Roslof makes a major contribution to scholarship on religion in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s by recognising that the success initially enjoyed by the schismatics was largely a result of support from aggrieved white clergy and by focusing on the laity's response to the Living Church. He demonstrates that parishioners were overwhelmingly hostile toward the initiative. The Living Church posed an insidious threat to the pious. Renovationists promoted adopting the Gregorian

calendar, conducting the liturgy in the vernacular, appointing white clergy to the episcopate, and reducing the importance of icons and sacraments in worship. Roslof argues that this modernist agenda was viewed as heretical. Parishioners demonstrated their opposition in a range of activities, from writing letters to the government and foiling Renovatianist religious parades to financially pressuring clergy not to split from the Moscow Patriarchate and boycotting schismatic churches.

The Living Church continued to function until 1934, when it was persecuted by the regime, apparently because the enthusiasm of its members made it a no longer reliable ally in the fight against religion. By this time, it had become apparent that the Russian Orthodox Church no longer represented a threat to the regime.

Roslof attributes the failure of the Living Church, with its 'rational, modern and extremely political' agenda, to a fundamental incompatibility with traditional Orthodoxy: 'The predominantly rural masses have no empathy with such changes in their faith, for it simply did not correspond to their everyday experience of life with its non-rational mysterious relationships made comprehensible through encounters with divine imminence' (p. 168). By denying the importance of divine imminence, so central to Orthodox dogma, the Renovatianists ostracized Orthodox laity.

Support for Renovatianism was not sufficient to split the Church and undermine the Patriarchate's authority. The laity's spontaneous and fragmented opposition defeated the regime's attempts to reduce Orthodoxy's influence through a schism. The Living Church was essentially defeated by cultural conservatism among the laity. Parishioners also recognised – and condemned – the regime's attempts to bastardise Orthodoxy for political purposes. Even if the clergy were genuinely devoted to both Orthodoxy and socialism, as Roslof argues, the Living Church was not sufficiently distanced from the state to ensure acceptance of their collaboration. Renovatianists attempted to operate in the most hostile of environments; they were viewed as heretics by the pious and regarded with suspicion by the government, which saw the schism as merely a means to an end, the destruction of Orthodoxy's influence.

Few volumes deal with popular responses to early Soviet religious repression in such depth. This book is set to become the authoritative volume on the Living Church. Roslof's extensive use of previously unearthed archival sources ensures this volume is essential reading for

academics and students studying Bolshevik strategies towards Orthodoxy in post-Soviet Russia, as well as reform initiatives within the Russian Church. Scholars of Orthodoxy in post-Soviet Russia will also find this study of great interest, as it deals with a topic which remains highly controversial within the Church and influences the way in which contemporary nonconformist movements and impulses are debated and understood.

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