

# The Soviet Government and the Churches

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Church-state relations in the USSR are governed at the highest level by a body whose precise powers have never been made public. This is the Council for Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers. The Council for Religious Affairs was formed in 1966 as an amalgamation of two previously-existing bodies, one of which dealt with the Russian Orthodox Church and the second with all other denominations. The Council has been referred to in a few official and even legal sources, but nowhere is a proper explanation of its competence to be found. Similar bodies have been set up in other East European states and their duties laid down in writing. But in the Soviet Union even what is written down in the field of church-state relations contradicts both itself and local practice.

In the April-May issue of the Austrian journal *Neues Forum*, an account is given of the visit of an Austrian Catholic student group to Russia, including an interview with a deputy president of the Council. Here is an extract from that account :

The state body dealing with the church is located in a one-storey building on Smolensky Boulevard No. 11 . . . In the modestly-sized room belonging to Pyotr Vlasovich Makartsev, Deputy President of the Council for Religious Affairs, there are not enough chairs for the group members, but more are quickly brought. On the walls hang pictures of Marx and Lenin, on the desk there is a pen-holder in the shape of a rocket and a box of paper-clips; in the course of the three-hour conversation the Deputy President breaks seven of these. During the discussion the telephone rings 73 times. On the 74th, Makartsev takes the phone off the hook. On his right sits a man who takes no part in the conversation . . .

The work of the Council for Religious Affairs consists of: (1) ensuring the observance of the laws; (2) looking after relations between the state and "religious organizations", so that the latter get everything they need; materials for church equipment and candles (they do the manufacturing themselves); paper and other materials for religious books and periodicals (they do the printing themselves). The "religious organizations" have to pay for all this. With likeable humour, Makartsev adds a half-sentence from the Bible: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's . . ." The Intourist interpreter does not translate this.

Q. Are you a Party member? A. Yes.

Q. Is the President of the Council a Party member? A. Yes.

Q. How many deputies does the President have besides yourself? A. Two others.

Q. Are they also Party members? A. Yes . . .

Q. Do you have any believers working in this office?

A. How do you mean? This is a state body. Representatives of religious organizations don't have any function here.

Q. We mean, do you employ any believers here?

A. I don't know. We have some non-Party members.

This is a sketchy, but interesting glimpse into the public relations aspect of the Council. Beyond such occasional accounts, and the superficial published sources referred to above, the only way to analyse the functions of the Council is to observe it in action. This may be done in particular through the uncensored writings of Soviet Christians.

Representatives of the Council for Religious Affairs are present at any important religious gathering. An example of this was given in an essay entitled "The 1961 Synod of Bishops". This was the controversial meeting of Russian Orthodox bishops which rubber-stamped a new church statute depriving the parish priests of all administrative power in their own churches. The event has been described in this long essay by an anonymous chronicler who reveals himself as both whimsical and sharp-tongued. He describes how the bishops assembled in the monastery at Zagorsk. They sat in two long rows, with the leading bishops at a head table; behind them sat three men in civilian clothes. The author describes the latter as "three with well-fed, clever faces, on which was written determination and assurance". The three men sat silently throughout the meeting, but their presence was of shattering significance for all present :

They were well-known to every bishop. They had assistants locally, in each diocese – special representatives of the department of religious affairs. These representatives in the dioceses were terrifying and implacable. They had the power to "bind and to loose", to debar priests from office and to deprive them of the priesthood. And if the local representatives were terrifying, how much more so these three sitting quietly behind the bishops! They sat behind, but their eyes literally penetrated like drills into the bishops whose backs were turned to them. They were silent and apparently had no intention of speaking, yet their silence was eloquent.

The anonymous writer goes on to say that these three were present in order to ensure that the bishops did what was expected of them : that they passed the measure, which had first been elaborated by the state authorities, to make it easier for them to close local churches.

The representative for the Council in Novosibirsk region is Alexander S. Nikolayev. Publicity was recently given in the West to the dismissal and enforced retirement of Archbishop Pavel (Golyshev). During his administration of the Novosibirsk diocese Archbishop Pavel complained to

the Patriarch, in a letter dated 6 February 1972, about a "vile provocation" against him by Nikolayev. He asked that steps be taken to deal with this man. Further testimony to Nikolayev's character and activities comes from the Orthodox believers of Kolyvan, 80 kilometres from Novosibirsk. In Kolyvan stands the ancient church of Alexander Nevsky. One member of the congregation, in a letter dated January 1972, describes it as the 'oldest architectural structure in the region and therefore worthy of designation as a monument (thus acquiring state protection). In fact, the church's fate has been quite different; in 1962 Nikolayev decided to close this church. It was promised that the church would become a museum, but it still stands locked and empty. The believers now have to meet in the basement of an old private dwelling, quite unsuited to their needs. In conclusion to the appeal, and not without humour, the writer suggests the following :

In Moscow there is an All-Union Tourist Bureau . . . I suggested to this Bureau that they open a new route and offer it to all the indefatigable and ever-seeking tourists: Moscow - Novosibirsk - Kolyvan. . . In the prospectus they should highlight three things: first, the weeping Kolyvan church of Alexander Nevsky; second, the gloomy basement where the Kolyvan believers now pray (if it doesn't fall down in the meantime); and third - not so much a tourist sight, but greatly in need of inspection - the local official for religion himself, A. S. Nikolayev - a man without conscience and without respect for Soviet legislation, a man without love for his native art.

Not far from Novosibirsk, and also part of the diocese formerly administered by Archbishop Pavel, is the town of Barnaul. Here there is an unregistered Baptist congregation which is attracting worldwide attention through its dramatic story. It was in a Barnaul prison that Nikolai Khmara was tortured to death in early 1964. Conditions for these believers have been made so bad that recently they handed in their civil identity documents, calling them meaningless in respect of civil rights. For some time mothers kept their children away from school to protect them from crude abuse. They have now returned to school, but the situation is still tense. On 20 June 1973 these believers addressed an appeal to Dr. Kurt Waldheim, General Secretary of the United Nations, asking him to forward it to the Soviet Government and also to bring it to the attention of the Western world. In this letter they describe an official interview at which the leading role was played by a local official of the Council for Religious Affairs. It is worth quoting at length :

On 11 May 1973 we were invited to the office of the Barnaul executive committee for a talk concerning our appeal to Moscow. We imagined that at last

our query about civil rights would be examined. We came to the meeting expecting some constructive solution of this matter. Leading the discussion was the deputy president of the committee, comrade Davydov. Also present in the Presidium were the official for religious affairs for the Altai area executive committee, comrade I. Ya Korobeishchikov, a medical doctor, V. N. Klyukov, and the senior investigator of the area procuracy, comrade Popov.

Comrade Korobeishchikov was asked to speak and he read the text of the telegram we had sent to Moscow. This concerned the breaking up of a peaceful meeting of pastors of our brotherhood on 20 January 1973 near Moscow; Christian literature was confiscated and some of them were arrested. We were forced to send the telegram as a letter since the post office would not accept it. . .

Comrade Korobeishchikov went on to try to disprove the truth. Crudely distorting the facts, he tried to justify the actions of the police and the authorities, saying that they had acted humanely with our brethren and that the latter had no cause for complaint against the authorities who broke up the meeting. He accused the believers of slander. He asserted that the meeting had not been broken up and that the authorities had acted legally, that force had been used only because the brethren did not immediately hand over all they had with them. . .

In his speech comrade Korobeishchikov accused the believers of having contacts with the West and in particular with people working against the Soviet Union. . . Later, he touched on the question of the martyrdom of our brother I. Moiseyev in the Soviet Army . . . he tried to explain it away as an accident.

One more local representative, about whom we know a certain amount, is the former official for Lithuania, Justas Rugienis. This man has now been replaced, but until recently he was responsible for this, one of the most delicate areas of the Soviet Union as far as religion is concerned. Rugienis figures largely in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*. In the second issue of the *Chronicle* the writers describe events in the town of Ignalina. A church was built there during the Second World War. Subsequently it was confiscated from the believers who were forced instead to meet in a hut. They sent a petition to the authorities and, in response to this, Rugienis himself came to inspect the "prayer house". He did not make himself known to the believers, and made a thoroughly inadequate inspection of the building. The believers complained again, and Rugienis personally abused them, telling them they would receive no satisfaction from him or any other authority.

It is clear from day-to-day practice that the Council for Religious Affairs has wide powers of observation and intrusion into church life. If the legal basis of the Council were published, it would undoubtedly reveal the repressive nature of its activities. While this remains concealed, the Council continues to represent an ominous factor in Soviet religious life.