

## **Patriarch Aleksii II: Between the Hammer and the Anvil**

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The timing of last August's Moscow coup ensured that Patriarch Aleksii II, like the representatives of many western governments – and President Gorbachev himself – did not have his advisers around him at the critical moment. As he was obliged to demonstrate leadership from right in the middle of events, this placed on Aleksii a huge burden at the most difficult time.

On the very morning of the coup, 19 August, Patriarch Aleksii was due to celebrate the liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral in the Kremlin (no less), which had recently been reopened for worship at major festivals for the first time since the Revolution (it was the feast of the Transfiguration). He omitted the petition in the litany for the Red Army. The next day he wrote a declaration which read in part:

[These events] confuse the conscience of millions of our fellow-countrymen, who are confronted with the question of the legality of the newly formed State Committee... Consequently, we declare it to be essential at this time to hear the voice of President Gorbachev and to find out his relation to the events which have occurred.

At 1.30 am on 21 August, after what must have been a fraught session of such of his advisers as he could summon, he wrote an 'Appeal' which was even more urgent in its language: 'The Church does not and cannot bless illegal, violent or bloody acts. I beg all of you, dear people, to do all you can to extinguish the flame of civil war. Stop!'

While these words fall short of condemning the leaders of the coup unambiguously and leave open a loophole for negotiation with them if they had come out on top, they can only have strengthened the hand of those military personnel who did not want to fire on their own people.

'He's an excellent parish priest, but you never know what will happen to a man when you put him between the hammer and the anvil.' These are the words of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Britain's leading Russian Orthodox churchman, referring to Aleksii II before he became Patriarch. They are extraordinarily apposite. He was born in free Estonia between the wars, but his childhood saw him caught between the hammer of the Soviet occupying power and the anvil of the Nazi invasion.

As an Estonian by birth, he has become the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, with dioceses not only throughout the Soviet Union, but also in the USA, Latin America, Australia, Western Europe and sundry other places. He is leader of a world-wide church which for decades was in shackles. Born elsewhere, bilingual and bicultural, he might have seemed to have the ideal cosmopolitan credentials for such an exacting role, but in Stalin's Soviet Union these very virtues rendered people suspect and cost some their freedom, even their lives.

Aleksei Mikhailovich Ridiger<sup>1</sup> was born in Tallinn on 23 February 1929. Even

quoting his name at birth raises an initial complexity. Ridiger is not an Estonian surname: it belongs to the old German aristocracy which earlier dominated the Baltic States. He is therefore of patrician stock, but his later education was in a society which officially rejected any idea of nobility and privilege from birth. Meanwhile, 'Mikhailovich', the patronymic, indicates that the family was Russianised and this was through his mother's side of the family. The young Alyosha (as the family called him) was brought up bilingually in Estonian and Russian.

After his election as Patriarch on 7 June 1990, the government newspaper *Izvestiya* became virtually his mouthpiece, carrying several major interviews with him and regular news of his comings and goings. (See, for example, the interview in this issue of *RSS*.) It printed a long article of special interest nine days after his elevation, resulting from a correspondent's having caught him on the wing, as it were, or rather on the overnight Red Arrow train from Moscow to Leningrad, when returning to his old diocese to say farewell. He revealed several personal details not before on record. His grandmother gave him a copy of the Gospels when he was six and it became precious to him. He was expansive on his childhood:

I started going to church when I was six years old. It was then that I first thought I would like to become a priest. The church where I was baptised was in Tallinn. My parents were very devout believers. I think that two pilgrimages as a child to the Valaam Monastery on Lake Ladoga had a profound influence on my personal spiritual journey... The striking beauty of the monastery left a lasting impression.

Aleksi went on to mention the disaster of the war, but he omitted the real trauma. In 1940, when he was 11, the Red Army occupied Estonia, incorporated it into the USSR without even a semblance of legality (this fact is no longer an obscure episode of European history) and began a brutal period of deportation, the aim of which was to cut off the flower of Baltic life – political, academic, intellectual, cultural. This process was interrupted by the German invasion the next year, but upon 'liberation' at the end of the war Stalin resumed the old policy, only with renewed brutality. The leadership of the nation was ground into submission.

Aleksi has never given public expression to what the young Alyosha experienced in those days, but along with all other teenagers of the time he cannot have been other than mentally lacerated by it. Truly, he was already between the hammer and the anvil.

What came out of this? He retained his Christian faith, along with a significant proportion of the people of the Baltic States. At 17 (that is, in 1947, before the Baltic peoples had been fully subjugated), he tells us, he was already applying to study at the Leningrad Theological Seminary, recently reopened after nearly three decades of closure, but he was considered too young. Almost certainly, his background was suspect to the Soviet authorities and they needed time for further consideration. Under the new regime for the seminaries there would be no possibility of the church's sponsoring its own candidates without reference to the secular authority.

The delay was not long. At the age of 20 he graduated, having turned out to be a brilliant student who could compress four years of study into two. He continued with a brief spell of higher education in the Theological Academy (the same building), was ordained deacon at 21, and continued his studies, while at the same time taking pastoral responsibility for a church in the Tallinn diocese.

The next 40 years of Aleksi's career show him to have been an ecclesiastical '*Homo sovieticus*', but is the pejorative connotation of this phrase justified? This was

certainly a Soviet man, with inter-republican sympathies, a loyal Soviet citizen, not willing to disturb the *status quo* between church and state.

Yet the ambiguity goes beyond this. This above paragraph contains the words *status quo*. In fact, 10 years into Aleksii's church career, after he had witnessed the virtual destruction of the nation into which he was born, an improved situation for the Russian Orthodox Church was shattered by Nikita Khrushchev's attempted elimination of religion – a period of violent persecution which saw the imprisonment of tens of thousands of believers of all denominations, the death of some, the closure of two-thirds of the 20,000 Orthodox churches, the vast majority of which had reopened only relatively recently during or after the war.

Soviet propaganda launched a worldwide effort to conceal this outrage and that its efforts were largely successful was due primarily to the willingness of the hierarchy to abet the cover-up. Perhaps the key moment, in retrospect almost outrageous in its boldness, was the permission the Kremlin gave to the Russian Orthodox Church to join the World Council of Churches at its New Delhi assembly in 1961. This inaugurated a campaign of misinformation which continued for a quarter of a century. Aleksii had a few weeks earlier become Bishop of Tallinn at the earliest possible age of 32. With the Soviet authorities in a virulently atheist mood, he must have satisfied them of his basic loyalty to the regime, whatever his innermost thoughts. This assembly also saw the beginning of his remarkable international career and, with no international experience, he was elected a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

Clearly, Aleksii did not speak out about any of the problems of the church in the Soviet Union to the hundreds of western church leaders he was to meet over the next few years. It would have been the end of his career if he had.

His subsequent elevation was meteoric, proving he had satisfied the authorities during these testing times. He became Archbishop in 1964 and Metropolitan in 1968. From 1964 he was also a member of the Holy Synod, the church's governing body. In 1986 he became Metropolitan of Leningrad, Russia's second see, while retaining jurisdiction over Estonia, which was natural enough, as he was the only bishop who spoke the language.

Internationally, his career took off not so much with the WCC as with the Conference of European Churches, a structurally separate body, but operating from the same building in Geneva and virtually sharing its cautious policies. He became its president in 1972 and chairman, a more influential position, in 1987, a post he retains to this day. In this capacity he became known as an efficient committee man who related well to senior churchmen of all complexions throughout Europe (except Roman Catholics, who were not members).

One can only imagine how exceptionally diligent the KGB vetting must have been at the beginning of these constant travels. He commanded a privilege, including access to hard currency, which was available to few outside the top rank of government ministers and diplomats. *Ipso facto*, he had to 'report back' to the KGB and among his travelling companions, including interpreters and secretarial staff, there were others who would report on him. This was a requirement of life, often boring and inconsequential, but with the constant danger of betraying someone or of being betrayed. So far, nothing has been found in the KGB church archives, now partially opened, that demands a modification of this judgment.

In those difficult times, which lasted right into the Gorbachev period, there were other members of the hierarchy who went much further than Aleksii did in justifying Soviet policies. Unfortunately, *glasnost'* has not yet given us any in-depth record of

his many years of work in Estonia, but there is no indication of his being unpopular either there or in Leningrad.

His beleaguered church in his own diocese (recently confirmed by the abess of the one convent at Piukhtitsa) looked on him as its protector and in 1990 an Estonian newspaper gave him the credit for having saved it from destruction 30 years earlier. He administrated well, served the liturgy with great dignity (a prerequisite for any bishop to gain respect), preached effectively and became known eventually as someone who looked forward. He was chairman of the education committee when no Christian teaching was permitted outside the seminaries, and of the pensions committee when no charitable work was allowed, and then became, before the full flower of ecclesiastical *glasnost'*, deputy chairman of the team preparing for the millennium celebrations of the Orthodox Church in 1988, before it was known how far public rejoicing would even be permitted.

By this time it was clear that major changes for the better were under way. Gorbachev summoned the leading hierarchs to the Kremlin in April 1988 and promised them a new deal in return for their loyalty in supporting *perestroika*. Astonishingly, he talked of the 'common cause' between religion and communism, invited the church to plunge headlong into charitable work, which had been illegal since the revolution, and promised a new and just law to replace the intolerably restrictive one passed by Lenin and tightened much further by Stalin. The celebration of the millennium six weeks later was a public display of the new place religion now occupied in the Soviet Union. The accompanying *Sobor* (National Council) of the Russian Orthodox Church saw the passing of new internal regulations which foreshadowed a new era.

Patriarch Pimen, who had been in office for nearly 20 years, had long been a sick man and had always been an ineffective leader. In May 1990 he died. The church did not allow a long time of speculation as to who would lead it in the era of *glasnost'*. Aleksii was sufficiently 'Russian' to qualify him for the job and he was self-evidently an efficient man and an accomplished church diplomat. For the first time since the Revolution, the state was in no position to impose a candidate for a top position. He was elected 'Aleksii II' because Pimen's predecessor had borne the same name.

At this time of immense opportunity, how has Aleksii responded? The 'Soviet man' is still there deeply controlling the psychology. It took him until September 1987 to call for a response to the new opportunities, but when he did, he made a clear call for a new law (this was six months before Gorbachev promised it).

Even before the political turmoil of the coup period, Aleksii faced an immensely complicated agenda. There are questions about how prepared the church is to deal with it and to take advantage of the immense new opportunities. Internally, it is riven by factions: the time is long overdue for reconciliation with Orthodox human rights campaigners, such as Fr Gleb Yakunin, who truly did bear the burden of the heat of the day in Soviet prisons while the likes of Aleksii were staying in luxury hotels abroad. There are more official disputes: the Ukrainian Catholic Church, after being banned for over four decades, has reasserted its property rights and taken back thousands of churches from the Moscow Patriarchate. Feelings run high in western Ukraine and Patriarch Aleksii's visit there in September 1990 did little to alleviate them. Apart from this, parishes have seceded to the Ukrainian Autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile, all of which would have been impossible before *perestroika*. Recently, Aleksii has spoken out in criticism of resurgent antisemitism: a word that has long been awaited. Perhaps the greatest danger and challenge of all, however, especially in the period of Yel'tsin's

ascendancy, is that the Russian Orthodox Church will be tempted, once again after 74 years, to claim the position of the state religion, along with all the triumphalism and intolerance which that implies.

Patriarch Aleksii II is a young enough man (63) to have a reservoir of physical vigour to face these challenges. He is also an ecclesiastical statesman of visible accomplishment. He did, however, take many people aback when he chose his ecumenical visit to England in November 1991 as Chairman of the Conference of European Churches, and the premises of Lambeth Palace, to attack the Roman Catholic Church for its 'illegitimate' missionary endeavours in Siberia and to say that the Pope would not be a welcome visitor in Russia until such questions were resolved.

Whether he has the worldly as well as the prayerful insight to guide the church towards solving so many intractable problems is, just two years into his period of office, a question which cannot be answered with certainty, but Russia needs a great church leader and the opportunities are unprecedented in the whole of history. Since the coup, Patriarch Aleksii II is no longer between the hammer and the anvil: he is master in his own house, or rather he can invoke the sovereignty of God and speak unambiguously to millions.

#### **Note**

- <sup>1</sup> Aleksii is his monastic name: the Russian tradition is to adopt a Christian name of one's choosing and officially to drop the surname on taking the tonsure. Parish priests do not make this change. The latter must also marry, and it is only from the ranks of the celibate that bishops can be chosen.