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Research Project

Finding Faith in an Atheist Land: Russian Orthodox Intelligentsia and the Late Soviet National-Religious Revival

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The 1960s and 1970s constituted a period of religious revival throughout the West, characterized by the emergence of new types of spirituality and religious movements, which placed a greater emphasis on individual experience and group worship, thus weakening the traditional role of churches. Disenchantment with ideologies and with industrial society fueled a religious revival with decidedly modern characteristics. In the Soviet Union, an atheist land regularly indicted for its infringements of the rights of believers, similar dynamics unfolded, bolstered by the rise of nationalist movements. Despite the attempt to isolate Soviet citizens from global developments, the 1960s were characterized by an opening to the West through foreign radio broadcasts and increased cultural and scientific exchanges. These developments had a marked impact on a predominantly urban intelligentsia, providing a fertile ground for the rise of political, nationalist, and religious dissent.

This study examines the Orthodox revival within the Russian intelligentsia, from the early forms of independent worship and opposition to the religious status quo in the 1970s, which were labelled as “dissent,” to the development of a mass movement or national and religious revival during the last years of the Soviet Union. Complexifying the predominant narrative of a “return of the repressed,” this research posits that the Russian Orthodox revival corresponded to what Anthony Wallace called a process of “revitalization” of an erstwhile Russian culture. Following the fragmentation of the Soviet cultural paradigm, violently imposed through partial acculturation for over half a century, a new Russian national and religious identity emerged as a result of heightened contacts with the West, inspired from an earlier Russian culture but redefined on modern terms to fit new needs. While the intelligentsia initiated this process of revitalization and tended towards a model combining religious with liberal- democratic values, I argue that the broadening of the process to the Russian masses during Perestroika caused the marginalization of this liberal model, with a progressive shift towards a new paradigm combining conservative Orthodoxy with nationalism and illiberalism.

Interrogating the causes, manifestations, and consequences of this Russian Orthodox revival, this study examines the trajectories of young Orthodox believers and clergy from the intelligentsia, from the 1970s to the early post-Soviet era, with a focus on the two Russian metropolises Moscow and Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg). While in the 1970s and early 1980s, their activities often fell under the label of dissent and triggered repression, by the late 1980s, the same actors were participating of the broader religious revival, and they would continue throughout the post-Soviet years to seek to influence the religious and political life of their country. Based on oral history, memoirs, and the analysis of underground and official publications of these Orthodox groups, this project constitutes the first study on the Orthodox Revival of

the late Soviet era. Breaking with the predominant vision in Soviet-era historiography depicting Orthodox dissent as a resurgence of a repressed religion in reaction to state repression, this research reinserts the Russian Orthodox case within a global context of cultural change and transnational influences, offering a model of analysis possibly replicable for other cases of national and religious revival throughout the late Soviet Union.

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