

Short Survey on the History of Russia

Russia is a country without natural borders, it has no single people and no true central identity. Its size is staggering, stretching across 11 time zones from the European region of Kaliningrad to 82 km from Alaska.

Considering the many of its regions are hard to reach and the population is isolated, all of this helps explaining why maintaining central control has been a real challenge and why the loss of this control over the country haunted its leaders. An KGB officer wrote: “I always thought it was all or nothing, either we hold the country with an iron fist or it falls apart!”

It must also be said that Russia is the eternal other: for Europe is Asia and vice versa.

Russia is a country having a certain, known and sure future, it is just its past that is unpredictable.

(Soviet saying)

Many times, Russia's rulers have revisited the past in the hope of building the future they longed for, each time retrieving the cultural or political myths and symbols they needed. For example, the tsars made them the symbols of the Byzantine Empire, the Soviet Union the grandeur of the Tsarist Empire and the present Russian Federation, the desire to “recreate”, or at least to imitate the Soviet Union. Russia is a country where reimagining the past is not only a passion, but above all a political and geopolitical industry.

862 – arrival of “prince” Rurik

882 – Oleg conquers the power and the fortress of Kyiv from the hands of his relatives

980 – Vladimir becomes *kneaz* of Kyiv

988 - Vladimir the Great decides to convert Kyivan Russia to Christianity

The population of Kiev was forced to enter under threat of spears into the River Dnieper for baptism. Christianity and paganism would still co-exist for a few more centuries. Frequently, tensions between pagans and Christians would be causes for much violence. Faith and state power will begin the close alliance that defines Russia to this day.

1812 – Napoleonic invasion of Russia

The French Revolution created a wave of secular radicalism in Europe. Napoleon's fail to conquer Russia made Alexander II encourage the adoption of a mystical and political messianism by the Russian people.

“the victory – a good reason to avoid modernization”

The eternal questions of the Russian culture:

Modernization versus stability ???

Europe versus otherness ???

1833 – the „reform” of tsar Nikolay I

To respond to revolutionary tendencies and to maintain the unity of Russia, Tsar Nikolay I proposed the notion of **official nationality**, a doctrine which claimed that Russia's traditional values had to be defended against foreign elements. The formula adopted was **Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality**. Russia was, according to this theory, the last truly Orthodox state, and Europe was a source of contamination. According to the same theory, God wanted Russia to be Russia and not a pale copy of Western Europe. The same country also created the special gendarmerie corps and founded the *third section* which actually dealt with the political police, actually the precursors of the later KGB.

1905 – revolution

1914 -1918 – First World War

1917 – February Revolution and the end of Tsarism
October Revolution

1918 – 1922 – Civil war, ascension of Lenin

1924 – death of Lenin

1941 – 1945 – Second World War

1953 – death of Stalin

1985 – Gorbaciov comes to power

1991 – end of Soviet Union

*Again the same eternal questions of the Russian culture:
Modernization versus stability ???
Europe versus otherness ???*

The Russian Orthodox Church during the Communist Regime

The Bolshevik reign of terror included an ideological assault on the Russian Orthodox Church. Within five years of the Bolshevik government being established, at least 28 bishops and 1,200 priests had been executed.

1917 – reinstated the Moscow Patriarchate (the title of “Patriarch of Moscow” was abolished in the 17th century) and Patr. Tikhon (Vasily Ivanovich Bellavin) was elected in this position.

During the Russian Civil War the Patriarch, like the entire Russian Church, was widely considered anti-Bolshevik and many bishops were exiled, imprisoned or even executed by the new regime. Tikhon openly condemned the killings of the Tsar's family in 1918, and protested against violent attacks by the Bolsheviks on the church.

1920 autonomy to what became later the [Orthodox Church in America](#).

1921, many of the Russian bishops, who had fled Russia in 1919–1920, had gathered in Sremski Karlovci, Serbia, and adopted a number of anti-Bolshevik statements; in May the following year Tikhon and his Synod formally dissolved the exile group, which nevertheless continued to exist as a separate Russian ecclesiastical entity, viewed as schismatic by the Moscow Patriarchate until 2007. This is what later became the [Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia \(ROCOR\)](#).

1925 – death of Patriarch Tikhon. Even if he made some loyalty declaration to the regime, he was considered a authentic figure and enjoyed people’s approval.

1927 – vow of loyalty (encyclical) of Patriarch Sergius I

We need to show, not in words but in deeds, that not only those who are indifferent to Orthodox Christianity, not only those who have betrayed it, but also its most zealous adherents, for whom it is dear as truth and life, with all its dogmas and traditions, with all its canonical and liturgical structure, can be faithful citizens of the Soviet Union, loyal to the Soviet government. We want to be Orthodox and at the same time recognize the Soviet Union as our civil motherland, whose joys and successes are our joys and successes and whose failures are our failures.

Any blow directed at the Union, be it a war, a boycott, some kind of social disaster, or just a murder from around the corner, like the Warsaw one, is recognized by us as a blow directed at us.

The expression ***Sergianism*** which designates a policy of unconditional loyalty to the Soviet regime practised by the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, and is associated with his 1927 above declaration, being derived from his name.

1941 – German invasion of Russia → 1943, Stalin changes its approach towards the Orthodox Church, asking for its help in the war, some rights of the Church are restored.

1945 – Patriarch Alexy, elected with Stalin permission.

1946 - Alexy I presided over the controversial "re-unification" of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with Russian Orthodox Church seen by many as a takeover forced by the Stalinist government.

Also in 1946, Patriarch Alexy called on all Catholics in the Soviet Union to reject all allegiance to the Pope: *“Liberate yourself! You must break the Vatican chains, which throw you into the abyss of error, darkness and spiritual decay. Hurry, return to your true mother, the Russian Orthodox Church!”*

Pope Pius XII replied: *“Who does not know, that Patriarch Alexius I recently elected by the dissident bishops of Russia, openly exalts and preaches defection from the Catholic Church. In a letter lately addressed to the Ruthenian Church, a letter, which contributed not a little to the persecution?”*

After the **death of Stalin on March 5, 1953**, the Patriarch composed a personal statement of condolence to the USSR's Council of Ministers. It read, *“His death is a heavy grief for our Fatherland and for all the people who inhabit it. The whole Russian Orthodox Church, which will never forget his benevolent attitude to Church needs, feels great sorrow at his death. The bright memory of him will live ineradicably in our hearts. Our Church proclaims eternal memory to him with a special feeling of abiding love.”*

In 1955, Patriarch Alexius declared, *“The Russian Orthodox Church supports the totally peaceful foreign policy of the Soviet Union, not because the Church lacks freedom, but because Soviet policy is just and corresponds to the Christian ideals which the Church preaches.”*

From 1959 however, the Russian Orthodox Church also had to endure a **new wave of persecution**, mostly carried out on the orders of the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

The persecution continued throughout the communist era with varying degrees of intensity, until by the 1980s the once-dominant Church was reduced to fewer than 7,000 churches across the country, with only 31 percent of Russians describing themselves as Orthodox in 1991.

1970 – Patriarch Alexy died

The Pan-Orthodox Conference of Moscow of 1948

Among the scholars of the history of the Orthodox Church, Viorel Ioniță offers one of the most detailed descriptions of this meeting, almost seven pages long. He writes that the official motivation of this Pan-Orthodox meeting was to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the proclamation of the independence of the Russian Orthodox Church, but *“this meeting had a political character and the decisions taken there had a direct impact on the relations between the Orthodox Churches and the Roman-Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement, but also on the course of the process of Pan-Orthodox cooperation”*.

After the commemoration of 500 years of autocephaly on 8 July 1948, the conference opened the next day and concentrated on four points:

1. The Vatican and the Orthodox Church;
2. The validity of Anglican ordinations;
3. The ecclesiastical calendar;
4. Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement

The document on *The Vatican and the Orthodox Church* presents a very conservative view and uses a very critical tone with regard to the Catholic Church. In this way the document accuses the Catholic Church of having plundered the purity of the ancient orthodox faith by introducing new doctrines, such as the Filioque or the Immaculate Conception. Above all, the doctrine of the primacy and infallibility of the bishop of Rome has been described as anti-Christian. The Catholic Church is also reproached in the Moscow document for the historical bloody deeds by which it forced various peoples to convert to Catholicism through *Uniatism*.

This very harsh tone, especially with regard to the historical events surrounding Uniatism “indicates a clear influence of the ideology of the Communist Party”.

With regard to the ordinations of the Anglican Church, the Conference has decided that these can be recognised in the Orthodox Church, provided that a dogmatic agreement and a unified confession of faith are first reached. This aspect is very important because it indicates the flexibility that that Conference showed with regard to certain ecclesial identities. It shows yet another detail: that a full, sacramental unity with the Anglican Church was considered possible at that time; this demonstrates once again the interest Anglicans enjoyed among the Orthodox.

With regard to the calendar, an issue we have already spoken about, we must say that this conference was not able to solve the situation created by the Pan-Orthodox Congress of 1923. Some Churches changed the calendar, others did not. What this Conference tried to do was to impose at least the uniformity of the Easter celebration (and of the feasts deriving from Easter), leaving the others to be celebrated in the same way.

It is important to say that the document emphasises that this situation is provisional, until a further synodal decision. Unfortunately, this situation, addressed in 1948, is still present in the Orthodox Church today.

The last document of this Conference refers to the Ecumenical Movement, especially to the relationship of the Orthodox Churches with the WCC (the World Council of Churches). It was important for the Orthodox side to make it clear, before participating in the ecumenical meetings organised by the WCC, that they cannot accept that the WCC has any kind of ecclesiastical value, as if it were a type of ecumenical church or a super-church. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church disagreed with the fact that the WCC required, as the only condition for participation, the confession that *Jesus is Lord*, considering this to be an excessive reduction of the Christian faith to its essentials. These precisions of the Moscow Conference were taken seriously by the WCC; it clearly stated in a 1950 document that the WCC is not a type of church at all. In 1961, on the other hand, the requirement for adherence to the Council was changed from a purely Christological confession to a Trinitarian one.

Father Liviu Stan (1910-1973; professor of Canon law in Sibiu), who was present at this Moscow Conference in 1948 as part of the Romanian delegation, wrote an article in which mentioned other topics discussed, without being mentioned in the final statements. These issues that were discussed, but not resolved according to Liviu Stan were:

1. The relations of the Orthodox Church with the Christian world and especially with the Eastern Churches;
2. The question of Mount Athos;

3. The question of the holy places in Jerusalem and Palestine (in view of the creation of the new State of Israel);
4. The question of an Ecumenical or Pan-Orthodox Council.

We consider it necessary to refer also to this Moscow Conference as a step on the historical path of the convocation of the Pan-Orthodox Council and not only because it already constituted an inter-Orthodox gathering. But since the topics discussed here will also be the focus of the preparatory work for the Great Council in the following years, insisting on some historical details helps us to better observe the evolution of some issues, up to the point where they arrived before the Synod Fathers (e.g. ecumenical relations), or up to the moment when, just before the Council, they were renounced (e.g. the calendar), considering them impossible to solve at the time of the Council.