

Keston Newsletter

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The Orthodox liturgy is celebrated outside in the Pskov kremlin during the pandemic

The Pandemic and the Russian Orthodox Church

by Roman Lunkin

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) faced a barrage of criticism from both Russian and Western media. The *Washington Post* expressed horror when the infection rate was at its height that Orthodox believers were continuing to kiss icons.¹ The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and in particular the monks of the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves were blamed for spreading the virus by the Ukrainian and Western press.² In a number of Russia's

regions journalists and officials tried to identify church members who had broken quarantine rules. Even the death of priests from the virus was used by social media to criticise the ROC. Reports appeared which pointed to the Church as

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the source of conflict and division within Russian society.³ If one looks, however, at the facts one can see other processes at work. As ever, religion reflected the views and hopes of people. The ROC during the lockdown showed how it, like any secular institution with a plurality of views, was engaged in heated debates. Much of Russian society remained blind to this reality.

Covid solidarity

Many of the Moscow Patriarchate's bishops and Patriarch Kirill himself supported the state's policies for combatting coronavirus, and, in many ways, the Patriarch's announcements repeated the basic recommendations of the main political leaders – of President Putin, Sergei Sobyenin (Moscow's mayor), and of *Rospotrebnadzor* (the Consumer Protection Agency), both at federal and regional levels.

The Holy Synod (ROC) on 11th March 2020 announced that the prophylactic measures against Covid-19 were essential and Patriarch Kirill set up a working group to coordinate the work of churches facing the rapid spread of the virus. On 14th March Metropolitan Illarion (Alfeev), the head of the Department for External Church Relations (DECR), announced that services in Moscow Patriarchate churches would continue to take place, even if there was a serious epidemic. On 17th March the Holy Synod issued instructions to all parish priests, monasteries and convents, explaining in detail the hygiene requirements for churches. On 24th March the Moscow Patriarchate's Chief Administrator, Metropolitan Dionisi (Voskresensky), sent a circular to

bishops within the Russian Federation, about the measures required for fighting the spread of the virus and warned:

“The question of limiting access to churches for services, must be considered should the authorities introduce a regime limiting the use of public transport, and restricting visits to public places, such as markets, food outlets, and other social venues.”⁴

The actions of the ROC, and the gradual changing of its position, were very much the same as those of other European Christian churches a few weeks earlier (the pandemic in Russia developed about a month behind Europe). The seriousness of the situation became clear after 25th March, when President Putin imposed a regime of self-isolation until 6th April (on 2nd April this was extended to 30th April). Sergei Sobyenin, Moscow's mayor, issued a decree on 26th March, advising people not to enter religious buildings – a milder version to that of St Petersburg's Governor, Alexandr Beglov, who, basically, banned all church services, and told believers (with the exception of priests and church employees) not to enter churches. The Petersburg Metropolia criticised Beglov's decision, and the conservative Russian Orthodox organisation “Forty 40s” movement announced that Beglov might go down in history as “the first persecutor” of Christians in contemporary Russia.⁵

On 26th March the ROC's working group for controlling the pandemic announced that the Church was ready to provide people with on-line church services, which meant in fact that the Moscow

From the Editor

It was a pleasure to welcome so many Keston members to our virtual AGM in November 2020. Clearly, for some who cannot travel to London this format enabled them to attend, so we have decided that this year's AGM (6th November) will be a hybrid meeting, with some members present in person and others able to join on-line. On p.41 I have included my 2020 AGM report.

Our speaker at the last AGM was Roman Lunkin who is a member of Keston's Encyclopaedia team. His subject that day, the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on the Russian Orthodox Church, is explored in greater detail in the first article in this issue of the *Keston Newsletter*.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 which was witnessed by two members of Keston's Council of Management, Alyona Kojevnikov and Elisabeth Robson. Their eye-witness accounts (p.19 and p.21) convey the atmosphere, the fear and jubilation, of that dramatic period in Russia's history.

In issue No.32 I included a document written by Michael Bourdeaux in 1977 about the Keston visit to Nadezhda Vins, the wife of the imprisoned Baptist pastor Georgi Vins. During this visit Michael discovered that Nadezhda had been told that she needed an operation, which she had refused as she feared this might be used to kill her. On their return Michael and his Keston colleagues debated how

they could help further, and decided to find a doctor who would be willing to visit Nadezhda. They approached the Secretary of the British Medical Fellowship, who contacted Dr George Hobbs and asked him whether he would travel to Kiev, and visit Nadezhda. Suspicious initially of Keston, Dr Hobbs met members of staff, who convinced him of Keston's reliability and good sense. He agreed to go. An abridged version of his sometimes harrowing account of this visit is now published on pp.25-31. Pastor Georgi Vins was eventually released from prison and expelled with his family from the USSR in 1979. He settled in Indiana, USA from where he continued to support those persecuted in the USSR for their faith. He died in 1998. Nadezhda died in 2004.

The protests in Belarus last year following the re-election of President Lukashenko, through the manipulation of the vote count, were headline news. Alexandr Shramko, an Orthodox priest in Belarus, discusses (p.32) the involvement of Christians in these demonstrations, and shows how barriers between denominations fell in the face of a common cause. His article is followed by a letter of support (p.36) for Belarusian Christians, signed by Christians in Russia and some other countries, who express their "solidarity, support and deep respect for the bishops, priests and all Christians who, ignoring danger, speak out for the freedom and dignity of mankind."

Xenia Dennen

Patriarchate saw no reason for not observing the recommendations of the political authorities. Metropolitan Illarion (head of DECR), however, stated that unlike Italy, France and Spain, Russia had not yet imposed a total quarantine

is the most important thing, and not mucking about like those who spend their free time at barbecues, listening to music, thinking that these are the holidays, rather than using the time given by the government for reflection, for stillness, for reordering one's life."⁶



Metropolitan Georgi of Nizhni Novgorod & Arzamas blesses a patient in hospital suffering from Covid-19

and therefore the ROC would not shut its churches completely.

On 29th March Patriarch Kirill at last spoke out when he preached during the fourth week of Lent, after the liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (the cathedral was almost empty). He said that like Mary of Egypt, who prayed in the desert, it was quite possible to survive without church services. The Patriarch clearly held up this saint as an example for the particularly devout, who refused to obey the secular authorities, and wanted to save their souls through prayer and full observance of the Lent services. He spoke with considerable emotion, trying to persuade people to self-isolate:

“Don’t listen to the sermons of foolish clergy – listen to what the Patriarch is telling you today.... Saving your soul

On 3rd April, the day after Putin’s second announcement, Patriarch Kirill issued a shorter message, in which he confirmed the appropriateness of self-isolation from a spiritual point of view, and gave his blessing “to the spiritual feat [*podvig*] of remaining at home.”⁷

ROC’s social work

Like many other Christian churches the ROC promoted social solidarity, placing the interests of society above personal interests. The ROC’s social work became a sphere in which church activists were highly effective.

According to the reports of the ROC’s Social Work Department (covering churches in Russia, in other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and dioceses in Europe), there were more than 100 help lines, 100 voluntary services, 7000 volunteers, while family support groups helped 19,000 people. Employees of the department taught social workers in the dioceses on-line. The website “Compassion” which is run by the department, while fundraising for food supplies, collected seven million roubles which were distributed to 27

dioceses. It is worth noting that this money was mostly collected in Moscow, but it was earmarked for people in other areas who were already being supported by local volunteers. A special group of trained priests from the Moscow Diocesan Hospital Commission, wearing PPE, visited patients in the Covid infection wards about 500 times between April and June 2020. As early as May, a hotline was opened in the St Alexi Hospital dealing with donations of plasma after Bishop Panteleimon of Orekhovo-Zuevo, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Social Work Department, appealed to all those who had recovered from the virus to give blood to help those who were ill.⁸

A report of the ROC's Youth Department on the volunteering work of young people, recorded that in the Alapaevsk Diocese 22 volunteers were helping the elderly; in the Omsk Diocese the volunteer organisation "Siberians" had collected 1,500 food parcels for those in need; in the Kemerovo Diocese, as part of the work of an organisation called "Feed the Hungry" and the work of the youth club "Haven", 64 people had been fed; in the Krasnoyarsk Diocese young volunteers were helping 25 homeless people, and 30 in a crisis refuge; in Mordovia the club "Alphabet of Good", part of the Union of Orthodox Youth, sewed 900 face masks which they distributed to 700 addresses; in the Ufa Diocese 378 volunteers were helping in hospitals; in the Vologda Diocese there were 23 volunteers, in the Ekaterinburg Diocese 320, in the Shakh-tin Diocese 100, and in the South-Sakhalin Diocese 20. In St Petersburg young people from the Orthodox clubs "Pro-Light", "Youth and Science",

"Koinonia" and "Mercy Bus" had volunteered in social centres during the pandemic. Young people had taken part in on-line discussions with the clergy, while the Youth Department had organised a webinar on the subject "What does it mean to be a Christian in the 21st century?"⁹

Use of technology

Church circles responded to the possibilities offered by modern technology in a multitude of ways. Many parishes, monasteries and church communities had long been successfully using virtual channels for communicating and distributing information, and, ironically, it was through social media that critics of the quarantine and self-isolation (for example "Forty 40s" via Instagram) spoke about the danger of landing in a "digital concentration camp", while in fact being part of it themselves. When parishioners could not attend the liturgy, particular forms of virtual prayer and coordination between believers and clergy came into being of necessity. Many priests became good at video-blogging, others kept in touch with people via social media, including collecting donations towards the upkeep of churches, and receiving intercession requests. In this way, parish life and the priestly ministry moved on-line; a new kind of virtual mission developed.

Close contact with the needs of a great variety of people strongly influenced the outlook of many clergy. For example, Fr Ioann Kudryavtsev, the priest at the Church of the "Joy and Comfort" Mother of God Icon within the Botkin Hospital, described how he felt after helping

people both in person and on-line during the pandemic:

“I have come to realise now that we priests often say much that is superfluous, though our words may be good, beautiful, and appropriate – quotations from scripture, the uplifting words of the Church Fathers... But if you overdo it, your words will offend and sound sanctimonious. You must speak from the heart, from a place within yourself that has suffered, otherwise a person will sense something false, not genuine.”¹⁰

At the start of the pandemic Protestant and Catholic churches in Russia appeared to be better prepared than Orthodox churches for life without any physical church services. The Catholic Church immediately after lock-down was imposed, following Pope Francis’s example, moved to a self-isolation regime and to broadcasting the Mass on-line. Archbishop Paolo Pezzi, head of the Archdiocese of the Virgin Mary in Moscow, regularly spoke publicly with video commentaries, which were widely circulated in the media. Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal and Evangelical pastors also filled the internet with sermons and broadcasts, which even before the pandemic had been a regular feature of their ministry.

Celebrating the Eucharist at home provoked a discussion among Protestants on whether the bread and wine could be consecrated in a domestic context, before a television screen with everyone praying virtually. In Orthodox circles, discussion took place on social media about whether the consecrated elements could be

distributed to people so that, after a virtual liturgy, they could receive the bread and wine at home. There was little support, however, for the idea of a virtual liturgy, and many believers, while listening to services on-line and taking part in bible studies via Zoom, also managed to find ways of going to a church, as the rules on self-isolation varied from one area to another. The ROC introduced strict disinfecting measures during communion: the bread was dipped in the wine and placed directly in the mouth or hands, without using a communion spoon.¹¹

Covid dissidence

Conflict between the ROC and the state increased, not because the Church opposed the authorities’ policies on health measures, but because these strict measures were not always compatible with the rights and freedoms of the individual. Believers announced publicly that their rights were being infringed. At the end of July 2020 religious organisations supported the Council on Human Rights, within the Presidential Federal Administration, which defined the situation created by the fight against the virus as religious discrimination. In the Council’s opinion, local authorities and *Rospotrebnadzor* (Consumer Protection Agency) had no right to ban church services¹² (a ban could only be imposed by religious leaders themselves), they had no right to introduce health protection measures, stop religious services, or conduct medical checks on clergy. In conclusion, the Council called for “a serious dialogue” between the state and religious organisations.¹³ An identical position



The liturgy is celebrated in the open air in Pskov's kremlin with Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) officiating



to Moscow and the Moscow oblast.¹⁵

In other regions, bishops made their own decisions. Over Easter churches were open in 43 out of 85 regions in Russia.¹⁶ Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) of Pskov was one of the first Russian Orthodox bishops to decide, with the support of the local authorities, to open churches and to allow services in the open air.

was adopted by the Council of Europe: it recommended that limiting the gathering of believers would lead to conflicts and in essence to the infringement of the balance between compulsion and prevention.¹⁴

The ban on the public celebration of the liturgy did not in fact come from Patriarch Kirill, but from the Moscow Patriarchate's chief administrator, Metropolitan Dionisi, and this ban only applied

Naturally, there were different interpretations of the actions of church leaders among church circles. A typical clergy reaction was that of Fr Georgi Maximov, from a church in the Moscow district of Businovo: on social media he presented Patriarch Kirill's position as more flexible and more appropriate, while he disliked the pronouncements of the head of DECR, Metropolitan Illarion (Alfeev):

“Metropolitan Illarion is trying to present the appeal of the Patriarch as an order. The difference between an appeal and an order is that the former gives the recipient freedom – either to respond or not to the appeal.”

Fr Georgi Maximov emphasised that the words of the Patriarch were correctly interpreted by Metropolitan Merkuri of Rostov, who said:

“The Patriarch did not tell people not to come to church. The Patriarch suggested that people should refrain from this as much as possible. No Patriarch, and particularly our Patriarch, would ever demand this. And furthermore, we can’t close churches.”

In the words of Fr Georgi Maximov:

“The Patriarch has said nothing critical about those Orthodox Christians who for various reasons did not have the strength to respond to his appeal; in no way were they rebels or ill-wishers of the Patriarch, but acted simply as people who could not imagine life without the Church.”

Some church leaders started to search for ways to circumvent the strict quarantine rules. Bishop Sergei (Bulatnikov) of Velikie Luki sent out a letter on 13th April, which stressed that the local authorities were to blame, that no one had closed a church, that believers had a constitutional right to gather together. The letter recommended that no one sign any

paper presented by an official from *Rospotrebnadzor* (similar recommendations were made in other dioceses). The head of the Syktyvkar Diocese, Archbishop Pitirim (Volochnikov), announced on 11th April that he was preparing a case, challenging the legality of the ban on mass religious gatherings, issued by the local branch of *Rospotrebnadzor*, while the words from a sermon given by Bishop Mefodi of Kamen’ on the River Ob were circulated widely on the internet:

“At the end of the day we will all be brought into church, but it is better to go to church on one’s own feet. We thus mark the pathway to the Kingdom of Heaven with our footprints.”



Metropolitan Kirill of Ekaterinburg

In Ekaterinburg an Orthodox activist called Oksana Ivanova from the Museum of Sanctity, was arrested by the police because she called the Governor of that oblast “an enemy of the Church” when he called for churches to be closed, while Metropolitan Kirill of Ekaterinburg reluctantly accepted the instructions of the local authorities and called for church services to take place without a congregation. His Easter Message strongly differed from that of the Patriarch – it was very emotional:

“The world today is in a panic, is afraid even of its own shadow, and demands from us an account of the hope we have in the resurrected Christ... I call upon you all to fight against this destructive infection, using all methods known to epidemiology and asceticism – observe social distancing, use personal protective equipment, and hygiene, and all that the doctors recommend. But no less carefully must we keep our souls pure and unsullied. We must keep our distance from provocateurs and those who spread panic, we must protect ourselves against information viruses, and wash not only the infection from our hands, but also the contagion of sin, fear, unbelief and panic from our souls... May our common misfortune bind our parish communities more closely together. The enemy of the resurrected Christ is unfortunately real and more dangerous than any virus. He wants to steal us from one another, he wants to steal our churches from us, and banish the Eucharist from the churches. We know that he wants to make the Church neither hot nor cold. But while God has even a few righteous praying with burning fervour, filled with Easter joy which no external pain, persecution or restriction can quench, God will have mercy on our earth.”¹⁷

In some dioceses the bishops paid no attention at all to the instructions of the local authorities. For example, the mayor of Elets (Lipetsk oblast), Evgeni Borovskikh, announced in response to the position taken by Bishop Maxim of Elets and Lebedyan:

“For the fourth day running I have tried to get an answer from the diocese, but so far without result. Therefore today I shall personally deliver to Bishop Maxim an injunction from the head of the administration of the Lipetsk oblast’s *Rospotrebnadzor* against church services remaining open for parishioners. I think I shall achieve a positive result, and the parishioners of our diocese will spend Easter week at home.”¹⁸

As a result of the confrontation between mayor and bishop, the Cathedral of the Resurrection in Elets was locked on Holy Saturday and services banned. Bishop Maxim in his sermon on the diocesan YouTube channel accused the authorities of considering churches to be more dirty than buses and queues in shops – and protested “we are not dirty.”

It was the categorical nature of the government’s demand (in St Petersburg and a number of other regions) to block access to “cult buildings” that led to conflict. The ROC’s legal department at the outset (26th March 2020) accused the Governor of St Petersburg of exceeding his authority, and infringing freedom of conscience and the Russian Federation’s Constitution.¹⁹ On 28th March believers were not allowed to join the service taking place in the Church of Christ-on-the-Blood (St Petersburg), while Fr Sergi Kuksevich, the priest-in-charge (also the secretary of the St Petersburg Diocese), stood on the front steps and announced that the government “had committed a crime by banning what was most important during difficult times – namely prayer.” However, subsequently

(13th April) the Petersburg Metropolia directed its incumbents to officiate at services without a congregation.²⁰ At the same time the Abbot of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery (St Petersburg) stated:

“We will not allow our churches to be closed by us ourselves. If this is done by the law-enforcement agencies, then the consequences will be on their consciences.”

The authorities were supposed to allow individual attendance at church and clergy visits to people self-isolating. Bishop Irinei of Orsk and Gai (Orenburg oblast), for example, gave instructions that only he and two unmarried priests with no family could visit the sick. On 17th April Patriarch Kirill called for priest-monks, who had been specially trained, to be allowed to enter the infectious wards in hospitals. When on 15th April special travel permits were issued in Moscow the authorities, however, did not make an exception for priests; only later were such permits issued to names on lists presented by the ROC. The critical care paramedic Fr Feodorit (Sen’chukov) protested on social media:

“The state is once again revealing its anti-Christian essence. While you limit people going to church during the most important festival for a Christian, why do you relax the rules for dog-walkers? This means that dogs are more important to our government than the spiritual needs of people; that is, our government is inhumane... What concerns me is

that you can’t move around the city, and the churches (in the authorities’ opinion) are not considered an essential service.”

Financial problems



Bishop Feoktist of Pereslavl' & Uglich

Many clergy faced financial difficulties when bishops decided to collect parish contributions, although churches had been unable to build up funds from church collections. An exception was Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) of Pskov, who not only exempted all his clergy from the levy, but also found donors to help support clergy families financially. But many bishops in small dioceses (Patriarch Kirill stated that there were more than a hundred) were in a difficult position, and had no wealthy donors to call upon. Bishop Feoktist (Igumnov) of Pereslavl' and Uglich vividly described the situation for many provincial bishops on Facebook:

“What are we bishops in the provinces to do about the church levy? We have not been exempted by anyone. Of course, I’ve often read about bishops living off the fat of the land, but in

reality, more often than not, the situation is different: all we collect in the form of a church levy we send on. One can blame the Moscow Patriarchate, as many do, but it spends this money on the synodal structures (in which many people work, who are also paid very little) and on our parishes abroad, which survive with great difficulty and are worse off than the bleakest of parishes on Russian soil... Our church levy is ten times higher than in other dioceses with the same population, and this year there won't be any tourists who are the people who basically fill our coffers. My diocese has no philanthropists able to help. I know bishops who do have philanthropists, and, thanks to them, look good in the eyes of the public: they are able to be generous and build up a reputation of magnanimity. But we have to sit tight, scratch our head and, well, appear in the eyes of society as mean scroungers."

On 17th April Vladimir Legoida, head of the ROC's Synodal Department for the Church's Relations with Society and the Mass Media, officially admitted that the Church was in a difficult position owing to the drastic reduction in donations. Soon after, Patriarch Kirill appealed to the government to temporarily exempt the Church from paying local taxes. In a sermon on 3rd May, Kirill announced that he had received support from some sponsors which would be distributed to the clergy:

"I turned to some wealthy people, who were well disposed towards the

Church, with a humble request for material support for our clergy. And, thanks be to God, my pleas were heard. Of course, this perhaps will not radically change the situation, but each of us must do what we can today to help our neighbour."

On 14th May he stated that the financial contributions from all dioceses, where lockdown measures had been imposed, had reduced by 25% compared to 2019.

Fundamentalists react

Thanks to the fears and hysteria aroused by coronavirus, the conservative-fundamentalist element within the ROC received a new lease of life, and openly supported those who refused to accept the closure of churches; many of them joined the ranks of Covid-deniers. The basic ideas of these conservatives were founded on conspiracy theories about coronavirus, on the need to fight against digitisation, seen as "the mark of the antichrist", and against the creation of a world government via implanted microchips controlled by 5G technology.

Publications appeared on the website of "The Russian People's Line"²¹ and on the website and TV channel of "Tsargrad"²² where local governments were rated according to how godless or god-fearing they were. The governors of the Altai Republic and of St Petersburg, who decided to close churches without consulting believers or the bishop, were rated as the leading godless, in contrast to the governors of the Murmansk, Chelyabinsk, Tver and Belgorod oblasts who had supported believers although they

had asked them not to attend church services.²³ Priests with a variety of views reacted negatively to the authorities' decision to "close churches" without any consultation. Even the extremely cautious former press secretary of the Patriarch, Fr Vladimir Vigilyansky, posted a critical message on Facebook which was then reprinted on the website of "The Russian People's Line":

"At the end of the day we see that the Moscow authorities have absolutely no confidence in the Church, in the law-abiding Patriarch, bishops, priests and laity, unlike other social groups, guards, officials, lawyers, journalists, builders, retailers, car repairers. I shall not be surprised if the closing of churches, and the ban on clergy ministering to the needs of believers, is defined as discrimination on grounds of religion."

Here are a few typical examples of the emotional reaction of Orthodox believers on Facebook. Fr Gennadi (Voitishko), who works for the ROC's Synodal Education Department, posted:

"The Church cannot live without the liturgy, without the Eucharist... I cannot understand how this can be stopped even on the pretext of the virus."

Sergei Bolotov, a journalist and former employee of the ROC's Information Department, posted:

"Emelyan Yaroslavsky [Bolshevik anti-religious activist, d.1943. *Ed.*] would be turning in his grave with

jealousy... The Patriarchate has capitulated."

The priest-monk Feodorit Sen'chukov posted:

"Our current government is anti-religious; it is the power of Satan. This is the answer for all those who criticised the Church for joining forces with the state. The state has revealed what sort of spiritual bulwarks it really has – they stink..."



Sergi Romanov

Fr Andrei Tkachev, one of the main dissidents arguing that the Church's liturgical life should continue, became a popular conservative preacher, and posted: "Close brothels because of coronavirus, not churches."

Sergi Romanov

Sergi Romanov belongs to the generation which was converted to Orthodoxy in the 1990s, and began fanatically defending the interests of the ROC. He was sentenced to 13 years in prison for murder and robbery and released from a

corrective labour colony in 1997. In 1998 he entered the Moscow Spiritual Seminary and became a novice at the Alapaevsk Monastery near Ekaterinburg. Despite the fact that ordination according



Sredneural'sk Convent

to canon law is forbidden to those who commit murder, he was ordained. There is no clear explanation for this – either the diocese accepted his repentance, or Romanov hid the seriousness of his crime from the church authorities. It is also quite possible that he was ordained even when all the facts about his past were known, because of the dearth of clergy in the 1990s and Romanov's business abilities.

By 2001 Romanov was a priest-monk at the Monastery of the Holy Imperial Passion-Bearers at Ganina Yama [site of the mine shaft, down which the bodies of the royal family were thrown on 17th July 1918. *Ed.*] near Ekaterinburg, which was

built in memory of the imperial family shot by the Bolsheviks. Romanov often used ruthless methods to restore the monastery, and in early 2000 some farmers accused him of stealing their land with the help of local criminals. In 2005 Romanov took charge of restoring the Sredneural'sk Convent in the Ekaterinburg Metropolia, and became its spiritual father. Businessmen, members of the law-enforcement agencies, Cossacks, famous artists and sportsmen, and devotees from other regions began to gather round him. His spiritual children included some of those who took part in armed conflicts in Donbass after 2014. On a Federal level, Romanov became famous in 2017 when the film “Mathilda” about Nicholas II's love affair with the famous Polish ballerina Matylda Krzesińska was shown in cinemas. Some within the ROC, including Sergi Romanov, condemned the film and wanted it banned from cinemas, because it besmirched the memory of the tsar, revered by some as a martyr. Natalya Poklonskaya, the State Council member for Crimea and a devotee of Nicholas II, travelled to Romanov's convent to show support, though she later stated that she had never been one of his spiritual children.

Romanov came into the limelight when he began making speeches about the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. He called people to disregard the instructions of the local authorities, and to continue holding church services. During Holy Week he said in a sermon:

“How could Orthodox believers turn into unbelievers? The spirit of the

Russian people has always been part of the Church! But our leaders are closing churches because of a fake pandemic. This is cowardice and weakness. God gives this warning: those who are afraid will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. I propose

leave. That month he was fined 18,000 roubles by the local authorities for verbally attacking those who supported what he called “the digital concentration camp” and vaccination (which he claimed would inject a microchip produced by “the devil Bill Gates”).



Sergi Romanov in his cell

we forget those who are senile and self-isolating. They should be sent off to the Republic of Birobidzhan [Jewish Autonomous Oblast. *Ed.*] or to Martinique, or to the Greek island Spinalonga. Once this has been done, the non-existent coronavirus and pandemic will disappear. May all those who help to close churches be cursed!”

On 27th April 2020 the church leadership banned him from preaching in public. Metropolitan Kirill, in charge of the Ekaterinburg Metropolia, confined Romanov to the St John the Divine Skete, but the latter decided on 17th June to remain in the Sredneural'sk Convent, which meant that the Mother Superior, Varvara (Krygina), felt compelled to

and *Rospotrebnadzor*. I consider these actions of Patriarch Kirill, the Holy Synod and the bishops, to be an insult to the Holy Spirit, and a betrayal of the faith.”

He also stated that he would not leave the Sredneural'sk Convent:

“I shall not leave this house of the Mother of God. My conscience is clear, I am at peace. They, that is the clergy and Metropolitan Kirill, will have to take the convent by storm. You, the persecutors of the faith, should leave the ROC.”

On 3rd July the ecclesiastical court of the Ekaterinburg Diocese defrocked Romanov on the grounds that he had betrayed his priestly vocation, his monastic vows and canon law. On 6th July Metropolitan

On 15th June Romanov appeared at the ecclesiastical court of the Ekaterinburg Diocese and announced:

“His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, the Synod, and bishops have no authority over the Church. The Church is currently being ruled by the medics

Kirill of Ekaterinburg sent an open letter to Romanov, in which he criticised the content of the latter's sermons:

"On Christmas Eve you lied to your parishioners when you read out, as a genuine document, the low-grade forgery, Stalin's fake testament, and then proceeded for 20 minutes to talk about the life and achievements of Stalin. On the eve of Christ's birth you talked about everyone except the Christ Child. You praised Stalin on the day we celebrate the life of saints, martyred during the Stalin period."

The Metropolitan then pointed to the unpleasant facts in Romanov's biography:

"You were expelled from year two of the Moscow Spiritual Seminary for lack of application... you covered up your crime in your autobiography when you were ordained with the phrase, 'From 1984-1997 I was working in UShch-349/13 [a corrective labour colony. *Ed*] as an electrician.' I think your deception and craftiness in the presentation of an inconvenient biographical detail are obvious to everyone."

Debates about Romanov reached their peak in the mass media when the well-known television presenter, Xenia Sobchak, made a film about him and the Sredneuralsk Convent. The film was entitled "The Special Purpose Convent" ["special purpose" was the term used to describe parts of Stalin's system of labour camps. *Ed.*] and described the oppressive conditions in which some

young girls lived in a refuge, within the convent, under the control of Romanov. In June 2020 before the film was released there had been a great drama: Xenia Sobchak, dressed like an Orthodox pilgrim in a long skirt and with a scarf on her head, was forcibly refused entry to the convent; she and one of her cameramen were beaten up and her nose was broken.

By July Romanov's words had ceased to be taken seriously, especially when he demanded that President Putin resign and hand over power to him, while calling upon people not to vote for changes to the Constitution, which Putin had proposed. There was a heated discussion in the press, suggesting that there might be a schism in the ROC, although there was no basis for this in reality. Nationalists within the Church, in fact, condemned Romanov. Some members of certain sections of the law-enforcement agencies were known to be among Romanov's spiritual children, but thanks to the absurdity of his ideas he was not taken seriously by most Orthodox conservatives. Many Covid-dissidents in the ROC were not prepared to side with him, and no organised movement in his support developed. Even those who agreed with his ideas about "a digital concentration camp", nevertheless refused to criticise the Church and the Patriarch.

The initial response of the Church's leadership to Romanov's behaviour was cautious, as they clearly wanted to avoid provoking any dramas around him, and any demonstrations by his supporters. In December 2020, however, the situation changed dramatically. On 8th December



Russian security forces storm the Sredneural'sk Convent on 29th December 2020

Metropolitan Kirill was moved to head the Metropolia of Kazan and Tatarstan, while the younger Metropolitan Evgeni (Kul'berg) replaced him in Ekaterinburg. Then during the early hours of 29th December the Sredneural'sk Convent was stormed by Russian security forces and Romanov was arrested. He was accused of infringing the law on freedom of conscience and of encouraging suicide. He was transferred to a Moscow prison where he currently remains while awaiting trial.

Conclusion

The complexity of the position taken by the ROC during the fight against coronavirus, is connected to two factors. First, Orthodoxy is still part of the complex phenomenon known as the “pro-Orthodox consensus”, as defined by the sociologist Dmitri Furman in the early 2000s, which argues that Orthodoxy remains an important element within patriotism and is

symbolically supported by almost all categories of the population, from atheists to Muslims as well as by the Orthodox themselves, in conjunction with no mass interest in actual religious observance. Second, one of the results of such a configuration is that the ROC's political role as an influential civil institution (which it became in 2010) is rejected. It has become much more usual to separate Orthodoxy as such from the church leadership, while associating the ROC as an organisation with those ideas which most people would never entertain, and which are both crazy and grotesque. On the strength of this, no one feels any obligation to observe instructions issuing from the ROC.

During the pandemic there were factors within the Church itself which helped to promote such an attitude: the official leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate made no striking statements of principle, which went beyond the announcements of the

political leadership; there were no dramatic statements about the social or political role of the Church, on the position of the ordinary clergy and parishes, on the dire situation facing small and medium businesses. This was a conscious decision of the church leadership, related to their reluctance to discuss serious issues during the crisis, and their general inability to promote discussion in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, the coronavirus crisis opened up the ROC's potential for social action, and gave an impetus to the activity of volunteers, both within and outside

the Church, for whom social responsibility and civil rights had become paramount by 2019.²⁴ Self-isolation made the clergy fight to support their flock, made them rethink the role of the Church in society, and brought out into public view forces which were previously hidden. The crisis did not act as a "magic potion" which brought the ROC to life. The varied forms of Russian Orthodox cooperation with society, the growth of parish life and the arrival of a new generation of clergy, have all been part of a phase of development, which began well before the election of Patriarch Kirill in 2009, and which continues to this day.

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3. Узланер Д. Постсекулярный поворот: как мыслить о религии в XXI веке. М.: Издательство Института Гайдара, 2020.
4. Circular letter on measures to counteract the threat of the virus spreading. 24 March 2020. URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5612227>
5. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that until 17 March believers were venerating the relics of St John the Baptist which had been brought to Petersburg from an Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem. The glass over the relics which believers kissed was wiped with "surgical spirit mixed with sweet-smelling oil."
6. For the text of the Patriarch's sermon see: URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5613859>
7. The Patriarch's message was addressed to all bishops, priests, monks, nuns and laity in Russia, 3 April 2020. URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5616517>
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11. "Metropolitan Pavel explained why he dissuaded believers from going to church": *Sputnik*, 14 April 2020. URL: <https://sputnik.by/video/20200414/1044445933/Mitropolit-Pavel-obyasnil-pochemu-ugovarivaet-veruyuschikh-ne-idi-t-v-serkov.html>

12. The Council on Human Rights indicated only three regions where the governors imposed a ban on entering religious buildings and stopped them functioning: St Petersburg, Ryazan and Amur oblasts.
13. Paper on “Lessons from the pandemic in relation to the observance of the rights of the individual and the citizen,” (Moscow, 2020). URL: <http://president-sovet.ru/documents/read/687/>
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Remembering 1991: 30th Anniversary

Living History

by Alyona Kojevnikov

Alyona Kojevnikov worked for Keston from 1978-1990 and headed its news service. Earlier she had worked for Radio Liberty in Munich, and from 1990-1991 became its London correspondent. She was then asked to set up Radio Liberty's Moscow Bureau, which she headed. After two years she resigned and worked for two international law firms in Moscow as a translator and interpreter. She now recalls the year of the coup against Gorbachev in August 1991, leading in December to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of Communism.

In this digital age, we know what is happening all over the world minutes after any event occurs, be it a volcano eruption, natural or man-made disaster, the doings of so-called celebrities and – more rarely – positive developments affecting the globe. It is a sad fact that the few attempts there have been to publish newspapers carrying only good news flopped dismally. We are inured to misfortune, usually feeling only abstract pity or approbation.

But such automatic complacency is knocked into a cocked hat when you find yourself pitchforked into truly astounding, history-shaping events. It is an amazing feeling!

When I arrived in Moscow on the evening of 21st August 1991 to visit my friends Vladimir and Victoria, there was no indication that the following day would see the fall of Communism. Vladimir met me at Sheremetyevo airport, and we stayed overnight in their central Moscow flat as it was too late to drive to

their little dacha in Domodedovo. Everything was quiet the next morning when we set off for the dacha, driving through silent, sleeping Moscow. About halfway to the dacha, we picked up an old lady who was carrying a basket of apples – it was the feast of the Transfiguration, the harvest festival when fruit (usually apples) and vegetables are taken to the church to be blessed. She had been to the early liturgy and told us that there were rumours that something fantastic was going on in Moscow, that there were tanks in the streets; the only thing on television was a performance of Swan Lake, the ballet, but nobody really knew what was going on.

When we reached the dacha, the same rumours had reached the village, but there was still no official reaction. If the information concerning tanks was accurate, I said it sounded like a military putsch. Leaving Vladimir and Victoria's three children (all under six years of age) with Vladimir's mother, we raced back to Moscow. As we approached the city,

we saw that tanks were parked alongside the road. We hopped out and asked the soldiers what was happening? They had no idea; they had been ordered out early in the morning but not told why. We stopped briefly at the Moscow flat for me to pick up my Radio Liberty tape recorder, and were just in time to catch the televised announcements made by the “putschists”, followed by yet another showing of Swan Lake. Phone calls from friends indicated that the place to be was the White House, where crowds were gathering in a show of defiance. We were joined by Vladimir’s cousin Alexei, and the four of us scurried from place to place among the swelling crowd. I was interviewing as many people as I could, which was quite easy because, when I identified myself as a Radio Liberty journalist, there was immediate cooperation on all sides. I still have that tape as a memento of that amazing time, as well as a piece of a red and yellow glass plaque from the entrance to the Institute of Marxism and Leninism, which I shattered with the high heel of my shoe. Vandalism? Yes, but how I enjoyed it! What struck me most was how there was no hysteria or confrontation: in fact, the atmosphere was very business-like, strange as that may sound. Quite a few people were armed with what looked like hunting rifles, but if there were any handguns, I did not see them. Nor did I encounter a single drunk. For me, the most breath-taking moment was the appearance and unfurling of a huge banner of the old Russian white-blue-red flag, instead of the red rag of the Bolsheviks. My family’s 70 years of exile from Russia was finally vindicated. Another moment etched in my memory forever

was sitting beside the driver in the cab of the heavy hauler that pulled down and dragged away the statue of Dzerzhinsky, outside the dreaded Lubyanka headquarters of the KGB. The few guards standing outside the huge, locked doors made no move to interfere. I had only enough tape left to ask the driver how he felt about bringing that monster’s statue down? “*Normal’no*” he answered calmly. And at that time, it actually did feel quite normal, and long overdue – the shedding of shackles, a feeling of hope that things would change for the better, even if there was no clear idea of what that “better” would be.

I lived and worked in Moscow for almost 20 years after that time, starting off as the first Bureau Chief of Radio Liberty, shortly after President Yeltsin signed a decree allowing foreign radio stations, which had been viciously jammed by the Soviets for decades, to set up shop in Russia. I retired in 2013 and came back to the UK, just before the first screws were being tightened by the new “masters” and led, alas, to what we see now – the Soviet Union Mark II. I fear I will not live to see a truly free Russia again. Solzhenitsyn was right when he said that it will take several generations to throw off the last remnants of Communism from the psyche of the nation. Freedom was never easy, it has to be learned and the lesson is a hard one. We shall suffer and grieve, but freedom from our bonds will eventually reach the most distant corners of our land. Russia is vast. It is said that we are slow to harness our troikas, but when we do – we drive hell for leather...

Failed Moscow Coup: 30 Years Later

by Elisabeth Robson

Elisabeth Robson worked for the BBC World Service as a journalist and programme-maker and as manager, founding and developing new departments and ending her career as head of the Russian Service. Her experience of broadcasting covered the Cold War, Gorbachev's period of glasnost' and the collapse of the USSR. She now recalls the attempt to overthrow Gorbachev in 1991.

I flew to Moscow on Sunday 18th August 1991 with a series of tasks ahead: I was bringing some equipment for the developing team of stringers reporting for the BBC, I had a draft contract for discussion with the Director of the Library of Foreign Literature for a big exhibition of the work of the BBC Russian Service, and I was to attend the Congress of Compatriots (*Конгресс Соотечественников*), and report back to London.

I have always wondered if there was any connection between the Congress of Compatriots and the timing of the 19th August 1991 coup. It seems too much of a coincidence, but probably is not: the plotters wanted Gorbachev to be safely out of the way, on holiday in Crimea, to make their move and declare him “sick and unable to fulfil his functions of President”, while holding him under house arrest.

The Congress of Compatriots was initiated by the City of Moscow Administration, and was run in conjunction with the Library of Foreign Literature. An invitation had been extended to the diaspora of former Soviet citizens to return to

Moscow and discuss a wide variety of topics, including the way forward for the reformed Soviet Union. Many of those attending had not returned since they had left years before, usually in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, with their citizenship revoked and their families left behind suffering all manner of reprisals. Sheremetyevo Airport was busy with all the arrivals and our group was collected and delivered to the Rossiya Hotel (now demolished). I had met my husband off his plane from Munich; he was in Moscow for Radio Liberty, the US Congress-funded international broadcaster. That first evening we enjoyed the sense of a newly free Russia, with smiling faces and warm greetings instead of the customary rudeness of customs officials and hotel staff. We walked and ate dinner in a glow of pleasure at the changed circumstances. Next morning we were to attend a service in one of the Kremlin cathedrals recently returned to the Church to mark the opening of the Congress.

The next morning early I put through a call to Larisa Bogoraz, the widow of Anatoli Marchenko, a prominent dissident who had died in the Gulag. We

were to attend an anniversary event, discreetly organised with details passed through brief phone calls. Not everyone felt the USSR had changed enough to be relaxed about making plans public. She answered quickly, and without any discussion asked if I had seen the television that morning. I had not, and she said to switch on immediately, and hung up.

I did so and my husband and I watched with cold shivers as we saw an all too familiar figure from pre-Gorbachev times of a stone-faced presenter reading out the words of the proclamation of an emergency situation, and the formation of the State Committee for the State of Emergency, needed because Gorbachev was sick and unable to carry out his duties. In between readings a recording of Swan Lake was shown – this was varied with solemn music throughout the day. Still in shock we set out for the Kremlin and met Russian friends expressing horror and alarm. Many of the returning diaspora had simply packed their bags and headed for the airport. Tanks and armoured cars were moving into the city.

In the afternoon I looked in on one of the Congress sessions – all was calm and peaceful, and the lecturer droned on. I soon left to seek out Ekaterina Genieva, (Katya to staff and friends), then Deputy Director of the Library of Foreign Literature, with whom I had an appointment. We sat in her office drinking tea and speculating about the future of our (BBC-LFL) relationship. I produced the draft contract and after some thought Katya remarked that generally the USSR honoured correctly signed and authorised contracts with foreign bodies. I produced

the BBC stamp, which I had found invaluable on previous trips to the USSR for the BBC, signed and stamped alongside Katya's signature and library stamp. I had no authority to sign such a contract, but I figured there would be no consequences back home in view of the circumstances. (There were not.) Library staff who had been out and about reported the tank movements, but also the extraordinary bravery of the crowds, engaging the soldiers in arguments, delivering leaflets which they dropped into open tanks, handing out flowers, and in most cases persuaded them to turn around and stop trying to get through the crowds and the improvised barricades that blocked access to the Russian Parliament, then housed in the White House.

In the evening there was an event in the Tchaikovsky concert hall to mark the opening of the Congress. Bizarrely, this went ahead, but between the musical interludes various dignitaries took to the stage to protest the coup and express support for the thousands of demonstrators in the centre of Moscow.

A few of us left early to go and see what was happening at the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the KGB. Earlier that afternoon a crowd had gathered and demanded the removal of the statue of the founder and first head of the Soviet secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky. By evening chains had been attached but the small mobile crane was insufficient to move it. Undeterred, the crowd stayed around and eventually a much larger crane arrived to remove the offending statue, to loud cheers.

Monday night was punctuated with the sound of tanks rolling along the river embankment, and early reports of at least ten deaths. Katya rang us to suggest we should think of leaving the country; things looked ugly, mass arrests seemed likely. She was concerned for our safety and offered to help in any way she could. We declined, however, and headed out to see the huge crowds still at the White House, where Yeltsin and others delivered rousing, impromptu speeches. Crowds also gathered at other important buildings, such as the Moscow City Soviet, where other leaders had established themselves as a focus of resistance against the tanks parked up outside. The Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, among others, addressed the crowds.



Statue of Dzerzhinsky is removed
© Andrei Solovyov, Gennadi Khamelyanin
TASS

The atmosphere remained tense, the presence of tanks and troops, even if they were holding their fire, made the crowds, and the journalists, extremely nervous. There were persistent reports of a storming of the White House by airborne troops being in preparation, and the big question was whether the junta could command the obedience of the troops, once confronted by unarmed civilians. The response the previous day must have sown serious doubts. But the tanks kept on rolling, and from our hotel we saw a sinister-looking group of men in army fatigues leaving an armoured car and disappearing into the darkness. Our imaginations ran riot and we felt the fear of the Russians.

Both on Monday and Tuesday one could catch in the crowds the sounds of radios

carrying the latest news. The “putschists” shut down as much of the media as they could, but Radio Russia somehow stayed on the air, and of the foreign radios both Radio Liberty (USA) and the BBC could be heard. Moscow Echo went quiet, then reappeared with the help of frequencies belonging to Radio Liberty. All these stations carried the latest news and kept up a stream of detailed information. We subsequently learned that telephones and fax machines had been much in use to distribute news abroad. I filed my stories to London by telephone. The junta signally failed to cut Russia off from news sources, despite the closures, and this must have contributed greatly to the success of the protests. The print press

had been comprehensively shut down, but despite this leaflets kept appearing stuck on walls and trees, carrying a chronicle of events as each day went on. This was initially something of a mystery: printing presses in the USSR were tightly controlled and securely locked when not in use for the official press. Photocopiers were rare, and even more tightly controlled. But still the news sheets kept appearing, encouraging all who saw them that the democratic push-back was still very much alive.

On Tuesday friends at the *Literary Gazette* (*Литературная газета*) joined the demonstrations because the paper could not appear – it used the same presses as *Pravda* and they had been shut down. There was anger among the journalists that their editor, Fyodor Burlatsky, was nowhere to be seen or heard – he chose to stay away on holiday until he saw which way events would go. On Wednesday he phoned in his protest over the closure of the paper, just in time for the front page of the delayed paper. His journalists were so angered by his behaviour that they voted him out of his post of editor.

By Wednesday the coup was looking increasingly shaky. The plotters had tried to win Gorbachev over and had failed. I was in the *Literary Gazette* offices, watching on the office television, when Gorbachev flew back into Moscow. He came down the steps, clearly shaken by his ordeal, and made an impromptu speech on the steps talking about restoring order and the reputation of the Communist Party. It was com-

pletely out of touch with the mood of the protesters, and so not what anyone wanted to hear at that moment. Yeltsin had seized the initiative and Gorbachev had failed to win it back. All fear had evaporated, and now all the talk was filled with mocking anecdotes about the trembling hands of the plotters' spokesman, and the incompetence they had shown. The dead were not forgotten and on Friday there was a solemn procession with a huge Russian flag. The euphoria after the sheer terror lasted for days afterwards. And our hotel staff smiled at us once again.

One last story which embodies the spirit of those days. The printed news sheets which had mysteriously appeared all over Moscow were gathered together under the rubric *The General Newspaper* (*Общая газета*). An army of young people had moved around the city, posting them wherever they could. But where had the copying been done? One of the main places turned out to be the Library of Foreign Literature. The editor of one of the independent titles which had sprung up under *glasnost* came to Katya to ask for help. She opened the office where the locked photocopier was stored, and made it and paper available. She knew that the room was alarmed and the local militia station would be alerted to a possible break-in. In due course the senior officer at the station appeared at the Library. Katya greeted him, told him the photocopier had been opened with her knowledge, and that she took full responsibility. He looked hard at her and then said: "Ekaterina Yurievna, just make sure that no light shows," and left.

Keston Archive

A Mercy Mission

The previous issue of the Keston Newsletter (pp.41-44) published a “top secret” document which told the story of how a group from Keston in March 1977 visited Nadezhda Vins, wife of the imprisoned Baptist pastor, Georgi Vins. The Keston group included Michael Bourdeaux, Sir John Lawrence (Keston’s first Chairman) and Keston staff member Victoria Watts. When they talked to Nadezhda they discovered that she was unwell and refused to undergo an operation at the hands of a Soviet doctor for fear that she would not survive. The “top secret” document stated: “Clearly, then, all those receiving this letter must take immediate council together... My staff’s suggestion is to send a doctor (possibly an oncologist?) to Nadezhda urgently.” A doctor was indeed found who was willing to help: that doctor was George Hobbs, a Keston member. An abridged version of his sometimes harrowing account of this mercy mission is now published.

In April I had a surprise phone call from Keith Sanders, Secretary of the Christian Medical Fellowship, saying: “George, how would you like a week’s holiday in the Soviet Union?” It turned out that the Revd Michael Bourdeaux, Director of Keston College (Centre for the Study of Religion & Communism) in Kent, had close contacts with the family of Pastor Georgi Vins of Kiev. Georgi was undergoing his second period of prison camp in Siberia (5yrs, to be followed by 5yrs exile), basically for being an outspoken pastor. His wife, Nadezhda, whom Michael had seen in early 1977, had said she was ill, and had been advised to have an op by Russian doctors. But she was very scared to have it as she felt it would be used as an excuse to kill her. Michael wanted a non-communist doctor to go to see her and

advise. So, unofficially, as Keston does not do any underground work, he asked the Christian Medical Fellowship if they had someone willing to go. I said: “Why me, surely there are specialists, or better GPs”. But they had no idea what sort of op was needed, therefore what specialist, and Keith thought that, with my overseas experience, I would be the right chap. So I prayed, and got several folk from Keston to come and tell my wife Elisabeth and me all about it. John Mayne also came to evaluate the idea, as we had no idea what Keston was and how scatter-brained they might be! Victoria Watts, Alan Scarfe, Sandy Oestreich and Jane Ellis came and convinced us that they were sensible. So I said “yes”. They are all Christians and pray about such things.

Visas had to be got, a tourist trip to Moscow and Kiev booked, and interpreters found. They found a young couple, Brian and Chitra Robson from London, who both spoke Russian. They had also spent two years teaching English in Bulgaria, so knew how to behave in Communist bureaucracy. It took weeks but finally we were off in June. We had been allowed to tell only our closest friends that we were off to the Soviet Union; and the fewest, most reliable ones, that it was to see the Vins family.

Saturday 11th June: On Saturday mid-morning Elisabeth took me to Heathrow, and we met Brian and Chitra. To the departure lounge: from now on we could not speak openly together of our mission, and only had two contrived opportunities to do so, and to pray aloud together in the next seven days. We flew on an Aeroflot plane – four hours to Moscow. Nothing special – indifferent service.

We reached Moscow at 10.30pm and were met (as always) by an Intourist guide who put us into a taxi to our hotel. Customs: several minutes scrutinising our passports in a little kiosk into which we could hardly see. We felt he might have TV screen to check our credentials and identity with a computer bank. But our luggage was not searched ever on the trip. A long journey into Moscow. We were taken to the Hotel Metropol near Red Square. Most hotels are massively built with marble, stained glass and high ceilings and date from the Stalinist era. We had original oil paintings in our rooms: taken from capitalist homes? We could not get any food that evening – only ices. Chitra, who had only been

diagnosed pregnant the previous day, went to bed, while Brian and I went out for a stroll.

We went past the Lenin Museum and up to Red Square. Behind us the ornate red brick gothic-towered Historical Museum. To the right the massive wall and huge buildings of the Kremlin, with Lenin's (no longer shared by Stalin) tomb in front. But best of all, over the domed square, at the far end, is St Basil's Cathedral. This is super: a wonderful extravagance of striped and spotted onions – and floodlit. All due respect to the Commies who keep it painted up – albeit as a museum. We stood in the middle of the deserted cobbled square under the floodlight. In front was St Basil with his guardian policemen, to the right the gate of the Kremlin (Spassky Tower) with its two guards, and behind us, dead Lenin. We prayed aloud to the living God – God even of the Red Square and Kremlin.

Sunday 12th June: Up about 9am. Soon it was time for a taxi out to the airport again and plane to Kiev. We were not part of a group, just the three of us doing Moscow, Kiev, Moscow. The usual long wait at the airport, but in a lounge specially for foreigners – to keep us apart from locals? Reasonable flight to Kiev over the vast forests – what a huge country. The airport is an hour's drive out of the town through the forests in which people hunt and, nearer in, have weekend strolls. These were the forests the Reform Baptists used for their services.

Ensconced in the Dniepro Hotel facing a large crossroads overlooked by the ever-present Lenin (here a huge 30' hoarding

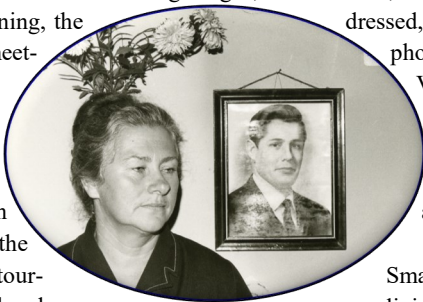
with him standing against the inevitable red ground). How I came to hate red! We took ourselves for a walk after a fair meal in the restaurant, down to the lovely broad Dnieper and its bridge. In fact, we took the metro across and walked back. In the middle of the bridge where we could see anyone approaching, we were able to hold our second and last verbal prayer meeting. We confirmed our plan to go to the flat on the far edge of the town next evening, the rendezvous for our meeting with Nadezhda.

Monday 13th June:

Chitra was tired so Brian and I took it in turns to stay in the hotel. We acted as tourists: I climbed a hill and visited St Andrew's Church being restored as a museum. Then to St Sophia's Monastery (again only a museum now). Superb campanile in white, pale blue and gold, with gold onions.

At 6pm we left as if for another "tourist walk". But we walked to the metro and past it, doubled back and down it. Five kopeks (2.5p) gets you in and travel as far as you like till you come up again. To the end of the line. Out. Waited for a tram. To the end of the line – near the edge of the city. Out, stroll around – no one behind us. Back onto the tram again and back two stops. (Brian seemed to know all the tricks.) Out, walked past a street and then doubled back to it. Past one block and round to the back of another. Up four flights of stairs. A little boy followed us. Why? We

stopped and knocked – the boy passed us. Into the flat – moments later the boy, Timothy aged 8, joined us – he had been watching out for us. We had asked how the family would recognise us strangers: "by your smiles". A middle-aged woman, hair in bun, let us in immediately, smiling. We did not seem to need introducing. Others trickled in, or were there, including Victor 26 and another younger girl, two babies, over fed and overdressed, but v. happy. A phone call to Nadezhda Vins, and she came. Cryptic conversation by phone – nothing given away.



Nadezhda with a portrait of Georgi behind her © Keston Institute

Small balcony off the living room, which had two tables, big short-wave wireless and huge old Russian bible. How they need a new translation, and small portable bibles. Brian and Chitra chatted and finally Nadezhda arrived. Such a gracious woman: welcoming, in complete control, making the occasional friendly quip, but crying gently when asked about Georgi.

A little persuasion was needed to get her to come to a bedroom: Chitra and me – "I'm not worth it, it's Georgi who needs help." I got a good medical history and with some persuasion got her to allow me to examine her, including *per vaginam*. After about two hours I was able to assure her that though an operation was the usual treatment for that condition, I wasn't convinced she in fact had it, and that she could safely wait and see.

[Dr Hobbs's diagnosis proved to be correct. Nadezhda in the end did not need an operation. *Ed.*] I was led to pray and lay hands on her, not from any sense of superiority – she is so much greater a Christian than me – but out of a great yearning to bless the lovely, humble, brave martyr. She asked help for her son Peter's hay fever. I gave her Piriton. How thrilled I was that so many of the drugs I had brought (my "Emergency Supply") were suitable for her. I had carried stethoscope, sphygmomanometer, auriscope, ophthalmoscope, torch and Cusco speculum in a small black shoulder bag bought for the trip. Just right – no one ever queried it. I carried it everywhere I went to make it familiar.

Then they pressed us to food – bread, soup, cucumber, sausage and milk. We had to hurry to be back at the hotel before midnight. We gave them watches, a calculator, tape recorder and clothing to use or sell, and had each brought a bible and concordance for them. Too many might have been found – these were the ones we "used ourselves". Mrs Vins then insisted on taking us back by taxi! We went via her home and she paid the whole fare. Thence back to the hotel before midnight, when they closed the doors. That was the last we saw of this wonderful lady. Although we had been invited to their church meeting the next night (and I to give a little address) events precluded this.

Tuesday 14th June: About 1am Brian called me: Chitra had abdominal pains – threatened miscarriage. I sedated her and we hoped. 7am: bleeding – little

could be done. Fortunately, she was very fit so we could afford to wait. (The Foreign Office had warned me to keep out of the hands of the Russian medical system.) But bleeding continued, we needed newspapers to collect the blood and finally she aborted. I hoped this would end our worries, but unfortunately she continued to bleed. How grateful I was that I had brought all my med. equip. including sphygmo. and speculum. But I now needed Ergometrine. The hotel called an ambulance and a dear old doctor and assistant came up. But as BP was fine I turned them away *pro tem*. They had no Ergometrine to give me though. About 10.30am I went out to try to get some. I went to the only Western authorities I could find, Mr Ralph Porter III, 1st sec of US embassy, running the Consulate in Kiev. He and his wife were marvellous. He dropped everything and took me across town to the VIP polyclinic. Much wheedling and fawning over three female (formidable) doctors, and waving of my printed cards (address: "British Med. Assoc. London" – just to impress in such circumstances), got a script for a syringe and Ergometrine. Out to a pharmacy. "No, we haven't got either." Just going when Mr Porter realised this could be a continuous wild goose chase, and he had been told he could get it here. Back in – played the heavy: yes, they had all! Rushed back to hotel at noon. BP had dropped: 100/? Got syringe boiled in dining room and called ambulance. (I'm glad to say that Chitra was later able to have a number of children. *GH*)

We were appalled at the callousness of all the Russian medics, and less so the

nurses. Particularly the little upstart ambulance doctor who seemed to have it in for us. At Kiev's Specialist Gynaecological Hospital, while Chitra was lying with a systolic Blood Pressure of 80/? in the "admission room" (semi basement), a doctor, smoking, wandered in and out. Apparently, he was "the Director" – most unimpressive. The sterility was poor to nil, the techniques fair, and equipment worse than we had in our AdoEkiti "Bush" Mission hospital in Nigeria ten years ago. The drip appalled me: it was put up only after the (barbaric) op, and consisted of rubber tubing and a Y-piece. One end went into a proper closed bottle (½ li of "plasma expander"), the other to an open flask, broken at the top and covered with gauze, filled from a jug – "glucose and vitamin"! I was scared to give this, but had no option. The syringe I was given to set up the drip was a cracked Record glass and metal one, wrapped in loose brown paper. The needle was v. blunt.

We told the doctors we had a flight back on Wednesday (which we had, but altered to Thursday) so that we could get Chitra out as soon as poss. They gave no antibiotics to cover their unsterile techniques. That evening (evac. was about 5pm) I insisted on staying with Chitra in the little five bed ward, despite great remonstrances from the staff that the women wouldn't like it (they however loved it!), and Brian much shaken, went off at about 8pm to fulfil our appointment with Christians. He had good fellowship and returned late.

I stuck it out, sitting by Chitra's bed, till about 10pm. Various doctors came and

tried to get me to leave; one hard-faced woman, much disliked by the patients, even threatened the police. I said I would sleep in a chair in the corridor outside the ward, but that didn't appease them. By 10pm Chitra was in fair condition. B.P. 100 systolic and happier. The other patients were kind and the nurse quite pleasant, so I left to get a taxi back to the hotel, promising to return at 7am.

Wednesday 15th June: Brian and I bussed and walked back to the hospital by 7am. Chitra had had a good night and felt better but weak. I took her temp. 97.5. The Director came round after breakfast and allowed us to take her home when I said I had antibiotics in the hotel, and our flight was booked for that day. There was nothing to pay – they were surprised when we asked. "Do you have to pay then?" "No, we don't even pay for drugs, like you have to," we replied. We left as quickly as possible in case they changed their minds, walking through the grounds. Chitra rested on a seat while Brian called a taxi.

In the evening we prayed about whether I should go to meet our Christian friends. Was it wise to go again when the mission was accomplished? Would we risk them? Could I do it without any Russian language? In fact, we all felt it was right (although I was scared), and I set off.

I remembered the route, and by frequent doubling back (as if I had made a mistake) and crossing the road, I assured myself I was not followed. I took my camera this time and was able to photograph the flat and its folk. Most of the time was spent with Victor. He showed

me the huge old Russian bible (pulpit size) and the little ones we had brought. I saw his big short-wave radio, and we heard a Russian language Christian broadcast – despite heavy jamming. We ate together bread, mashed potatoes with a mayonnaise sauce, tomatoes, cucumber and milk to drink. Fresh strawberries. About 10pm he indicated we should go and he would take me home by tram and bus. In fact, we branched off and went further out, to the church building. This was the Reform Baptist church and after 13 years of secret meetings in the forests round Kiev, sometimes being beaten up by KGB, they were inexplicably given permission to build a church building. (Perhaps the KGB felt they could keep an eye on them better if they knew where they met?) They built a solid church, mainly wood, seating 700, on waste land near a railway yard. It was immediately too small, so they built an extension which holds 300 – still too small.

Two young folk were coming away as we approached over rough waste ground. The meeting had finished: they have 3-4 per week! But they turned and came back with us; the pastor's son and daughter – both in their 20s. The whole church was opened up and illuminated for me. The chap was a fine pianist. Victor and I realised we knew two hymns together: "O Lord my God, when I in awful wonder" and "Take it to the Lord in prayer" (Nadezhda's favourite) written by my Great Uncle Scriven. So we had these bashed out on the piano, and bellowed them out in Russian and English. I almost wept at the privilege of being in the place where these brave folk worshipped – truly holy ground. Yet no

sanctimoniousness or depression: they were joyful, firm believers.

I learnt from Victor's photos that there is a very large church choir, and an orchestra of 13 balalaikas, two big balalaikas, one violin, one accordion and wind instruments. The pulpit has a cloth saying "God is love". A huge bible in plaster is on the "East" wall with Isaiah 55:6 "Seek the Lord while He may be found", and Acts 2:21 "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved". A big wedding (in photos), in the open air, had had a huge text banner for all to see: "Rejoice in the Lord O ye righteous. Praise befits the upright. Let thy steadfast love O Lord be upon us even as we hope in Thee." (Psalm 33: 1 & 22)

Finally we left. Back on a tram Victor met young friends – a chap and girl. Cheery. As we left, he gave me a card – quite openly. It was John 3:16 with a picture of Christ and an invitation, if I wanted to hear more, to come to one of five addresses for worship on Sundays. I was thrilled at this street evangelism card. This church will never be suppressed. Back to the hotel. Chitra improving.

Thursday 16th June: We had a flight to Moscow at 6pm. Brian and I took it in turns to stay with Chitra while the other went sight-seeing. The weather was hot, sticky and overcast, with occasional downpours – quite unheralded. We noticed the maps of Kiev we had bought to take back for Keston had no scales, and distances were greater than expected. I therefore paced out one long street and

marked, indirectly on my map, so a scale could be worked out. I visited the pleasure garden near the hotel which had a big wheel. I went up the latter and got a wonderful panoramic view northwards of the Dnieper River, and the big lake to the north, watched over by the huge statue of St Volodymyr, the evangelist of Ukraine. Apparently, he is much revered locally, so the Communists have left his statue, saying that, after all, he brought civilisation to the Slavs and is OK.

The usual taxi took us back to the airport. No facilities to rest or even lie down (no medical room), so Chitra sat for quite a time till the plane came. Routine flight and fortunately no trouble. We were delighted when, as the plane came down, they played soothing music. One tune has the words "Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters....Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee"! Another taxi – long drive into Moscow. This time to the Ukraina Hotel. Vast, from Stalin's era, and poor service.

Friday 17th June: I whizzed off to the British Embassy to sort out our flights. I got lots of help: a flight was arranged on a BA plane that evening – I only had to collect the tickets. I visited Dr D.H. Woodhead, the embassy doctor, and chatted. He was not at all surprised at my tales of the hospital, and asked me to write it up as people in the UK believed all the propaganda about Russian medicine. A Sudanese doctor I met at the embassy confirmed my stories: he lived and worked in Russia, and had a Russian

wife. He said there is no spirit of caring in Russian medicine, and their eye surgery, much vaunted, was years behind the UK.

Back over the bridge to Red Square and October Revolution Square, and BA office to collect the tickets. Then to the hotel. Brian had a quick skip out before our car to the airport. What a relief to get onto an English staffed plane. Chitra could lie down and travelled well. At 10pm we were at Heathrow – a day earlier than planned. I contacted the medical centre and got Chitra a wheelchair. When going through customs she had excellent attention, and soon was on her way with Brian to the North Middlesex Hospital. Now I was free to go home. But several phone calls to Elisabeth failed to get through and there were no buses. Marvellously, my friend Peter Edmunds was on duty in the control tower. I phoned, he came and dosed me down on a bed in his office. I was worn out.

Saturday 18th June: Up with the lark, though not feeling like one, and breakfast in the canteen with Peter, who then drove me home. It took me several days to get the tension out of my system, and one odd fact was my disgust of red: Elisabeth had a lovely red scarf on when I got home, and I had to ask her to take it off, as it reminded me too forcefully of all the red banners, flags, and hoardings in the USSR, and particularly of the red scarves round the necks of the little young Communists.

Facing Truncheons with the Bible

by Alexandr Shramko

On 9th August 2020 presidential elections were held in Belarus which were judged by the international community, and by large numbers of Belarusians, to have been manipulated, and thus President Lukashenko re-elected on falsified results. The Moscow Patriarchate's Exarch in Belarus, Metropolitan Pavel, at first offered his congratulations to Lukashenko on his victory, but later, after seeing the injuries inflicted on demonstrators by the heavy-handed treatment of the police, changed tack and supported the demonstrators. On 25th August he was removed by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and replaced by Bishop Veniamin (Tupeko). Many Christians – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – joined those demonstrating against Lukashenko. Following this article we print a letter of support for Belarusians organised by Russian Christians.

At first the religious component in the Belarus protests went almost unnoticed, but within two weeks after the elections it became so obvious that even Lukashenko expressed his displeasure. During one of the early pro-regime meetings he said:

“I am surprised by the position of our churches. My dear clergy, come to your senses and get on with your job. People should go to church to pray! Churches should not get involved in politics...The government is not going to stand by quietly.”

Lukashenko's displeasure, judging by this emotional outburst, was provoked by various denominations, but the Orthodox, the most numerous in Belarus, angered him the most. As traditionally the most loyal to the government, their involvement was the most unexpected. Why did this happen? The church is made up of people, so whatever happens

in society touches the church to some extent as well. But the status and interests of people within the church differ. The episcopate of the Orthodox Church has a special relationship with the state, and tries to comply as much as it can. In addition, a bishop's life is very different and disconnected from the everyday lives of most people, so the hierarchy often has little idea about how ordinary people live. Almost 60% of Belarus's population are Christian believers (80% Orthodox, 11%



Protesters with the message “We are against violence”

Catholics). They naturally have the same hopes and fears as the rest of society. Parish clergy find themselves caught between two opposites, the people and the church leadership – between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, they are hamstrung by a strict, almost serf-like dependence on the hierarchy, and so are compelled, to some degree at least, to obey and follow the line imposed from above, even if inwardly they disagree with it. On the other hand, they are in direct contact with people who come with their questions and problems. It is the parish priest who is confronted with the whole spectrum of life as lived by ordinary people. And, more often than not, he too is part of that life.

The more intense the conflict between “the powers-that-be” and the majority of people, the greater the tension within the church. The church leaders, who usually define the “church’s position”, are more drawn to “the powers-that-be” and try to remain loyal to the end. There are limits, however: general corporate interest leads to “saving face” before society and the laity. After all, the church depends not on the state for its funding but on sponsors and parishioners, whose trust, if lost, can lead to loss of support. Also, political leaders have a tendency – a rare one – of sometimes changing tack. You need to perceive when change is in the air and adapt in time.

The “church’s position” is not defined by the parish clergy, yet it is they who have to answer before the people for their church leaders’ actions. The greater the conflict between the people and the government, the more the ordinary

priest is pulled in different directions. He feels the pressure of his duty to obey his superiors, and at the same time he feels his solidarity with, and deep sympathy for, his neighbour.

During the Belarusian protests, against a background of a church leadership which did not know what to do, there were clergy who spoke out forcefully, went out onto the streets to pray and to preach, and came to the aid of the wounded and those in prison. Although there were not many such priests, the majority of the clergy, most of whom were not as brave, supported them in spirit.

Should the church stay out of politics, as demanded by Lukashenko? Although his view relates really to the Soviet past, when the church was confined to the ghetto of performing only worship services, the principle of remaining apolitical still faces us today; and by politics I mean the rivalry of political parties and elections. The church cannot be indifferent to the open flouting of the Christian commandments and ethical norms, and she rightly must condemn such actions whoever are the perpetrators. In the last analysis, the church is justified, according to church texts [e.g. “Fundamentals of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church”. *Ed.*] in calling for civil disobedience.

The surge of protests in Belarus, in which believers were also involved, was provoked by two moral factors. Firstly, the lying and falsification evident during the pre-election campaign, and then fully evident during the vote counting, were both morally unacceptable. This, in

Christian terms, involved committing the sin of giving false witness, which the government encouraged all over the country. Secondly, the mass use of force, beatings, and torture during the early days of the protests against the falsification of the elections, was also morally unacceptable. Not only protesters were affected, but even people just walking by were grabbed off the street. Some have died, others have been crippled, and some people have not yet been found. Some clergy spoke out against all this – with prayers for the victims and for

their signatures because of pressure from their superiors or from fear of reprisals.



Bishop Oleg Butkevich of Vitebsk



Archbishop Artemi of Grodno & Volkovysk
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national reconciliation in a spirit of Christian love, and not in support of any particular candidate; they have been accused by the government of getting involved in “what is not their business”. Both Orthodox and Catholics reacted to the illegal detentions and falsification of the pre-election campaign with two notable initiatives. The Catholics organised a campaign called “Catholics do not falsify”, and the Orthodox distributed placards, with the words “Orthodox are against falsification, humiliation and oppression of the individual”. These words were also posted on social media above the signatures of many clergy and church workers, though some withdrew

Following the mass use of force and beatings, the church had to take a position. The Catholic Archbishop of Minsk, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, spoke out more emphatically than Metropolitan Pavel, who called “everyone to stop”, and, for those “who had come to Belarus to foment enmity and hatred”, to go home. Both tried to reconcile what they presented as two equal sides, although only a very few militia were hurt, whereas thousands of demonstrators were beaten and tortured. The Catholic bishop of Vitebsk, Oleg Butkevich, spoke out more forcefully and clearly, while from among Orthodox leaders Archbishop Artemi of Grodno and Volkovysk called his clergy to overcome evil with good, and drew attention to “the experience of recent days when wives, mothers and sisters came out onto the streets with flowers and smiles, in the place of their wounded husbands, sons and brothers.”

The position taken by Metropolitan Pavel clearly wavered. At first he supported the government; following Patriarch Kirill he hastened to congratulate

Lukashenko on his victory, which horrified many Orthodox. He also at first distanced himself even from the procession of the cross and prayers against the use of force, which were organised by a group of Orthodox laity. But then, particularly when he saw photographs of the wounded, he supported this latter initiative, and then himself held daily prayers and a procession of the cross in Minsk's cathedral. After this service, Orthodox believers regularly joined Protestants and Catholics, who held a joint prayer meeting nearby. In the early days, these prayer meetings ended with a procession of



Metropolitan Pavel



the cross through the centre of the city to the prison where many of the arrested were being held. Metropolitan Pavel even visited the wounded in hospital, and in a sermon suggested that prayers should be said in front of the prison. He has now been replaced by someone more to the liking of the government [Bishop Veniamin (Tupeko). *Ed.*] .



Chain of Repentance

For the edification of clergy, one of the departments of the Belarusian Orthodox Church issued a special "clarification", which condemned clergy for "emotional public statements", and for "taking up

the stance of Christian activists" in "the political life of society". The document indirectly criticised a sermon against the use of force, given by Archbishop Artemi, which supposedly provoked "perplexed questions". The clergy paid no attention to this warning, although this did not mean that they all joined the street demonstrations. Their involvement was expressed through their sermons and on social media, and of course through organising help for those in hospital or in prison.

All Christian denominations were involved in what was called the "Chain of Repentance". On 21st August Christians from different denominations formed a prayer chain almost 15 kilometres long through Minsk, from the site of the mass murders under Stalin to the prison where those arrested during the protests were being held. This culminated in another event, the "Prayer for Belarus", in which members of different denominations and religions participated.

It is difficult to imagine that this experience of solidarity, after the walls between denominations have fallen, will not have a significant effect on church life in Belarus. But the church, and particularly the Orthodox Church, must learn an important lesson: she must remain outside politics, must be separate from the state, but on no account

separate from the people. As a consequence, the disconnect between the bishops and the ordinary clergy may lead to church leaders playing an increasingly formal role, while the real life of the church will be concentrated at a local level, with more involvement of the laity. This is the best scenario for the future of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.

Alexandr Shramko is an Orthodox priest who was dismissed from his post at Minsk's Church of the Holy Archangel Michael in October 2018 for criticising the Moscow Patriarchate, as well as Patriarch Kirill himself when he arrived at the main cathedral in Minsk, surrounded by security guards, and paid no attention to the people in the street. "Could he not have said a few warm words and shaken a hand or two?" Fr Alexandr wrote on his Facebook page.

Letter of Support

Dear brothers and sisters, Christians of the long-suffering land of Belarus!

We the undersigned, clergy and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church, other local churches, faithful of the Roman Catholic Church, and also Christians of other confessions in Russia and other countries, send you our assurance of solidarity, support and comfort.

Evaluation of current events in the social sphere is the task of lawyers, not the church fellowship. Nevertheless, in accordance with the "Fundamentals of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church", the church cannot be isolated from "participation in the resolution of socially-significant issues" and may not be deprived of the "right to evaluate the actions of authorities" (III.3) – to make a moral evaluation.

We all know from experience that "the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 5:19). Each one of us, irrespective of our country of residence, encounters injustice, deceit and hypocrisy. But the events occurring in your country over the past several months forbid us to look upon them in silence and indifference. Although divided by political boundaries, we Orthodox people are members of the One Body of Christ, and therefore, in the words of the apostle, "whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor 12:26).

On 16th August the Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church issued an appeal which, in part, stated: "We believe and hope that the leadership of the country, that is by right called upon to respect and defend its people, shall stop the violence, hear the voices of the offended and

innocent victims during the confrontation period, and that those who have perpetrated atrocities and cruelty shall be tried and convicted.” This did not happen. None of those who engaged in “atrocities and cruelty” were condemned; on the contrary, the degree of violence continues to rise. Documented instances of injuries inflicted in police stations and pre-trial detention facilities number hundreds. Proof of torture, humiliation and debasement of detainees, confirmed by photographs and video recordings, bring to mind the atrocities perpetrated by the German occupying forces and NKVD butchers in your land.

Here is the testimony of Fr Alexandr Kukhta, who was in the volunteers’ camp and met the youngsters detained during the first days of the protests: “I was there and saw with my own eyes the people injured and beaten upon detention, tortured in police vans and in prison. They were assaulted with fists, truncheons and tasers. They were not given any food for three consecutive days, and were held either outside, or 40 people were crammed into 5 x 6 metre cells (they had to sleep standing up) and subjected to periodic beatings. Just like that. For no reason. Because they could get away with it... There was also a young man who had a cross beaten into his back by truncheons. Why? For what possible reason?” Several people have died since the beginning of August, including 31-year-old Roman Bondarenko, who was detained and beaten to death.

As we approach the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, it is with special grief and pain that we recall the story of the Jewish

king who destroyed so many young lives in fear of losing his power. The chilling words of an Old Testament prophet come to life: “Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob, and ye princes of the house of Israel: should you not know what is right? You who hate good and love evil; who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones; who also eat the flesh of my people and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the cauldron. Then shall they cry unto the Lord, but he will not hear them: he will even hide his face from them ...” (Micah 3:1-4).

Ministers of the Church of Christ who raise their voices against lies and violence in Belarus are subjected to pressure and threats. “The state will not look upon this with indifference”, “the law enforcement agencies should assess them” – these orders issued by the authorities are carried out. Roman Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, who appealed to the authorities to start a dialogue and put an end to violence, was forbidden entry into the country. For a single appearance with a placard bearing a portrait of Newton and his formula “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” and also for participation in a peaceful demonstration, Fr Vladimir Drobyshevsky of the Gomel diocese was under arrest for a total of 25 days. Fr Alexandr Bogdan of the Grodno Diocese was issued with a caution for laying a wreath on 13th September in memory of the museum director Konstantin Shishmakov, who refused to sign the final protocol of votes, and was later found

dead. After the destruction of the impromptu memorial on the spot in Minsk where Roman Bondarenko was arrested on 15th November, and also in other places, the chairman of the Synodal Information Department of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Fr Sergi Lepin, wrote the following on his Facebook page:

“I cannot understand the reason for this mockery of the pictures of the murdered man; why this diabolical trampling of lamps and icons, this destruction of impromptu memorials in a courtyard and along the road-side? What is the point? This has not received [official] permission, has it? Has permission been given for such behaviour? By whom?”

This questioning alone was sufficient for the priest to receive an official warning from the Procuracy which stated, *inter alia*, that he was deliberately raising the level of social tension, inciting hatred towards the authorities, encouraging aggression, and in addition his statement contained elements of slander. A similar warning was received by Catholic Bishop Yuri Kosobutsky for critical comments on the same subject.

We express our solidarity, support and deep respect for the bishops, priests and all Christians who, ignoring danger, speak out for the freedom and dignity of mankind, created in the image and likeness of God. Your merciful and righteous service is manifested in care and sorrow for every beaten, slandered, humiliated, innocent and suffering person. Anyone who has not entered into a conspiracy with conscience for profit

and security, serves as an example to us of honesty and courage.

Sadly, even now many believe that the Church is always on the side of those who hold power, that the Church always adapts to them and serves their interests. Your ministry shows that this is not so. The sermon preached by Archbishop Artemi of Grodno and Volkovysk, via a recording on YouTube, warmed the hearts of tens of thousands of people. Clergy and laity, men and women – all of you are motivated by love, the greatest power on earth.

While thinking about you, one cannot but recall the words addressed by His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon to the Council of People’s Commissars, a year after the October Revolution:

“We know that our denunciations will only arouse your anger and indignation, and that you will examine them only in order to find grounds for accusing us of opposing the authorities; but the higher your ‘pillar of fury’ rises, the more it will serve as evidence for our denunciations.”

It is not our task to judge temporal power; every power, permitted by God, would receive our blessing, if it were truly “God’s servant”: “for government, a terror to crime, has no terrors for good behaviour” (Rom. 13:3-4). As for you who resort to power to persecute your neighbours and exterminate the innocent, we address our words of admonition: celebrate your time in power by releasing prisoners, ending bloodshed, violence, ruin and oppression of faith; turn

not to destruction, but to establishing law and order, allow the people the respite they deserve from internecine strife. Otherwise, every righteous drop of blood you shed shall be required of you (Luke 11:51) and you who took up the sword will perish by the sword (Matthew 26:52).

Any expression of your free spirit will provoke anger and resentment, but Christians have no other way. May you be strengthened by the examples of the holy luminaries St Ambrose of Mediolana, St John Chrysostom, Philip of Moscow and many others who were not afraid to denounce the evil and lies of those in power. “No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light.” (Luke 11:33).

We offer our prayers for the land of Belarus, in the hope that no one else will be humiliated, beaten, subjected to torture or killed for their convictions. We pray for those who, following orders, are given the power to use force and weapons against protesters. May everyone in uniform who bears arms, retain a clear conscience, honour and dignity, and a sense of responsibility towards their fellow citizens, their brothers and sisters. We believe that peaceful dialogue is the only alternative to violence. As we approach the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, we know that we, together with all of you living in Minsk, Grodno, Gomel, Brest, Mogilev and Vitebsk, in small towns and villages, shall soon greet the Infant Jesus and hear the words, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men” ring out on a frosty winter night.

1. *Mikhail Aldashin, Orthodox artist, Russia*
2. *Yves Hamant, Catholic, academic, professor, France*
3. *Andrei Anisimov, Orthodox, architect, Russia*
4. *Alexandr Arkhangel'sky, Orthodox, writer, Russia*
5. *Sergei Akhunov, Orthodox, composer, Russia*
6. *Fr Oleg Batov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
7. *Marina (Tikki Shel'en) Bogdanova, Catholic, philologist, translator, Bulgaria*
8. *Polina Bogdanova, Orthodox, theatre specialist, Russia*
9. *Maria Bozhovich, Orthodox, philologist, Russia*
10. *Sergei Bryun, Catholic, historian, Russia*
11. *Katerina Gordeeva, Catholic, journalist, Russia*
12. *Evgeni Hendricks, Catholic, priest, Russia*
13. *Boris Grebenshchikov, Orthodox, musician (“Aquarium”), Russia*
14. *Fr Leonid Grilekhes, Orthodox, priest, Belgium*
15. *Hieromonk Ioann (Guaita), Orthodox, priest, Russia*
16. *Anna Danilova, Orthodox, editor-in-chief of “Pravoslavie i mir”, Russia*
17. *Alexandr Dvorkin, Orthodox, religious specialist, Russia*
18. *Adriano Dell'Asta, Catholic, professor, Italy*
19. *Andrei Desnitsky, Orthodox, philologist, Russia*
20. *Denis Dragunsky, Orthodox, writer, Russia*
21. *Xenia Dragunskaya, Orthodox, literary specialist, Russia*
22. *Yulia Zaitseva, Orthodox, journalist, Russia*
23. *Andrei Zubov, Orthodox, historian, Russia*
24. *Martha Carletti, Catholic, journalist, Italy*
25. *Larisa Klimova, Orthodox, philologist, Russia*

26. *Fr Andrei Kordochkin, Orthodox, priest, Spain*
27. *Alexandr Kornoukhov, Orthodox, artist, Russia*
28. *Maria Kornoukhova, Orthodox, artist, Russia/Georgia*
29. *Alexandr Kravetsky, Orthodox, philologist, Russia*
30. *Xenia Krivosheina, Orthodox, writer, activist, France*
31. *Nikita Krivoshein, Orthodox, writer, activist, France*
32. *Fr Sergi Kruglov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
33. *Dmitri Krymov, Orthodox, theatre director, Russia*
34. *Andrei Kuznetsov, Orthodox, artist ("Mit'ki"), Russia*
35. *Mikhail Kukin, Orthodox, teacher, Russia*
36. *Maya Kucherskaya, Orthodox, writer, Russia*
37. *Inga Leonova, Orthodox, architect, chief editor The Wheel, USA*
38. *Alexei Lidov, Orthodox, art historian & Byzantinist, Russia*
39. *Fr Andrei Lorgus, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
40. *Igor Luzhetsky, Catholic, history teacher, Russia*
41. *Alexandr Manotskov, Orthodox, composer, Russia*
42. *Olga Meerson, Orthodox, Slavist, USA*
43. *Fr Georgi Mitrofanov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
44. *Karina (baptised Xenia) Moskalenko, Orthodox, barrister, international lawyer, Russia/
France*
45. *Valida Naveriani, Orthodox, chemical restorer, Russia/Georgia*
46. *Fr Sergi Nikiforov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
47. *Boris Novoderzhkin, Orthodox, psychologist, Bulgaria*
48. *Svetlana Panich, Orthodox, interpreter, Russia*
49. *Fr Vyacheslav Perevezentsev, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
50. *Hieromonk Dimitri (Pershin), Orthodox, priest, Russia*
51. *Maria Pimenova, Orthodox, art expert, Russia*
52. *Irina Paert, Orthodox, university teacher, Estonia*
53. *Leonid Razgon, Orthodox, rehabilitation child specialist, Russia*
54. *Yuri Rost, Orthodox, journalist, Russia*
55. *Elena Ruchkina, Orthodox, actress, Russia*
56. *Pyotr Sakharov, Catholic, philologist, Russia*
57. *Zoya Svetova, Orthodox, journalist, Russia*
58. *Olga Sedakova, Orthodox, poet, philologist, translator, Russia*
59. *Mikhail Seleznyov, Orthodox, specialist in biblical studies, Russia*
60. *Fr Alexandr Stepanov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
61. *Andrei Surotdinov, Orthodox, musician ("Aquarium"), Russia*
62. *Igor Timofeev, Orthodox, musician ("Aquarium"), Russia*
63. *Marina Tokaryova, Orthodox, theatre critic, Russia*
64. *Fr Alexi Uminsky, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
65. *Nyuta Federmesser, Orthodox, founder of the Faith Foundation, Russia*
66. *Fr Vladimir Fyodorov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
67. *Evgeni ("Ai-yai-yai") Fyodorov, Orthodox, musician ("Tequilajazz"), Russia*
68. *Alexandr Filonenko, Orthodox, philosopher, Ukraine*
69. *Fr Alexandr Shabanov, Orthodox, priest, Russia*
70. *Fr Vasili Shagan, Orthodox, priest, Bulgaria*
71. *Dmitri Shagin, Orthodox, artist ("Mit'ki"), Russia*
72. *Tatyana Shagina, Orthodox, artist ("Mit'ki"), Russia*
73. *Yuri Shevchuk, Orthodox, musician ("DDT") Russia*
74. *Fr Valeri Shemchuk, Orthodox, priest, USA*
75. *Igor Sternberg, Orthodox, actor and director, Russia*
76. *Irina Yazykova, Orthodox, art expert, Russia*
77. *Darya Kel'n, Orthodox, editor of Pravoslavie i mir, Russia*

Keston AGM: 7th November 2020

Chairman's Report

Michael Bourdeaux

Michael Bourdeaux, the founder of Keston, retired from Keston's Council of Management on 27th January 2020. His leadership, inspiration and constant watch on the press, on events and publications relevant to Keston's work, will be greatly missed by all of us on the Council. I am delighted that he has agreed to continue as Keston's President.

I remember meeting Michael for the first time when, in the summer of 1966, he came to see me at my Oxford college. I had just finished my final exams. By chance a friend of mine had met him at a conference, and had heard him describe how he badly needed an assistant, as he was overwhelmed by the amount of Soviet samizdat which was landing on his desk, and which needed translating and publicising. My friend thought I would be the ideal assistant, and so Michael arrived to see whether I would do! I knew nothing about the USSR, having only studied Russian literature up to the end of the 19th century, and I was fascinated by the thought that religious believers were managing to survive under the repressive Soviet regime. In the end I started working with Michael in February 1967. He has been a great friend as well as a colleague over all these years, so I shall greatly miss his presence at our Council meetings. On behalf of the Council I would like to thank him for all he has done for this charity.

The significance of Keston's work and of Michael's contribution were fittingly acknowledged, I believe, when Bishop Rowan Williams at last year's AGM said "we can celebrate the consistency, the insight and the professionalism of Keston over this half-century in bringing to light something about the very nature of religious liberty, and so bringing to light something about the very nature of functioning, just, and legitimate human society."

Council of Management

I would like to thank my fellow trustees for all their work and support over the past year. You will see under item 7 on your agenda that in addition to Michael Bourdeaux we are losing two further members of the Council. Giles Udy resigned last month, and Robert Brinkley will not be standing again for election at this AGM. I would like to thank them both for their long and valuable contribution to the work of Keston.

Pandemic

As with so many other charities, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our work since the last AGM. I was due to join my Encyclopaedia colleagues on a field trip to St Petersburg in early April, which aimed to tie up a few remaining loose ends for the volume on St Petersburg. This field trip had to be cancelled,

and at the moment we do not know when future field trips will be able to take place. Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin have almost finished writing the text, so it is extremely frustrating that they are unable at present to add the finishing touches which a final field trip would supply.

I am very grateful to Roman for agreeing to talk to us at the end of the business part of this AGM: his subject will be the pandemic and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Encyclopaedia

Despite this temporary halt to the work of the Encyclopaedia team, we still have plans laid for the future. For the volume which will follow the one on St Petersburg we plan to visit Rostov-on-Don, Pskov, Vladivostok, Penza, Samara, Perm, Omsk, Oryol and Orenburg – when exactly we of course do not know, but perhaps we will be able to start next year.

Our last field trip took place in November last year soon after the 2019 AGM. This was to Ryazan, 200km south-east of Moscow. It proved a frustrating field trip as regards the Russian Orthodox Church, because the Metropolitan in charge of three dioceses turned out to be a tyrant, who ruled his metropolia with an iron fist, and sent round text messages banning his clergy from meeting Sergei Filatov and me, after we had spent hours trying to set up meetings. We had no trouble, however, getting an interview with a local Old Believer priest, while Roman had no difficulty setting up interviews with a number of Pentecostal pastors, an Evangelical Christian pastor and some Adventists.

Nevertheless, Sergei and I managed to talk to members of an interesting Russian Orthodox fellowship, called the Transfiguration Brotherhood, who were able to tell us a good deal about the church in the area. I was particularly interested in their attitude to the Soviet past, and to the persecution of all and sundry under the Stalin regime: “You must know your past, establish the truth, find out about your own relations who were killed,” said Oleg from the Brotherhood. He and others had tried to organise a conference about the Christian martyrs from the Soviet period, and were campaigning to erect a memorial to the “unjustly repressed”. They faced great opposition from the local government, as Ryazan was still strongly Communist and, for example, had put back the statue of Lenin and had reinstated the Communist era street names.

I remember one interview in particular with a Slovak Catholic priest called Fr Josef Gunčaga, who told me about his life. “I’m a simple country boy,” he said, “and grew up in the country working the land; I got no higher education.” In 1971 he had decided to train as a doctor, at which time he was already attending church. He joined a secret Catholic student movement and became one of its leaders. In 1972 he organised a secret retreat in the mountains, and then later took part in a secret religious summer camp for 40 students. In 1976 he spent a year in the USSR. After completing his medical training he went on another secret retreat in Slovakia, after which he was called in for questioning by the Czech secret police: he had been taught, he said, how to behave in such a situation

by his spiritual director, who had told him to learn a gospel off by heart as preparation for a spell in prison. He was one of a group of 15 (both men and women) who felt called to be missionaries in Russia, and were trained for this in Slovakia. Fr Josef was secretly ordained in 1982, and then in 1989 he met a Polish priest who told him that the situation in the USSR had changed: “My dream to go to Russia then came true,” he said. In 1990 he served as a priest at the Catholic church of St Louis in Moscow for a year, then went to a town near Volgograd for four years where there were many Russian ethnic Germans. From there he was sent to Kursk and then to Oryol. He founded Catholic congregations in a host of Russian cities – in Bryansk, Ufa, Astrakhan, Penza, Yaroslavl, Belgorod, Kostroma and Lipetsk. He had served the church in Ryazan for the past 20 years.

Keston Center

One outcome of the current Covid pandemic has been that Keston’s Council of Management has had to hold all its meetings virtually, and so, as a result, Kathy Hillman, the Director of the Keston Center, has been able to join in our discussions.

The pandemic prevented me from flying to Texas in March 2020 to attend a meeting of the Keston Center’s Advisory Board, but at the July meeting of the Council we were able to hear a detailed report from Kathy Hillman about the Center. The pandemic has of course affected the University and the Keston Center, but teaching continues, as does

the work of the Center. One important aspect of that work involves digitisation: the Keston archive contains many videos and tape recordings, which need to be digitised so that they can be preserved, and then stored in a format which will make them accessible to researchers. Keston’s Council has decided to contribute some funding to help this project.

The Keston Center is also working with a British university on what is called a “Collaborative Doctoral Award” (CDA) proposal, which will be submitted to the UK university before Christmas. Keston’s Council is keen to support such cooperation with funding, as it will involve a doctoral student working in the Keston archive.

The Keston archive is what we call a “living” archive, to which new material can be added, so it was excellent news to learn that Michael Bourdeaux had recently gathered together much of his personal papers and books and sent them to Baylor, where they are now safely stored under Kathy Hillman’s watchful eye.

Away Day & the future of Keston

In my report to the 2019 AGM I mentioned that the Council would spend a whole day in January 2020 discussing the future of Keston. Roland Smith, the Vice-Chairman, chaired the day and summed up our discussion as follows:

- We agreed that for the next five years we would carry on our existing tasks, working to complete the second edition of the Encyclopaedia and making a fresh effort on the English version.

Patrons

The Rt Revd Lord Williams of Oystermouth
The Archbishop of Westminster
The Chief Rabbi of Great Britain
The Moderator of the Free Churches
The Archbishop of Glasgow
The Archbishop of Thyateira & Great Britain
Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia

- We should try to take forward “Collaborative Doctoral Awards” with UK universities, in order to direct research into areas where it was most needed. We would look for partnerships, which might in the long-term provide an alternative framework for Keston UK.
- We were prepared to draw down the financial reserves, as appropriate.
- We could see challenges looming: declining membership, and fewer people with direct knowledge of the Cold War. We did not need to take any drastic immediate steps. We should continue as a membership organisation for as long as we could, and keep on finding appropriate people for the Council.
- We discussed alternative institutional frameworks, but could not immediately see one. We would continue to explore this through, for example, CDAs.

- We saw no case for again acquiring permanent staff or an office, and we accepted the limitations which that imposed.

One Word of Truth

To end I would like to recall that telling phrase in the title of Michael Bourdeaux’s memoirs – “one word of truth”. I think that phrase should become Keston’s motto in this age of fake news. Keston has always tried to tell the true facts, to fight against what Sir Isaiah Berlin in a letter to David Astor in 1958 called “the perverters of truth who squeeze the facts into iron frameworks of doctrine, against all that their hearts or consciences tell them”. Hard as the authorities, and even church leaders, within the Communist bloc tried to hide the persecution of religious believers, and claimed that there was religious freedom, the reporting of Keston proved in the long-run to have been accurate. Most telling are the words, quoted in Michael’s memoirs, of the distinguished Romanian Orthodox theologian Fr Dumitru Stăniloae (d.1993), who was imprisoned for many years by the Romanian Communist regime: in 1991 at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, he said to Michael, “Michael, you were right all along – and you are still right now”. May that accolade continue to be true of Keston.

Keston Institute

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