

DISSENT AND REFORM IN RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH HISTORY FROM THE
11th THROUGH THE 16th CENTURIES

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Although the Russian Orthodox Church (and the Christian East in general) experienced no reform movements comparable to the Reformation of the 16th century of western Europe, the Russian Church had, almost from its inception, dissenters and reformers. Perhaps its reformers were not of the magnitude of Luther, Calvin, or Knox; but they nevertheless played a role in the religious developments of their times. Usually categorized by the names *eretiki* ("heretics"), *raskolniki* ("schismatics"), and *sektanti* ("sectarians"), they faced persecution from authorities in the established Church.

In the present survey it will be our purpose to capture a glimpse (mainly from Russian chronicle records) of the highlights of the history of the *eretiki* from the 11th through the 16th centuries. It should be pointed out that records regarding the *eretiki* are relatively scant, inasmuch as extant documents pertaining to the history of the Russian Church tend to treat only the glory of the Church and the privileges of its hierarchy. Indeed, it would seem that records reflecting the history of dissent and reform have often been suppressed. In an attempt to erase the memories of persecutions, the Church of the late 19th century categorically denied that inquisitorial methods were used by the Orthodox Church as had been the case in the Catholic West. But E. F. Grekulov has pointed out in his article "Inquisition in the Eastern Church" that inquisitorial methods were the right arm of the Church in the East, just as in the West, and that the Church can never successfully erase the events of persecution which

are so deeply impressed in the lives of the people of Russia.¹

We may begin our survey with the year 1004, when an abbot named Andrian was imprisoned for refusal to conform to the laws and practices of the Orthodox Church. The record of this event in an ancient chronicle from an Old-Slavonic monastery in Southern Russia is possibly the earliest extant account of treatment of a religious nonconformist in Russian church history. The Russian chronicles briefly state:

In this year [1004] the metropolitan bishop Leont committed abbot Andrian, the eunuch, to prison because he refused to conform to the laws of the Church, against the advice of the bishops, presbyters, and abbots, until he should reform and come to a knowledge of the truth, though so many people regarded him as a pious and virtuous man.²

This brief passage does not indicate the nature of Andrian's disobedience. The fact that he is specifically designated as "the eunuch" is of interest. Was he perhaps some sort of religious enthusiast? Also of interest are the reference to his condemnation by all three leading branches of the clergy and the mention of the esteem in which he was held by "so many people." What eventually happened to Andrian we do not know, for this brief mention is the only information we have concerning him in the chronicle.

After the case of Andrian, Russian chronicles are silent regarding any similar case for more than a century. Then in 1123 there is record of another reformer in southern Russia whom the Synod of Kiev branded as an "evil heretic."

¹ E. F. Grekulov, *The Inquisition of the Orthodox Church in Russia* (Е. Ф. Грекулов, *Православная инквизиция в России* [Pravoslavnaia inkvizitsiia v Rossii]) (Moscow, 1964), p. 3.

² *A Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles* (Полное собрание русских летописей [Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei]), IV (Moscow, 1962), 69. The word "eunuch" may indicate that as early as the 10th century, this kind of asceticism was practiced among some ultra-conservative groups of the Orthodox Church. Andrian was not committed to prison because he was a eunuch.

This man, named Dmitriï, was committed to the dungeon, but further information regarding him is lacking. Three decades later, in 1153, the same Synod passed sentence against another "evil heretic," Martin by name. Martin's offence is noted in the chronicles more specifically than is the case with regard to the earlier "heretics":

This man is teaching against the orthodox laws of the Church, attracting to himself multitudes of unlearned people, whom he causes to neglect, and even to oppose, the mother church.³

Martin was condemned by the Synod to be burned. He was thus the first heretic-martyr committed to the flames.

Not until the beginning of the 14th century do we find any serious movement toward reformation within the Russian Orthodox Church. At this time there were hundreds, and probably thousands in the city of Novgorod, who openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the Church because of her complete domination of every phase of their life. There are clear evidences in history that the dissatisfied group was large enough and sufficiently well organized for self-protection in case of an eventual persecution. They were called *eretiki*, "the heretics." Joseph, the bishop of Volano, with the intention of discouraging the trend towards heresy, writes in his book entitled *Education*:

An evil man named Karp, and by profession a heretic, lives here in our city of Novgorod. He brought a dangerous heresy into the lives of many orthodox believers, who, because of their weakness and ignorance, accept it, thinking that by doing this they do the right thing. But the day is at hand for them (the *eretiki*); for our Archbishop Dionisiï, coming back from Constantinople, brought a letter from the ecumenical Patriarch Anthony, addressed to the elders of the city and instructing them to burn the *eretiki* so as to destroy heresy forever.⁴

As we see from the above quotation, the persecution of the

³ Grekulov, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴ N. A. Kazakova and A. S. Lure, *Heretical Movements in Russia* (Н.А. Казакова и А. С. Луре, Антифеодальные еретические движения на Руси [Antifeodal'nye ereticheskie dvizheniia na Rusi]) (Moscow, 1955), p. 35.

eretiki was planned. But it did not occur, because the archbishop of Novgorod died suddenly and a new archbishop was to be chosen. In this city it was traditional for a new head of the Church to be chosen by the people, and they were very proud of this prerogative. Actually, the nomination was made by the nobility, though the whole populace had a part in the final vote. Inasmuch as the *eretiki* at this time were not yet officially condemned, and none of them was as yet excommunicated from the Church, they took the opportunity to suggest a change in the election procedures; they encouraged their friends, the common people, to place their nomination against that offered by the nobility. The people accepted this proposition and nominated a man of exceptional ability and character, Vasiliĭ Kalika, who was elected by a great majority to the office of archbishop in 1330.

This new archbishop was not a friend of the *eretiki*, but he knew well that he owed his office to them. On the other hand, the *eretiki* themselves used caution and restraint, for they knew that no one could do greater service for them than a friendly orthodox archbishop. Vasiliĭ, in turn, canceled any plans he may have had for persecuting them. As long as he was in office (1330-1352), they were safe. A Russian historian has commented thus:

Vasiliĭ was one of the most interesting persons ever to occupy the chair of the archbishop of Novgorod. He was so wise and so progressive in comparison with his predecessors and successors that he will forever stand in history as a truly great man.⁵

Thanks to Archbishop Vasiliĭ, the situation in the city of Novgorod became a situation of religious tolerance for more than twenty years. His personal interest in the progress of his townsmen, his decisive rejection of any measure against the *eretiki*, and his wise efforts to satisfy the nobility, created an extraordinary atmosphere for the activity and progress of the reformers. During Vasiliĭ's term of office,

⁵ *Ibid.*

only one incident was recorded wherein this religious toleration could at all be considered as violated. One of the followers of the new faith did "something" ⁶ to offend the abbot of St. Nikola's monastery, who in turn called a meeting of the common people to discuss the problem. The fact that nothing is said of the decision in the meeting suggests that there were so many followers of the new faith that the abbot, after discussing the problem with them "all day and all night," could not impose any punishment upon the accused.⁷

On the death of Archbishop Vasilii in 1352, the situation in Novgorod changed. The new Archbishop Stefan, who was chosen again with the help of the common people and the dissenters, lacked Vasilii's wisdom and character. Soon after his election he became hostile to the dissenters. However, external problems prevented the Church from launching at this time a campaign of extermination against the heretics, and for another twenty years the latter enjoyed relative peace and progress.

Finally the respite was broken when the *eretiki* themselves, probably reacting against some repressions imposed upon them by the Church, began an active campaign against the clergy and stopped attending church services. Their meeting-places were in the fields, in the parks, in the streets, and in ordinary houses. With a few exceptions, their leaders came from the lower priestly circles and from among the educated laity. Some of these leaders were excellent orators, others were well versed in the Bible, and still others were poets and musicians. They created a new literature and virtually a new culture in the city during a period of some 70 years of peace and progress (1300-1370).

Unfortunately the literature, poetry, and art have not survived to our day; but Bishop Stefan, a literary opponent of the reformers, reveals some interesting things about them.

⁶ The chronicle does not indicate what the offender did, but it may be deduced that he attacked the abbot in person.

⁷ Kazakova and Lure, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Said Stefan, advising Orthodox Christians to stay away from the *eretiki*, "Christ teaches us, instead of praying in the streets and the fields, to pray in secret places, and instead of boasting with the words of knowledge, to run away from the wisdom of men." ⁸ This declaration against the *eretiki* shows clearly that their preaching and praying appealed to a great many in the city. The direct interpretation of the Bible was a mighty rod in their hand. Stefan tried further to show that the Church has the gift of eternal life and that every one leaving the Church and following the new faith will experience eternal torment: "Therefore it is dangerous for a Christian to listen to the preaching of the *eretiki*, for he may be caught like a bird in the devil's hands, and thus be given to eternal torment." ⁹

Neither Stefan's rhetoric nor the threat of excommunication from the Church could stop the progress of those who considered the Bible as their sword against the enemy. In the year 1375, the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the nobility decided not only to stop the progress of the reformation, but to annihilate the movement completely. That year, persecution started suddenly and with great force. "Then," says the chronicle, "they killed the heretics; deacon Mikita, deacon Karp, and another man were pushed off the bridge." ¹⁰ Only these three men are mentioned in the chronicle as being drowned in the river Volhov, but a picture on the page facing the literary record shows five men in the water and two others being pushed from the bridge. It is probable that the persecution was of a more general character than just affecting a few leaders of the movement, for the Church was engaged with the *eretiki* for the next 100 years. In 1425, fifty years after the first wave of severe persecution and the above-mentioned execution of the Novgorod *eretiki*, there is evidence that the dissenters were still active. In that

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *A Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles*, IV, 72.

year the Metropolitan Archbishop Fotiĭ, of Moscow, wrote a letter to the Novgorod authorities to thank them for taking firm measures against the *eretiki*. He also advised them to use any means in crushing the stubbornness of the false prophets.¹¹

After the execution of the leaders and persecution of their followers, the reformers still managed to gain new members. This naturally forced the hierarchy to look for new means of repression. Bishop Stefan recommended a new measure, banishment from the city: "Anyone criticizing the priesthood as the *eretiki* do should be banished from the city, for it is written 'Take the evil one from among you; a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.'" ¹² It may be that this advice of Bishop Stefan was accepted, for some of the dissenters were banished from the city. In any case, the application of capital punishment, excommunication, banishment, and other brutalities appears to have almost destroyed the great reformation movement in Novgorod, for the historical sources of the second half of the 15th century are silent about it.

However, Novgorod was not the only place where heretical activity was known to Russian church history. As the persecutions continued in that city, many of the persecuted fled to other cities, including Moscow. Bishop Joseph, in his *Story of Heresy*, mentions the two "arch-heretics" Aleksei and Denis, who according to his account, "with many people whom they first made Jewish, fled from Novgorod." ¹³ He then proceeds to tell how these two heretics found a shelter in a monastery near Moscow. The abbot of the monastery there, Zosima, being very sympathetic with the refugees, provided a place for some of them in his monastery quarters, while others settled in the city of Moscow itself.

¹¹ Grekulov, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹² Kazakova and Lure, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 147; *A Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles*, XI (Moscow, 1956), 58.

At this time Czar Ivan III sent Feodor Kuricin, one of his diplomats, on a special mission to Hungary and Moldavia. Kuricin's successful peace mission in Hungary led him to proceed to Moldavia (modern Rumania) for a similar political purpose. Meanwhile Poland started a war against Russia, and Kuricin and his men were unable to pass through Poland to get back to their home country. Kuricin then decided to go through Turkish Crimea, hoping to get home that way. When he arrived in Crimea, he was put in prison until instructions came from Istanbul to release him. Whether Kuricin came in touch with some European reformers while in Hungary or Moldavia, is unknown; but we know that immediately after his arrival in Moscow he identified himself with the reformation movement and soon became its leader.

Czar Ivan III was an ambitious ruler. His growing power had but one serious rival, the Church. He knew well that one of the two must yield to the other, and he determined to be the victor. The heresy movement—a chief internal problem of the Church—was therefore virtually welcomed by the Czar. His friend Kuricin, now the leader of the movement, introduced Alekseï, a refugee from Novgorod, to the Czar; and Alekseï took the opportunity to say a good word about Abbot Zosima in connection with the latter's generosity toward the refugees from Novgorod. As a result of this interview, Zosima became the Metropolitan Archbishop of Moscow, the head of the whole Russian Orthodox Church.

When Zosima occupied the chair as the primate of the Church, he immediately discouraged the persecution of the *eretiki* everywhere. Knowing that now both the Czar and the Metropolitan were friendly toward them, the *eretiki* launched a proselytizing activity as never before, preaching to everyone who would listen, their exposition of the Bible. Many joined the circle of these enthusiastic preachers of the Gospel. The chronicle supplies the names of many rich and well-educated people who did so. Just as in Novgorod, the leadership in Moscow was mostly of the lower priestly order while

some of the outstanding preachers and teachers were laymen. The chronicle mentions one "Ivasko Chernoi, who writes the books,"¹⁴ and Zubov, a rich businessman who had great influence among the business people.

Feodor Kuricin, Ivasko Chernoi, Zubov, and Protopresbyter Alekseï were not the only ones of the Moscow aristocracy to join the *eretiki*. Beside other names found in the chronicle, there is also a record which indicates that the Czar's daughter-in-law, Elena of Moldavia, was an active member of the *eretiki* circle. This is known from a letter written by Czar Ivan to the archbishop of Novgorod, who had pleaded with the Czar to take some measures against the movement. It is possible that there was a connection between the movement in Moscow and the reformation activity in Moldavia, for, as we have already mentioned, Kuricin had visited that kingdom just before becoming a reformer himself. Could it be, in fact, that Kuricin obtained his leaning toward reformation in Moldavia, the home of princess Elena?¹⁵

Now then, what was Metropolitan Zosima's role in the movement of the *eretiki*? As far as actual help or word of encouragement is concerned, there is no proof of Zosima's involvement on the side of the *eretiki*. But there is considerable material in the chronicles and in Zosima's personal letters to show that he at that time was not opposed to the teachings of the heretics, if not in complete sympathy with them. We have already mentioned that while he was still abbot of a monastery, he opened its doors and gates to the persecuted refugees from Novgorod. But this is not an evidence that he

¹⁴ This Moscow heretic was commissioned by the Czar to translate the Greek chronicles into Russian. He speaks of 24 men who were helping him in this project. The names he supplied seem to be identical with the names we meet in the pages of the history of the *eretiki*. This may have been the committee that provided the leadership for the movement.

¹⁵ The chronicle said "daughter-in-law" and "Elena," which would indicate that the crown-prince's wife Helen of Moldavia was a heretic. But the circumstances and chronology tend to single out Elena, the daughter of Ivan III.

was an *eretik* himself. As a person of a compassionate heart he may have been moved to extend his Christian love toward the lost brethren. On the other hand, an episcopal record pictures him as "Zosima, the wolf, the serpent, who denies the life after death, and who pays no respect to the holy images."¹⁶ The same author writes further with great personal disturbance about the mass movement of the heresy, saying:

All ask about faith, but they do not go to the prophets and apostles for information; they go to the *eretiki*, the enemies of Christ, the ones who are excommunicated from the Church by the acts of the Holy Synod. They go to the sons of the priests and to their sons-in-law. With them they are friends, eating and drinking, and learning of Judaism from the servant of the devil, the Metropolitan, where they stay day and night.¹⁷

The question of Zosima's heresy is one of the problems of history. Many investigations have been made by scholars to find out whether he was truly involved, and if so to what extent. Most of the material found against him is written by men who had no respect for historical accuracy, but had a purpose of slandering the Metropolitan. The loudest criticism came from the Church hierarchy in the places where the *eretiki* were successful in their propaganda, like Novgorod and Moscow. Gennadiï, the Archbishop of Novgorod, grew impatient with Zosima, because the former was not able to get official permission from the Metropolitan to persecute the *eretiki*. Therefore he made many slanderous accusations against Zosima. There were also others who, either because of their fanatical feelings against the *eretiki* or because of personal reasons, made such obvious and intentional slanders that they cannot be considered historically valid.

One thing is certain, namely, that Gennadiï was inclined to follow the measures of inquisition against the dissenters. He wrote to Zosima in 1490, "See, the French are able to hold their faith with a firm hand. An ambassador of the

¹⁶ Kazakova and Lure, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

king of Spain told me how they cleaned up the country from all heretics, and I sent you word about that.”¹⁸ When the Metropolitan ignored his request, Gennadii wrote a letter to the Czar, asking for permission to persecute with a firm hand. In his letter he assured the Czar that he would be competent in applying the measures of inquisition against the *eretiki* because he had received the fullest information of “how to do it” from some of his Spanish inquisitionist friends, especially from Torquemada, who in 15 years of faithful service to God had sent thousands from this world to either hell or heaven by burning and by using other methods of extermination.

Ivan III at this time did not appreciate Gennadii’s proposition, and he replied that as a servant of Jesus Christ he should abstain from blood. Ivan advised him to find other methods which might discourage the *eretiki* in their fervent zeal for the new faith, without involving bloodshed. Ivan’s reason for so advising was not his compassionate heart, but his ambition for absolute power, which at this time was in the hands of the Church. He could see his way clear only with the help of as many people as possible; so he counted the movement of the *eretiki* as one of the tools in his hands to achieve his purpose of transferring the desired power from the Church to the crown.

Receiving the answer from the Czar, Gennadii decided, nevertheless, to proceed as far as he could in persecuting the new faith, hoping to make an end of it in his territory. On the advice of his friends, who had experience in how to persecute, he called a synod to secure an official condemnation of the dissention. Having done this, he brought all the *eretiki* of the city and surrounding towns into the city of Novgorod and ordered that they take their clothes off and put on some old rags that were prepared for them. Then they were ordered to mount horses with their faces backward

¹⁸ Grekulov, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

and to hold signs over their heads with the words, "This is the army of Satan." In such condition they were taken around the city, after which the orthodox people took the *eretiki* outside the city in a field and there beat them as much as they could. At the end of the day's procedure they burned a few leaders to death, put others in prison, and banished the rest from the city.

Zosima, the Metropolitan of Moscow, as we have already mentioned, was a man of different disposition. He was a man of peace and humane tendencies. There is no evidence in the writings of his opponents that they had a notion of any heresy on his part during the first two years of his administration. But when the Church Synod of Moscow, in 1490, put some of the *eretiki* on trial for penetrating into the royal family with their new faith, Zosima pleaded with the bishops not to demand capital punishment. When the Synod refused to follow his advice, he dismissed the session and set the accused free. This seems to be the starting point of misunderstanding and hatred between the bishops and the Metropolitan. The situation of enmity against Zosima continued, and in 1494 he decided to abdicate as Metropolitan of Moscow and primate of the whole Russian Church. He retired to the monastery of St. Trinity. A picture in a chronicle depicts him as leaving his palace voluntarily to take up a peaceful life in a monastery.¹⁹

In 1503, nine years after Zosima's resignation, the Synod of Moscow convened again in order to find a solution regarding the *eretiki*. The Synod passed sentence against the leaders of the movement by sending Ivan Volk, Mikhail Konoplev, and Ivan Maksimov to be burned in Moscow. At the same time Nekras Rukavov was condemned to be burned in Novgorod. Some of the Moscow reformers were drowned, others killed by various means, and a great many were sentenced to be "put to dungeons to stay there as long as they live." Whether

¹⁹ Kazakova and Lure, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

this sentence of life imprisonment was actually carried out we do not know.²⁰

During the persecution of 1503 Gennadiï, the archbishop of Novgorod, showed himself so inhumane that the Czar, who was opposed to the persecution, pressured Gennadiï severely enough that Gennadiï resigned from office in the following year. He tried to stay in Novgorod as long as he could, but the Czar ordered his banishment to a monastery where he did not desire to go. There are two chronicle pictures relating to Gennadiï's banishment: one depicts his unwillingness to leave his palace while the Czar's soldiers push him out of the city gate, and the other shows his unhappy death in the monastery.²¹

Once the persecution had started in this inquisitorial fashion and received an official approval of the Church, it could not be stopped easily. Many *eretiki* were apprehended here and there and put to death by the local bishops, priests, and abbots. A few years later, anyone saying anything against the priesthood or the church was regarded as an *eretik*. A social worker named Maksim Grek was condemned as an *eretik* by the monks of a monastery. They put him into a dungeon where they kept him for six years under the most inhumane conditions. Finally he was brought to the Synod of Moscow to receive his sentence of death for "blasphemy against God and the holy Mother of God, and also for criticizing the holy Church and her holy laws." They put him in a very narrow and deep hole and left him there to die. Maksim's friends were also apprehended. One, Mikhail, was burned in the city of Kolomna, and another, Silvan, was choked by smoke in a monastery.²²

In 1551, at the centennial meeting of the Church Synod in Moscow, the bishops pleaded with the Czar for his help

²⁰ Grekulov, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²¹ *A complete Collection of Russian Chronicles*, XII (Moscow, 1962), 28.

²² Grekulov, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

against the *eretiki*. The Czar answered their petition by a commitment against all forms of dissent. Because of this declaration, Abbot Artemiï wrote to the Czar asking him to reconsider his commitment on the ground that it was abused day by day by the priests and monks. This angered the priesthood. Had it not been for the Czar's intervention, the priests would have beheaded Artemiï, but they only sent him back to his monastery, together with a command to a newly appointed abbot "to keep him inside with a great care, in the cell of silence."²³

The Synod of 1554 sentenced "the godless heretic and apostate from the Orthodox Church," Matvei Baskin, who taught that the institution of slavery is against the basic principles of Christianity, and that the Church has no right to exploit the poor people. Because Christ said that only God is the Father, and all men are brothers, therefore, Baskin declared, a priest is not a father. He refused to venerate the images and rejected some other dogmas of the Church. Baskin was subjected to questioning and was declared an *eretik*. He was locked into a wooden cottage and burned together with it. As many of his disciples as the priests and monks could find were subjected to hard labor in different monasteries.²⁴

The bloody terror of the Church against the *eretiki* became common practice. Every day of the year someone somewhere in Russia was persecuted and terrorized by the Church or by civil authorities. And yet the Orthodox Church of Russia never admitted that it persecuted anyone.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.