



DECR Vice-Chairman Hegumen Philip Riabykh: ‘The war was won by our multinational people guided by love of their Motherland’

A letter came to Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk as head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s department for external church relations from A. A. Prokhanov, Zavtra daily editor-in-chief, asking to explain the Church’s position on the role of Stalin in the country’s history. The author of the letter asked Metropolitan Hilarion to answer questions from his article ‘Blessed Are Peacemakers’ (Zavtra, Issue 1, 2010).

On the eve of the 65th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, answers to the questions raised in the article are given on behalf of Metropolitan Hilarion by his deputy, Hegumen Philip Riabykh:

To: A. A. Prokhanov

Editor-in-Chief

Zavtra daily

Dear Alexander Andreyevich,

With the blessing of the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate’s department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, I will reply to the letter you sent him.

Today the Church’s understanding of the 20th century history is presented in numerous studies devoted to the paths traversed by the Russian Church and the Russian State in the 20th century. In them one can find a patriotic view, the only possible for the Church, based on the selfless love of the Motherland and

witness to the importance of faith in the people's life.

Russia's history in the 20th century has shown that no human efforts, even the toughest ones, can hold a society united and make it prosperous. The lack of faith, all the more so theomachism, tends to lead to errors in political and public life: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"* (Ps. 14:1).

The Russian Church's view of the 20th century history was formed throughout the last century and reached through the suffering of thousands of believers. True patriots of historical Russia should do everything possible to prevent the state's struggle with religion from being ever repeated because this struggle would once again threaten the very existence of our Motherland.

The glorification of godless people and their ruling methods cannot be a uniting principle for the peoples of historical Russia. On the contrary, it brings disunity to our societies. What kind of patriotism, you think, is represented in the following statement by V. I. Lenin written with regard to World War I: "The proponents of victory for their government in this war, just as the proponents of the motto 'no victory, no defeat', share the viewpoint of social chauvinism in equal measure. The revolutionary class in a reactionary war cannot but wish defeat to its government, cannot but see a link between its military failures and a relief from its overthrow... On the contrary, precisely this kind of action would be correspondent to the hidden thoughts of any conscious worker and would be in line with our activity aiming to turn an imperialistic war into a civil one'.

Meanwhile, despite everything, many of those who suffered from the Soviet power remain faithful to Russia. I will cite the example of the Holy Martyr Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fyodorovna. Seeing the abyss in which the Motherland got caught, she wrote to Emperor Nicholas II at a time when Lenin and his associates called to their own country's defeat: "I felt so profound pity for Russia and her children, who do not know what they are doing now. Isn't she a sick child whom we love one hundred times more at a time when she is ill than when she is healthy and happy? One wishes to take upon oneself her suffering, to help her. Holy Russia cannot perish. But Great Russia, alas, is no more'.

In the beginning of their activity, the Bolsheviks did much to contribute to the death of one of the greatest Christian states in the world and annihilated many of our compatriots for the sake of building a paradise on earth. Here I do not want to idealize the Russian Empire. But she was formed for centuries as a country based on Christian principles and could have developed further by evolution if the opposition had not 'rocked the boat' but rather sought a compromise with the historical power.

Under Stalin, an inhuman system was built, and nothing can justify it, neither the industrialization, nor the atomic bomb, neither the preservation of state borders, nor even the victory in the Great Patriotic War, for all this was not achieved by Stalin but by our multinational people. The regime built by Stalin

relied on terror, violence, suppression of the human personality, falsehood and informers. That regime devoured itself, turning executioners themselves into victims, and it worked for a while.

Accusing Stalin, I will not become like 'the enemies of the Empire' you have mentioned. Our Motherland, Russia, owes nothing to anybody for the crimes committed by the communist powers as she was the primary victim of that regime. As soon as Stalin passed into the other world, the regime he built collapsed like a house of cards. True, the agony of that regime lasted for several decades but its count-down began on the 5th of March, 1953. As is known, systems which embark on the path of theomachism do not live long. The Lenin-Stalin system in Russia lasted only 70 years, while the Russian Christian civilization initiated by St. Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles has lived for over one thousand years.

Russia can have a future if she remains faithful to her historical roots taken in the Kiev baptismal font. Then, God willing, many nations will live in harmony in Russia.

In your article you appeal to the public opinion. Yes, I do not rule out that many believe Stalin to be 'the most popular leader in Russia'. However, it does not express any support for the totalitarian regime he built but rather a wish to see in him 'a strong hand' capable of putting the country in order. Certainly, Russia needs a strong and competent power just as any country needs it. Only it must be based on different values and ruled by different methods. I assure you that if you ask people whether they want to abandon their flats and go to live in inhuman conditions in concentration camps and to be used as unpaid labour, I am sure you will not find such people even among those who hold the same views as you.

Prayer for the authority and contacts with its officials under Stalin did not mean that the Church accepted the policy pursued by the state towards religion and other spheres of public life. The single fact that the Church preached a religious view of life at that time when materialism and one ideology were imposed everywhere meant that the Church did not reconcile herself with the ideology of that regime. Deep in their hearts, many bishops, priests and lay people opposed the godless regime, dreaming of Holy Russia's revival. I will cite the words of Archbishop Vasily (Krivoshein, 1900-1985). Once, passing by the Kremlin cathedrals, his nephew pointed to their beauty. Archbishop Vasily said in response, "Yes, they are very beautiful, but a day will come when these churches will have to be re-consecrated". And these days, thank God, have come. Founded by the Lord Himself, the Church is called to change the world through the power of love. Remembering the words that God wants all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), the Church entered and enters into dialogue with various authorities and people in the hope that they will turn to God. That is why St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, 'I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, *who wants all men to be saved*' (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Certainly, considerable changes took place in the state's policy towards religion in 1943. I will remind you that this change in Stalin's policy was preceded by quite specific events, namely, the attack of Hitler's Germany on the Soviet Union. A considerable part of our territory was occupied, including the regions where religious life had been often fully liquidated. On the whole, by the moment of the attack, there were no more than 300 churches left in the territory of our country in its 1939 borders. There were four ruling bishops and no more than 500 clergy who escaped the repression.

However, the Bolshevik regime, which set itself the task to eliminate all the forms of religious life, and its head Stalin did change their attitude during the Great Patriotic War. And did it for quite explicit reasons. The mass revival of church life in the territories occupied by the Germans – they opened some 9000 churches, while Stalin returned only 718 churches to believers. And do you think we must worship Hitler for that? – demanded that Stalin should have taken some propaganda measures in response. He had to show that in the unoccupied territories there were also church life, and the liberation by the Red Army would not mean the liquidation of religious life.

The same can be said about another thing, namely, the return of Russian classics, music and architecture and shoulder straps in the Army. All this was only propaganda with a single aim to preserve the regime. Many of our compatriots who had left Russia after the Civil War responded to this Stalin's deception and came back home. As a result, most of them were met with shackles and mess of pottage.

You credit Stalin with restoration of 'the great Russian space'. But as is known, it was lost by the heirs of the 'Leader of All Times and Nations'. It was Stalin who planted a time-bomb by reshaping 'the great Russian space' at his will and creating artificial borders between the former Soviet republics. As a result of this Stalin's policy, we reap the fruits of extremism, nationalism and xenophobia. Now only one linking clamp has remained in the territory of historical Russia – the present Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and other now independent states – it is the Russian Orthodox Church. If it were not for the experiment in the form of national-territorial division of the former Russian Empire, no question would have been raised about the division of once united country and it would not have ceased to exist in the early 1990s.

Through centuries our Holy Church has been and will always be with her people both in sorrow and joy. Our clergy shared the people's fate in the cruel years of the Golden Horde's yoke and in 1612 and during Napoleon's invasion and in the trenches of World War I and under the Red Terror and in Stalin's GULAG prisons and during the Great Patriotic War and in the days when our Motherland disintegrated and in the time of heavy economic upheavals.

In response to your last affirmation, I can say that the victory in the Great Patriotic War was gained by our people not thanks to Stalin. Authoritative historians insist that it was through his fault that we

suffered such great losses, sacrificing millions of lives for the victory because of the ill-considered pre-war domestic policy. The war was won by our multinational people guided by their love of the Motherland even unto 'laying down their lives' (cf. Jn. 15:13).

I would like to hope that discussions on the recent history of our Motherland will be held in a civilized manner, without dividing the united people into two warring camps.

With respect and hope for understanding,

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Vice-Chairman

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