The Russian Exarchate: A Eulogy

Katherine Kelaidis

1,092 miles separate Constantinople and Moscow. The only two cities on earth ever to have served as capitals of Orthodox Christian empires are today the seats of the two most important, powerful, and (perhaps most significantly, in this image-driven age) visible Orthodox hierarchs: Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. There is so much that these cities, and these men, share, and yet it is increasingly clear that they are much further apart than the miles and history between them would suggest. The distance that separates them is at the heart of a growing conflict in the Orthodox world, as both sees have become proxies for cultural, religious, and geopolitical battles being fought both inside and outside the Church. And because their struggle has become so entangled in wider fights, the hotspots most significant to the tides of current events tend to garner the most attention. This fact has sadly relegated the horrendous situation of the former Exarchate for Orthodox Parishes of the Russian Tradition in Western Europe to relative obscurity outside of its small domain.

Historically based in the Cathedral of Saint Alexander Nevsky at 12 rue Daru in Paris's eighth arrondissement, the Exarchate was never large or (it should be said) rich. While there has been a small Russian expatriate community in France for centuries (the cathedral was built in 1861 under the patronage of Tsar Alexander II), Russians only began

St. Sergius Theological Institute faculty, students, and their families with Metropolitan Eulogy (Georgievsky) and Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, 1926.

to immigrate in large numbers following the Revolution of 1917. Of the nearly 1.5 million refugees who fled in the wake of the revolution and subsequent civil war, approximately one third settled in France, largely in and around Paris. These exiles faced a serious battle in preserving their religious tradition. The Moscow Patriarchate was effectively unable to govern the churches in the diaspora after the Revolution, and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), a church-in-exile set up in the wake of the revolution, faced serious questions of legitimacy and was rife with internal conflicts. Thus, by the early 1930s, Metropolitan Eulogy, then the spiritual head of the Russian Orthodox in France, sought the canonical protection of Ecumenical Patriarch Photius II. In 1931, Constantinople received Metropolitan Eulogy and his parishes. One of the most peculiar yet inspiring outposts of Orthodox Christianity was born: a small collection of parishes and monasteries, primarily in France, observing Russian cultural and religious customs under the protection of the Greek patriarch, himself in a kind of internal exile in Turkey.

It was obviously a strange situation: A band of Russian exiles, of little interest to either their Greek hierarch or the Russian bishops they had left behind and so largely left to their own devices, living and working in Western Europe throughout the changes of the twentieth century. But it proved to be an extraordinarily fruitful one, intellectually and spiritually. The Exarchate was a site of liturgical revival and reform. It embraced and lived out the most important reforms of the Moscow Council of 1917–18, including the adoption of the Gregorian calendar and (in the Council's recreation of the Patriarchate) the embrace of an Orthodoxy that could exist with the powers of church and state separated. Moreover, the greatest thinkers of modern Orthodoxy nearly all have ties to Saint Sergius Theological Institute, the Exarchate's theological school. Founded just eight years after the Russian Revolution, the list of Saint Sergius's former teachers and students cannot fail to impress anyone familiar with modern Orthodox thought: Sergius Bulgakov, Cyprian Kern, Nicolas Afanassieff, Élisabeth Behr-Sigel, Olivier Clément, Georges Florovsky, Nicolay Lossky, John Meyendorff, and Alexander Schmemann, among others. These scholars, representing a tradition that had long been isolated from theological dialogue with the West and was not experiencing any serious internal development of theological scholarship, found themselves in the middle of the changes brought about by the twentieth century, in the middle of one of the most significant European capitals. The results were remarkable. The vibrancy of Saint Sergius's teachers and students is due largely to the unique nature of the Exarchate, as it is difficult to think of any other part of the Orthodox world in which such brilliant minds, under such unique circumstances, would have been given similar freedom to work. Finally, it should not be ignored that the Exarchate was also a "land of saints." It was, after all, in the Exarchate, during the darkest days of World War II, that Saint Maria of Paris along with Saint Dmitri Klepinin, Saint George (Yuri) Skobtsov, and Saint Elie Fondaminsky were martyred by the Nazis. Mother Maria, in particular, is perhaps the most widely-known and venerated Orthodox saint of the twentieth century and, importantly, a truly modern example of saintly virtue in the contemporary world—the kind of example generally lacking among the officially canonized saints of both Eastern and Western Christianity.

Neither the patriarchs' indifference nor the Exarchate's freedom was to last,

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow elevates Archbishop John (Renneteau) to the rank of metropolitan, November 3, 2019. Photo: Oleg Varov / Moscow Patriarchate.

however. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Patriarch of Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church began their comeback. After a notably sluggish start, in 2009, Saint Petersburg-born Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev was enthroned as Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. He has nurtured a close relationship with Vladimir Putin as well as leaders of the American right, such as Franklin Graham, son of the late evangelist Billy Graham. Under Kirill's leadership, the Russian Orthodox Church has become a voice for social conservatism, not just in Russia but around the world, attracting both center and far-right activists in Europe and the US to its sphere of influence.

In this new role of culture warrior, the Patriarch of Moscow has begun to assert himself on the world stage as a serious global player and a genuine threat to Bartholomew, constrained as he is behind the walls of the Phanar. While the world has paid significantly more attention to this conflict in the context of Ukraine, where the Patriarch of Constantinople's decision to acknowledge of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was seen not only a rebuff of the ecclesialstical authority of Kirill but also of Putin's attempts to annex Crimea, the canonical dissolution of the Exarchate and its subsequent fracturing into elements under Greek and Russian authority has received considerably less attention. It is unnecessary to repeat here the details of what is now a year-long and decidedly painful struggle, a struggle that has left the Exarchate a memory, and the future of the community it protected uncertain. Besides, any recounting of the facts would be met by at least some with suspicion. In a manner telling of our times, even the facts of what has transpired cannot be entirely agreed upon.

This being said, it is clear to all but the most naive that the conflict in Kyiv and the conflict in Paris are inextricably related. After all, Bartholomew dissolved the Exarchate at the exact moment in which he (re)asserted his authority as chief governor of all the diaspora. In this context, bringing the parishes of the Exarchate under the Greek metropolitans in Europe parallels the "normalization" of the Ukrainian situation according to

the Phanar's narrative. It is foolish not to see that Bartholomew essentially offered up the Exarchate as a sacrifice in order to protect the bigger prize of Ukraine. It is a prize that Kirill could not help but find attractive, after all. As an archconservative, he could use a more liberal realm to act as a shield against charges that he is a mere puppet of a very specific kind of twenty-first century politics. But none of this explanation offers much comfort when we consider what has been lost.

For a long time, arguably since the very dawn modernity itself, it has been unclear whether Eastern Orthodox Christianity can have a true place in the modern world. This is partially the product of an unhappy history. For nearly all of the modern era, some part of the Orthodox world has been locked in captivity: to the Ottomans, to the Communists, and today to totalitarian regimes in the Middle East. Such oppression in not conducive to adaptation, thoughtfulness, introspection, and intellectual development. In fact, it arguably has the opposite effect. When you feel attacked and at risk of losing your culture and your identity, you draw up the bridge and hunker down for the fight. Thus, in its traditional lands, Orthodoxy has spent the past five hundred years on the defensive. And things have not been better in places where Orthodoxy has not historically been the majority confession, places that, even generations after the establishment of an Orthodox community, we still call "the diaspora," and in which ethnically insular communities of those from traditionally Orthodox groups exist alongside—but seldom in close contact with—ideologically insular communities of converts. In a reflection of the old country's ways, these Orthodox communities live in perpetual exile, never fully engaging in the pluralist world in which they find themselves.

The Exarchate was different. And by its very existence, the Exarchate suggested another way in which we could all be Orthodox in the modern world. In fact, it is not too much to say that the Exarchate was and remains our most powerful witness to a truly modern Orthodox Christianity. The Exarchate showed us that in a multi-ethnic ecclesiastical structure, ethnic traditions and local customs could be preserved. That Orthodoxy could foster vibrant intellectual engagements that did not lead to a loss of faith or piety. And now it is gone, killed by Orthodoxy's most persistent internal enemies: the idolatrous worship of ethnic identity, clerical authority, and secular power. It is foolish to think the Exarchate can be resurrected, but we can save its most precious legacy by committing ourselves anew to creating a truly modern Orthodox faith, a vibrant and intellectually engaged faith that is not afraid of the world, but rushes to baptize it. The Exarchate existed because a small band of exiles fought to preserve their faith against enormous odds. We honor them when we dedicate ourselves to the same. ✠

Katherine Kelaidis is a resident scholar at the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago. She is a professional historian, trained at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of London.