

The Supreme Ecclesiastical Administration Abroad in Constantinople

In the history of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), there is a little known period, since few documentary resources survived. This applies to the sojourn of the Church administration abroad in Constantinople from November 1920 to May 1921. Then ROCOR did not yet have its own publishing concern, and its chancery was only founded later, with the move of the Synod Abroad to Sremski Karlovci, Serbia. Therefore, the first months of the existence of the Church Abroad is a sort of terra incognita, even for experts. The centennial of those events gives reason to consider the reasons for the appearance of an autonomous ecclesiastical structure in the emigration.

In Distant Lands

The defeat suffered by the Russian Army under P.N. Wrangel in November 1920 led to the mass evacuation from Crimea of both participants in military actions as well as a multitude of civilians. Also leaving the peninsula was the Supreme Ecclesiastical Administration (SEA) of the South of Russia, which had operated in the “White territories” in 1919-1920 (more detail can be found in Yulia Biryukova’s *Vremennoje vyssheje tserkovnoje upravlenie na Yuge Rossii v 1919-1920 godakh*. Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, 2018, No. 1—Ed.). True, its leader, Archbishop Dimitrii (Abashidze) of Tavria, did not leave his diocese— Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) became the leader of the ecclesiastical emigration abroad. At first the archpastor wished to disperse the ecclesiastical administration and settle in a monastery, handing the flock over to local Orthodox Churches. But other bishops insisted on continuing the work of the SEA, notably Archbishop Evlogy (Georgievsky) and most especially Bishop Veniamin (Fedchenkov).

Archpriest Grigory Lomako recalled: “Metropolitan Anthony and I are standing by the window. The burgeoning bishop of the Christ-loving Russian military, Vladyka Veniamin, rushes in and bursts out: ‘The Supreme Ecclesiastical Administration is opening in Constantinople.’ Metropolitan Anthony: ‘Who advised you to such foolishness?’ ‘I did myself.’”

It turned out that Bishop Veniamin had already visited other hierarchs, first of all Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky) and Archbishop Feofan (Bystrov), and persuaded them to preserve the Supreme Ecclesiastical Administration.

Soon Metropolitan Anthony himself stopped believing the project to be foolish. There were in fact foundations for the further activity of the church administration. Let us not forget that even in the Crimean period, the SEA managed the external affairs of the Russian Church, beginning with clergy appointments and ending with negotiations with Constantinople over the question of Polish and Georgian autocephaly.

As before, it was necessary to decide such external matters, since Patriarch Tikhon could not at that moment manage the life of Russian dioceses and parishes across the borders. One instance is known when an invitation to a conference in Geneva was not even shown to Patriarch Tikhon—the letter returned from Soviet Russia with a mocking inscription stating that the addressee could not be located.

Understandably, under the situation wherein the Moscow ecclesiastical authority could not manage external affairs, only the administration abroad could assume the role.

But administrative matters took a back seat to pastoral challenges. By the end of 1920, there were about two million refugees in the emigration. Though contact with Patriarch Tikhon was lost, the emigration as a rule did not entertain the thought of joining other Local Churches—their way of church life was too baffling and foreign to them. “We began to don our vestments,” remembered Archpriest Sergy Bulgakov about a divine service in a Greek church. “I couldn’t tell right away where I was. Only later I realized that this was a side altar, and the table at which we were removing our vestments was the holy altar table. I was in utter horror when I saw that some kind of suitcase was splayed out on the altar table, along with two cassocks... Another chapel had some divine-service books dumped on the altar table, and, leaning on it in a casual pose was the serving priest, offering us red sacramental wine after Communion in shot glasses. They were more cautious with the central altar table, though there were a few books resting on its edge. This was so shocking that even now I recall that bazaar in the altar with grievous revulsion... Yesterday I was told that some people who came to a Greek church to hear the Passion readings left in tears, unable to tolerate the ugliness in church.”

But the Serbian and Bulgarian ways also did not suit the Russian exiles. Serbian singing seemed too “monotonous,” and the Balkan divine services and customs were alien to them. In Bulgaria, for example, one was not required to fast or make confession before the Eucharist, there was no custom to take Communion on Great Thursday and Great Saturday, vigil the evening before Sunday was often not performed.

It isn’t surprising that the Russian refugees, whichever country they found themselves in, would first and foremost open churches. In Turkey, for example, such churches were established in private homes, rented from the local population, and sometimes in army tents. The altar screens would be made of sheets with paper icons pinned to them, and candle-stands were crafted by the exiles from tin boxes.

The organization of church life

By the time of the arrival of the SEA in Istanbul, there were already twenty Russian bishops abroad. In Turkey, the parishes were headed by Archbishop Anastassy (Gribanovsky) of Kishinev and Khotinsk, driven from his cathedra for refusing to violate the canons and submit to the Romanian Church.

Hierarch Serafim (Sobolev) taught at the higher theological school of the Constantinople Church on the island of Khalki. Bishop Germogen (Maksimov) of Ekaterinoslavsk ministered to the Russian flock on the island of Lemnos. The renowned hymnographer Bishop Gavriil (Chepur) of Chelyabinsk and Bishop Feofan (Gavrilov) of Kursk settled in Serbia in 1920. The latter did not lead the community of refugees, but he did organize a religious-philosophical society. Bishop Feofan himself was its president, and its members were university and academy professors. Weekly lectures would gather 50-100 attendees. The “Hodigitria of the Russian Diaspora,” the Kursk-Root Icon of the Mother of God, saved by the bishop, was located in the city of Zemun. Finally, several hierarchs, a multitude of priests and hundreds of thousands of refugees were found in China at the time. In addition to establishing parishes, it was necessary to decide problems in improving divine services, developing publications, setting up brotherhoods and sisterhoods, preaching. All this demanded significant material resources, which only a unified church organization could undertake.

At the same time, the refugees were in need of priests not only to perform the Sacraments, but as preservers of the Russian traditions and also as patriotic leaders. Another reason for continuing the

activity of the SEA was the news that General P.N. Wrangel planned to preserve the military organization for a future anti-Bolshevik campaign.

Without a doubt, neither Greek, nor Bulgarian nor Serbian clergy could assume the mantle of ideological leadership within the Russian emigration, could not properly understand its hope for the emancipation of their Homeland. They could not claim the role of unifiers, and the political parties were few in number, poor and fractured.

As the emigres joked, there were all sorts of parties, “from Markov to Martov,” that is from monarchists to Menshevik communists. It turned out that the unifying center for the Russian refugees was left solely to the Church. And so the SEA of the South of Russia continued its work in the emigration. On 19 November 1920, on the ship “Grand Duke Alexandr Mikhailovich,” in the port of Istanbul, the first meeting of the SEA in the emigration commenced. This historic event included Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky), Archbishop Feofan (Bystrov), Bishop Veniamin (Fedchenkov) and Archpriest Georgy Spassky. All except for Archpriest Spassky became members of the SEA Abroad, whose president was Metropolitan Anthony.

Later, the Russian Church Abroad was criticized for the fact that it mainly consisted of bishops who fled their cathedras. Foreseeing this, the SEA noted from the start that the abandonment of their cathedrals did not hinder the preservation of the episcopal powers. Canonical foundations were put forth, first of all the 39th Rule of the 6th Ecumenical Council. According to this canon, the head of the Church of Cyprus, Bishop John, moving with his flock from the island, conquered by the Saracens, to the territory of the Patriarch of Constantinople, was permitted to preserve his rights and powers while in exile. An entire series of historical precedents were pointed to in the emigration, for instance, how the great saints Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyprian of Carthage and others left their cathedras.

Patriarch Tikhon confirmed that abandoning their cathedras due to danger from the militant atheists was no crime. Firstly, the SEA in the South of Russia during the Crimean period (1920) almost completely consisted of bishops who left their cathedras. Yet Patriarch Tikhon recognized their directives as lawful. Secondly, after the move of the hierarchs across the border, Patriarch Tikhon did not condemn them and even agreed with their new appointments, as for instance Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky), Archbishop Evlogy (Georgievsky) and Bishop Serafim (Sobolev).

The SEA Abroad at its very first meeting decided to appeal to the Constantinople Patriarchate to formalize its status. Blessing was received. On 2 December 1920, a decree was issued by the *Locum Tenens* of the Patriarchal Throne, Metropolitan Dorotheos, No. 9084, addressed to Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky).

The Russian hierarchs were permitted to create a temporary ecclesiastical commission (via epitrope) under the supreme administration of the Constantinople Patriarchate for administering the church life of the Russian colonies within the boundaries of Orthodox countries. This document did not grant the foundation to organize an independent ecclesiastical structure, which is not surprising: the Constantinople Throne would not tolerate such proximity any independent church power. The rights of the commission were significantly abridged in the area of marriage court, which later became a constant cause of conflicts. Still, the Patriarchate did not object to the existence of the Russian Church Abroad for ministering to the refugees, which was confirmed in 1922 by Metropolitan Kallinikos (Delikanis). According to his article in the journal of the Constantinople Patriarchate, “Church Truth,” the Phanar

explained its support for ROCOR for two reasons, most of all from a desire to help the suffering Russian Orthodox faith. The SEA Abroad itself saw itself not as a “commission” subjected to Constantinople, but a full-fledged administrative organ. Immediately upon receiving the decree, the SEA informed the Russian parishes abroad that it is the legal successor to the SEA of the South of Russia and represents the supreme church authority for parishes abroad until the establishment of “proper and free communications” with the Moscow Church authorities.

Soon, from various corners of the world, responses came with support for the decree issued. “Most Benevolent Archpastors of the Russian Orthodox Church of Christ!,” said one of the missives. “Please respond! Declare your existence to your spiritual children who are as sheep without a shepherd and scattered today in various places... We desire that in the great diaspora, the Russian Orthodox Church would be unified, bonded together and leading the whole through its archpastors.”

Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) informed Patriarch Tikhon of the organization of the SEA of the Russian diaspora in Constantinople. His Holiness, by his own admission, gave the ecclesiastical administration abroad his blessing, though this document did not cross the borders and the emigration never referred to it. Metropolitan Anthony’s soul yearned for Mt Athos. Over the course of several months he strove to obtain the permission of Constantinople to seclude himself on the Holy Mountain for monastic labors. The archpastor did not receive a positive response. Instead, the Metropolitan was invited by the head of the Serbian Church—His Holiness Patriarch Dimitrij. On February 16, Metropolitan Anthony was dispatched by the Church administration to the Kingdom of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia and stayed there permanently. After his departure, the SEA was presided over by Archbishop Anastassy (Gribanovsky), who was sometimes replaced by Archbishop Feofan (Bystrov) and Bishop Veniamin (Fedchenkov). The SEA continued to handle ecclesio-administrative matters, first of all by ensuring a normal church life for Russian refugees. On 8 April 1921, the ukase on appointing Archbishop Evlogy (Georgievsky) to Western Europe was repeated. The first such ukase was issued by the SEA in the Crimea in October 1920, but it did not reach Archbishop Evlogy. In order to deal with problems in America, the SEA sent Metropolita Platon (Rozhdestvensky) there.

The Gathering of the Russian Soul

Pastoral work was also organized. Bishop Damian (Govorov) of Tsaritsyn, for instance, was able to obtain from the municipality buildings with 36 rooms, where a “Russian House” was established. Here the hierarch organized an orphanage.

The ecclesiastical leadership did not neglect to establish an ideological base for the Russian Church Abroad.

The fact that masses of Orthodox Christians found themselves outside of the border of their Fatherland was seen as providential. The idea of a grand mission of the emigration was at the time close to the heart of St Tikhon, who said that the émigré bishops were faced with an important challenge—to illuminate the peoples with the light of the true Faith in Christ. Bishop Damian (Govorov) shared that sentiment, having recorded in his journal: “Our Christian consciousness told us that everything we see happening is not by chance. The movement of Russia and the movement of the world has led us to the center of Orthodoxy for some grand goal.”

But wherein lay this goal? This question was to be deliberated on by the “Ecclesio-Representative Assembly” consisting of bishops, clergymen and laity abroad.

In preparation, a committee was established and chaired by Bishop Veniamin, three archpriests and eight laypersons. Metropolitan Nikolaos of Caesarea, *Locum Tenens* of the Ecumenical Patriarch, blessed the event. The committee outlined the main challenges for the Russian Church Abroad—the problem of refugees, and also the resolution of global national problems. As mentioned in the report, the Russian diaspora faced “super-national,” “super-Slavic” challenges. The authors of the report were convinced that Russia would be healed of its revolutionary passions, would mature spiritually, would recognize her mission and in time could provide succor to others, but not only physically, but spiritually as well.

Yet the emancipation of the country from the godless dictatorship did not mean the preaching of any political ideas. The committee noted that the goal of the Russian emigration is to manifest “the process of gathering the Russian soul, the fusion of the entire people, of all classes, into one whole.”

Orthodoxy, as the basis for the Russian nation, took the prime position. “Do we, Russian emigres, form even in potential, the Russian nation?” read the materials of the committee. “The answer, sadly, is negative. There is no unified government will and thought, no state in our emigration. Other forces are needed which could unite Russia people outside of Russia. If no political concord is possible (it is a bitter thing to admit after all that we have endured!), then we must apparently reeducate ourselves morally. If we have no state, we still have the Church... the Church would give us Russian emigres that organization which we were accustomed to having from the government, it would give a single center for various and differing groups of Russian emigres. If such a center is established, we would cease to be refugees, but would become a nation, or at least, the embryo of a future nation. So the Catholic Church, over the course of a century and a half, preserved the Polish nation and helped her to her feet. So did the Greek Orthodox Church preserve and lift up the Greek nation. Now the Russian Orthodox Church is burdened with this goal—to likewise help the ‘wandering’ Russian emigrants, to gather them together spiritually, if not physically.”

During the committee’s work, most of the bishops left Constantinople for the Kingdom of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. On 15 May 1921, the last session of the SEA was held before departing for that nation. The administrative center of the Church Abroad moved to the city of Sremski Karlovci, near Belgrade. Gradually other Russian emigrants moved to Europe. That is why the Ecclesio-Representative Assembly, still held in Istanbul on 21-22 July 1921 did not prove that grandiose forum which it was expected to become. There were few bishops participating—the Chairman Bishop Veniamin, Bishop Damian, and Bishop Polykarp of Neo-Caesarea, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

But their small delegation in some way benefited the assembly. The lack of “stately” politicians helped decided national problems primarily in an ecclesiastical, Christian spirit. N.M. Zyornov remembered that “a genuine ecclesial spirit reigned” at the meeting. A series of documents was prepared at the gathering, among which was “Regulations for Administering the Russian Church Abroad,” “The Temporary Regulations on Administering Church Regions and Communities Abroad,” “Draft Appeal to All Faithful in Christ” and others. The decrees of the Constantinople conference were reviewed by the SEA in Sremski Karlovci, improved and approved.

The meeting became the final echo of the activity of the SEA in Constantinople.

In the history of the Russian Church Abroad, a new “Yugoslavian” period began. But the half-year presence of the leadership of ROCOR in the Turkish capital left its mark in history—it was during those months that the ideological foundation of the Russian Church Abroad was laid, when its existence began.