

# Imperial Russia as a Failed State: The Role of Orthodox Church

G. L. Freeze

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The purpose of this article is to assess the role of the Orthodox Church during the prelude to the February Revolution. Recent historiography on the Great War in Western scholarship has foregrounded the role of the Churches, Protestant and Catholic, in sustaining popular support for a war that entailed unprecedented death, suffering, and hardship. That new research, seeking to explain the “endurance problem” (*Durchhaltproblem*), point to the Churches in the West as the pillar of the existing regimes right to the very end of the war and as an effective instrument in mobilizing support and patriotism to defend each country’s “civilization”. Hence, no less important than brilliant military plans and effective governance, the Churches provided critical support and raised morale of both troops and civilians. Such was not the case in Russia. With few resources at its disposal, the Orthodox Church provided initial but ephemeral support. As is shown here, the Church was not only unable but unwilling to embrace the ancient regime: against a background of general war weariness, the Church elites, parish clergy, and ordinary parishioners were increasingly determined to pursue their own interests, not those of the state. By February 1917 the Church did not condemn but welcomed the overthrow of the monarchy that ultimately led to the Bolshevik seizure of power and years of brutal civil war. The monograph by I. V. Potkina “On the eve of the catastrophe. The state and the economy in Russia in 1914–1917” has many positive elements, but it is important — given recent historiography, which foregrounds the role of Churches and religion in sustaining society’s willingness to endure the Great War — to pay attention to the role of the Russian Orthodox Church.

*Keywords:* Russian Orthodox Church, World War I, Russia Empire, churches, religion, historiography.

## Имперская Россия как несостоявшееся государство: роль Православной церкви

Г. Л. Фриз

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Задача настоящей статьи — оценить роль Русской православной церкви в преддверии Февральской революции. Новейшая западная историография о Первой мировой войне

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Gregory L. Freeze — PhD, Professor of History, Brandeis University, 415, South Street, Waltham, MA, 02453, USA; [freeze@brandeis.edu](mailto:freeze@brandeis.edu)

Грегори Л. Фриз — PhD, профессор истории, Брандейский университет, США, 02453, Массачусетс, Уолтем, Саус-стрит, 415; [freeze@brandeis.edu](mailto:freeze@brandeis.edu)

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подчеркивает роль протестантской и католической церкви в мобилизации народов на борьбу с врагом. Церковь играла важную роль не только на фронте, но и в тылу, убеждая население продолжать воевать, несмотря на небывало высокий уровень смертности, страданий и трудностей из-за войны. Западные церкви оказались важными инструментами в мобилизации народных масс на защиту национальных ценностей. Религиозные организации оказались не менее важными, чем эффективное управление, в поддержании высокого боевого духа среди солдат и гражданского населения. В Российской империи Русская православная церковь не играла такой роли. Поскольку в ее распоряжении были очень ограниченные ресурсы, она смогла обеспечить только эфемерную и номинальную материальную поддержку. Но гораздо важнее то, что Русская православная церковь не только не могла, но и не хотела легитимировать старый режим и помогать ему справляться с громадными проблемами, вызванными войной. На фоне общей усталости от войны три главных составляющих Русской православной церкви — церковные элиты, белое духовенство и рядовые миряне — выступали в защиту своих интересов, а не интересов государства. К февралю 1917 г. Русская православная церковь перестала поддерживать старый режим и даже приветствовала его свержение и приход Временного правительства к власти. Монография И. В. Поткиной «В преддверии катастрофы. Государство и экономика России в 1914–1917 годах» имеет много положительных моментов и убедительно показывает, как Российское государство справлялось с трудностями войны. Однако надо также обратить внимание на роль Русской православной церкви, объяснив, как и почему она отказалась поддерживать государство, продолжавшее участвовать в затяжной войне.

*Ключевые слова:* Русская православная церковь, Первая мировая война, Российская империя, церкви, религия, историография.

“Forgotten”<sup>1</sup> in Soviet Russia, the Great War has finally become the focus of considerable research. The immense number of conscripts (15.8 million), killed (1.5 to 2.0 million), injured (5.0 million), MIAs and POWs (2.4 million), and refugees (6.5 million) had a powerful impact on Russian state and society<sup>2</sup>. Contrary to earlier accounts, the new research has demonstrated that the central government functioned as well as, sometimes even better than, the other combatants<sup>3</sup>. Historians no longer attribute the collapse of the ancien regime to a unique economic crisis; rather, the February Revolution triggered economic collapse, not vice-versa. These findings support the “optimist” perspective and challenge facile assumptions about the inevitability of October<sup>4</sup>.

That perspective informs I. V. Potkina’s close study of the government’s normative acts to regulate the economy and maximize its potential capacity<sup>5</sup>. From 9,197 normative

<sup>1</sup> Die vergessenen Front — der Osten, 1914/15: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung / ed. by G. P. Gross. Paderborn, 2006; Rossiia v Pervoi mirovoi: Velikaia zabytaia voina / ed. by A. A. Klimov. Moscow, 2014; Cohen A. Oh that! Myth, Memory, and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union // Slavic Review. 2003. Vol. 62. P. 69–86.

<sup>2</sup> Winter J. Demography // A Companion to World War I. Oxford, 2010. P. 248–262; Beyrau D. Der Erste Weltkrieg als Bewährungsprobe. Bolschewistische Lernprozesse aus dem “imperialistischen” Krieg // Journal of Modern European History. 2003. Vol. 1. P. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Markevich A., Harrison M. Great War, Civil War, and Recovery: Russia’s National Income, 1913 to 1928 // Journal of Economic History. 2011. Vol. 71. P. 672–703.

<sup>4</sup> It bears emphasizing that the “optimist”/“pessimist” binary is simplistic. It is a far cry from the sophisticated study of “failed states” in the 1990s, culminating in the “Fragile State Index”. For details on that index and its twelve variables, with hard and soft data to rank some 180 countries, see: URL: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/> (accessed: 15.06.2022).

<sup>5</sup> Potkina I. V. V predverii katastrofy. Gosudarstvo i ekonomika Rossii v 1914–1917 godakh. St Petersburg, 2022.

acts, the author analyzes 1,279 (13.8 %) pertaining to economic policy, supplemented by a selection of ego documents of high officials. Unfortunately, the monograph does not use any archival materials to elucidate the politics of decision-making and to document implementation. The author rightly emphasizes the special problems of a multi-national, multi-confessional empire, where the flood of refugees precipitated ethnic conflict and posed an extraordinary challenge for the government<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, religion could also help combatants to endure the hardships caused by the war. Catholic and Protestant churches, whether in the Central Powers or the Entente, zealously supported their country, not just at the outset of the war, but to the bitter end<sup>7</sup>. As the popular classes expected the least and suffered the most<sup>8</sup>, Church's patriotism was especially important and proved critical in solving the *Durchhaltungsproblem* (endurance problem)<sup>9</sup>. Given the religious language used to sanctify the national cause and to demonize foes, some even have called this a "religious war"<sup>10</sup>. In short, the Western churches were effective in raising morale and counteracting the war-weariness from years of unimaginable carnage<sup>11</sup>. In the Kaiserreich, for example, the Protestant Church remained an ardent supporter of the monarchy right to its collapse in November 1918<sup>12</sup>.

Given the new Western scholarship, it is regrettable that the author did not examine the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Great War. The text contains only one reference to "tserkov" (church), three to "dukhovenstvo" (clergy), four to "religioznyi" (religious), and three to "pravoslavie" (Orthodoxy). Nor does this study consult the vast recent scholarship on the church, whether in Russia or the other combatants; it only contains references to three articles about Ufa diocese. Apart from sources emanating from non-

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<sup>6</sup> Lohr E. *Russia // Companion to World War I*. Oxford, 2010. P.479–493.

<sup>7</sup> Snape M. *The Great War // The Cambridge History of Christianity*. Vol.9. Cambridge, 2008. P.131–150; Waddel P. *Guns, Gore and God: Bishop Gore and the First World War // Journal of Anglican Studies*. 2017. Vol. 15. P.88–107.

<sup>8</sup> Claims of national enthusiasm were exaggerated, for they reflected mainly the view of the urban educated middle classes. See: Verhey J. *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany*. Cambridge, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Bauernkämpfer A., Julien E. *Einleitung: Durchhaltung! Kriegskulturen und Handlungspraktiken im Ersten Weltkrieg // Durchhalten! Krieg und Gesellschaft im Vergleich 1914–1918*. Göttingen, 2010. P.7–30; Hürten H. *Die Kirchen in der Novemberrevolution. Eine Untersuchung zur Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution 1918/19*. Regensburg, 1984; Purseigle P. *A very French debate: the 1914–1918 'war culture' // Journal of War and Culture Studies*. 2008. Vol. 1. P.9–14; Meteling W. *Neue Forschung zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Englisch- und französischesprachige Studien über Deutschland, Frankreich und Großbritannien // Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. 2011. Vol. 37. P.614–648.

<sup>10</sup> Becker A. *Faith, Ideologies, and the 'Cultures of War' // A Companion to World War I*. Oxford, 2010. P.234–247; Watson A. *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies 1914–1918*. Cambridge, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Missalla H. "Gott mit Uns." *Die deutsche katholische Kriegspredigt 1914–1918*. Munich, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> Hoover A. J. *God and Germany in the Great War: The View of the Protestant Pastors // Canadian Review of Nationalities*. 1987. Vol. 14. P.65–81; Hürten H. *Die Kirchen in der Novemberrevolution*. Regensburg, 1984; Pressel W. *Die Kriegspredigt 1914–1918 in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands*. Göttingen, 1967; Bailey C. F. *Gott mit Uns: Germany's Protestant Theologians in the First World War*. PhD diss. [S.l.], 1978; Meier K. *Evangelische Kirche und Erster Weltkrieg // Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*. Weyarn, Austria, 1997. P.691–724; Mommsen W. J. *Die nationalgeschichtliche Umdeutung der christlichen Botschaft im Ersten Weltkrieg // Gott mit uns: Nation, Religion und Gewalt im 19. Und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen, 2000. P.249–261; Scheidgen H.-J. *Deutsche Bischöfe im ersten Weltkrieg*. Köln, 1991.

elites<sup>13</sup>, it would have been helpful to know about the scholarship on confessions and underlying documentation — from clergy and lay believers. Whatever the macroeconomic indicators (newly constructed!) may say, contemporary perception was critical in shaping attitudes and behaviors<sup>14</sup>. Since the strategy of addressing social needs relies on non-state actors like the Russian Orthodox Church, it is essential to determine whether the Church was capable, or willing, to bear this immense burden.

Here we shall examine the role prescribed for the Orthodox Church and its response. As will be seen, the Church did not fill the gap left by the central government. Delegating those tasks did enable the government to shift a major burden and thereby focus on its economic priorities. However, this strategy did not guarantee an effective social policy and provide a social net to cope with unprecedented wartime hardships.

## The Orthodox Church: Social Tasks and Performance

Like other combatants, the Russian government assigned social services to non-governmental organization, including the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>15</sup>. The Synod responded immediately to the challenge by mobilizing diocesan authorities, monasteries, parish clergy, and laity. By the end of 1914 the Synod had collected 137,300 rubles, a seemingly large sum but inconsequential when compared with the 30 million rubles spent each day on the war<sup>16</sup>. Individual dioceses showed initiative; authorities in Pskov, for example, vowed to devote 2% of the gross church income to the war cause<sup>17</sup>. But the Church focused mainly on four areas: 1) morale-building propaganda and preaching; 2) hospitals to care for wounded and sick soldiers; 3) assistance to military dependents (wives and children; widows and orphans); and 4) relief for the influx of refugees. Organizationally, each parish was to establish a special “parish trusteeship council” (*prikhodskoi popechitel'skii sovet*) to oversee and report on local activities.

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<sup>13</sup> The ego documents of bureaucratic elites are important, but so too are those of soldiers, workers, and peasants. For the soldiers, the letters are especially valuable: *Astashov A. B.* Russkie soldaty i Pervaia mirovaia voina: psihoistoricheskoe issledovanie voennogo opyta // *Sotsialnaia istoriia: ezhegodnik*. 2001/2002. P. 399–426; *Lokteva N. A.* Frontovye pis'ma kak istochnik dlia izucheniia moral'nogo i patrioticheskogo dukha soldata Pervoi mirovoi voiny // *Posledniaia voina Rossiiskoi imperii*. Moscow, 2006. P. 100–107; *Agapov V. I.* Soldatskie pis'ma s fronta Pervoi mirovoi voiny v dal'nevostochnykh gazetakh 1914–1915 gg. // *Rossia i ATR*. 2015. Vol. 12. P. 169–181; *Rosenberg W. G.* Reading Soldiers' Moods: Russian Military Censorship and the Configuration of Feeling in World War I // *American Historical Review*. 2014. Vol. 119. P. 714–740; *Izmozik V. S.* K voprosu o politicheskikh nastroeniakh rossiiskogo obshchestva v kanun 1917 g. (po materialam perliustratsii) // *Rossia i Pervaia mirovaia voina*. St Petersburg, 1999. P. 160–171.

<sup>14</sup> The “cultural turn” taught us that subjective, not just objective, reality shapes social behavior. See: *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* / eds L. Harrison, S. Huntington. New York, 2000. One might rephrase the thesis to suggest that *Perception Matters*: even if Russian macroeconomic indicators were less horrific than once thought, that did not automatically translate into contemporary perception. Indeed, perception is central to contemporary social science research, such as the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), based on massive and differentiated polling. For the CPI for 2021, with details about methodology, see: *Corruption Perception Index*. URL: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021> (accessed: 15.06.2022).

<sup>15</sup> Prominent too were the zemstvo and the Red Cross. On the latter see: *Davis G. H.* National Red Cross Societies and Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1918 // *Journal of Contemporary History*. 1993. Vol. 28. P. 31–52.

<sup>16</sup> *Lisitsyna O. I.* K voprosu ob organizatsii blagotvoritel'noi i patrioticheskoi deiatel'nosti tul'skogo dukhovenstva v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny // *Izvestiia Tul'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. 2013. No. 3 (1). P. 93.

<sup>17</sup> *Mikhailov A.* Pskov v gody Pervoi mirovoi voine, 1914–1915 gg. Pskov, 2012. P. 165.

How well did the Church respond?

As for *propaganda and preaching*, the clergy — at least in sheer quantitative terms — were hardly derelict, at least in the first year of the conflict. The Synod itself hastened to condemn foes (especially Kaiser Wilhelm II) and to urge defense of the fatherland, faith, and fellow Slavs<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, the government and Synod made a great show of emphasizing patriotic support for the war. As in the case of other combatants, however, this patriotic enthusiasm was far more contained and ephemeral than contemporaries were led to believe<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, the Russian Church filled its central and diocesan press with proclamations and sermons against the blasphemous “Teutonic” hordes<sup>20</sup>. By 1914, after a century of gradual expansion, the sermon had become a regular feature of religious services, as the annual report (*otchet*) from each diocese emphasized<sup>21</sup>. Priests were zealous not only in publishing but also in reading aloud printed sermons, a direct response to popular distrust of impromptu homilies<sup>22</sup>. In Vladimir diocese, the local clergy formed a special “circle” to publish a new serial to make these new sermons readily accessible<sup>23</sup>.

Nevertheless, quantity did not guarantee quality and reception. First, the Church’s message was diffuse, offering multiple explanations, for example, on why the war started in the first place<sup>24</sup>. These explanations included divine punishment (as retribution for the prewar decline in piety and morality), the duty to combat the villainies perpetrated by the Central Powers (from the violation of Belgian neutrality to the use of poison gas and the wanton destruction of Christian churches), support for fellow Slavs (above all, Serbs), and defense of the motherland and Russian civilization. The general population, evidently, tended to be left confused rather than to check off “all the above”. Second, even diligent priests found it difficult to communicate with so socially and culturally differentiated a flock; in despair they complained that preaching to the illiterate majority — who were often ignorant of basic prayers and teachings — was very problematic<sup>25</sup>. Third, the initial

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<sup>18</sup> Synod resolution of 2 July 1914 // Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (hereafter RGIA). F. 796. Op. 198, otd. 1, st. 1. D. 329, ch. 1. L. 1–2 ob.

<sup>19</sup> Verhey J. *The Spirit of 1914*. P. 12–71; Hirschfeld G. *Germany // Companion to World War I*. Oxford, 2010. P. 432–447; Belov S. G. *Patriotizm 1914 goda: k voprosu o prirode (sotsiologii) fenomena russkogo (rossiiskogo) patriotizma*. Nizhnii Novgorod, 2009; Sanborn J. *The Mobilization of 1914 and the Question of the Russian Nation: A Reexamination // Slavic Review*. 2000. Vol. 59. P. 267–289.

<sup>20</sup> Runkevich S. G. *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina i tserkovnaia zhizn'*. Petrograd, 1916.

<sup>21</sup> In the report (*otchet*) for 1914, for example, the archbishop of Vladimir reported that the local clergy (1,098 priests and 37 men in lower ranks) delivered 40,129 sermons (including 8,350 personal compositions, 3,955 impromptu homilies, and 27,824 readings from published texts. While some priests (mostly older ones) rarely preached, others did so and almost on a weekly basis (RGIA. F. 796. Op. 442. D. 2628. L. 28–29 ob.). For early sermons expressing enthusiastic support for the war, see those published in *Vladimirskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, 1914, no. 32 (“Vtoraia Otechestvennaia voina”), no. 35 (“Istinnii smyl' nastoiashchei voiny”), and no. 39 (“Po povodu nemetskikh zverstv”).

<sup>22</sup> As one priest reported, parishioners were more inclined to trust a reading from a printed sermon, which they deemed to be more authoritative than an impromptu homily. See: *Eparkhial'nye izvestiia // Vladimirskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*. 1915. No. 2. P. 33.

<sup>23</sup> RGIA. F. 796. Op. 199, otd. 6, st. 1. D. 300. L. 1–1 ob. (Archbishop Aleksii of Vladimir to the Synod, 20. 11. 1914), reporting on the formation of a “Propovednicheskii kruzhok dukhovenstva” and its plans to publish *Propovednicheskii listok*, the first issue of which appeared on 1 December 1914.

<sup>24</sup> Soldiers’ letters, increasingly, contained candid comments about the senseless war as well as the speculation of the bourgeoisie and bureaucrats. *Porshneva O. S. Sotsial'noe povedenie soldat russkoi armii v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny // Sotsial'naiia istoriia: ezhegodnik*. 2001/2002. Moscow, 2003. P. 386–397. See also: *Astashov A. B. Russkie soldaty i Pervaia mirovaia voina*. P. 404.

<sup>25</sup> *Astashov A. B. Propaganda na russkom fronte v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny*. Moscow, 2012. P. 65–85.

zeal to preach about the war soon waned, with priests returning to traditional religious and moral subjects<sup>26</sup>. That may have been due to dismay over popular response or their own doubts about the “short, victorious war” that proved neither short nor victorious. There were also clear signs that even zealous chaplains could do little to stem the surge of desertions and surrenders<sup>27</sup>.

As in other countries, the *chaplains* were a favorite butt of criticism by officers and troops. The Russian army, like other combatants<sup>28</sup>, suffered from an acute shortage of chaplains to cope with the massive conscription of new officers and soldiers<sup>29</sup>. The army had modestly increased the number of chaplains before 1914 but was totally unprepared for the massive increases from a general mobilization<sup>30</sup>. It was also a question of quality: the chief chaplain complained that bishops preferred to send the elderly and tainted as chaplains, nominally meeting the demand but aiming more at ridding the diocese of the undesired<sup>31</sup>. But with pressure from the Synod and secular authorities, the army increased the number of chaplains from about 700 to 2,000 (achieving rough parity with other armies), but the chaplain-soldier ratio was still abysmal. The army increased not only the number of chaplains but the long list of their duties. Whereas the parish priest had a reasonably stable population of residential laity, the chaplain faced an ever-changing turnover, with one wave rapidly giving way to the next, making a normal pastoral role impossible. Even the most zealous chaplain found service difficult, often — for want of a regular chapel — had to conduct services in make-shift sites. Nor could the chaplain focus on pastoral duties: he was also to assist the wounded at the front and perform paramedical roles at the field hospital. Although forbidden to engage in combat (in contrast to the Catholic chaplains in the French army), Orthodox chaplains were exposed to danger, with 40 killed, circa 400 wounded, and 200 more becoming POWs<sup>32</sup>.

Despite these risks and sacrifices, Russian chaplains — like their peers in other armies — frequently came under criticism. Relations with officers were often fraught: the officers resented the social pretensions of the chaplain (who held the formal military rank of an officer, to the dismay of the well-born), and complained that they were lax in performing pastoral duties. The chaplains had their own grievances, especially the officers’ tendency to relegate religious services to late hours, when soldiers were more interested in sleeping than praying. Not that the relations between the chaplain and the soldiers were

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<sup>26</sup> For example, “Propovednicheskii listok”, established in 1914 to provide an outlet for the publication of sermons, produced relatively few sermons on the war in 1915: only 12 (14%) of the 88 sermons dealt with the war, with 66 (75%) devoted to traditional spiritual-religious topics, and 10 (12%) dealing with such topics as politics, charity, and the religious education of children. See: Propovednicheskii listok. 1915. No. 1–12.

<sup>27</sup> *Astashov A. B. Prestuplenie i pravo v russkoi armii (1914 — fevral’ 1917 goda) // Vestnik Tverskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Istoriia. 2012. No. 3. P. 52–67. See also: Beyrau D., Shcherbinin P. P. Alles für die Front: Russland im Krieg, 1914–1922 // Durchhalten: Krieg und Gesellschaft im Vergleich 1914–1918. Göttingen, 2010. P. 156.*

<sup>28</sup> *Houlihan P. The Churches // International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 1914–1918 online. URL: [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-the\\_churches-2015-10-22.pdf](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-the_churches-2015-10-22.pdf) (accessed: 15.06.2022); Madigan E. Faith under Fire: Anglican Army Chaplains and the Great War. London, 2011; Meier K. Evangelische Kirche und Erster Weltkrieg. P. 714–717.*

<sup>29</sup> *Kandidov B. P. Tserkovnyi front v gody Mirovoi voyny. Moscow, 1927. P. 61.*

<sup>30</sup> *Benecke W. Zur Rolle der russisch-orthodoxe Militärgeistlichkeit vor 1914 // Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropa. 2004. Vol. 52. P. 383–384.*

<sup>31</sup> *Leont’eva T. G. Pravoslavnoe dukhovenstvo v gody Pervoi mirovoi voyny // Rossiia i sovremennyi mir. 2014. No. 2 (83). P. 108.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid. P. 117.*

ideal. The troops looked askance at the chaplains' preference for the company of officers, a hostility that only grew as weariness over the "short war" intensified. Chaplains also complained that the soldiers refused to attend services and even displayed openly anticlerical sentiments.

*Military hospitals* were another focus of Church activism. Given the empire's limited network of medical institutions, the regime realized that it would need auxiliary hospitals to care for the wounded and sick. It therefore urged society to re-task suitable buildings and provide funding for the doctors, nurses, and pharmacies that would serve in them. The Church ordered monasteries and diocesan authorities to identify suitable premises and organize the financial resources to run them. Nizhnii Novgorod opened its first hospital in August 1914, with 300 beds, and within three months increased its capacity to 1,700 beds<sup>33</sup>. In June 1915, Tver diocese reported converting a seminary building into a military hospital with 375 beds<sup>34</sup>. By 1915, the 916 monasteries in the empire had opened 190 hospitals, with a total of 7,644 beds, but that was "negligible" given the scale of need<sup>35</sup>.

That limited response, moreover, proved difficult to sustain. While the hospitals seemed a temporary measure for a "short war", they proved increasingly burdensome in terms of the Church's institutional needs, especially for seminary facilities needed to educate the next generation of parish clergy. Within a year, indeed, some dioceses began to complain and suggest the need to restore these facilities to their original, essential purpose.

*Assistance to military dependents* — widows and orphans, wives and children — was another sphere of Orthodox caritas. After the Synod instructed diocesan authorities to establish special "parish trusteeship councils" (*prikhodskoe popechitel'skie sovety*), many parishes in fact compiled and undertook to perform a range of functions — from collecting money and goods to cultivating the land of families where the breadwinner had been sent to the front. By all accounts, however, the councils' achievements were exceedingly modest: most raised some funds, but when divided among the huge number of affected families the net amount per family was minuscule. By October 1914, for example, the 343 councils in Kursk diocese had collected 8,484.37 rubles (an average of 24.74 rubles per council), but when shared among 4,920 families in need, the average sum was a mere 1.72 rubles<sup>36</sup>. In 1915, the councils in the empire provided 6,357,570 rubles, which they distributed to 2,146,242 dependent families, yielding an average of just 2.96 rubles<sup>37</sup>.

*Bezhtensy* (refugees) constituted another sphere of responsibility. A natural priority was the institutions and clergy fleeing from the war zones. The diocesan authorities in Kaluga, for example, provided money and housing for refugees and consistory files from Minsk<sup>38</sup>. However, as in the case of military dependents, demand increased exponentially in 1915 and overwhelmed available resources<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Belov S. G. Patriotizm 1914 goda. P. 30–31.

<sup>34</sup> Tverskaia guberniia v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny 1914–1918 gg. / ed. by V. P. Buldakov. Tver', 2009. P. 119.

<sup>35</sup> Kliuchareva A. V. Blagotvoritel'naia deiatel'nost' pravoslavnykh monastyrei v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny // Istoricheskie, filosofskie, politekhnicheskie i iuridicheskoe nauki. 2011. No. 8 (14), ch. 2. P. 98–102.

<sup>36</sup> Bunin A. Iu. Deiatel'nost' pravoslavnogo dukhovenstva Kurskogo kraia v 1905–1929 gg. PhD Diss. (History). Kursk, 2005. P. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Obzor deiatel'nosti vedomstva pravoslavnogo ispovedaniia za 1915 god. Petrograd, 2017. P. 45.

<sup>38</sup> Belova I. Pervaia mirovaia voina i rossiiskaia provintsii, 1914 — fevral' 1917 g. Moscow, 2011. P. 100–102.

<sup>39</sup> The Council of Ministers recognized the magnitude of the problem, adopting a decision on 16 December 1916 to allocate state credits to address the urgent needs of the refugees. *Osobyie zhurnaly Soveta ministrov Rossiiskoi imperii. 1916 god* / ed. by B. D. Gal'perina. Moscow, 2008. P. 599–600.

In sum, the Church had limited resources and no reserves of wealth at its disposal. By the summer of 1915, as the military disasters brought a steep growth in the number of the wounded, dependents, and refugees, the Council of Ministers recognized the “exhaustion of constant sources of means because of the wartime conditions” and considered making credits available from the state treasury<sup>40</sup>. In other words, the Church was simply unable to fulfill its charitable obligations, but it was also a question whether in fact it was *willing* to do so.

## Disillusionment and Discontent

Significantly, the mirage of patriotic support for the war began to dissipate by the spring of 1915<sup>41</sup>. The shift became apparent, despite military censorship<sup>42</sup>, even in letters from soldiers at the front<sup>43</sup>. Izmozik’s study, for example, found that all but one letter were negative<sup>44</sup>. By February 1917, the military censors reported that the letters routinely complained about “the high cost of living” and called for “the most rapid conclusion of peace”<sup>45</sup>. Letters even from respectable quarters openly confirmed that revolution was expected and imminent<sup>46</sup>. Apart from letters and police reports, there was growing evidence of anticlericalism and religious indifference (if not overt hostility)<sup>47</sup>. Dynamics behind the shift were multiple: not only the military debacles of 1915 (with a catastrophic loss of troops, territory, and population) but also growing suspicion of treason in high places and dismay that the “short war” proved interminable<sup>48</sup>. While the more favorable reconstruction of macroeconomic indicators is impressive, it was not available to contemporaries who, amidst massive budgetary deficits (of which 81 % were covered by printing money) suffered the full brunt of inflation and drop in real income. Given that per capita GDP in Russia was much lower than in the other combatants, its population simply lacked the wherewithal and safety net to soften the full impact of the war.

Against all that, the Orthodox church proved no match. It suffered critical weaknesses that left it incapable of defending the ancien regime as effectively as did its peers in the West.

One major factor was the *political alienation of Church elites*. The discontent among Orthodox prelates should not come as a great surprise: tensions between Church and state had been mounting for decades. Superficially, historians have emphasized disenchantment with the pretensions of the chief procurator (*ober-prokuror*), who asserted ever greater con-

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<sup>40</sup> Osobyje zhurnaly Soveta ministrov Rossiiskoi imperii. 1915 god / ed. by B. D. Gal’perina. Moscow, 2008. P. 278 (journal of 2 July 1915).

<sup>41</sup> Nechaev M. G. Tserkov’ na Urale v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny // Tekhnologos. 2011. No. 4. P. 75; Jahn H. Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I. Ithaca, 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Smith J. T. Russian Military Censorship during the First World War // Revolutionary Russia. 2001. Vol. 14. P. 79–81.

<sup>43</sup> Narskii I. Frontline Experience of Russian Soldiers in 1914–1916 // Russian Studies in History. 2013. Vol. 41. P. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Izmozik V. S. K voprosu o politicheskikh nastroeniiakh... P. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Tverskaia guberniia v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny 1914–1918 gg. P. 339.

<sup>46</sup> Izmozik V. S. K voprosu o politicheskikh nastroeniiakh... P. 167–170.

<sup>47</sup> Leont’eva T. G.: 1) Pravoslavnoe dukhovenstvo v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny. P. 114–115; 2) Dukhovenstvo i sel’skii mir, 1905–1922 // Akademik P. V. Volobuev: neopublikovannye raboty, vospominaniia, stat’i / ed. by P. V. Volobuev. Moscow, 2000. P. 290–291.

<sup>48</sup> Markevich A., Harrison M. Great War, Civil War, and Recovery. P. 672–703.



trol over central and diocesan administration. But it was also a matter of policy: the government, increasingly driven to act in the name of *raison d'état*, pursued policies contrary to interests of the Church, most notably through concessions to other confessions and violation of the Church's claim to precedence and privilege. The last prewar years did nothing to improve relations, given the emperor's decision not to convoke a Church council and the alleged (if exaggerated) influence of Grigorii Rasputin<sup>49</sup>. It is hardly surprising that when the chief procurator urged the Synod to adopt a resolution in defense of the monarchy, it refused to do so and a few days later welcomed his abdication and replacement by the Provisional Government. While there is some disagreement on the magnitude of episcopal antipathy for the ancien regime<sup>50</sup>, at the very least it stands in dramatic contrast to the staunch support rendered by the churches in the other combatant states.

*Institutional breakdown of ecclesiastical administration* was a further factor. On the one hand, the Church's staffing budget had not increased since 1869, and wartime inflation sharply reduced any residual worth. As the Smolensk bishop complained in 1916: "Not for the first time is it necessary to note the pitiable condition in which the local diocesan consistory finds itself"<sup>51</sup>. As a result, when the army drafted the younger staffers, the consistory was unable to find replacements for positions that offered such miserly salaries. On the other hand, governing became more difficult: the breakdown in communications and dispersion of the male population diminished the capacity to collect information and contact believers. That problem was most acute in divorce cases, which had exploded in number over the previous decade and now constituted the main sphere of diocesan administration. The sheer volume of divorce cases far exceeded the capacity of the consistory, as emphasized in a review of the St Petersburg consistory for 1904–1915<sup>52</sup>. It was, for example, all but impossible to obtain the legal depositions required to process divorce suits, and the number of unresolved divorce suits steadily mounted<sup>53</sup>. An inspection of the Vladimir consistory drew the same conclusion<sup>54</sup>. The swollen workload impacted consistories in remote dioceses as well. The Yakutsk consistory, for example, had the same staffing as in 1869, but the number of new cases increased from 2,864 in 1870 to 15,446 in 1913 — a 540 % increase for the same staff size<sup>55</sup>.

The administrative breakdown applied as well to the central bureaucracy: it ceased to collect, process, and report on the flow of new business. Suffice it to say that the chief

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<sup>49</sup> *Izmozik V. S.* K voprosu o politicheskikh nastroeniakh... P. 166. — The press often alleged that Rasputin had an extraordinary influence in the Church, but some defended the bishops as hostile (for example: Rasputin i ierarkhi tserkvi // Peterburgskii kur'er. 6 July, 1914. P. 2).

<sup>50</sup> For a monograph emphasizing the episcopate's oppositionist mood, see: *Babkin M. A.* Dukhovenstvo Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi i sverzhenie monarkhii, nachalo XX v. — konets 1917 g. Moscow, 2007. For a critique, see: *Leont'eva T. G.* 'Revoliutsionnaia tserkov' ili 'tserkovnaia revoliutsiia'? // Soviet and Post-Soviet review. 2009. Vol. 36. P. 182–195.

<sup>51</sup> *Kail' M. V.* Smolenskaia eparkhiia nakanune revoliutsii. Dokumenty iz otcheta o sostoianii Smolenskoii eparkhii za 1916 g. // Vestnik PSTGU. Serii: Istoriiia Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi. 2010. No. 3 (36). P. 113.

<sup>52</sup> Spravka // RGIA. F.797. Op.96. D.271. L.216–219.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the reports about delays in processing divorce cases in the Lithuanian consistory proliferated: Lietuvos Vaslybės Istorijos Archyvas (hereafter LVIA). F.605. Op.9. D.1689, 1683, 2035, 2020, 2423, 1878, 1920.

<sup>54</sup> Otchet o revizii Vladimirskoi dukhovnoi konsistorii v 1915 g. // RGIA. F.796. Op.202. D.11736. L.3–76.

<sup>55</sup> *Iurganova I. I.* Iakutskaiia dukhovnaia konsistoriia: istoriia stanovleniia i deiatel'nosti, 1870–1919 gg. PhD Diss. (History). Yakutsk, 2003. P.39–40.

procurator had published an annual report since 1836 but produced the last full report in 1914. The Church budget, vitiated by inflation and starved of provincial revenues, barely managed to publish its central weekly and, by 1917 its treasury was barren, forcing the staff to sell office furnishings for cash to pay their salaries.

*Discontent among the parish clergy* was a third factor in Orthodoxy's marginal support for the regime. They felt the full devastating impact of wartime inflation: as a superintendent (*blagochinnyi*) reported in 1915, "material support of the clergy" has declined so drastically that "many staffs of the district are in dire need"<sup>56</sup>. An official report by the chief procurator for 1915 emphasized the penury: "During the time of the present war the material condition of the clergy has become extremely bad, since life has become incomparably expensive, but the income of parish staffs has not only failed to increase, but in places even worsened"<sup>57</sup>. That was due to the fact that priests found it impossible to increase fees on rites<sup>58</sup>. Indeed, some parishioners even reduced the customary gratuities for various rites and sacraments — which had long been a source of priest-parishioner conflict<sup>59</sup>. The conscription of so many from the village also left the clergy with little, or over-priced, labor to cultivate parish church land. The average income for priests in Penza diocese was just 300 rubles per year, and by February 1917 that even sum had shrunk, leaving the clergy in abject poverty<sup>60</sup>.

At work too was the long-festering conflict between the celibate monastic ("black") clergy and the married parish ("white") clergy. The former held a monopoly of power in the Church and dominated the ecclesiastical schools (academies, seminaries, and primary schools) that provided education for the clergy's sons. The conflict had gained momentum since the Great Reforms and reached an acme during the Great War. The note of October 1916 from an archpriest in Minsk about his local bishop, Georgii (Eroshevskii), is colorful but not unique: "It is difficult, even in one's dreams, to imagine such a prelate as ours. This is some kind of mummy — without life, inert, without a mind and meaning... It makes one grieve for the future of the Church. Its elites, it seems, have become totally rotten"<sup>61</sup>.

That internal clerical conflict permeated a famous "Memorandum" that the Duma clerical deputies submitted to the chief procurator on August 4, 1915<sup>62</sup>. Signed by arch-conservative and nationalist clerical deputies (42), with only a few left of center (1 Octobrist, 2 aligned with Trudoviki, and 1 non-party), it was hardly the handiwork of liberal or radical priests<sup>63</sup>. Coming amidst a general political crisis culminating in the formation of

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<sup>56</sup> Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Vladimirskoi oblasti (hereafter GAVO). F.556. Op.1. D.4995. L.63. Reports of many other superintendents echoed this same sentiment (e.g., L.45–48, 49, 63).

<sup>57</sup> *Obzor deiatel'nosti vedomstva*. P.48–49.

<sup>58</sup> *Poverantsev I. Chrezvychainaia dorogovizna i dukhovenstva // Penzenskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*. 1917. No. 6 (16 March). P.183–188.

<sup>59</sup> Parishioners often filed accusations of extortion by the local priest, and all such parish complaints increased sharply in the prewar years — from 115 in 1903 to 821 in 1913. See: *Aksenov V. Narodnaia religioznost' i obrazy dukhovenstva v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny i revoliutsii // Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom*. 2019. No. 1/2. P.277–278.

<sup>60</sup> *Aristova K. G. Obnovlenchestvo v Penzenskoi eparkhii v 1917–1923 gg.* PhD Diss. (History). Penza, 2011. P.35–36.

<sup>61</sup> *Aksenov V. Narodnaia religioznost'*. P.276.

<sup>62</sup> *Pechat' i dukhovenstvo // Missionskoe obozrenie*. 1915. No. 11. P.286–298.

<sup>63</sup> *Rozhkov V. Tserkovnye voprosy v Gosudarstvennoi Dume*. Moscow, 2004. P.345–346. — Similar, though slightly different numbers emerge from the tally by: *Firsov S. Russkaia tserkov' nakanune peremen (konets XIX v. — 1918 gg.)*. Moscow, 2002. P.229.

the Progressive Bloc<sup>64</sup>, the Memorandum provided a lacerating critique of the monastic clergy and their dominance in the Church. The Memorandum also confirmed a general decline in piety, “not only among the educated strata” but also among “the simple people”, with a corresponding drop in the authority of the spiritual pastors. To reverse this tendency, the Memorandum insisted that the Church must appoint worthy candidates to the priesthood and, as a precondition, improve their training and education. That, according to the Duma clergy, required an end to the domination of the seminary by the “learned monks”, who used the schools as a steppingstone for a brilliant personal career. The Memorandum recognized the need to improve the status and role of parish clergy but conceded that the wartime economy left little hope for any change in their material condition. Only if all these reforms were undertaken, however, could the Church possibly hope to attract worthy candidates to stem the exodus of believers.

The February Revolution afforded priests an opportunity to rebel openly and depose unpopular hierarchs. Within days they removed prelates with alleged ties to Rasputin and then still others in the following months. Acquiescing to the demands of a new age of “democratization”, on April 29, the Synod authorized the election of successors by diocesan clergy and laity. All that presaged the Church Council of 1917–1918, which gave priests and laity a majority of votes as they pressed for fundamental reform and revision of ancient canons.

*Rebellion of the parish* was the final, even decisive, factor in Orthodox politics. Not only bishops and priests rebelled: so did the parishioners. Ever since the 1860s, when authorities took steps to empower the parish (as a strategy to enhance material support for clergy, schools, caritas, and the local church), parishioners became increasingly determined to assert their rights<sup>65</sup>. Many, for example, claimed the right to choose and discharge the local clergy, a direct challenge to the bishop’s canonical authority. Even more sensitive was the issue of diocesan assessments to support the seminary and diocesan schools; since these served almost exclusively the clergy’s offspring, parishioners vehemently objected and resisted<sup>66</sup>.

All that was but a prelude to 1917. In the wake of the February Revolution, parishioners gradually took control of the parish, not only expelling and choosing new clergy, but seizing church lands and assets<sup>67</sup>. Parishioners also refused to provide funds for diocesan and central Church administration<sup>68</sup> and played a prominent role in diocesan congresses

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<sup>64</sup> For the bloc’s program, see: *Iakhontov A. Ia. Tiazhelye dni // Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*. Berlin, 1926. Vol. 18. P. 109–110.

<sup>65</sup> For the prewar history of the “parish question”, see: *Freeze G. L. 1) All Power to the Parish? The Problem and Politics of Church Reform in Late Imperial Russia // Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*. London, 2001. P. 174–208; 2) *Voina i reforma: Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’ v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny, 1914–1917 gg. // Vestnik Tverskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. 2015. Issue 1. P. 90–116.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, the superintendent’s report: GAVO. F. 556. Op. 1. D. 4955. L. 21 ob.

<sup>67</sup> *K voprosu ob izgnanii dukhovenstva iz prikhodov // Penzenskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti, neof. chast’*. 1917. No. 20/21 (10–20 September). P. 659–664. — Saratov likewise reported about a large number of expulsions: *Izvestiia i zametki // Penzenskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti, neof. chast’*. 1917. No. 19 (1 September). P. 632–633. — At the diocesan congress in Penza in August, 1917, the clergy and laity engaged in a bitter fight about the clergy’s rights to compensation. See: *Chernozerskii V. So s’ezda dukhovenstva i mirian 8–13 avgusta // Penzenskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti*. 1917. No. 18 (20 August). P. 567.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the Synod’s complaint, published in the Orel diocesan paper: *Ukaz iz Sv. Pravitel’stviushchego Sinoda // Orlovskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti*. 1917. No. 27–28 (15 July). P. 54–55.

that had previously been limited to the clergy<sup>69</sup>. Given the powerlessness of the Provisional Government, parish clergy formed unions in a futile attempt to defend their interests but could do little to turn back the tide. Many clergy complained that parishioners were even acting to reduce or abolish the traditional gratuity for various rites and sacraments<sup>70</sup>. By the fall of 1917, the parishioners had come to prevail, so much so that the Bolsheviks — in the famous Decree of January 1918 separating church and state that disestablished the institutional Church — recognized the “church” (the parish) as the sole legitimate authority<sup>71</sup>.

## Conclusion

As has been argued here, the Russian Orthodox Church failed to play a central role in sustaining the country's war effort — in striking contrast to churches in Western countries. To be sure, it made some effort in the first phase of the war to promote patriotism and to provide concrete material assistance, but by the spring of 1915 that zeal began to decline. Indeed, rather than support the state, the Church — bishops, priests, parishioners — became primarily invested in pursuing their own interests rather than uphold those of the state. The year 1917 was thus not a direct consequence of the war or radical shift; rather, it was the culmination of a process underway in the decades well underway before the outbreak of war. Of all the churches, the Orthodox Church was least prepared and least disposed to support the regime and its unpopular war. The ancient regime may have succeeded in moderating the economic downturn, but it failed to mobilize a key institution in its defense — the Russian Orthodox Church.

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<sup>69</sup> For the diocesan congresses in 1917, see: Freeze G.L. Vladimirskaiia eparkhiia: ot tserkovnoi k prikhodskoi revoliutsii // *Konfessional'naia politika Sovetskogo gosudarstva v 1920–1950e gody*. Moscow, 2019. P.6–16; Freeze G.L. Votserkovlenie 1917 goda: tserkovnyi krizis i prikhodskaiia revoliutsiia // *Gosudarstvo, tserkov', religiiia v Rossii i za rubezhom*. 2019. No. 1/2. P. 30–57.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, the animated discussion at the Riazan diocesan congress in March 1917 (Nauchno-issledovatel'skii Otdel Rukopisei, Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteki. F.60. Op. 1, papka 4. D.2).

<sup>71</sup> See: Freeze G.L. From Dechristianization to Laicization: State, Church, and Believers in Russia // *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. 2015. Vol. 57. P.6–34.

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