*Oleh Gerus*

**The Experience of Christian Churches in the Soviet Empire**

From the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to the collapse of Soviet communism in 1991, Christian religion in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe faced an unprecedented challenge posed by the official militant atheism. In its ideologically driven determination to reinvent society, communism attacked the traditional foundations of civilization. Organized religion, notably the Christian ecclesiastical structure, was one of them. So, how did churches react to such an onslaught?

The roots of communist atheism lie in the materialistic Marxist-Leninist philosophy which is incompatible and irreconcilable with religion. To the fathers of communism, religion represented reactionary and deceptive superstition, while the church was nothing more than a clever institutional instrument of class oppression. In the Marxist view, religion hence had no place in a progressive socialist society which was being contemplated. In theoretical Marxism, freedom of conscience could be achieved only by freeing the masses from the chains of religion. This would be done by means of the permanent ideological struggle against the religious conception of the world. Such struggle was to be conducted by education and propaganda rather than by the wholesale suppression of religion. In fact, even Lenin had argued before the revolution of 1917 that large scale repression would be counterproductive as it would raise the church to martyrdom, revitalize the faithful and even prolong the life of the church.

It was a given that in a Marxist state, organized religion would be completely separated from the state and from public education. Citizens would theoretically be free to choose whether to believe or not while being inundated with unabated anti-religious propaganda. Thus, it was this concept of the uncompromising ideological struggle against all forms of religion that distinguished the Marxist idea from the Western practice of church-state separation in which the state generally has maintained neutrality in ecclesiastical matters.

When Marxist/communist regimes seized power, first in the former Russian empire and after World War II in Eastern Europe, their religious policies were not determined exclusively by their ideology. They were also shaped by the prevailing historical and political circumstances which created various degrees of opposition to communism. In such circumstances, the security of the regime was paramount. This meant that the nature of the confrontation between church and state differed from place to place. Differences aside, however, never before had the churches been so harshly opposed by communist governments which were ideologically committed to the construction of an atheist socialist society. On occasion, it even seemed that the very survival of organized religion was threatened. Yet, in reality, ecclesiastical institutions proved to be less vulnerable than they appeared. Depending on the circumstances, the various churches never capitulated but offered resistance, either active or passive, to communism. In the Soviet empire, as it turned out, the imposed communist regimes had to cope with a Christian tradition of a thousand years which represented the cultural and spiritual framework of millions of people and which the communists never really understood.

*The Church in the Soviet Union*

Historically, the Russian Orthodox Church has been the largest Orthodox community in the world. It was an offshoot of the church of Kyivan Rus', founded in 988 and moulded by Byzantine missionaries and philosophy. In Imperial Russia, the Orthodox church was the official church of the land. The emperor himself was the guardian of the dogmas of the faith and the preserver of Orthodoxy as its secular head. The Russian Orthodox Church was a highly conservative, privileged (it alone had the right to evangelize) and economically powerful institution, with huge land holdings and properties to which nearly 70% of the multinational population belonged, formally at least. All ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Belorusins were considered, ipso facto, members of the Orthodox church and were forbidden by law to leave it. In return for its denominational primacy, the church was subject to tsarist control through a special ecclesiastical department, the Holy Synod, which in the 18$^{th}$ century had replaced the Patriarchate of Moscow. As a loyal servant of the state, the Russian

church was intimately identified in public mind with the increasingly unpopular tsarist autocracy.

Other religious denominations, which enjoyed legal status but not equality with the Russian Orthodox Church, included the Roman Catholic Church of Russian Poland and Lithuania as well as several Protestant churches (Lutherans in Latvia and Estonia; Mennonites in Ukraine). There were also numerous sectarian groups, such as the Old Believers, embracing millions of Russians but, because there was no freedom of religion until 1905, they were obliged to worship in secrecy.

In February 1917, the Russian revolution overthrew the incompetent tsarist regime and created a struggling democratic system. For the first time in Russian history, all religions -- Christian and non-Christian -- experienced a brief period of real freedom. The Russian Orthodox Church, itself freed from political control, convened a general church council (sobor), the first since the 18th century, which restored the historical Moscow Patriarchate. The council initiated other reforms designed to maintain the primacy of the Russian church but at the same time keep it free from state control. The reformed patriarchal church, however, was determined to maintain domination over the non-Russian lands of the former empire. Thus, when the Ukrainians took steps to establish their own independent state and revive their ancient autocephalous Orthodox church, which had been taken over by Moscow in 1685 in defiance of canonical law, the patriarchate vigorously opposed their efforts.

The subsequent Bolshevik seizure of power threw Russia into a brutal and lengthy class war in which millions perished. It was only logical that the Moscow Patriarchate would not support the Bolsheviks with their atheistic agenda. The anti-Bolshevik stand provoked Lenin into an unprecedented wave of terror against the Russian church. Right from the inception of Soviet power, considerations of security of the regime were always present in the formulation of religious policies. To Lenin, the Russian church was not only an ideological nemises but also a dangerous agent of the counter-revolution. It had to be crushed.

The Soviet government used both legislated measures and outright force to undermine organized religion in general and the Russian church in particular. The decree of January 1918 provided the legal basis for a provisional church-state relationship in Soviet Russia. Lenin's regime secularized the Soviet state and declared war on organized religion with a specific focus on the Moscow Patriarchate. The Russian church was deprived of the status of a juridical person, stripped of all its properties (land, church buildings, monasteries, bank accounts and parochial schools) and of the right to teach religion outside the church. Individual parishes could try to function by registering with the local authorities and then leasing back their former property. Later the church was further crippled when new laws deprived the believers of the right to conduct religious activities in public and prevented children from attending church services. In the face of such systematic persecution of believers, the constitutional guarantee to "confess any religion or not at all" was rather hollow, much like all Soviet constitutional rights.

The unexpected level of popular, especially peasant, resistance to anti-religious campaigns compelled the government to change its tactics but not its objective. It turned to the time-tested policy of divide and rule. To further undermine the Moscow Patriarchate, the government supplemented repression with tactical support to the anti-patriarchal dissident Orthodox Christian movement, such as the Russian Living Church and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. But as soon as the patriarchate weakened, the regime turned against the dissident churches and, despite their spreading popularity, crushed them. The Ukrainian church, headed by Metropolitan Lypkivsky, was officially liquidated and most of its hierarchy and clergy perished in Siberia.

In the 1930s, anti-religious campaigns blended with the general wave of Stalinist terror waged in the name of Soviet socialism. In this unprecedented deliberate violence of the government against its citizens, which included the Ukrainian famine-genocide (*holodomor*), millions of people perished not for what they did but for who they were, the so-called enemies of the people. In this madness, thousands of church buildings as well as synagogues and mosques, representing the spiritual and artistic legacy of the multinational Soviet Union, were destroyed and their religious contents looted. Of

those that managed to survive, only a miniscule number continued to function as places of worship while the rest became warehouses and museums of atheism.

On the eve of World War II, after years of systematic persecution, the Russian Orthodox Church had virtually ceased to exist as an ecclesiastical institution. Throughout the entire Soviet Union less than 400 parishes still functioned with some regularity. The patriarchal office was vacant and only four elderly bishops remained at liberty. Ironically, it was the outbreak of the war and the subsequent German invasion of the Soviet Union that halted the persecution and made possible for the institutional revival of the Moscow Patriarchate. When it became obvious that the people would not fight for communism, Stalin turned to Russian patriotism for salvation. Perhaps guided by the widespread revival of religious life in German occupied Ukraine, Stalin, the lapsed seminarian, halted repression of the Russian church and it responded with patriotic fervour.

The Moscow Patriarchate's support for the war effort and its loyalty to the regime was rewarded with a legitimate though strictly controlled existence. The church was allowed to remain an exclusively liturgical institution. The truce between the brutal communist regime and the church was correctly seen by both sides as a temporary arrangement of convenience. The Kremlin made no secret of its ultimate goal to eradicate all forms of religion.

Beginning with Patriarch Sergei, the Russian church leadership saw its subservience to communist power, compromised as it was in the eyes of the faithful, as the only realistic way of preserving the church structure until such time that communism, an earthly force, would disappear whereas the church was deemed to be eternal. This rationalization of subservience, or the creed of resignation, was not shared by all Orthodox faithful. Many of them, perhaps in the millions, turned away from the "tainted" and police-infiltrated official Orthodox church and formed alternative underground religious communities. The émigré Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, for its part, vigorously denounced the Moscow Patriarchate.

The government watchdog, the Council of Religious Affairs, was in charge of legal organized religious denominations in the Soviet Union. But in practical terms, the welfare of individual parish life depended not so much on central authority as on the attitude of local officials. The rampant corruption of the Soviet bureaucracy actually allowed the wealthier parishes to buy protection from police harassment.

There is no question that in the post-war period, the Russian church was used as an instrument of Soviet policy. Initially, the Moscow Patriarchate played an important role in the Sovietization of Western Ukrainian and Belorus' lands that Stalin had taken from Poland. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which had revived during the war, was forced into exile while the faithful were arbitrarily incorporated into the Russian Church. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, a bastion of Ukrainian nationalism in Galicia, was liquidated in 1946 by a process of enforced “reunification” with Russian Orthodoxy. This move was inspired by the renewed Moscow Patriarchate which coveted that church’s holdings and faithful. As later events demonstrated, the majority of Ukrainian Greek Catholics never reconciled themselves with Russian Orthodoxy and remained closet Catholics, worshipping in the underground church or simply pretending to be Orthodox.

The gradual improvement in the institutional life of the Moscow Patriarchate was severely shaken by Khrushchev’s sudden and virulent anti-religious campaigns undertaken in the 1960s. Although statistical data is imprecise, it is estimated that half of the working Orthodox parishes were closed down. In the 1970s the situation improved as the Kremlin began to use the church in the Cold War struggle. The Moscow Patriarchate agreed to endorse the propaganda line about religious freedom in the Soviet Union and the Kremlin’s peaceful intentions. As a member of the World Council of Churches, the patriarchate diligently promoted Soviet foreign policy -- the legitimization of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe (detente) and the Kremlin version of international peace.

*Church Life in Eastern Europe*

Towards the end of World War II, communist regimes were established in Eastern Europe courtesy of the victorious Red Army. Determined to create a loyal buffer zone, Stalin placed local communists in control of the occupied lands. Schooled by the Kremlin, the new regimes set out to consolidate their power and then launch a socialist revolution modelled on the Soviet system. Organized religion was considered a threat and as such had to be controlled and eventually eliminated.

Eastern Europe represented a mixture of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant faiths. In the pre-communist days, these respective churches had enjoyed privileged legal status, considerable influence and economic power. The newly imposed communist regimes attempted to establish firm control over organized religion by restrictive laws and intimidation. In the Roman Catholic countries of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia for instance, special effort was made to isolate local churches from the Vatican. The Vatican's uncompromising anti-communist posture had made it a target of the communist propaganda, denouncing the papacy as a tool of American imperialism.

As in tsarist Russia, the Orthodox church had been an integral part of the state as the national religion of pre-World War II Bulgaria, Romania and of the Serbian, Macedonian and Montenegran republics of Yugoslavia. As such, the church in these countries defined the national identity of its adherents and tended to reflect the political views of the government in power. The long standing Byzantine tradition of political authoritarianism and cultural-religious conformity in the Balkans inadvertently facilitated the relatively rapid imposition of the communist system. But there was an important difference in the attitude of the Bulgarian and Romanian governments towards the church. Their atheism was not militant but politically pragmatic. In fact, the Bulgarian and Romanian regimes understood the historical and strategic importance of their Orthodox churches and, in the short term, they chose to use it for their own purposes. Thus, the survival of the church in Bulgaria and Romania was not immediately

threatened, but its social mission and its traditional community leadership certainly were.

The Bulgarian and Romanian churches were purged of unreliable personnel and the legal church-state relationship was reorganized along the lines of the Moscow Patriarchate. The churches reluctantly became agents of the communist regime whose policies effectively destroyed the churches' potential of becoming centres of opposition. The submissive behaviour of Orthodox churches in Romania and Bulgaria was the reflection of the traditional Balkan strategy of survival by outwardly adapting to occupying powers.

In the formative stage of the communist rule in Bulgaria, the primate of the local Orthodox church, Exarch Stefan, did resist the stripping of the church's traditional status and was removed from office. A number of priests was also arrested but, by Soviet standards, the purge was rather mild. By 1953, a mutually advantageous relationship was established between the government and the church hierarchy. In return for complete obedience, the government recognized the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as "the historic church of the Bulgarian people". Furthermore, with the approval of Moscow, the communist regime elevated the church to the prestigious status of the patriarchate. The restoration of the patriarchal office (Patriarch Kiril), lost in the 14th century when the Moslem Turks had conquered the Balkans, was a wise political move as it appeased the Bulgarian sense of patriotism and pride.

In return for its steadfast public support of the political system, the Bulgarian church remained the largest non-communist institution in the country. In the 1970s, for instance, the church boasted nearly 4000 parishes, several monasteries, a seminary and a theological school. It had a small publishing house which produced limited religious literature. The church supported itself by the donations of the faithful and revenues from the monopoly of candle production and sales. Still, the church was controlled and manipulated. It was prevented from ministering to the young who, in turn, were pressured not to attend religious services. It was assumed by the regime that in time, as the old religious generation died out, the young generation, educated in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, would have no need for religion and the church would wither away.

Romania had been a police state before the war and continued as one after. The communist regime here was the most repressive in the entire satellite system; however, the regime also recognized the historic importance of its Orthodox church in the nation-building process and even provided the church with limited funding. Not a single parish church was closed. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Cults had extensive discretionary powers to interfere and limit religious activities and it used those prerogatives.

The Catholic and Protestant experience under communism ranged from serious difficulties to reasonable accommodations. It was the Roman Catholic Church of Poland, respected by the Polish people as their national institution, which defiantly refused to submit itself to the new communist authority. Under the strong leadership of its primate, Cardinal Wyszynski, the Polish church relied on public support to withstand government pressure and even to denounce atheism. In Hungary, too, the communist regime found resistance on the part of the Catholic church. But in Czechoslovakia, with its long secular tradition, the Catholic church had been considerably weaker and as such experienced severe repression until the Prague Spring of 1968.

In Hungary (63% Roman Catholic, 25% Protestant), the communist regime was led by a Moscow-trained leadership which strove to make Hungary a carbon copy of its sponsor. As a result, Hungary experienced more terror between 1948 and 1953 than any other satellite. Cardinal Josef Mindzenty, the conservative primate of the Catholic church, was an outspoken anti-communist and refused to cooperate with the regime. The government arrested him and unleashed a crackdown on the church. Religious orders were dissolved, several thousand monks, nuns and priests were imprisoned, church property was confiscated, parochial schools were secularized and charitable organizations were disbanded. The dire situation for the Catholic church improved somewhat after Stalin's death in 1953. A compromise was reached with the authorities by which Catholic bishops pledged loyalty to the state in return for the relaxation of anti-religious regulations. Incidentally, Protestant denominations (Lutherans and Calvinists) fared better because they were more cooperative and, more importantly, did not have external ties like the Catholic church.

Following the failed Hungarian revolution of 1956, relations between the new and pragmatic communist government and the Christian churches improved dramatically. In fact, the Catholic and Protestant churches even won the right to offer limited religious education in public schools after hours. Although attendance was voluntary, now atheist indoctrination of the young could be legally countered by religious instructions. For their part, the churches recognized the determining role of the government in the area of senior church appointments and agreed to endorse the cause of socialism, except atheism. Further improvement in church-state relations was illustrated by the election of several Protestant clergymen to the Hungarian parliament.

The religious situation in East Germany (GDR) differed most noticeably from the rest of the Soviet empire. In the early stages of communist rule, the regime itself was comparatively moderate. Because it was sensitive about the Nazi past and because Berlin was the focal point in the emerging East-West tensions, the East German communist leadership initially refrained from undertaking Stalin-like repression. Secondly, East Germany, the historical cradle of the Protestant Reformation, was the only communist state with a large and dynamic Protestant church, the Evangelical Lutheran. The Roman Catholic Church here, in contrast to neighbouring Poland, tended to be a relatively passive institution. Indeed, the Evangelical Lutheran Church was allowed to perform a wide range of religious, social and educational functions. However, as the Cold War intensified , the communist government initially tried to assert firm control over religious activities. After a decade of tension during which the church enjoyed strong public support, the government eased its policies and even reaffirmed the Evangelical and Catholic ownership of extensive church properties. Furthermore, it provided funding to establish Protestant theological faculties at six state universities.

The Protestant church leadership of East Germany, while cooperative, was not subservient in the manner of the Orthodox hierarchies. It not only defended religious freedom but periodically spoke out independently on national issues. The difficulty the government had in controlling the Lutheran church without resorting

to repression was largely due to the Protestant tradition of putting individual conscience above institutional discipline. In the 1980s, the regime revised its strategic approach to religion when it no longer characterized religion as a reactionary force but as a necessary part of a socialist society in its formative phase. The end of religion, however, was still its ultimate ideological goal.

The inter-war Czechoslovakia had been the only democratic state in Eastern Europe. There was no state religion and religious toleration was a way of life. Although a majority of the population was nominally Roman Catholic, the nature of Catholicism differed between the Czechs and the Slovaks. The urban Czech culture had become secularized early in the 20th century and the church played only a marginal role in the lives of the people. Here Catholicism was not tied to the sense of Czech national identity as in Poland and an attitude of indifference towards religion seemed to dominate. There was also a strong Hussite Protestant tradition which counterbalanced Roman Catholicism. Slovakia, in contrast, had a formidable Catholic church which constituted a defining part of the national consciousness and, as such, exerted dominant influence over the rural population. As in Poland, priests were the actual leaders of Slovak nationalism. This differing historical background was translated into a wider acceptance of communist religious policies among the Czechs and into resistance among the Slovaks.

During the brief Prague Spring of 1968, the reforming communists headed by Alexander Dubcek assumed power and, in anticipation of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, attempted to humanize and democratise the brutal Stalinist system. Stifled religious life was revitalized. Church contacts with Rome were re-established and efforts were made to restore the right of religious education. But Dubcek was ahead of his time and panicked the conservative communist regimes of the Soviet empire into a military retaliation. The Warsaw Pact forces crushed this experiment in real socialist democracy.

For the next twenty years, the Catholic Church of Czechoslovakia assumed a politically quiescent appearance while quietly conducting its pastoral activities both publicly and clandestinely. The fact that the church retained its presence was important. As one of the surviving

non-communist institutions in the country, the church became a beacon for a variety of political dissidents, including non-believers. People could and did express their inner hostility towards the regime by their deliberate association with the church, the symbolic and ideological antithesis to communism.

Of all the Soviet satellites, Poland was the most restive one. For historical reasons, the Polish people despised Russia and their Moscow-imposed communist regime. Poland represented the largest Catholic community (app.36 million) in the Soviet empire. Its church remained a powerful historical and national institution. During the communist period, the church was not afraid to criticize the regime when it threatened its prerogatives. Its head, Cardinal Wyszynski proved to be a courageous and skilful opponent of the regime and of its encroachment on the church's liberties. The unpopular regime reluctantly tolerated the church as an autonomous institution and an alternative value system. The church became a political force which, in addition to its moral prestige, preserved considerable economic power and legal means to further growth and influence. In practical terms it meant extensive property holdings, a system of parochial schools, thousands of clergy, its own press, seminaries, Catholic lay associations, and the only confessional university (Lublin) in the communist world. The fact that the Polish church grew larger in communist Poland than it had been in pre-war Poland testifies to these unusual church-state relations in that country.

The moral and political authority of the Polish Catholic Church was based on the deep religiosity of the Polish people and, even more so, on their perception of the church as an embodiment of the Polish nation. The church skilfully nourished the acute sense of frustrated Polish nationalism with its appeals to tradition and patriotism, especially in its criticism of the servility of the Polish communist leadership to Russia which the Poles considered culturally inferior. With the election of the Polish cardinal, Karol Wojtila, to the papacy as John Paul II in 1978, the already formidable Polish church received a powerful boost at the expense of the regime. The pope's three triumphant visits to his homeland as the uncrowned king of Poland further undermined the political legitimacy of the communist government in the eyes of the nation.

In the 1980s the Polish church became a key player between the repressive but incompetent regime and the increasingly rebellious society as represented by the Solidarity Movement. The government reacted by proclaiming martial law. While sympathetic to popular grievances, the church leadership, mindful of the Hungarian (1956) and Czechoslovak (1968) tragedies, was determined to prevent a violent social upheaval and the dreaded Soviet intervention. While the church preached moderation, it became engaged in secret negotiations with the government which led to the eventual restoration of civil authority and normalization.

*The Fall of the Empire*.

The unexpected collapse of communism and of the Soviet empire in the short period of 1989-1991 was triggered by a combination of deeply rooted factors in which the failed communist economy and the efforts to salvage it – *perestroika* and *glasnost* – stand out. As well the simmering underground processes – the human rights activism and nationalism, collectively known as the dissident movement -- were also decisive factors in the undermining of the communist system and the Soviet empire. It must be emphasised that the question of freedom of religion was an important component of the human rights demands.

In the Soviet Union, the dissident movement emerged in the post-Stalin period as a catalyst around which small groups of democrats, ethnic nationalists, and human rights and Christian activists coalesced into an illegal opposition to the communist status quo. The dissidents succeeded in compromising the moral legitimacy of the communist rule by defiantly challenging the glaring discrepancies between constitutional guarantees of human rights and the regime's brutal violation of them. These highly principled and courageous members of the Soviet intelligentsia, such as the renowned scientist Andrei Sakharov, captured the attention of the western media and focused the unwanted spotlight on Soviet domestic affairs. To the dissidents, the question of religious freedom was an integral part of a broader issue of human rights.

In the 1970s, contrary to the Helsinki Accords on human rights which Moscow had signed, non-Orthodox Christian denominations in the

Soviet Union felt the full blast of harassment. However, thanks to the underground dissident press (*samizdat')*, their plight could no longer be kept secret. In Moscow itself, an underground body, the Christian Committee to Defend Believers' Rights, headed by the imprisoned but defiant Orthodox priest, Gleb Yakunin, sharply challenged Soviet lawlessness. Yakunin also berated the hierarchy of his own church for its collaboration with the atheist regime. He was particularly critical of the patriarchal public denial that religious oppression existed in the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, the religious rights activists were augmented by the growing number of non-believers. Segments of the Soviet intelligentsia and even the youth, although indoctrinated in communism, began to show interest in the church because it represented to them their history and culture. Others sought moral values absent in Marxism. Even the Komsomol youth was occasionally drawn to the church by genuine curiosity about the forbidden fruit. In the fourteen non-Russian Soviet republics, religion (Christianity and Islam) was also imbued with local, generally clandestine, nationalism. This interdependence between religion and nationalism was particularly noticeable in Lithuania where the traditional Roman Catholic Church came to personify the Lithuanian nation and its aspirations to independence. In the Baltic republics, in Ukraine and in Moslem regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia, local nationalism was stimulated by Moscow's rigid but incompetent centralism and Russian cultural imperialism. Minority nationalism often manifested itself in the legal local heritage committees for the preservation and restoration of historical monuments, which in many cases meant the surviving places of worship. There was also a very practical reason for political dissidents to associate themselves with religion because under Soviet law, religious transgressions carried lighter penalties than political crimes.

In 1986, a new and progressive Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, launched a series of reforms. His efforts to modernize and save the stagnant and corrupt Soviet system inadvertently unleashed the forces of disintegration of the Soviet empire. Gorbachev's democratization stimulated further public pressure for reform, both in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. That pressure for personal and national freedom, combined with Gorbachev's reluctance to use

force, undermined and quickly toppled all communist regimes replacing them with embryonic democratic governments. This remarkable and completely unexpected transformation of the Eastern European satellites amazed the West. Soon a second shock wave stunned the world as both the communist power and the Soviet Union itself disintegrated when the constituent republics, including Russia, declared their independence. The Soviet Union officially ceased to exist on December 25, 1991 following a formal dissolution agreement by the founding republics of the Soviet Union: Russia, Ukraine and Belorus'.

*Conclusion*

Throughout their existence, the communist regimes in the Soviet empire paradoxically demonstrated contempt for and fear of religion. Fearful of the traditional influence of the church and of its alternative morally based belief system which challenged the imposed validity of Marxism and totalitarianism of the Communist Party, these regimes worked hard to reduce religion's influence on society. By legal and coercive measures they waged an ideological war. They attempted to create an allegedly superior materialistic and atheist society by discrediting religion, by repressing the faithful and by controlling the church. But as it turned out, despite increased secularism, the public acceptance of militant atheism proved to be highly superficial as illustrated by the religious revival in the post Soviet period.

The rulers of the Soviet empire were misled by their own propaganda and disinformation into underestimating the actual depth of religious convictions in their domain. Religious beliefs and traditions of a thousand years had too much history behind them to be swept away by secular indoctrination and violence. The millions of practising Christians proved to be quite resilient in their adjustment to the hostile circumstances without giving up their basic beliefs. In fact, it appears that adversity strengthened their faith and further alienated them from the harsh secular religion of Marxism-Leninism. Furthermore, the repression of religion covered the believers with an aura of martyrdom and this, as Lenin had feared, served to reinforce rather than to weaken the faith of many Christians.

Protestant and Catholic churches in the Baltic republics of the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe also served an important political function by attracting a variety of political and cultural dissidents, including non-believers, who recognized the historical, national or cultural role of Christian churches. Most importantly, however, there remained a powerful historical relationship between religion and nationalism which the communist ideologists never fully understood. It was nationalism of the subjugated nations that inspired and fuelled their drive for liberation from Soviet imperialism. In so far that Christianity had been an integral part of East European national identity it contributed directly and indirectly to the demise of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet empire.

In the Soviet Union, government policy towards the Kremlin controlled Russian Orthodox Church began to change with Gorbachev's reforms in 1986. The church was allowed to celebrate the millennium of Christianity in Kyivan Rus' (1988). Furthermore, Gorbachev later met with Patriarch Alexei II and expressed regret for the past mistreatment of the church and promised that there would be genuine freedom of conscience in the reformed Soviet Union.

Indeed, Gorbachev's statement was followed by the relaxation of restrictions on many social and political activities of all religious institutions. For the first time since the Bolshevik revolution, the clergy was allowed to participate in civic affairs and in 1990 more than 300 clergymen, largely Orthodox priests, were elected to local soviets. Religious material was permitted to be printed on government presses. The long forbidden importation of the Bible and the Koran were lifted. The ban on the outreach activities of all surviving churches in the Soviet Union also ended. They were now authorized to engage in charitable and educational activities.

After decades of repression and clandestine worship, the emancipated Christianity was being reborn in a spectacular fashion, filling the moral vacuum created by communism. Despite the acute shortage of clergy, hundreds of old churches were reopened and new parishes established by eager believers of various creeds. As expected, the liberalization of religious policies was resisted by the hard-line communists who frustrated the implementation of new freedoms. Among Christian denominations themselves new tensions

and conflicts erupted as a brand new phenomenon -- open competition for souls, for church properties and for jurisdiction -- was now at hand.

It was the Moscow Patriarchate that experienced considerable loses in jurisdiction and property. Of the estimated 11,000 Russian Orthodox parishes in the Soviet Union in 1989, about half were in Ukraine. It was in Ukraine that the two banned churches, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, dramatically resurrected themselves in 1989 at the expense of membership and property of the Russian church. Nonetheless, the Moscow Patriarchate has managed to retain a substantial part of the Ukrainian faithful. In October 1990, the Ukrainian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church was granted "wide autonomy" by the Moscow Patriarchate, and renamed the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" (for clarity's sake often referred to as the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate"). Later, in 1992 when the Kyivan Patriarchate was created by the unification of portions of the UOC-MP and the UAOC, the newly independent Ukraine became a home to three competing and conflicting Orthodox jurisdictions.

In the chaotic post-Soviet period, the Moscow Patriarchate has regained much of the church's pre-revolutionary privilege and prestige in Russia proper. This was indeed a remarkable resurrection of a church once threatened with liquidation. Today, despite the constitutional separation of church from the state, the Russian government has embraced the Russian Orthodox Church as its political pillar and raised the Moscow Patriarchate to a position of primacy while placing restrictions on activities of the rapidly growing Protestant denominations. In fact, according to the most recent law, contemporary Russia recognizes only its historical religions: Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. But there is a potential political problem in this pre-eminance of the Moscow Patriarchate with its increasing ultra Russian nationalism as it clashes with the ethnic and religious diversity of the Russian Federation . Given Russian history, as long as the patriarchate remains subservient to the Kremlin, it will continue to enjoy its renewed ecclesiastical status.

There are many explanations for the sudden collapse of the Soviet empire. Most identify the dismal performance of the Soviet economy as the prime reason; however, the collapse had much to do with the pseudo scientific and misguided ideology and the resulting Kremlin's obsession with compulsory social engineering. It is obvious now that the Soviet system was based on ideological myth and physical and psychological terror. The enforced and irrational pursuit of the earthly paradise sacrificed millions of lives, inflicted unprecedented suffering and gave little in return. Gorbachev's noble but futile efforts to revive the moribund system by injecting it with doses of freedom and democracy only strengthened the underground centrifugal forces and hastened the inevitable disintegration of an empire held together by force. In Eastern Europe, Communist authority was far less firmly established than in the USSR. Its security lay in Moscow. In 1956 and 1968 Moscow had intervened militarily to save its puppets from their own people. Gorbachev, in contrast to his predecessors, was not prepared to enforce the myth of Communist solidarity and left them to their own resources.

This fundamental change in Moscow's policy sounded the death knell of the Soviet satellite system. In 1989 democratic-nationalist coalitions, supplemented by reformist communists, swept the old discredited regimes from power. The liberation from Soviet imperialism was achieved with remarkably little bloodshed. With the exception of Romania where peculiar local conditions necessitated violence, the communist regimes in the Soviet empire capitulated with a remarkable degree of passivity.

The general euphoria of freedom was quickly tempered by the acute political, economic and social difficulties inherent in the unprecedented transformation process. Those ongoing and unpredictable changes in the increasingly secularized environment have posed new challenges for Christian churches in the post communist world. The restoration of capitalism and the influx of Western material culture into the former Soviet empire have become as problematic for the traditional religious values as communism had been.

In Russia, for example, the revival of the Orthodox church and of its national status, while impressive on the surface, in reality appears to be less so in the urban centers. While the majority of the Russian population does claim some cultural affiliation with Orthodoxy, there is a growing indifference to its church as reflected both in public opinion surveys and by the declining church attendance. The post-Cold War generation of Russia and Eastern Europe has firmly embraced western materialism with all its secular ramifications. The response of the local Christian churches in the former Soviet empire to these developments will determine their relevance, influence and status.

There are two main reasons why the Christian church survived the Communist experiment. First, there is the strength of the Christian belief system which has sustained the church for 2000 years. Secondly, there was the bloody, corrupt and inefficient communist experiment itself. That experiment has proved definitively that Marxist-Leninist ideology does not work in real life as human nature craves a moral base which only faith provides.