Nationalism versus Internationalism: Russian Orthodoxy in Nineteenth-Century Palestine

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Anxious to advertise Orthodoxy’s global reach, the influential Synodal official Andrei Nikolaevich Murav’ev (1806–74) opened his History of the Church of Russia in 1838 by boasting that the Eastern Church could ‘count her children’ from the Adriatic to the Pacific and ‘from the ice-fields which grind against the Solovetsky Monastery on its savage islet in the North to the heart of the Arabian and Egyptian deserts, on the verge of which stands the Lavra of Sinai’. L a t e r i n t h e c e n t u r y , c h a n g - ing international borders made the diaspora seem even wider. After the Alaska Purchase in 1867 opened up a new episode in the Russian missionary presence established on Kodiak Island in 1794, the Orthodox community stretched from Abyssinia to the North American Arctic.

Since such a far-flung flock required a multinational system of ecclesiastical government, a network of patriarchates of equal status initially seemed to offer a plausible springboard for the formation of a vigorous Orthodox International. Under Alexander I (r.1801–25), there was every prospect that it might incorporate Russians whose patriarchate had been abolished by Peter I (r.1682–1725) in 1721. During the Greek War of Independence, the chief procurator of the Holy Synod and Minister of Education, Prince A. N. Golitsyn (1773–1844), galvanized both secular and ecclesiastical authorities to raise millions of roubles to ransom captives taken into Muslim slavery after the massacre at Chios and to relieve the Ottoman Christians who fled to Ukraine after the Turks hanged Patriarch Grigorios V at Easter 1821. Over the following decade, Golitsyn’s philanthropic appeal touched every level of Russian
society across the empire, and so, on a somewhat smaller scale, did the campaign organized privately by the Moscow Slavonic Benevolent Committee in support of Bulgarian refugees from the Ottoman Empire in 1858. Indeed, in that year the Orthodox Church was acclaimed by E. A. Freeman (1823–92), an admirer of the Greeks, as ‘the greatest existing witness to the principle that national independence and religious intercommunion are in no way inconsistent’.

By then, however, tensions in the pan-Slav ideology, splintered from the start by the Poles’ attachment to Catholicism, were further aggravated by hostility between Greeks and Bulgarians, whose cause was championed in the 1860s by the maverick Russian ambassador in Constantinople, Count N. P. Ignat’ev (1832–1908). In 1872, the declaration of an independent Bulgarian exarchate, branded schismatic by the Patriarch of Constantinople, obliged Russians to choose between the ethnic principle of national liberation and the spiritual quest for ecclesiastical unity. Pan-Slavists such as Mikhail Pogodin (1800–75) and Ivan Aksakov (1823–86) preferred the former; Tertii Filippov (1825–99), Konstantin Leont’ev (1831–91) and Fedor Dostoevskii (1821–81) advocated the latter, though not in a spirit sympathetic to the Greeks. Dostoevskii famously envisaged Russia as conqueror rather than protector of the Orthodox East. It was not, however, necessary for contemporaries dissatisfied with the role of primus inter pares to subscribe fully to his brand of messianism in order to aspire to ecclesiastical predominance in the Balkans and the Levant. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some more moderate men believed that they had already achieved their aim. ‘Our patriotic Church incontestably occupies first place among all the Orthodox churches’, claimed a prominent activist, Professor I. E. Troitskii, following his first visit to Constantinople and Mount Athos in 1886. Significantly, Troitskii, an historian of Byzantium at the St Petersburg Theological Academy, believed that Russian achievements had been made in spite of the papal pretensions of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Joachim III (1834–1912), and in the face of unremitting hostility from rival members of the Orthodox oecumene: ‘Despite the difference in their national characters, in their relations with Russia both Greeks and Bulgarians adhere to one and the same policy: “To take from her as much as possible, and to give nothing in return.”’

Such stridency was by no means simply a response to the exigencies of ecclesiastical politics in the Orthodox East. On the contrary, it was in some ways a natural outcome of long-standing intellectual developments within the Russian Church. Having emerged from the