

SCHISM IN THE BULGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

by Janice Broun

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Last year, Bulgaria has seen angry public confrontations between clergy of its Orthodox church. Occupations and counter-occupations of key church buildings, the Synod headquarters, Sofia seminary, Sofia diocesan offices and several monasteries have provided an unedifying spectacle attracting peaktime media coverage. The siege of the Synod, occupied by the rebel bishops, involved water canons and teargas. St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia has been under constant guard by its staff against threatened incursions by the rebel Synod supporters, with seminarians in shifts mounting nightly vigil behind the iconostasis. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, already despised for its subservience to the former Communist regime, has become further discredited. An injudicious purge initiated by the United Democratic Forces (UDF) government's Board of Religious Affairs last May sparked off a power struggle which has rent the Church from top to bottom.

The UDF is dominated by intellectuals who profess a concern for restoring the Church to a prominent role in national life but are often out of touch with ordinary church members who have an instinctive abhorrence of schism. Sadly this dispute has prevented the Church from providing clear moral guidance for a nation still on a razor's edge regarding economic survival. It was also a contributory factor in the fall of the UDF government in late October 1992. In 1991 the UDF had only a narrow majority over the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the revamped Communist Party. The schism has provided the latter with a pretext to espouse the cause of disgruntled Orthodox believers.

Despite the key role it played in the nation's history and culture, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was already weak before the Communist takeover. For centuries it had been subjected to Greek chauvinist rule--Greeks were perhaps more unpopular than Turks! Even after Bulgarian independence and its declaration in 1870 of autocephaly, it had to wait until 1945 for recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Bulgarians are proud of their long tradition of tolerance towards ethnic and religious minorities; this may be partly at least due to a natural pragmatism and lack of religious fervor--one observer rated Bulgarians Europe's least religious people!

The Church was unable to stand up against what was described to me by a lecturer at Sofia's Kliment of Ohrid Academy as "massive infiltration," especially during the last twenty years as the pre-Communist clergy were aging and needed to be replaced. It started in the seminary, then the Academy, which became a haven for university rejects, and it slowly worked its way up through the ranks of the priesthood, right up to the hierarchy. Well informed Orthodox such as former translator Vera Gugulieva estimate

that up to half of their clergy worked for the security, and that a substantial proportion were not even believers. Thanks to their unwavering loyalty to Zhivkov's government, Patriarch Maxim and the Holy Synod as a whole commanded little respect.

Active religious dissent did not emerge until 1989. It was led by a lone and enigmatic figure with an odd background, Fr. Hristofer Subev. Born into a State Security family and a student of physics in Moscow, after a failed marriage he took monastic vows. His activities on the eve of the Revolution, his trenchant and well-argued demands for reform, attracted widespread support among believers. He was involved in the November 'velvet' revolution, the subsequent round table talks and became a Vice President of the emergent UDF.

The Church establishment played no active role in the lead-up to these events and continued to sit on the fence while the outcome was in the balance during the subsequent period. The forces of democracy were not able to take complete charge of the government until after the elections of autumn 1991. As one Communist leader after another was being forced to resign, most people expected that Maxim, who is in his late seventies, would bow to public pressure and have the decency to retire gracefully to a monastery. Instead he stayed put. His Synod procrastinated and delayed convening a *Sobor*, a nationwide democratically elected Council, which has not met since 1953 and which is a prerequisite for setting the Church's house in order.

By 1992, the UDF government, which was meeting similar resistance in the second largest religious body, the Muslim Supreme Spiritual Council, finally lost patience. Despite separation of church and state under the new 1991 Constitution, the government had not dispensed with a supervisory body for religious affairs. This in itself was a controversial step. Many believers wanted the end of state interference in any shape or form. The Turkish Hussein Ahmed Karamalla, a member of the Parliamentary Commission on Religion, emphasizes that the Board acted only in response to hundreds of letters from believers demanding the dismissal of leaders whom they regard as atheists. The Board justified its intervention on the grounds that these leaders were appointed illegally. It argued that though Maxim and all the other bishops were validly consecrated, Maxim's election as Patriarch in 1971 together with other appointments as Metropolitans, (senior administrative bishops), since 1953, could be regarded as null because they were chosen by the state and not canonically elected by a *Sobor*.

In February 1992 the Board's first attempt, the dismissal of the entire Muslim Council, misfired. The Council refused the budge from its headquarters. The Board, under Metodi Spasov, determined that it would ensure compliance to its dictates next time round.

On May 26 the Board declared the Holy Synod and Maxim's election invalid. It replaced it with a provisional Synod under Metropolitan Pimen of Nevrokop with a mandate to convene a *Sobor* at the earliest possible date. It authorized the new Synod, which was supported by four out of thirteen Metropolitans and six out of sixteen bishops, to occupy the Synod building. Four of the bishops had second thoughts and rejoined the Patriarchal Synod.

Most believers, including all but about 200 of 1500 priests and almost all theological students regarded this as a blatant violation of their church. A more radical minority feel that as long as the church is under the old management, genuine renewal is impossible. These include Gugulieva and Balkanmedia's young editor, Rossen Milev, who says it is not the unity of the church but its morality which is his prime concern.

Plunging the church into schism was one thing, but the composition of the provisional Synod strained credibility. Its leaders were the three most compromised Metropolitans, all faithful lackeys of the Communist government. Pimen had, among other things, been responsible, in 1963, of expelling the best priests from Bulgarian Orthodox parishes in the USA. Pankrati of Stara Zagora who as Chief of the Church Foreign Department had endorsed government policy and had been elected a Deputy in the new Assembly--for the Fatherland Union, a BSP front party. Kalinik of Vratsa was popularly known as the "Red Bishop." Furthermore, as members of Maxim's inner Standing Committee for years, they shared responsibility for his decisions. They should each have stood for reelection every four years but had not done so. Now two of them were at last about to be replaced.

Even more oddly they had entered into an alliance with Fr. Hristofer. He had repeatedly called for the removal of Maxim and a purge of the Synod, including themselves. As Chairman of the Assembly Commission on Religion and the leading influence on the policy of the Religious Affairs Board, he had no right to become personally involved in fomenting a Church schism. The rebel Metropolitans even consecrated him Bishop of Makariapol. In the Orthodox church the entire hierarchy of a church must assent to a consecration. Subev had already forfeited much of the respect he formerly enjoyed owing to his political activities and bizarre outdoor protest rallies against Maxim. This action destroyed his credibility.

Most observers regarded the provisional Synod as a vehicle for a bid for the Patriarchate. By the autumn, not surprisingly, rifts began to appear in the alliance, with Subev going into a sulk and disassociating himself from the Metropolitans because they had, he alleged, consecrated another bishop without his consent. The UDF and Spasov, meanwhile, were trying to disassociate themselves from Subev.

The dispute had deep repercussions. The freezing of the original Synod's bank accounts for three months deprived priests and seminaries of funds, which were diverted to pay for bodyguards. Priests could just get by on fees for rites of passage. The staff at the re-opened Plovdiv Seminary were worse off, preferring to `keep their consciences clean' rather than endorse the provisional Synod. Rector Evlogy speaks of deep and long-lasting wounds inflicted in the souls of staff and boys. This year's intake dropped.

In response to an appeal from the original Synod, the Constitutional Court ruled the Board's intervention unconstitutional but left the Supreme Court to rule which Synod was legitimate. The latter, on July 2, ruled the original Synod invalid on a technicality. It had missed the Board's deadline for registration by one day. Most churches' members, and not only the Orthodox, refuse to recognize secular jurisdiction over church matters.

At a further appeal on November 6 the Supreme Court ruled both Synods invalid, the original one for not observing Orthodox canons when it applied for registration and the provisional Synod on the grounds that the Board had no right to register a Synod which was not elected by church members. So the impasse remained.

The original Synod, at long last, organized preliminary parish elections on November 1, 1992, for the long awaited *Sobor*. It tried to ensure that all candidates and electors were bona fide church members. Because the *Sobor* appears to be the only sure means of resolving the dispute, the elections arouse widespread interest. Electors keenly scrutinized candidates' backgrounds in order to exclude Communist influence. The next round, diocesan elections, took place on January 24, 1993. As for future church leadership, because of the falling off in monastic vocations,--there are just over a hundred monks, the majority elderly--the number of active, well-educated, monks of real integrity eligible to become future bishops could almost be counted on the fingers of two hands.

The schism has plunged Bulgarians, already reeling under the impact of an invasion of foreign sects, into even more confusion. Neither Synod is 'clean.' Both have resorted to violence. Some observers maintain that the Security service is still active, infiltrating the church and UDF, and see the schism as ultimately a Communist rearguard action to destroy the church. The new government is the fruit of an uneasy compromise between the mainly Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which holds the balance of power, the BSP and a splinter group of the UDF. It is not expected to last long. But it pledged to abolish the Board of Religious Affairs, and the new Prime Minister and other representatives, including, for the first time since 1945, the Army, were present at the January 6, 1993, Blessing of the Waters in St. Alexander Nevsky. Since the Ecumenical Patriarchate's delegation was also present, endorsing the Patriarchal Synod, this amounts to its legitimization once more.

Subev, disenchanted, detached himself from the provisional Synod in December 1992. He is nothing if not persistent in his campaign to purge the church. On January 26, 1993, in front of television cameras in the church of St. Kiril and Metodi in Plovdiv, in his capacity as Bishop of Makariopol, he and a self-constituted Spiritual Tribunal consisting of two prosecuting priests, eleven clergy and three lay people solemnly anathematized Communism and all those actively associated with it, in imitation of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Tikhon's anathema of communism in 1918.

They specifically targeted the 'pseudopatriarch' Maxim and his assistants Neofit, Bishop of Levskiya and General Secretary of the Patriarchal Synod, and Natanail, Vicar of Sofia Diocese, accusing them of betraying the Bulgarian Orthodox Church by allowing the Greek Orthodox Church to interfere in its affairs. They castigated Subev's former collaborators on the provisional Synod, Metropolitans Kalinik and Pankrati, for their failure to fulfil public promises of repentance made back in July 1990. They then proceeded to 'excommunicate' these leaders, along with another Bishop consecrated unilaterally by the provisional Synod. This was Gennadi, who had demonstrated his political allegiance by standing as a municipal councillor for the BSP. The rest of the

bishops were, they judged, less guilty, but they set them all a deadline (February 10) for public repentance.

No doubt Maxim and the Patriarchal Synod, now set for rehabilitation, will ignore and dismiss this curse with contempt. Subev's action does however draw attention to the fact that some bishops in both synods have skeletons in their cupboard. Behind Maxim are others with their eye on the Patriarchal throne. The provisional Synod and its supporters too are now concentrating on getting their candidates elected to the national *Sobor* this autumn. One diocesan elector, Milcho Spasov, suggested that with the exception of glaring cases of collaboration all clergy should be given a chance to prove their commitment to their ministry by their diligence. He felt that it would be best to delay the election of a new Patriarch until conditions of democracy and openness were fully established.

The debate and struggle for power within the Church may be shifting to fresh ground, but it still has a long way to go.