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Bread of Life: Orthodox Charitable Initiatives in Bulgaria

The current issue of the East-West Church Report *features interviews with Orthodox Christians involved in two remarkable non-profit initiatives providing sustenance—both physical and spiritual—in Bulgaria. Both projects draw upon local Christian traditions of hospitality and care for one's neighbor that were lost under Communist rule from 1944-90. During this period, suppression of church life in Bulgaria was among the harshest in the Eastern Bloc. As the Kremlin's closest satellite, this small Slavic nation also found its Orthodox Church placed under especially tight secret police control. This legacy has yet to be fully resolved as the Church awaits the election of a new leader following the passing of Patriarch Neophyte on 13 March 2024.*

Evening food distribution by the Volunteers of Saints George in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia (G. FAGAN)

"Sharing is the least thing you can do in this world": An Interview with Deyan Petroff

In downtown Sofia, on a patch of open ground at the crossroads of Sveti Georgi Sofiyski Street and Pencho Slaveykov Boulevard, a food truck serves hot meals with fresh bread and dessert to around a hundred people three times a week. The operation is run by the Volunteers of Saints George (in addition to the well-known martyr, Bulgaria has two more), an Orthodox Christian initiative to help support local people in need. One evening in November 2023, the editor of the East-West Church Report *participated in meal distribution at the site. Following voluntary recitation of the Lord's Prayer, portions of hot stew and loaves donated by a local bakery were served, with requests for particular types of bread (wholemeal, charcoal-black, or soft white) honored as far as possible.*

"I wanted to help these poor people who need this food and who are alone," 76-year-old volunteer Ralitsa explained to the editor. A younger team member, Asya, said she had long sought "a place where I can do something like this and feel alive." The principal organizer of the initiative is Deyan Petroff, a local lawyer. As Deyan prepared the stew, fetched bread, and hauled water to clean cooking equipment, the editor of the Report *enquired about the Volunteers of Saints George, as well as the wider role of Orthodoxy in Bulgaria. The interview took place in English.*

How many volunteers do you have?

We have a group of more than 80 people, of whom around 10-15 are most active. Some people also support us financially. Every time we serve food—three times a week—we need at least five people. Volunteers come and go: Nobody here receives a dime for what they do, and it is very demanding, especially on Tuesdays and Fridays, as they are working days. Being a lawyer, I can fit my job around this schedule, but it is challenging to plan even a month ahead.

Do all the volunteers have an Orthodox connection?

Not necessarily. One lady who helps said, "I'm not a believer—I do this only because I think it's a way to do good." We are not trying to preach here—we just say a simple prayer before the food is served and that's it; we don't require anything from anybody. More than that, we are trying not to make the food the only and main thing here. The food is just the reason to come; we are trying to encourage people to interact—to be the community we are supposed to be in Christ's name.

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Petroff Interview *(continued from page 1)*

What is the scale of your work?

We give away more than 13,000 meals a year here. Since we started four years ago, that makes more than 50,000 meals, freshly cooked and delivered by a non-professional team. The social services have even started sending people to us!

Are the people who come here for food generally homeless?

There are homeless, including people who are alcoholics or addicts of some kind. But sadly, more and more retired people come who do, in fact, have a place to live. We buy the ingredients for the meals nearly every day, and I can tell you that food prices here have literally doubled. So what I see is our mothers and fathers queuing for food. It is incredible that this is happening in Europe in the 21st century. People have dignity—they don't want to admit that they come here because they are poor. So they say that they come to socialize or to help serve the meal.

Deyan Petroff (G. FAGAN)

In the old days, there were no pensions or social institutions. Everything was down to the family or the neighborhood, but now we are living in isolation. We are afraid of others—what I have is mine and mine only. Yet the more isolated we become, the more we suffer. We start drinking, becoming aggressive, and eventually we die alone and unhappy. A lot of us are living in excess. But how much can you eat? How many clothes can you put on your body? How many rooms do you need to live in? Whatever I have that is not essential belongs to those who are deprived.

We are not setting huge goals here; we are not dispensing salvation or trying to build Communism. We are just trying to remember who we truly are, that there is a heart, conscience, and compassion in every one of us, and that this is our true nature. Look at children when they eat—they always share. What happened to us further down the road?

Entrance to Aleksandrovska Hospital, Sofia (G. FAGAN)

How did the Volunteers of Saints George come together?

Five or six years ago my mother was very sick in hospital. I was walking around this area while she had surgery—one of six operations she had to undergo in the course of 18 months at that time. This area of Sofia is where all the major hospitals are: Aleksandrovska Hospital, next to where we serve food, is the biggest and oldest hospital in Bulgaria, founded in 1884. It has 24 different wards and is a medical university as well. Less than a mile down the road is the emergency hospital for the whole of Sofia. Nearby there is also the military hospital. Inside the yard of Aleksandrovska Hospital I came across a hospital chapel, but it was closed. I waited and waited outside—praying and crying, basically. I came back a few more times and noticed something amazing. There were 20 or 30 flowers that had been wedged into the door by other people who had also come to the chapel. By this I understood that the chapel was never open. I began to wonder why it was closed, and how I could enter to pray, even if just for a while. I thought about how much a chapel was needed, a place where people could go to pray for their sick relatives.

So I started asking around and found out that one of the doctors at Aleksandrovska Hospital had a key to this chapel. I asked him if it was possible to unlock it, so that I could go with my mother to pray and give our thanks to the Lord. She had come through the surgery by this time but was unable to walk, so it would have been very difficult for her to go to another church. The doctor was so busy that it was difficult to meet with him, but when we finally did, he said, "You know what, why don't you take the key and open the chapel. And whenever you have the time, just come and open it up."

So I started going there—it was very cold inside and not many people came at first, if at all. But I felt that this was something useful to do, even for one person. We started to read prayers there, including akathist prayers commemorating St. Luke of Crimea [d. 1961, a bishop who was also a surgeon] and one of our patron saints, St. George the Newest of Sofia [martyred circa 1530 near the present site of Aleksandrovska Hospital], after whom the chapel is named. This is what I could do without any priest present. But the main goal was just to be there so that people could enter and pray. In Greek, the word "chapel"—*parekklisi*—means "comfort": it gives people the comfort of prayer. [Editor's note: the Bulgarian for chapel is similarly *paraklis*.]

After perhaps a year, more people started coming. The more regular ones among us started to discuss what more we could do than simply keeping the chapel open. We wanted to start a volunteer group to help sick and dying people—those who were alone and who didn't have other means or options of support. That would be people who are terminally ill, who don't have relatives, or whose relatives don't care about them.

Here, we had the miraculous help of one of Bulgaria's most prominent psychiatrists, Professor Toma Tomov. He is the cornerstone of the medical university's psychiatric clinic, which he headed for 16 years. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the United Kingdom. Professor Tomov offered to provide training to our volunteers free of charge, and he developed his own methodology and schedule for this. For six months we met with him once a week in order to study how to interact with hopelessly sick, lonely, and dying people.

After that, we concluded agreements with the heads of Aleksandrovska Hospital and the emergency hospital, so that our volunteers could visit their patients. With the blessing of His Grace, Bishop Tichon of Tiberiopolis, we had 35 people ready to start. But then Covid came, and we were unable to enter the hospitals. We didn't know what to do. At that time, a lockdown was in place and people were left alone in their homes. Social services would not enter because of the regulations. They would leave food at the doorstep—but if a person is unable to walk, how can he collect food that is at a doorstep seven stories below his apartment? We decided we would help these people in need: shop, fetch medicine, and prepare food for them. We started cooking at home—each volunteer would prepare around 20 meals, and we would distribute these to people at home. For three or four months during the strictest lockdown, we were driving around the city when nobody else was on the streets. Later on, the pandemic measures were softened and our volunteers had to go back to work, so this became increasingly difficult. We realized that we would have to operate from a physical location, so we started a campaign to collect donations in order to buy a food truck. After receiving the help of many people in the course of over 18 months, here it is!

Cross commemorating St. George the Newest of Sofia, martyred c. 1530 near the site of Aleksandrovka Hospital (G. FAGAN)

Faith is the inspiration for your initiative. Were you raised an Orthodox Christian?

No. My great-grandmother was a very strong believer, but she died before I was born in 1974. My parents were both baptized, but they were not churchgoers, so for me faith was something where you find your own way in response to God's call. I was baptized when I was 26.

That must have been around the end of the Communist period in Bulgaria.

Yes. When Communism collapsed, all kinds of spiritual movements came to Bulgaria. That is when I learned what John 3:16 means ["For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"]—playing guitar in a park (Chuckles.) I wanted to find my place—I was interested in spirituality and the world beyond what we see and feel about it. I wanted to be very methodical about this, so I went around all the churches and confessions I could find. It took me nine years. In the first instance, I wanted to go with Orthodoxy as the religion of my predecessors. But when I went to a church to say that I wanted to be baptized, the priest just glanced at me and said, "Okay, you have to bring a towel, soap, a bunch of flowers, 20 bucks, and you're done."

That wasn't holy enough for me, so I started shopping around. I was very impressed with the Catholics—such a huge cathedral where everything was white and shining. The priest I spoke with there—a Jesuit, I think—was very serious. I still recall his office, with books up to the ceiling, a fireplace, and him in a cassock with a rope tied around his waist and sandals, as you would imagine Jesus wearing. His response was, "Very good, I'm happy for you. You will have to come here every Thursday for catechism, and after one year there will be a kind of examination, and then we'll talk about your baptism." "It can't be that difficult!" I thought.

There was also Protestantism, of course, and—as I was studying law at the time—I was attracted to Judaism. It seemed so smart and thoughtful, so logical and divine at the same time. But when I went to the synagogue—ours is the largest in the Balkans—I didn't understand a word. It also didn't feel right that the women were separated from the men behind something like a fence.

The hospital chapel of St. George the Newest of Sofia (G. FAGAN)

In the end, it was like that joke in which a guy wants to be baptized, except he was blessed with only having to make up his mind between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. His friend asks him: "What did you do?" He answers, "I went to the Catholics, and they were amazing. Then I went to the Orthodox, and the priest was joking around and seemed to be tipsy." "So you became Catholic?" his friend replies. "No, no, I went to the Orthodox,"

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says the guy. "I understood that, if this church still exists after 2000 years despite having such clergy, then God *must* be in it!"

So after a really long journey, I basically came home. It was not something I wholeheartedly accepted mentally or spiritually. I attended Orthodox services for almost a decade without fully knowing what was happening there. I just felt secure, in my place.

Despite Communism's damaging legacy to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, there must have been some quality there that made you think, "Something genuine has survived."

Oh yes. That was His Grace, Bishop Tichon. He was the Chairman of the Board of St. Aleksandr Nevsky Patriarchal Cathedral in Sofia. As a student at the seminary, I had to attend Orthodox liturgy there on Sundays, but every week after the service I would rush straight to the cathedral to catch Bishop Tichon's sermon at the end of the liturgy there. I was very impressed—he was like no other bishop, ever. His sermons were succinct, understandable, and sincere; he spoke like an ideal father, like an older, wise, and caring person. On top of that, he was a bishop, which—from the perspective of a seminary student—was the most senior church level imaginable.

I can tell you a few things about Bishop Tichon's story. He was born in Germany—his mother was German. In 1946, when he was one year old, his family moved back to Bulgaria. His mother was then permitted to return to Germany, but it was more than 20 years before he saw her again because he was not allowed to travel outside the country. By the 1970s the Eastern Bloc was trying to convince the West, "We're not so bad. We respect human rights, religious freedom." The German government began to insist that their citizens in Bulgaria should be allowed to leave, and Bishop Tichon was one of them.

After that he spent 27 years working in a German hospital, first as an orderly and then as a certified nurse. As his education was in theology, there was not much else he could do. At the same time, he was secretary to the then metropolitan of the Western European diocese of the Bulgarian Orthodox

Volunteers of Saints George preparing an evening meal (G. FAGAN)

Church. On becoming a monk, he was made a bishop in 2003—he flew to Bulgaria for the consecration, attended a formal dinner with the other bishops, and then flew straight back to Germany to resume washing patients. He became rather respected in Western church circles, for a bishop who works with his bare hands is very rarely seen.

Was Bishop Tichon assigned to a diocese?

He became auxiliary bishop of the Western European diocese, but in practice he was leading it, as the metropolitan was old and sick. Bishop Tichon would do eight or ten nightshifts at Katharine Hospital in Stuttgart and then drive to Rome for three weeks at a time—he was moving around constantly. When people asked, "Where is the seat of your diocese, Your Grace?" he would say, "My seat is in my car."

I was also drawn to a few older priests and other Christians who had managed to preserve their faith. But there were more who were the opposite. During my time as a seminary student, I even came across a few clergy who I'm not sure believed in God at all.

They just ended up there somehow?

Or they deliberately wanted to be there for an easy life with a salary.

People begin to arrive for the Volunteers' evening meal (G. FAGAN)

Is this also part of the Communist legacy?

Yes. Essentially, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was very strictly controlled and used as a political instrument. It was filled with clergy who had few qualifications, who were unable to make a living unless they were fed or supported by somebody.

Did this put many Bulgarians off church?

Absolutely. To wider society, the Church became a symbol of laziness and other

negative characteristics. Nowadays, Christians are in the minority here. On paper, 75 percent of Bulgarians are Eastern Orthodox. But in practice? A recent Pew Research study found that only around five percent are active churchgoers [Pew Research Center, "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," 10 May 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.]

Bulgaria was always the closest satellite to the USSR. You know how strong and influential the Romanian Orthodox Church is today—well, it would be the same here, if it weren't for the fact that the Bulgarian Church was so deeply soaked in the poison of Communism. In 1944, when the Red Army entered Bulgaria and the Communists seized power, our church was in schism. In 1953 the Bulgarian Patriarchate was restored under strong pressure from the Kremlin, whose influence over the hierarchy has continued.

So the situation for Bulgarian Christians under Communism was comparatively tough compared with other Eastern Bloc countries?

Oh, yes. There would be cordons of police around the churches at Easter, physically preventing people from attending services. Or there were secret agents—who weren't very secret because everyone knew who they were (Chuckles). They would be inside the churches taking notes on those attending, who could then be fired or even sent to a labor camp.

Was it possible to attend church if you were someone without a significant job, or a pensioner?

Yes—and a lot of people were baptized secretly by those grandmothers. They would take the baby and go to church, or priests would baptize in people's homes. When I was younger, we used to laugh at our grandmothers, but several times I have encountered priests who told me: "These old ladies saved the faith, with their funny singing, their stubborn everyday life, and by simply not giving up on church traditions, like making bread for memorial services." Even if they didn't always recall what the tradition was about, they were keeping the faith alive. So, more respect to them!

What is your hope for the future of your initiative, the Volunteers of Saints George?

To be living in a more compassionate society. I dream of a day when I will come here to find that nobody is waiting for food because they have relatives, friends, or neighbors—whether Christian or not—who support them.

A lot of people say, "What you do is great—these people should be thankful." But I don't think so, because it is just our duty, and we do not expect any gratitude for doing what is, in fact, our duty. Also, we are doing very little of what we are capable of doing. Sharing is the least thing you can do in this world, and it makes us feel content to multiply goodness. ♦

For further information on the Volunteers of Saints George, see: https://www.dobrovolcite.bg/en.

Food distribution is livestreamed at: https://www.facebook.com/dobrovolcite.bg.

Deyan Petroff (third from right) with fellow Volunteers of Saints George (Source: www.facebook.com/dobrovolcite.bg)

"God decided that we would become Christians—it is not our own accomplishment":

An Interview with Bishop Tichon of Tiberiopolis

Bishop Tichon (Ivanov) of Tiberiopolis is auxiliary bishop to the patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, most recently the newly departed Patriarch Neophyte (d. 13 March 2024). He is also patron to the Volunteers of Saints George, an Orthodox initiative to help support people in need in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. Born to a Bulgarian father and German mother in Stuttgart at the end of the Second World War, Bishop Tichon has close experience of institutional Orthodoxy in Bulgaria under Communism as well as long practical service as a hospital nurse in Germany.

The editor of the East-West Church Report *interviewed Bishop Tichon in Sofia in November 2023. The original conversation alternated between Bulgarian—simultaneously translated into English courtesy of Deyan Petroff of the Volunteers of Saints George—and German.*

Bishop Tichon of Tiberiopolis
(**G. FAGAN**)

Deyan has already described a little about your German background. Why did your parents choose to leave Stuttgart for newly Communist Bulgaria in 1946, when you were one year old?

They didn't understand. In 1946 there were still promises of free elections. Conditions in Stuttgart were also very difficult. After the war, people were starving there. In marrying a Bulgarian, my mother became a Bulgarian citizen and lost her German citizenship. My father did not belong to any political party. He was an opera singer and the son of a high-ranking officer in the royal Bulgarian army. [Editor's note: Bulgaria was a monarchy from 1887-1946.]

You entered Sofia Theological Seminary in 1959.

Yes. The seminary was in exile in a small monastery around 80 kilometers [50 miles] away—the Communists moved it out of Sofia. After that I had to do two years' military service. Following the First World War, the Treaty of Neuilly forbade Bulgaria from having an army, but there was still military service. The conscripts were treated like reservists; they performed general labor in uniform. The Communists kept this arrangement because they could assign it to anyone they did not trust with weapons: Turks, Roma, Christians. After that—until 1971—I continued my studies at Sofia Theological Academy. At that time it was a separate church institution, not a university faculty, as it is now.

Why did you choose to study theology?

I was 13 years old, so it was rather my father's decision. It was the only place that the Communists had no influence at that time. I was not the only one. Many of my classmates came to study at the seminary because they were not permitted to study anywhere else. If you wanted to pursue advanced studies, you generally needed to obtain a document from the local Communist Party where you lived, and this document would state that you were "reliable" [Bulgarian: *blagonadezhden*]. The children of families like mine would never receive such documents, so they would go to seminary. Patriarch Neophyte and I were classmates.

Were you aware of activity by the secret police during your theology studies?

All the time. *Everything* was under surveillance. Two of my fellow students did not come back after the first semester, because their local Party comrades said, "That's enough. You are not allowed to go there." To them, it was a disgrace that a child from *their* villages crossed over to the enemy—the Church. But God's will is another matter—one of those students is now a senior priest in southern Bulgaria. He continued his studies at home. Previously, he came in first place in an exam…

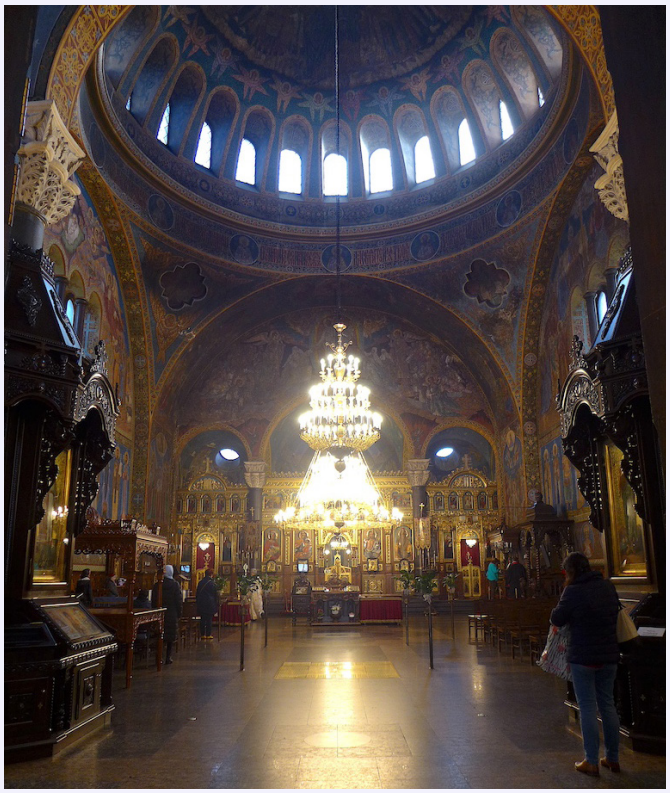
…Was there a special effort to prevent intelligent people from going to seminary?

Back at that time the whole idea was that *nobody* should go to seminary. The phenomenon to which you refer took place maybe 10 or 15 years later, at the Theological Academy. By that stage people who had graduated from regular schools were able to apply to study theology there. The top 20 applicants would be struck from the list automatically.

Were you forced to leave Bulgaria in 1977?

I must warn you that my biography reads like a complex crime novel! (Smiles) Hard to believe, but true. After the Theological Academy, I was appointed to be a teacher at the seminary, but before I began lessons, the Patriarch called for me. He asked, "What are your prospects?" and if I wanted to become a priest or a monk. I had not thought about that, as I thought I would become a teacher. By this time, only my father and I remained in Bulgaria—my mother had gone to Germany in 1954, and my sister had gone there to study in 1966. My father gave me his blessing, and so I said to the Patriarch, "I'm prepared to become a priest or a monk. But I have one request, Your Holiness: Please give me a mission, a task. I cannot just be idle or a unit in a monastery somewhere—I would go crazy." He said, "Very well," and after a while he hired me as the technical editor of the church's whole publishing operation. That consisted of a newspaper, a periodical, and general press business. Then, after four years, I was suddenly dismissed. I sensed that this was due to the government. Twenty years later—thanks to a relevant law—I was able to read my secret police file and see that this was indeed the case: There had been an order for my removal.

At the time of my dismissal, it also became clear that they wanted to bar me from Sofia to somewhere provincial—that is, to a place where I would not know anyone. So I myself moved to a small, abandoned village. Where could they ban me from there? Meanwhile, in Germany, Helmut Schmidt had become chancellor in place of Willy Brandt. When he moved to Bonn [then seat of the West German government], he took with him the chief editor of the SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany] newspaper and appointed him as Government Spokesperson. My stepbrother from my mother's first marriage, a German citizen, took his place as editor—he had been the deputy editor. My stepbrother then had a word with his former boss about how I was stuck in a village in Bulgaria. His former boss—now Government Spokesperson—wrote a letter to the authorities here, which they interpreted as coming in an official capacity rather than from a private individual. That is obviously how I received permission to leave Bulgaria.



St. Nedelya Church, Sofia. Built on 10th-century foundations, it was blown up by Soviet-backed Communist revolutionaries in 1925, resulting in hundreds of casualties. (G. FAGAN)

You have close experience of the impact of the Communist regime upon the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. How would you evaluate that, especially infiltration by the secret police?

In the early years, the Communists fought against the Church in order to impose militant atheism. Right after they took power in 1944, they killed a huge number of priests—nobody knows the exact number, but there were thousands. Priests in small towns and villages used to be very influential here in Bulgaria. They were respected pillars of society, and the Communists considered them to be competition. Anyone who attended church was also threatened with losing their job or with their children being barred from study. Since they could not be influenced in that way, predominantly old grandmas and grandpas ended up going to church.

Then some people like me appeared—children of the so-called "former people" [Bulgarian: *bivshi khora*, those in "bourgeois" social categories who were repressed by the Communist regime]. We, who were studying in the seminary, were to replace those priests who had been killed. Every year, however, only 25 people graduated from seminary. Of those, a maximum of four would be ordained—for the whole of Bulgaria! The rest would become historians, doctors, and so on. So when democracy came in 1990, we had what I call "severe anemia of personnel." All of a sudden a lot of young people then started studying theology. They found an intellectual niche, and the so-called new Bulgarian Orthodox Church became a mixture of intellectual introspection and mysticism without actual, lived experience.

I had left for Germany on 16 April 1977, so I cannot say what it was like in Bulgaria after that. I can only go by what I could see and the later consequences. But I can say that it [Communist influence] was catastrophic for the Church, because an atmosphere of mistrust—a feeling that everyone is dishonest—developed. The biggest blow came when they opened the secret police files on the hierarchs of the Church, because it appeared that all of them, in one way or another, were in the service of the state; the secret services. The bad thing was that they all kept silent about this. Instead of saying publicly, "We are sorry, we were forced to collaborate," they did not comment. This suggested that they were not concerned about the opinion of the average Christian, and that they were frightened of the consequences of breaking off relations with their curating officers [in the security services], even after the advent of democracy. I formally criticized them for this on television. None of them ever picked up the phone to contradict me or to say, "How dare you?"

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Was the appearance of the so-called Alternative Synod in 1992—a schism since resolved—an attempt to counter Communist influence over the Bulgarian Orthodox Church? It occurred when the newly democratic government declared then-Patriarch Maxim's election in 1971 to be invalid due to Communist control.

The only hierarch who was not registered as an agent of the secret police was Patriarch Maxim, but it is certain that he was close to Communist circles even prior to the Second World War. It was they who later installed him as Patriarch and hid his agent file. Moral and canonical responsibility for the failure within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is theirs—nobody else can be responsible, no matter what the circumstances. Those who formed the Alternative Synod did not hide their own links with the secret services. People then decided to remain with Patriarch Maxim instead of siding with them. The Alternative Synod was a plot by the secret services to save Maxim—that is my opinion.

Patriarch Maxim died in 2012. Yet the issue of Orthodox collaboration with the secret services remains. The Bulgarian authorities recently expelled the head priest of the Russian Orthodox parish in Sofia for "activities directed against the national security and interests" of Bulgaria.

Former Bulgarian Communist Party headquarters, now National Assembly of Bulgaria offices, Sofia (G. FAGAN)

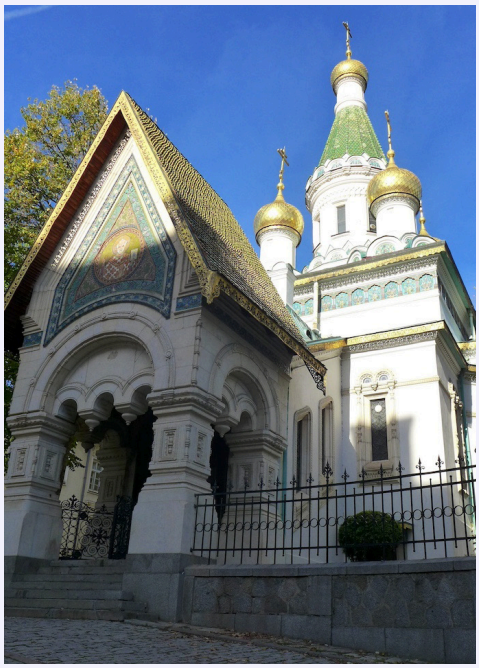
I've said publicly several times: We may assume all Russian priests serving abroad are KGB people. Last year, the one who was expelled from Bulgaria was sitting across the table, as you are, when I told him, "Why don't you allow the Ukrainians to form their own church? This way you will remain friends." He said, "Indeed, but many of them want Patriarch Kirill to be head; they respect him greatly." I said to him, "Hah! They are all KGB, right? Ukraine will never allow you to do that, you know." Instead of saying, "What are you talking about?" he just froze—I could see that he was thinking, "How do you know?" (Laughs).

[Editor's note: The Russian priest formerly in Sofia, Archimandrite Vassian (Zmeev), was expelled from Bulgaria along with two Belarusian church personnel on 21 September 2023. In addition to a Russian government protest, the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church maintained on 11 October 2023 that the expulsions were "egregious and discriminational acts… under a false pretext."]

Has the Bulgarian Orthodox Church made any official statement about the war in Ukraine?

No, because within our synod—which is meant to say something—the influence of Russian agents is very strong. Other members just do not think that anything is needed. At the end of the day, a public statement would not do anything for anybody. Who cares about the opinion of our Bulgarian Church? One thing is clear—we have not declared that we are against the Ukrainian Church that was blessed by [Patriarch of Constantinople] Bartholomew [i.e. the Orthodox Church of Ukraine or OCU]. We were never asked for our view.

[Editor's note: Following this interview, on 6 January 2024, Patriarch Neophyte made a public statement condemning the war in Ukraine: https://df.news/en/2024/01/08/bulgarian-church-leader-condemns-devastating-war-against-fraternal-ukraine/; Bulgarian original at: https://bg-patriarshia.bg/news/patriarshesko-blagoslovenie-za-velikia-bogoyavlenski-vodosve. This statement was mentioned by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew [of Constantinople] in his address at the funeral service for Patriarch Neophyte in Sofia on 16 March 2024: https://vema.com.au/address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-funeral-service-for-the-late-patriarch-neofit-of-sofia-and-all-bulgaria/.]



Russian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas, Sofia, completed to serve the Russian diplomatic mission in 1914 (G. FAGAN)

Do you see any way for the stand-off between rival Orthodox in Ukraine to be resolved?

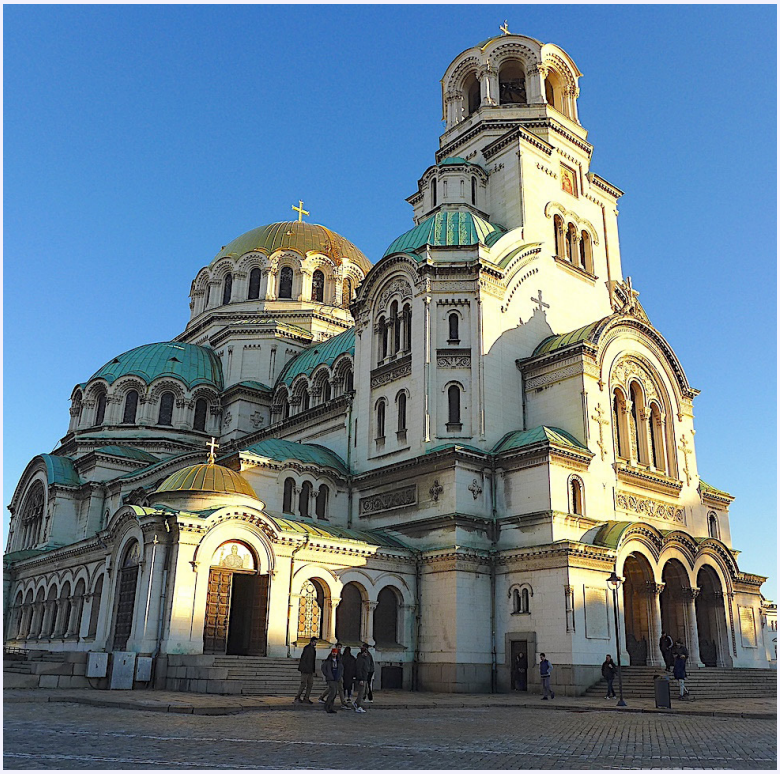
I do not know how the situation in Ukraine will end. One thing is clear: the Russian Church is thereby condemned. The only person who could have stopped this war—the *only* person—was Patriarch Kirill. He could have said "No," and acted in such a way that the whole situation would have been different. Now he is developing a theology on the basis of this whole mess [German: *Schlamassel*, from Yiddish *shlimazel*]. There will be a catastrophic consequence for the Russian Church because it is not only acting without grace, but preaching evil. It is blessing warriors to attack other Orthodox Christians.

[Editor's note: On 25 September 2022, referring to "the many who are dying today… in this fratricidal war" and four days after the Russian authorities declared partial military mobilization, Patriarch Kirill preached that those killed in the line of duty sacrifice themselves in place of others, and that "therefore, we believe this sacrifice absolves a person of all their sins": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUSb9_ULkBM.]

Even Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine have been destroyed as a result of the Russian invasion.

Yes. Whatever is said about the horrors of the Russian army, Americans do not have the capacity to picture the reality. So much inhumanity is simply outside your traditions. People say, "Come on, that's too much." As is the case with the current situation between the Arabs and Israel—it is forgotten that Hamas were killing babies because, in the minds of free people, that is only possible if someone is a psychopath. So then the propaganda comes: "Oh, come on, you're making it up!" I experienced this personally in Germany after 1977 whenever I told dissident circles about what it was like in Bulgaria. People smiled and said, "Really? Oh, that cannot be true."

If there is one thing I detest as much as falsehood, it is half-truth. You claim that I hit you, I say I did not, and then someone says, "Well, it must have been somewhere in-between." What is that supposed to mean, somehow there was half a slap?



St. Aleksandr Nevsky Patriarchal Cathedral, Sofia, consecrated in 1924 (G. FAGAN)

How did your time living in Germany influence your view of the church?

When you live in a completely different place and atmosphere, you understand that it is not very productive to insist upon your own understanding and rituals. Back then, as immigrants, Orthodox usually had a minority complex. You might be the poorest person, but you had something: "I am Orthodox." Only that leads to a ghetto mentality, which in no way corresponds to my view of human relations. Here I was influenced by a British writer, Archibald Cronin, who wrote *The Keys of the Kingdom*. All of us have our faith by the accident—if we can call it an accident—of our birth. God sends the immortal soul of every person into the body of a Bulgarian, German, American, or English person so that he or she fulfills his or her duty as a human being. God decided that we would become Christians—it is not our own accomplishment. He just wants to see how diligently we are prepared to follow that path.

According to St. Vincent of Lérins, we must have unity in necessary things, freedom in uncertain things, and love in all things. It occurred to me that we should start the other way around—with the brotherhood of love. If we then observe minor differences, let us respect each other's freedom. After that, we can ask the theologians to work for unity, but no earlier. The church should not be like the state, establishing many laws and rules that nobody knows but which are obligatory for everybody.

In Communist Bulgaria, charitable work like the Volunteers of Saints George was not permitted…

[With ironic tone] Of course—there are no poor people in a Communist state!

How typical do you think it is for Bulgarian Orthodox clergy to support such initiatives?

Be warned, I am about to say something that will shock you. It is not the Church's job to perform charity. The Church has to teach people—Christians—to be compassionate and charitable. First, if you give some money to me, and I use it to feed the poor, then I'm being hypocritical, because people will think that it's my money. Second, you will not be able to receive the joy of seeing the outcome of your charity with your own eyes. Also, if people come to me and say, "If it weren't for you, I would not have anything to eat tomorrow," the effect resembles an indulgence in the medieval Catholic Church [i.e. where salvation is exchanged for money]. A bishop is supposed to encourage people, to give direction, to criticize where necessary—not to do it [dispense charity] as if it were his own work and find pride in what he's doing.

Our volunteers who work and donate deserve to see what is happening, and their efforts multiply the willingness of other people to contribute. This is important. One day, a critical mass of people will get together and say, "Hello, government—why are these people being fed by Deyan from his food truck, and you, with your expenditure for tanks and airplanes, cannot solve this issue for all Bulgaria?" If the people who are being fed by us now live a noble life in the future, we will be happy that we won't be needed anymore.

Still, I wonder whether your own practical experience working in hospitals, or your family background, drew you to support the Volunteers of Saints George.

(continued on page 10)

Bishop Tichon Interview *(continued from page 9)*

There is a story I wish to share. I was born in Stuttgart on 26 May 1945. At some point that August my father was searching to find something for us to eat on the black market. This market would gather in a huge crater in the city center, where a bomb the size of a telephone booth had destroyed the *Kronprinzenpalais* [19th-century Crown Prince's Palace]. As soon as the American military police appeared, everyone scattered except for my father—as a Bulgarian citizen, he would not be of interest to them. "Come here, who are you?" they asked. "Georgi Christov Ivanov." "What are you doing?" "Looking for food for my child." "What is his name?" "Christo Georgiev Ivanov." Then they asked him for his address and sent him on his way.

The next morning, on our doorstep, there was a box containing a month's rations from the American army. It measured about one cubic meter [1.3 cubic yards] and contained tinned food, coffee, shaving foam, razor blades, and goodness knows what else. Today, if I were to give away a top-model Mercedez-Benz, it would not be as great a gift as that parcel was back then. We were literally saved from starvation. All we were asked was our names and where we lived. It transpired that one of the soldiers, being of Bulgarian origin, had the same name as me—Christo Georgiev Ivanov. I always wanted to find him or his relatives to thank them for this unprecedented gesture that saved me and my family in Stuttgart in 1945. ♦

"Bread is truly amazing—the smell and touch can bring you back to things you have lost in yourself":

An Interview with Nadezhda Savova-Grigorova

A Bulgarian Orthodox Christian, Nadezhda Savova-Grigorova holds a doctorate in anthropology from Princeton University in the United States. She is founder of the international Bread Houses Network [www.breadhousesnetwork.org], which fosters social cohesion through communal breadmaking sessions. Many of these take place in a Christian context, whether the formal Orthodox tradition of baking Eucharistic bread or the informal introduction of Christian concepts to wider society through the many biblical metaphors drawn from breadmaking.

Nadezhda and her family attend St. Sophia Church in the center of the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, whose fourth-century foundations make it one of the oldest Christian churches in Europe. She, her husband, and their four young children live in their self-built home approximately 10 miles [16 km] away in the mountain village of Bistritsa. Their yard contains one of the wood-fired Bread Houses that host community baking sessions.

The editor of the East-West Church Report *visited Dr. Savova-Grigorova in November 2023 to learn more about the Bread Houses Network. The interview took place in English.*

Nadezhda Savova-Grigorova
(G. FAGAN)

Could you explain what Bread Houses are? What gave you the idea to start them?

I guess one way to define them would be community centers—but they are much more than that. The idea was born when I was visiting Bethlehem in 2008 and discovered that the name of the town means "bread house" in Hebrew and Aramaic. *Bet* means house and *lehem* means bread. A vision came into my head—how it would be so nice if there were houses where people were making bread together and rejoicing, with bread being the vehicle towards peace. To see how this might work, I created the first Bread House in my great-grandmother's house in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, in 2009. All this was while I was working for my PhD in anthropology at Princeton—my dissertation was on community centers and the arts as vehicles for social change. I was studying a cultural policy that had circulated under Communism in Cuba and Bulgaria, and which Brazil had also adopted; this cultural policy developed large networks of community centers to heal people and to unite youth through the arts. During the years of my PhD—2006-13—I also had a scholarship that allowed me to travel, research, and write, so I began to develop Bread Houses in different cities alongside my studies. That was just my personal passion, but eventually it became a part of my dissertation.

Here religion came up, of course, because bread and breadmaking is so central to Orthodox Christianity: the baking of *prosphora* [Editor's note: leavened bread offered at the

Eucharistic liturgy]. I started to realize that church people—at least in Bulgaria—don't make *prosphora* anymore. We completely lost that tradition. Only the Greeks have kept it—the Greek grandmothers still bake *prosphora* at home and bring them to the church for liturgy. Then I started dreaming of including priests in the whole vision of the Bread Houses—priests who might lead community baking sessions with children and their parents, or with anyone at all. In Gabrovo we started inviting the local priest in 2010, and then priests from other cities started coming. They would bring people from their parishes and students from the theological faculty in nearby Veliko Tarnovo.

Did you establish Bread Houses in Bulgaria before your initiatives abroad?

Yes— we started in Bulgaria with the Bread House in Gabrovo. Then slowly, as I was travelling as a guest in different cities, people in churches or community centers became interested in starting a Bread House program where they were. We have had a number of different physical locations over the years. We currently have eight Bread Houses in Bulgaria—some are not designated spaces, but part of an organization that already exists. In the city of Varna, for example, we have three programs. One is at a church—the parish built a wood-fired oven in their yard. They regularly involve residents of old people's homes and orphanages, so that they can connect like grandparents and grandchildren. The other two programs are at centers—a day center and an eco-agricultural center—that work with people who have disabilities.

I have never established a Bread House in Bethlehem itself, but recently a Palestinian Arab who runs a bakery in Bethlehem showed interest in starting the Bread Therapy training that we do online. Perhaps this will become something like an interreligious Bread House, a place trying to bring Jews, Muslims, and Christians together to talk about things that can reconcile their communities.

First Bread House, Gabrovo
(Source: N. SAVOVA-GRIGOROVA)

Banner at the Bread House in Dr. Savova-Grigorova's yard, Bistritsa (G. FAGAN)

Were the sessions initially centered on baking *prosphora* bread?

Some of them were, but others were an adaptation of the main method that we use in the Bread Houses, called Theater of Crumbs. This is a form of art therapy. It starts with everyone drawing in flour and telling a story, or something that he or she feels about a chosen topic. We just spread out the dry flour over the table that we are going to knead upon, so that it becomes a white canvas. We choose a topic that interests us—it could be war, peace, friendship, humility, spring, summer… no matter how simple, there are always very personal and deep things that people start sharing. So we start to tell stories, and everyone connects his or her story to the previous one. Out of all these individual pieces comes one story, rather like a fairy tale.

Then we make dough. We refer to a lot of Christian metaphors during the kneading stage. Sometimes we use this method as a form of catechesis, where we simply talk about Christianity and its message. Christ mainly spoke in metaphors, and there are many Gospel parables about flour, yeast, or leaven. One is the three cups of flour to which a woman adds leaven, and which Christ likens to the Kingdom of God [Matthew 13:33]. It's not really "cups"—in the Bible it is actually an ancient, much bigger unit that cannot be translated into modern-day English. It is a very large measurement—something more than 20 kg [44 lb]. It immediately makes you wonder—why would a woman make so much bread? In Christ's parable, the leaven that the woman placed in that huge amount of flour transformed the whole dough. So, it is a symbol of the tremendous power of Christ's love. There are actually many interpretations of that parable. St. Nikolaj Velimirović [d. 1956] has a very beautiful, long one which refers to the three parts of a human being—the intellect, the heart, and the will, so it is also a symbol of our being trinitarian [https://www.pravmir.com/woman-symbol-christ/].

(continued on page 12)

Has the breadmaking process made you think about biblical imagery in a new way?

It always surprises me how people have different interpretations of the ingredients of bread. We talk about relevant biblical metaphors, and I ask, "What does it remind you of, personally?" I have always thought of salt as something related to negative emotions, for example—to tears or things that are painful. But I have had people who say, "No, it reminds me of being in the sea, of happiness." People are always telling me new information: things I hadn't noticed in the Bible, in the lives of saints, or the lives of fellow Christians. I started collecting these stories and by now I have gathered more than 300 pages—so I have also been writing a book along the way. A possible title would be *Three Cups of Flour.*

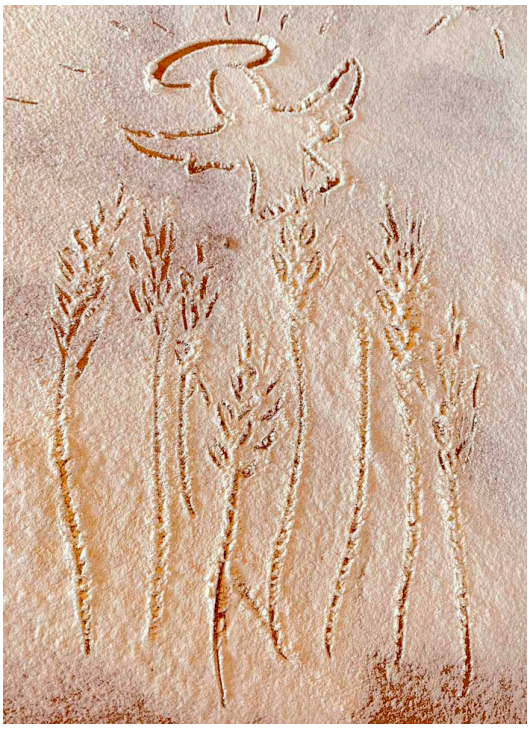
To return to the Theater of Crumbs—what is the next stage in the process?

Having made the dough using all these metaphors, we don't just make simple bread. We create puppets out of it, which depend upon the characters we came up with in the story. These could be actual characters or symbols. We put them in to bake, and when they are out of the oven we play a real theater, with a storyteller. We draw props on a new canvas of flour, and different people play the characters. It is really fun, as well as transformative for many people.

Ukrainian refugees at the Bread House in Dr. Savova-Grigorova's yard, Bistritsa (Source: N. SAVOVA-GRIGOROVA)

Could you give an example?

Last spring [2022] we had sessions with Ukrainian refugees. In one session, we started off with the simple topic of "Spring" and suddenly it involved the image of the huge wheat fields of Ukraine—"the bread basket of Europe." A man on a tractor goes out to work in his field when he sees a Russian tank approaching and attacking. The man stands bravely in front of the tank and says, "No, let's make bread, not war!"—I had just told the group that I use that expression a lot at Bread House sessions, and they incorporated it. The soldiers then said, "Well yeah, why not?" They all sat there in the field and



Flour drawing by Ukrainian refugee at the Bread House in Dr. Savova-Grigorova's yard, Bistritsa (Source: N. SAVOVA-GRIGOROVA)

collected the wheat, made flour, then bread from the flour, and ate that bread of peace. Oh, there were so many tears during that story! Everyone was crying, children of different ages with their mothers. It was a very powerful experience for all of us. Because this is improvised, people come up with all kinds of stories and ideas that they wouldn't normally think of. In this case, they even came up with an improvised song at the end, for the tractor driver. That is the thing about these sessions—you never know what is going to come out and this is why they are so therapeutic. When the refugees arrived, we did not say, "Now we're going to talk about war." The topic was "Spring." Then someone said something, and it just flowed from there.

So the sessions have a healing aspect.

I haven't studied psychology and, to begin with, I did not think about this method as therapeutic in any way. Then, when I was at a global conference on health, well-being, and the arts in Peru, I met Patch Adams—he practices humor therapy, such as visiting hospitals as a clown. There is a movie about him in which he is played by Robin Williams. As part of this conference, I did a breadmaking session, and when Patch Adams saw this and how people were reacting to it, he said, "This is therapy—bread therapy." It grew from there. From 2018 until Covid hit, we had two very good programs in two children's hospitals in Sofia. The children usually stay there with their parents, and we were also able to involve some of the doctors and nurses in the breadmaking.

I have also had a few experiences when I would make bread with war veterans or former prisoners. A program at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst chose to approach female veterans using the community baking method. We were doing the Theater of Crumbs at the veterans' shelter when one of the women started crying—the toughest one of all, who never spoke about anything. She said, "The only nice memory I have from my childhood is my grandmother making biscuits"—she

was from the South—"and I can smell them now that I smell the baking bread." I had a similar reaction from a former prisoner in London, UK. He was a big, tough guy from Uganda, and he started crying—again, it was the best memory of his childhood: his grandmother baking another type of bread over the fire. He had been a refugee, immigrated to London, and became involved in various street gangs. He said, "I want to change my life, bring joy to orphans like me." Bread is truly amazing—the smell and touch can bring you back to things you have lost in yourself.

Are the breadmaking sessions with a specifically catechetical element aimed primarily at adults?

Honestly, it's for anybody who comes. Recently, at a church in the nearby village of Pancharevo, we just announced to the community, "Hey, whoever wishes, come on the day of the Christian family"—for us, that is 21 November, the feast of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple according to our calendar. A lot of people came, and we did the Theater of Crumbs with Christian metaphors. Many parents did not know anything about the particular feast or the Bible—even though they considered themselves Orthodox, they had never even opened the Bible. My Protestant friends sometimes say to me, "Do Orthodox Christians never read the Bible?" I explain that the tradition of catechesis, of Christian education, was lost in Bulgaria during Communism. So if your parents don't teach you, how are you going to learn? There is no religious education in schools. The whole catechism process is growing very slowly here, with younger priests in their 20s, 30s, or 40s.

Rather than catechism, which has to be organized as regular sessions with written materials, what I am doing is more like a way to build community. It's more like a Sunday school, or initial outreach to people who are not at all educated about what it means to be Orthodox. It is not, "Come Let Us Teach You About Orthodoxy." If it were, people wouldn't come at all—Bulgarians generally have a negative attitude towards the Church because they heard that it was corrupted by the Communist Party, which was smart enough to install priests

Loaves from a Bread House session (Source: N. SAVOVA-GRIGOROVA)

Breadmaking session at the Bread House in downtown Sofia (Source: N. SAVOVA-GRIGOROVA)

obedient to the Party. So people are skeptical, even now. Many say, "Oh, those priests—you can't trust them! They just collect money from baptisms and weddings." People also prefer yoga—that is the big fashion here now. It is very hard to change such attitudes, but breadmaking while discussing different Christian topics is a good way to introduce people to the Church.

Were you raised Orthodox yourself?

I was seven when the Communist regime in Bulgaria fell in 1990. I was brought up believing that God exists, but the only way that most people who believe in God in Bulgaria demonstrate that is to go to church and light a candle. They just go whenever they feel like going, light a candle, pray, and leave. I didn't know that anything special happened on Sundays until I went to the United States for my bachelor studies. My friends at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, asked me where I went to church on Sunday, and I was surprised: "Why would I go to church on Sunday, I just go whenever I like—but here there is no Orthodox church, so I don't go." When they asked me, I also thought to myself, "What am I?" They were asking, "What do you believe in? What is this—'Orthodox'?" None of my fellow students knew about Orthodox Christianity—they thought I was Jewish when I mentioned Orthodoxy. I discovered online that there was a Greek Orthodox church nearby. Gradually, a group of us formed—an Ethiopian, an Egyptian, and another Bulgarian—and we started going to church regularly. The priest there explained Orthodoxy to us, and this is how my life in the Church began.

Later on, when I started developing the Bread Houses, I organized breadmaking sessions in various Orthodox parishes around the USA, from the East to the West coast, and I deeply miss the spirit of American Orthodox Christianity—it is so full of joy and active community outreach. This is something largely missing in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and I hope it will slowly grow. ♦

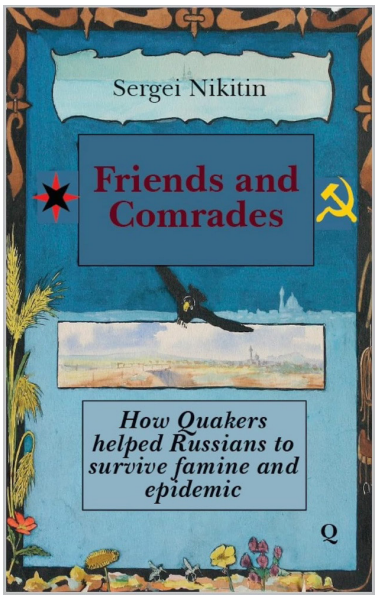
BOOK REVIEW

Friends and Comrades: How Quakers Helped Russians to Survive Famine and Epidemic

by Sergei Nikitin
(translated by Suzanne Eade Roberts)
York, UK, Radius Publishing, 2022
385 pp., $16.40 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-912728-57-2

JOHAN MAURER

In 1947 the Nobel Committee of Norway's parliament awarded that year's Nobel Peace Prize to the Quakers, also known as Friends, "represented by their two great relief organizations, the Friends Service Council in London and the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia." In his presentation speech at the award ceremony, Nobel Committee chair Gunnar Jahn cited the Quakers' role in peace and relief work in many countries, including Russia. As Jahn recalled: "It is through silent assistance *from the nameless to the nameless*"—my emphasis—"that they have worked to promote the fraternity between nations cited in the will of Alfred Nobel."



At the peak of the famine relief work in the 1920s, over 400,000 Russians were depending upon Quaker food rations to stay alive. Between 20 and 30 thousand were treated in Quaker malaria clinics every month. Many people will indeed remain "nameless" in the history of this campaign. We will never know the identities of most whose lives were saved from starvation and disease through Quaker efforts, or of those who offered prayer and funds to support this work. Thanks to Sergei Nikitin's book, *Friends and Comrades*, however, the full scale of the effort and the names of many of its central figures are made known and brought to life.

Nikitin's book is organized into five broad areas, four of which correspond to the chronology of British and U.S. Quaker relief and reconstruction work in Russia:

- **Assistance to First World War refugees in 1916-18**
- **Assistance to children suffering in 1920-21 as a result of the post-revolutionary Russian Civil War**
- **The massive famine relief, medical aid, and agricultural rehabilitation efforts of 1921-27 centered upon the settlements of Buzuluk and Sorochinskoe (southeast of Samara), and the continued official Quaker presence in the USSR until 1931**
- **Individual Friends' continuing involvements in the Soviet Union after 1931**
- **Reflections on the complex relationships between Friends and the Soviet authorities throughout this history.**

Missions of this magnitude generate an enormous amount of archival material—logistical records and ledgers; official and unofficial correspondence among every conceivable subset of actors; public relations and fundraising materials; news accounts; photos, films, and graphics of all kinds; and memoirs. It is a huge challenge to make a judicious selection that can bring these voices into our own time with an appropriate mix of accurate reportage and fair analysis, all in a package of manageable length. It is my judgment that Sergei Nikitin has succeeded in this task.

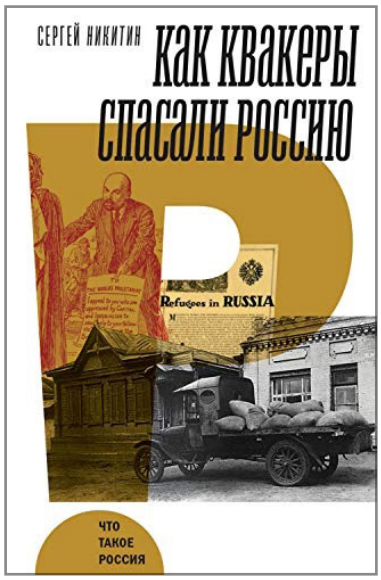
Previous treatments of this story include an article by John Forbes in the *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, "American Friends and Russian Relief 1917-1927," published in two parts (vol. 41, no. 1, Spring 1952, and vol. 41, no. 2, Autumn 1952). While Richenda C. Scott's excellent book *Quakers in Russia* (London, UK: Michael Joseph, 1964) ranges from the first Quaker contacts with Tsar Peter the Great all the way to her own time, more than half is devoted to this same famine and refugee relief work. More recently, David McFadden and Claire Gorfinkel told this story following a more thematic approach, in their book *Constructive Spirit: Quakers in Revolutionary Russia* (Pasadena, CA: Intentional Productions, 2004), to which Sergei Nikitin contributed an introductory chapter in the form of a personal overview.

As Nikitin explains in his new book, he had been gathering relevant archival materials and personal interviews ever since he first heard about the story of Quakers in wartime Russia and the early Soviet Union. During his 15 years as head of Amnesty International's office in Moscow, he had no free time to put this material together in book form, but his

retirement from that service afforded him the time needed to collect additional material and write *Friends and Comrades*.

Nikitin has taken full advantage of the archives already available to previous authors, although he often makes different selections from this material. All have described a crucial debate among the Quakers: Was their work of famine relief and medical aid in itself the main Quaker message to Russians, or was it a means by which Friends could spread their spiritual beliefs in Russia, and also build relationships with Tolstoyans and likeminded Russians? Along with previous historians, Nikitin quotes a memorandum to the Bolshevik authorities that was proposed—but not sent— in 1920 by those supporting the latter priority:

> **"We are upon an active campaign to overcome the barriers of race and class and thus to make of all humanity a 'Society of Friends'." The letter's authors were frank about the historical examples of Quakers' dissidence due to their basic principles: "This has led us to follow a course, on some occasions, different from that of fellow citizens; even to act contrary to the law of our country when our legislators bid us violate our principles, particularly when called upon to take human life in warfare." In closing, the Quakers asked the Bolsheviks openly: "Hence we seek to know your attitude towards us and our concern to unite in fellowship with Russian people. With that in view, we desire to ask if you will allow representatives of the Society of Friends to come to Russia for the purpose of establishing independent work for the administration of physical relief and to give expression to our international and spiritual ideals and principles of life."**



Russian-language edition of Sergei Nikitin's *Friends and Comrades*

Arthur Watts, a British Quaker based in Moscow, was viscerally opposed to this approach, believing that any stated purpose other than strictly disinterested relief work would threaten their hitherto relatively unfettered access to Russia. Nikitin takes up the story:

> **He [Watts] called the draft "A mild lecture and an explanation of our 'chief concerns'." Reasonably enough, he criticised the part of the text where the Quakers talked about social class: "It will be difficult for me to convince the recipients of the activeness of your 'campaign to overcome the barriers … of class'." On this point, Watts was right to reproach the authors of the letter of hypocrisy, reminding them that British Quakers still withheld control in industry from their workers, and that their British employees did not have control of anything. He wrote: "I have a strong objection to pretending to be better than we are."**
>
> **Arthur Watts also condemned the London committee's apparent caution and concern that Quaker help would be interpreted as an expression of sympathy for Bolshevik methods. He wrote that he could not believe that Quakers might abstain from helping Russian children out of fear of being misunderstood. He added: "This is really most unworthy of you. Did you demand a statement from the Tsarist Government that our help was not to be taken as indicating approval of their aims and methods?" He drew parallels with the parables in the Bible, asking, "I wonder if Christ thought of issuing a Statement of Aims before raising the Centurion's daughter," and made the sarcastic comment that if the Good Samaritan had drawn up a careful minute, "we might have admired his 'Quaker Caution' but it would have spoilt the point of the parable."**

Here, Nikitin is the only historian to include Watts' commentary on class hypocrisy.

Another new element that Nikitin brings to his book is his research in Russian government archives. Previous histories looked at these events primarily through the eyes of the British and American participants. For example, Nikitin touches upon the debates between the American Friends Service Committee leadership and the future Quaker president of the USA, Herbert Hoover, who headed the American Relief Administration and its program of famine relief. McFadden and Gorfinkel's *Constructive Spirit* goes into these conflicts in fascinating detail, illustrated by numerous extracts from letters and memoirs. While Nikitin treats this aspect of the history more briefly, he describes the awkward consequences of this conflict for relations between the British and American relief teams.

Thanks to Nikitin's Russian sources, we learn far more about the Bolshevik authorities' own secret reports from the hardest-hit famine districts, their scrutiny of the Quaker teams, their generally favorable assessments of those teams, their worries about Quaker influences on the population, and the role of the secret police in infiltrating and monitoring the Quakers' work. Nikitin also describes the sad fates during Stalin's Great Terror of some of those Russians who collaborated in that work—and, ironically enough, the fates of some who spied on the Quakers and were shot regardless. Equally powerful in their own way are the numerous statistical reports provided by the Russian sources. According to archives held in Buzuluk, "in June 1922, American and British Quakers fed 85 percent of the population in need in Buzuluk district!"

(continued on page 16)

Nikitin Review *(continued from page 15)*

Nikitin's own voice and viewpoint are the other distinctive elements of his book. He observes and comments as a Russian. He learned about this whole history with something of the same astonishment that I heard myself from people in Buzuluk as they remembered their great-grandparents' recollections, saying in effect: "How could it be that these British and American people cared enough about us to make the hazardous journey, face all the risks of civil war and famine, and even die for us?" (Typhus killed two of the women on the Quaker teams, Mary Pattison and Violet Tillard.) Nikitin reports on some of the dozens of interviews he conducted among people with first-hand experiences of the famine years, and among their descendants.

US Quaker Dorothy Detzer with clothing bales in Sorochinskoe, 1923 (Courtesy: Friends Historical Library of Swartmore College)

Nikitin covers not only such heroism, but also the mistakes, disorganization, and discouragements that inevitably accompany disaster relief in unfamiliar surroundings, where nobody arrives with adequate preparation, and everyone involved is learning as they go. Furthermore, Quaker idealism—in some cases, taking the form of sympathy for the Bolshevik cause—could have made them "useful idiots" for the new regime. Some Quakers naïvely assumed that their Russian counterparts would be as honest as themselves. Nikitin gives several examples of the Quakers' capacity to believe what they wish to believe despite evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, his overall assessment remains generous:

> **Looking back today at the history of interaction between Quakers and the Russian authorities, the Society of Friends clearly did extraordinary work. Through incredible effort, hundreds of thousands of people were saved from death. Goodness, honesty, openness, and a willingness to help—these characteristics of the British and American Quakers left a warm glow in the heart of each Russian who interacted with them.**

Among the book's useful supplementary material is a detailed chronology and a roster of every team member involved in the missions of 1916-19 and 1920-31. The author additionally includes many archival photographs, as well as bibliographies of his English-language and Russian-language sources. ♦

Johan Maurer *has served as general secretary of Friends United Meeting and editor of* Quaker Life. *He taught classes in English, American Studies, and Mass Media at the New Humanities Institute in Elektrostal, Russia, during 2007-17. In 2008 and 2011 he visited Buzuluk, Sorochinsk [formerly Sorochinskoe], Totskoe and other famine-related sites.*

The quarterly *East-West Church Report* explores Christian life in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. We focus on:

- church-state, interfaith, and interchurch relations
- emerging threats to religious freedom for all
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