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RUSSIA

Broken Idols,
Solemn Dreams

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God wrote to the official atheist magazine, *Science and Religion*, that she wore a cross "as a symbol of the invincibility of the Russian people. Our people went at their enemies with the cross, and won. A mother would see her son off to a war and bless him with a cross . . . I see it as a powerful force which can repel any evil. In the cross lies the history of the Russian people." The magazine's editorial board replied irritably that the cross, also worn by Teuton knights on their armor and featured by the Nazis in the highest military medals, was "used by would-be enslavers of your own motherland." The editors concluded: "The cross is not exclusively a Russian symbol and therefore is not a national, but a purely religious one." But her argument must have touched many Russians, for otherwise the atheist magazine would not have felt compelled to publish and rebut it.

And so the creations of the church hover among intersecting beliefs, admired from this angle and that, raised as images of one faith or another, revealing and masking motives in a complex game. I remember in 1979 when Handel's *Messiah* was performed in Moscow for the first time since the Revolution. It was done on Good Friday in the Great Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory. As with all performances, this was authorized by the Ministry of Culture. Moscow was buzzing. Some chords of sympathy in the hierarchy? Some safety valve to release the people's yearning, to make the church less of a taboo and thus less lustrous?

The authorities' ambivalence has made casual affiliation with the church a relatively safe form of fairly private protest. "In many cases it's an act of dissent, not an act of faith," said a nonreligious mathematician. "By this step, they deny the official ideology." They possess something of their own, quietly, something apart from the flat surface of Communist conviction. "Official religion," said the mathematician, "is the only permissible outlook other than Marxism-Leninism." Lev Kopelev explained it through the term *sobor*, which in Russian has two overlapping meanings. It is the word for "temple" or "cathedral," and the root of words meaning "to gather," "to collect," "meeting," "gathering." "The people have a need to bring themselves together," Lev said. "The party is also a *sobor*, but it makes demands. The church is the meekest one. The church does not oblige or press so much. It is an opiate. Soothing."

Marx's famous "opium of the people" epithet is actually part of a fuller, more compassionate passage written in a tone of pity.

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature," he wrote, "the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of soulless stagnation. It is the opium of the people."*

Lenin was harsher: "Every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness, . . . vileness of the most dangerous kind, 'contagion' of the most abominable kind. Millions of filthy deeds, acts of violence and physical contagions are far less dangerous than the subtle, spiritual idea of a God decked out in the smartest 'ideological' costumes."†

Basic Soviet theory has envisioned the natural withering away of the church as the aged men and women raised in its traditions die, and the younger breed of "Soviet man" rises into adulthood in a society that has no need of the archaic, the unscientific. This may be why the elderly are usually left to worship openly, mostly old women hunched and bundled in heavy coats, muttering prayers, kneeling on stone floors, carrying candles in trembling hands—images of a supposedly dying rite. The young and middle-aged are the focus of officialdom's concern. To lure the young away from midnight Easter services, state movie houses usually run American and West European films that can never be seen any other time; the only showings are at midnight. For good measure, Komsomol activists and plainclothesmen ring the churches, letting through the old and screening out the young. Names are taken, and there are repercussions at schools and places of employment for those caught trying to enter. The severity depends on the period and the prevailing atmosphere, which shifts from year to year, from generation to generation. One linguist friend of mine, now middle-aged, remembers his grandfather as a church elder in Zagorsk, the residence of the patriarch and the site of the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery dating from the fourteenth century. But the old man's son—my friend's father—was a strident Komsomol leader in Stalin's time who tore down icons and blocked church doors. Now the linguist finds himself attracted to the art and music of the church, though not to its faith.

The original Soviet Constitution of 1918 permitted "freedom of religious and antireligious propaganda." If this reflected a certainty

*Marx and Engels, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 385, 1st ed. (Moscow: Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, 1938-48), cited in Robert Conquest, ed., *Religion in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: Praeger, 1968).

†Lenin, *Works*, vol. 35, pp. 89-90, 93, 4th ed. (Moscow: Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, 1941-50).