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Church Makes Efforts at Gulag Remembrance

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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Ever fewer Russians display much interest in Stalin's system of camps, the notorious gulag through which millions of their ancestors passed and in which a large number died, despite new efforts by the Orthodox Church to encourage attention to and repentance of one aspect of that tragic chapter in their national life.

The Church, however, from Patriarch Kirill on down, is almost exclusively concerned with memorializing Orthodox hierarchs, priests and believers who perished in the gulag rather than with recalling all those who suffered from Stalin's crimes, argues Boris Kolymagin, a poet and specialist on Russian religious life, in an article in Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

On the one hand, he suggests, speaking about "the victims of Stalinism" now is so uncommon that anything the Church is doing in this area is important. But on the other, Kolymagin says, the Church's focus on its own former leaders to the exclusion of other gulag victims not only further distorts history but implies that some who perished are more worthy of recollection

than others.

Moreover, he continues, much of the Church's activity seems more directed at attracting media attention than at increasing the attention of Russians to what happened in the past.

This aspect of the Patriarch's campaign was much in evidence at a recent event where a stone from the Solovetsky camps was brought to Moscow and an eternal flame lit. Not only did participants in this action have to pass through a militia line to take part, but the "selectiveness" of the leaders of the groups involved was highlighted both by the suggestion that an Orthodox Church should be put in front of the Lubyanka where the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinsky used to stand and by the content of the speeches at the meeting.

Speaker after speaker, Kolymagin notes, "recalled only Orthodox believers" in speaking about those who suffered and often died in Stalin's camps. "Not a word was said about the other victims of the gulag and about remembering them" or about the need for "popular repentance" for what had happened.

Moreover &mdash and this may be the most disturbing feature of all given the current ideological climate in Russia &mdash nothing was said about those who committed the crimes in Stalin's times but only about the victims of those crimes, as if they somehow suffered but no one was really guilty or needed to be held responsible.

But despite these limitations, at a time when "ever fewer people are reading [Solzhenitsyn's] 'gulag Archipelago'" and when President Dmitry Medvedev's creation of a commission to fight "the falsification of the history of the fatherland" makes it likely that even fewer will do so in the future, the actions of the Church are important, Kolymagin suggests.

The Church's activities in this regard have taken two forms: one very public and one less noticed but perhaps ultimately more influential. The public form includes the much-discussed "anti-Stalinist" interview of Archbishop Ilarion, who now heads the external affairs department of the Patriarchate, and the statements of Patriarch Kirill himself.

When Kirill visited Ukraine, for example, the patriarch spoke at the memorial to the victims of the Stalin-era famine in that country in terms that left little doubt that he viewed these as crimes against humanity. In the face of criticism in the wake of the OSCE's equation of Stalinism and Nazism, he retreated. But, Kolymagin suggests, the reason for that is obvious: In the first case, he was speaking "as a man of the Church; in the second, as a politician."

At the same time and as his visit to Solovki showed, Patriarch Kirill has engaged in a more personal and private dialogue in which he and his hierarchs talk about their own parents and grandparents who died in the gulag, thus adopting "a tone that is very important in conversations with young people" who often view the 1930s as ancient history.

Unfortunately, Kolymagin concludes, this focus on Orthodox victims of Stalin's crimes, while important, has the effect of ignoring the millions of others who suffered or died as well,

something that is morally significant and politically important given that there are now some 800,000 relatives of victims who even now cannot secure information about them.

But perhaps the most important comments in Kolymagin's article about both the importance and the limitations of the Orthodox Church's activities were offered by the grandson of Father Pavel Florensky, the great Orthodox philosopher who died in the Solovki camps.

On the one hand, he said, Russians now should remember that "even in the most extreme conditions, the individual as a personality [and not just as a religious actor] could survive." And on the other, if Russians now refuse to learn from the past, then "there will be new political and religious repressions and persecutions."

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