



The End of the Atheist Empire

Every person who raises arms against his neighbor,
against unarmed civilians, will be taking upon his soul
a very profound sin which will separate him from the
Church and from God.

—Patriarch Aleksy's address to the nation, 1:42 A.M., August 21, 1991

ON AUGUST 19, 1991, SOVIET KGB and party hard-liners returned from their dachas and summer vacations to Moscow, determined to suppress the democratic movement born when Boris Yeltsin had been elected president of the Russian Republic just two months earlier. He was the first popularly elected leader in the thousand-year history of the Russian people. Yeltsin threatened to exercise the Russian Republic's legal right under the country's constitution to withdraw from the multinational state. The Soviet system, always officially proclaimed a voluntary union, was in danger of being hoist by its own petard. The junta, led by Vladimir Kryuchkov, head of the KGB, seized television and radio stations and, with the majestic music of *Swan Lake* as background, announced on the airwaves that it had formed a "State Emergency Committee" and was "taking supreme power in the USSR." Earlier on the previous evening of August 18 just before 5:00 P.M., it had taken captive, in the government dacha in Yalta on the Black Sea, the president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev. His chief of staff played the Judas, accompanied by Politburo member Oleg Shenin and a small clutch of party myrmidons. They demanded he either sign a decree declaring a state of emergency or resign. Courageously, Gorbachev refused to do either. Nevertheless, the traitors confiscated the codes needed to launch the Soviet nuclear arsenal and confined him and his family to house arrest. He was now nowhere to be seen. The KGB plotters made just one mistake: they missed taking prisoner Boris Yeltsin.

The CPSU and KGB hard-liners had worried about glasnost and perestroika when Gorbachev announced them as policies after he became general secretary of the CPSU in March 1985. But he first provoked a sharp

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reaction on March 8, 1991, when he unveiled the draft of a new, conciliatory union treaty. It proposed a new name for the country omitting the words “Socialist” and “Soviet.” Even though the republics were offered much greater autonomy, allowing them to control their own economic development, sign international treaties, and establish separate diplomatic missions, only nine of the fifteen Soviet republics participated in the referendum. While Gorbachev continued to work on a draft treaty acceptable to all, the KGB and party bosses knew there could be no compromise. They recalled only too well the earlier loss of central control when Gorbachev had released a little nugget of glasnost to the Baltic States. In a radio address on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, Gorbachev admitted that Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia had been forcibly incorporated into the USSR. Western historians knew this perfectly well, having read the pact’s secret protocols, but the Soviet population had been fed the party line that the Baltic States had “volunteered” for the privilege. Backing and filling, Gorbachev had immediately argued that a “common destiny” had been forged for all republics, so everyone should still stay together. But countless numbers of protesters linked hands to form human chains spanning the borders of the three Baltic satellites.

Even worse for the party and KGB sclerotics, shortly thereafter on September 10, 1989, Austria took down twelve and a half miles of the border fence with Hungary. East German families, who were legally free to travel to Hungary, now saw a safe, though circuitous escape route to West Germany. They loaded their cars and set off. The party’s East German satrap, Erich Honecker, implored Gorbachev to order the Red Army (which was still deployed in Hungary) to forcibly put the barrier back up and open fire on the caravans. He refused, and the floodgates stayed open. The last person shot trying to make it over the Berlin Wall died in February 1989. Within six months, he could have strolled across unchallenged. East Germany itself, the jewel of the Warsaw Pact crown, was no more. Honecker, once all-powerful dictator, suddenly became a fugitive, not knowing whether he would be arrested or shot on sight. After all, that was the treatment he had meted out in the past to innocent citizens.

At this critical hour, Gorbachev’s passive response to Yeltsin’s challenge threatened the existence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics itself. Yeltsin wanted to sign a new union treaty that would loosen the bonds of the country to a far great extent than Gorbachev had proposed. The plotters very much doubted that anything acceptable to Yeltsin would preserve the party as the country’s leading force, and the KGB as the party’s “sword and shield.”

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They feared that they too would soon be perestroika-ed right out of their jobs and privileges. And so it came to pass, but the decisive challenge emerged from a totally unexpected source.

With Gorbachev safely tucked away at Yalta, the plotters wrestled with the problem of Yeltsin, now holed up in the Russian Parliament, a multistory office building called the “Russian White House.” He and his staff still had access to fax and telephone, and later to radio and television. He summoned the ordinary citizens of Moscow to defend the democracy—that is, his election—that had just been born. He stood on one of the tanks at 1:00 P.M., August 19, audaciously defying the junta. In a few hours, a loudspeaker announced to the Muscovites forming human shields around the building that ten of the tanks had gone over to the defenders of the Russian White House.

By an extraordinary coincidence, the United States had an eyewitness and participant in these events who was also a distinguished Russian historian. James Billington, the librarian of Congress and founding director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, happened to be in Moscow for a library conference. When the conference broke up, Dr. Billington learned about the attempted takeover. He squeezed among the defenders and heard cries from the crowd: “A rhythmic chant of *mo-lod-tsy*, *mo-lod-tsy* [literally, “good guys, good guys”] was the crowd’s response to this, the first of many communiqués that ‘Radio White House’ broadcast periodically.”¹ As Billington notes, this was a “first announcement of an unprecedented change of allegiance by a military unit,” and it inspired the crowd ringing the parliament.

The unit comprised only ten tanks with their commanding officer, but the fact that Radio White House could broadcast this news at all came as a nasty shock to the plotters. In a critical move, the Russian Supreme Soviet radio service had circumvented the KGB’s seizure of the radio and television stations. It began broadcasting from the Parliament Building itself on 1,500 kHz medium wave. Then the Echo of Moscow radio station, which had been forced off the air on the afternoon of August 19, resumed broadcasting on 1,206 kHz at 1:40 P.M. August 20.² Now the KGB was in the unfamiliar and unpleasant position of having its opponents able to get their message across to the mass of the Russian people. The junta had decreed, “Control shall be established over the mass media, for which a specially created organ of the Emergency Committee shall be responsible.”³ Already its orders were being flouted, a sign the junta had lost Leninist efficiency in controlling sources of information.

Yeltsin used the media to make a tough speech claiming that elements of three divisions of the troops sent to storm and occupy the Parliament had

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crossed over and were now supporting him. Then the elite Alpha Unit, paratroopers commanded by General Alexander Lebed, a hero of Afghanistan, refused to storm the White House. Yeltsin spoke from a podium where now Major General Kobiets stood in full uniform, acknowledging Yeltsin's pronouncement that he had been appointed the new defense minister. The defection of just ten tanks had pulled the thumb out of the KGB's dike, and the momentum was sucking others up the chain of command over to Yeltsin's side.

But the outcome was still very much in doubt. Yes, the rings of human shields around the Russian Parliament were increasing by the hour. But the defenders had ten tanks, whereas the party and the KGB commanded whole armored divisions. If they attacked, thousands would die in the carnage. Yeltsin fully expected a bloodbath and tried to get help. He first called the West. He telephoned President George Herbert Bush and also John Major, who had succeeded Mrs. Thatcher as the British prime minister in the fall of 1990. Perhaps Bush recalled that he had telephoned Gorbachev just weeks before to warn him that a coup was threatening. Apparently the general secretary never shared this foreboding with Yeltsin. Gorbachev ruefully recalled in a 1996 interview with Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, "Bush phoned me and I said, 'George, you can sleep soundly. Nothing's going to happen.' That's what I said." Now Bush—like Major—could offer only sympathy to the embattled Yeltsin. Stymied by the West, Yeltsin then took a fateful step.

He appealed to the new patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, the former Aleksey Ridiger, who had been elected in June the previous year by a meeting of bishops. He had taken the official name of Aleksy II. Yeltsin's words went out over the national radio, defying the junta's orders to silence him:

The tragic events that have occurred throughout the night made me turn to you, to reach the nation through you.

There is lawlessness inside the country—a group of corrupt Party members has organized an anti-constitutional revolution. Essentially, a state of emergency has been declared inside the country due to the extreme gravity of the situation, and the laws and constitution of the USSR and of the sovereign republics of the Union have been grossly violated.

It is no coincidence that these events have taken place on the eve of the signing of a new Union Treaty, which would have paved the way to freedom, democracy, and progress and a resolution of the recent crisis.

Our State has been violated and along with it the newly emerging democracy, and freedom of choice for the electorate. There is once again the shadow of disorder and chaos hanging over our country.

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At this moment of tragedy for our Fatherland I turn to you, calling on your authority among all religious confessions and believers. The influence of the Church in our society is too great for the Church to stand aside during these events. This duty is directly related to the Church's mission, to which you have dedicated your life: serving people, caring for their hearts and souls. The Church, which has suffered through the times of totalitarianism, may once again experience disorder and lawlessness.

All believers, the Russian nation, and all Russia await your word!⁴

They did not have long to wait. Within hours of this appeal, the patriarch demonstrated that he would not remain a bystander but would throw the full weight of his position as patriarch against the coup.

On August 19, as the tanks moved ominously into their staging area in Red Square, Aleksy was physically only yards away (see figure 1.1). Inside the redbrick walls of the Kremlin, he was presiding at the liturgy of the Feast of the Transfiguration in the Cathedral of the Assumption (Uspensky Sobor), not only the oldest cathedral within the Kremlin but also the most important Orthodox church in Russia, having been begun in 1326–28 at the behest of Metropolitan Peter, whose move of the Orthodox see from Kiev to Moscow ended Kiev's status as the center of the faith. Still unfinished, it collapsed in 1472. As with other Kremlin cathedrals, architects imported from Italy, in part from the Ticino (an area in northern Italy and southern Switzerland), rebuilt it in its present form.

During the service Aleksy said nothing about the outside events but made an interesting change in the closing litany. Instead of remembering the “authorities” and “the army” as was customary, he prayed “for our country protected by God and its people.”⁵ Then he took a momentous decision. On August 20, only a day after Yeltsin's appeal to him, Aleksy faxed to the country and to selected sites around the world an “announcement” (*zayavlenie*), which challenged the junta's legality.⁶ Aleksy had already identified this as the key weakness of the coup:

This situation [i.e., the departure of Gorbachev from power, and his disappearance] is troubling the consciences of millions of our fellow citizens, who are concerned about the legality of the newly formed State Emergency Committee. . . . In this connection we declare that it is essential that we hear without delay the voice of President Gorbachev and learn his attitude toward the events that have just taken place.

Notably, the patriarch made no mention of Yeltsin. Instead, he referred to Gorbachev, a reformer with whom he believed the church could do business, the

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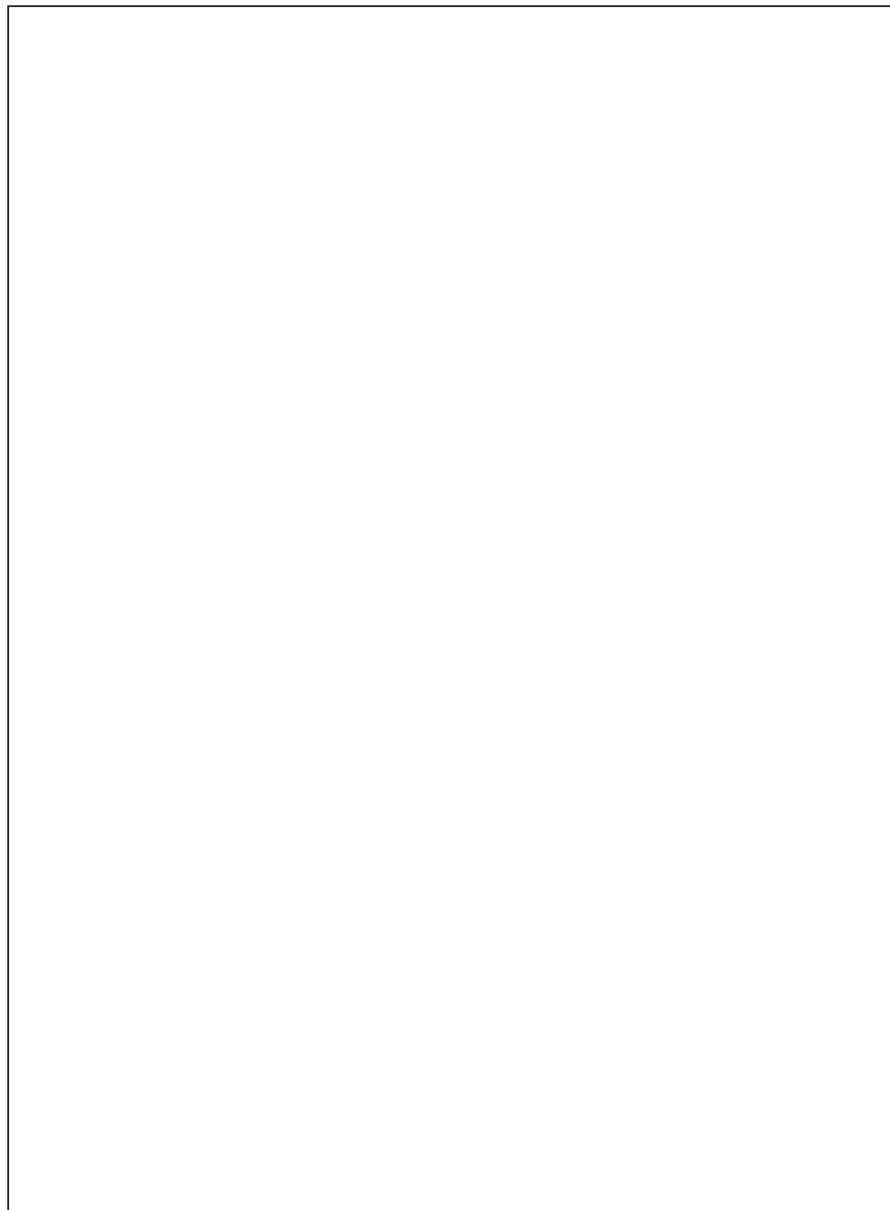


Figure 1.1 Soviet map showing the location of the Kremlin, cathedrals, Red Square, Metro stations, and the Lubyanka. (Photo credit: "Intourist" Map, Moscow, 1960)

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same attitude once expressed by Margaret Thatcher. Now Aleksy repaid the ROC's debts to Gorbachev's reforms by calling for Gorbachev to be allowed to speak to the country. But this would not be the limit of his help.

The remainder of Aleksy's "announcement" demonstrated his political savvy: "We hope that the Supreme Soviet of the USSR will give careful consideration to what has taken place and will take decisive measures to bring about the stabilization of the situation in the country." That is, he called politely for action from the top government body in the country, notably *not* the party apparatus.

Next, he sought to isolate the plotters from two other national institutions, the church and the army:

We call upon all parts of the Russian Orthodox Church, the whole of our people, and particularly our army at this critical moment for our nation to show support and not to permit the shedding of fraternal blood. We raise the heartfelt prayer to our Lord and summon all true believers in our Church to join this prayer begging Him to dispense peace to the peoples of our land so that they can in future build their homeland in accordance with freedom of choice and the accepted norms of morality and law.

Again, the patriarch touched delicately on the Achilles' heel of the coup, as he alluded to the "accepted norms of morality and *law*." Yeltsin had begun his radio appeal to the patriarch by referring to "lawlessness." Now the patriarch was reiterating the same idea to the nation, but associating legality with a "heartfelt prayer to our Lord" studded with the familiar language of the peace campaign—"peace" and "freedom"—turned back on the KGB.

Among the KGB generals directing the coup, a frisson of fear and righteous indignation must have taken hold. How dare Aleksey Ridiger, the very man they had put into power, speak out against them! The position of patriarch was on the KGB's *nomenklatura* list, meaning that the generals had the privilege of signing off on the occupant. And by 1991, Ridiger had been their man for thirty-three years. According to researchers at the Keston Institute in Oxford, who looked at all available documents, Ridiger had been "recruited by the Estonian KGB on 28 February 1958, just days after his 29th birthday." In February 1988, "exactly thirty years after his recruitment as an agent, Aleksy was given an award (*gramota*) by the KGB in recognition of his long service to them."⁷ After handing him their equivalent of a thirty-year pin, surely they had a right to expect some gratitude. And if just now their *drozd* ("thrush" was his code name) did not want to sing the right tune from his gilded cage, then all he had to do was say nothing and go about his business

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of presiding at liturgies and other harmless religious services. His silence would give consent.

But Aleksy would not keep silent. Shortly after midnight on August 21, 1991, a column of tanks approached the barricades around the White House. Two young men were shot dead. Tank treads crushed another youth. Crowds swarmed the vehicles and set an armored personnel carrier on fire. Aleksy learned of this within moments, and now took a daring, virtually inconceivable step. At 1:30 A.M., only an hour after this carnage, and minutes before the order was expected for the general assault to storm the White House and seize Boris Yeltsin and the parliamentarians, he sent an extraordinary “address” (*obrashchenie*) to all “fellow-citizens.” It was broadcast at 1:42 A.M. on national television and radio.

The patriarch began by addressing his listeners as “Brothers and Sisters.” These were the same words Joseph Stalin, the former Russian Orthodox seminary student Joseph Dzugashvili, used when, two weeks after the German invasion of June 22, 1941, he called upon the Soviet citizenry to rise up and repel the invader. Now the patriarch appealed to his brothers and sisters to rise up and prevent *civil war*:

The delicate civil peace of our society has been rent asunder. According to the latest information, open armed conflict and loss of life have begun [i.e., the death of three young men trying to block the tanks]. In these circumstances, my duty as Patriarch is to warn everybody for whom the word of the Church is dear and carries weight: Every person who raises arms against his neighbor, against unarmed civilians, will be taking upon his soul a very profound sin which will separate him from the Church and from God. It is appropriate to shed more tears and say more prayers for such people than for their victims.

May God protect you from the terrible sin of fratricide. I solemnly warn all my fellow-citizens:

The Church does not condone and cannot condone unlawful and violent acts and the shedding of blood.

I ask all of you, my dear ones, to do everything possible to prevent the flame of civil war from bursting forth.

Cease at once!

I ask soldiers and their officers to remember that no one can set a price on human life and pay it [i.e., that price].

I ask the Most Holy Mother of God, the Protector of our city, at this time of the Feast of the Transfiguration, not to withdraw Her protection from us, but to preserve all of us.

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O Mother of God (Mater Bozhia), help us to reconcile ourselves to one another, to the truth, and to God! Aleksey II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.⁸

The first of his interventions had been simply an announcement, but the address was both more personal and more magisterial. Once again there is the light touch on the theme of lawlessness, “the Church . . . cannot condone unlawful and violent acts.” But there is more. The patriarch does not claim to speak “infallibly” as has the pope in Rome since the nineteenth century, but liturgical language has its own sonorous power, and Aleksey was cloaking himself in the aura of his position and the righteousness of his cause.

When Aleksey Ridiger was enthroned as patriarch June 10, 1990, he was free, like the pope, to select a new name. (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI when he succeeded John Paul II to the papacy in April of 2005.) “Aleksey II” recalled Aleksey I, who had become patriarch in 1945 at the end of World War II, after serving (as would Ridiger) as metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod. While metropolitan, the first Aleksey had also given a stirring address to the people of Moscow. It happened on August 10, 1941, almost exactly fifty years before the current crisis, and also at a moment when the state and the people’s existence hung in the balance.

On August 10, 1941, the Red Army was retreating on all fronts, and German Panzers were racing toward Moscow. Desperate to rally the people, Stalin turned *not* to the party but to the ROC. He permitted Metropolitan Aleksey, one of the very few senior clerics to have survived the purge of the church hierarchy, to publicly address the people at the Epiphany (Bogoyavlensky) Cathedral in Moscow. The metropolitan appealed to their strongest motive:

Russian patriotism is known to the whole world. This deep and most fervent love of country is a particular characteristic of the Russian. It can only be compared to the love of one’s mother, with the most tender care of her. It seems that in no other language is there exactly the same conception of “mother land” that we have. We do not simply say “native land,” but “mother native land [i.e., *mat-rodina* or *rodina-mat*].”

In August 1941 the “mother native land” was under attack by “a strong enemy who dreams of crushing the whole world and barbarously sweeping from his path everything of value that has been built up during centuries of the progressive efforts of humanity.” The metropolitan continued:

This struggle is not only a struggle for our native land, which is in great danger, but it can be said, for the whole civilized world over which the

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sword of destruction is suspended. And just as the Russian people were called during the Napoleonic era to liberate the whole world from the madness of tyranny, so today has fallen to our people the high mission of delivering humanity from the villainies of fascism, of giving back freedom to the enslaved countries and of establishing everywhere peace, which has been so insolently destroyed by fascism.⁹

Then he called on the name of St. Prince Alexander Nevsky, who had declared “God is in Truth, not in Force” when he struck “terror in his enemies, the infamous ancestors of the present still more infamous fascist barbarians.” That invasion was but the forerunner of this one, another in the long line of incursions by *religious* foes, who aimed to destroy the people and the faith of Russia. The metropolitan then went on to single out another hero—Prince Dmitry Donskoy of Moscow, who as described in the prologue sought the blessing of Sergius of Radonezh before setting out to battle the “savage Mamay,” one of the Tatars who had oppressed “Russia for about three hundred years.” And the “holy Sergius gave him not only solid advice, but also his blessing to confront Mamay, foretelling success in his undertaking and sending with him two of his monks—Peresvet and Oslabya—two heroes as help for the warriors.” As a result, Russians won the victory of Kulikovo in 1380, just as they defeated the Teutonic Knights in the famous Battle on the Ice of Lake Peipus in 1242. Both victories the metropolitan credits to divine intervention.

Metropolitan Aleksey assured the Muscovites that the same constellation of heroes and the same heavenly aid would come to their rescue:

As in the time of Dmitry of the Don, of Holy Alexander Nevsky, as at the time of the Russian people’s struggle with Napoleon, the victory of the Russian people is due not only to their patriotism, but also to their deep belief in God’s aid to the righteous cause. Just as at that time the Russian army and the whole Russian people were shielded by the Blessed Mother of God, the warrior’s patroness, and had the blessing of the saints, so too now we believe the whole heavenly host is with us.

The metropolitan’s words turned out to be clairvoyant. The Russians would indeed halt the Wehrmacht in a magnificent stand; they then launched their counteroffensive on December 5, 1941. With the temperature minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit, oil in the sumps of the Wehrmacht’s Panzers and trucks congealed to the consistency of tar, and the drag on the dynamos prevented even starting the engines. As their cylinder blocks split and axles refused to turn, the Germans’ superiority in mobile warfare disappeared.¹⁰ Siberian ski

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troops (transported across the country in record time) outmaneuvered a force now reduced to moving at the speed its inadequately clothed soldiers could slog through the snow. Military historians attribute the Red Army's halt of the German advance on Moscow to factors such as their unparalleled skill in mobilizing "General Winter," just as their deep knowledge of the ice had helped Nevsky defeat those "infamous ancestors," the Teutonic Knights. But Orthodox believers hold that in 1941 as in 1242 they were "shielded by the Blessed Mother of God." In 1991, almost exactly fifty years to the day after the Metropolitan of Leningrad had promised that the Theotokos would save Moscow, another Aleksy rewove the basic strands of that speech. And he too would call upon Mary to save the capital.

Now it was not foreign invasion but civil war that threatened. It was not German tanks but the Russians' own Red Army's armor poised to attack. The patriarch began by telling them that once again the "peace of our society has been rent asunder"—this time through the prospect of Russians killing one another. And, like his namesake, Metropolitan Aleksy, he exhorted Muscovites to turn to the most important weapon in their arsenal, "the most Holy Mother of God." He reminded his audience that she was "the Protector of our city," and he pleaded with her "not to withdraw Her protection from us, but to preserve all of us."

These references to Mary as the "Protector of our city" tapped the deepest memory of the Russian people. For hundreds of years the Orthodox had believed that wonder-working icons of Mary protected them. Probably the most famous was the Vladimir icon of the Theotokos, the most sacred object in all of Russia and the inspiration for countless copies, several of which acquired wonder-working properties as well. The Vladimir icon shows Mary holding the Christ child in her right arm, with his cheek resting against hers.¹¹ The historian Vera Shevzov has studied this icon in detail and her account bears quoting at length:

The life of the icon, which began outside the borders of Russia, was intimately tied to the history of the Russian nation. The icon belonged to that group of Marian images that have been attributed to the brush of the evangelist Luke. [That is, it was believed to have been painted from life.] According to the Vladimir icon's story, it was brought to Russia in the twelfth century as a gift from the patriarch of Constantinople, Lukas Chrysoberges, to the grand prince of Kiev, Yury Dolgoruky. It traveled with Yury's son, Prince Andrey, in the mid-twelfth century to northern Russia and became associated with the establishment of the principality of Moscow as Russia's center. Throughout the following centuries,

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believers attributed the survival and welfare of the Russian state, especially during times of national crisis, to the protection of the Mother of God through this icon.¹²

The icon was moved from Vladimir to Moscow in 1395, where it is credited with protecting the city from the ravages of Tamerlane, also known as Timur the Lame. There it was hung inside the Cathedral of the Assumption; Aleksy had been celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration before it at the moment the tanks had moved into Red Square.

Russian believers are convinced that Mary continued protecting “Her” city throughout the centuries. Tatars again besieged Moscow in 1451. Metropolitan Jonah organized a religious procession around the town’s walls, with the people following behind the Vladimir icon and other icons of the Theotokos. According to the Chronicle, “Saint metropolitanate [*sic*] Jonah ordered all the holy orders to sing prayers in all the town, and all the people to pray to God and the Most Holy Theotokos . . . and the Tatars on the same night ran away from the town having heard the great noise in the town, thinking that the Grand Prince had come with a big army.”¹³ Even if Soviet censorship meant Russians had not been able to read this account for generations, that memory had been preserved in famous icons. The Resurrection (Voskresenie) Gates, which fronted on Red Square, had once had a chapel with its icon, “Our Lady of the Gates.” Recalling the same incident, a believer recounted that the people prayed to the Theotokos to intercede and “The Tatars never reached Moscow.”¹⁴ And one of her icons was considered to have wrought a miracle at the beginning of the seventeenth century. This was held in the Cathedral of the Kazan Icon of the Theotokos, outside the Kremlin walls. It was considered to have saved the city from the invading Catholics of the Polish-Lithuanian state during the Time of Troubles (1605–13), which followed the succession crisis after the death of Tsar Boris Godunov.

The Soviets had blown up many of the churches housing these miracle-working icons. They dynamited the Cathedral of the Kazan Icon of the Theotokos, just as they reduced to rubble “Our Lady of the Gates.” But the image of the Mother of God as “Protector of our city” was still buried in the deep recesses of the Russian mind. Metropolitan Aleksy of Leningrad had been able to tap that past in 1941. He had promised that Mary would again spread her protecting veil against the Wehrmacht’s Panzers, and Russian believers are convinced that she did so.

Now Patriarch Aleksy II closed his appeal to the “Mother of God” (Mater Bozhia) in the form of a prayer-petition. It is shorter, but similar to the famous *troparion* written to the Kazan Icon of the Theotokos credited with

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saving the city in the early seventeenth century: “Our zealous Intercessor, the Mother of God the Most High, pray to Your Son, Christ our God, asking for salvation of everybody, who come to your powerful protection. Protect all of us, Most Holy *Theotokos* [as we are in] sorrows and illnesses, burdened by many sins, praying to You with moved soul and humble heart.”¹⁵ Upon hearing Mater Bozhia, the Russian Orthodox believers in the crowd began crossing themselves and bowing, thus completing with their bodies a direct and dynamic relationship between the patriarch and his flock. Mary was being petitioned to save her city not from Tatars, Poles, or Lithuanians, but from the tanks and the soldiers of the Red Army. Would they obey the party and the KGB? Or would they be moved by this appeal to the Theotokos to help the patriarch and the Parliament?

Such an appeal, heard nationwide, was both powerful and dangerous. According to Orthodox thinking, if one’s prayer is not answered, then in the eyes of the faithful, the petitioner has had insufficient faith. (This explains those otherwise surprising failures when the miracle is not granted.) Aleksey had asked for Mary’s help to defeat the coup; if the coup succeeded, the KGB would order him rusticated to a distant church in eastern Siberia. Rustication would then be followed by his quiet liquidation, through either untreated pneumonia or the potions lining the KGB’s medicine chest. The remaining hierarchy of the ROC would be assembled to enthrone a new patriarch, and the faithful would be told that Aleksey was not truly a man of God, for Mary had not interceded for him. Instead, she had “spread Her protecting veil” to preserve the Soviet state’s apparatus. In short, if Mary did not answer positively, he was a dead man.

There is no doubting the courage required by the patriarch to make that petition. But it is fair to note that before he appealed to heaven, where, according to the New Testament, an army of “twelve legions of angels” musters (Matthew 26:53), Aleksey had been cultivating wingless allies with boots on the ground: the generals of the Red Army. The day before celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration, he had been reburying the remains of the former patriarch Tikhon (who died in 1925, shortly after being released from stringent Soviet captivity) in the Moscow Monastery dedicated to “Our Lady of the Don.” This church contains a copy of the wonder-working (*chudotvornaya*) icon credited with helping Grand Prince Dmitry Donskoy (later canonized) defeat the Horde at Kulikovo.¹⁶ None other than the vice-president of the Russian Federation, Alexander Rutskoy, whose exploits in Afghanistan had made him a Hero of the Soviet Union, was in the crowd of worshipers.

On the evening of August 20, Rutskoy spoke in ringing tones against the coup, urging his fellow soldiers to “cross over to the side legally elected by

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the people, the organs of power, the president of the Russian Federation and the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation of Soviet Socialist Republics.” Rutskoy was defending his own election, but through his disavowal of the coup, he aligned himself with the new patriarch. The alliance between the patriarchate and the military that had existed in the catacombs was just beginning to surface into public view.¹⁷

And by 1:42 A.M. of August 21, even the KGB’s own Praetorian Guard, the elite Alpha Unit of two hundred professionally trained killers, was leery of taking orders from the coup junta. As recounted earlier, on the afternoon of August 19 it had refused a direct order to storm the Parliament Building. Although this action did not occur on the public stage, it is highly likely that Aleksy, with his close contacts in the military, was apprised of it immediately. The refusal of the Alpha Unit to obey this command has puzzled Western Sovietologists, who paid virtually no attention to the fact that in January 1991 the patriarch had taken a very strong, public stand against Alpha’s storming of the television station in Vilnius, Lithuania, at 2:00 A.M. More than twenty of the defenders died. Aleksy’s response was forthright:

The use of military force in Lithuania is a huge political mistake, or in church language, a sin. I ask Russians who are living in Lithuania not to consider these tragic days as “days of victory.” . . . As for those soldiers who are currently in Lithuanian cities, I want to remind you of the words John the Baptist used when replying to the soldiers who came to him for advice: “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation.” (Luke 3:14)¹⁸

One Western diplomat stationed in Moscow at the time, however, did take surprised notice of Aleksy’s open condemnation of the bloodshed. When the national newspaper *Izvestia* carried the patriarch’s words all over the country, British embassy officials realized that the party’s ability to declare media silence was cracking. Sir Rodric Braithwaite, then the ambassador to the USSR, sensed that real change was in the air:

Such language from the traditionally sycophantic Orthodox Church was an unprecedented appeal to very profound Russian instincts. . . . for the first time since the October Revolution, a major Soviet crisis was conducted in the full glare of public opinion. No one could claim that he did not know what the issues were. A demonstration called by *Moscow News* on 20 January [i.e., of 1991] was attended by up to half a million people. Later estimates put the figure at 100,000—still a very large number.¹⁹

Party oligarchs were furious that Muscovites (Russians!) had turned out in thousands to support the perennially recalcitrant Lithuanians. They did

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not appreciate the irony that, in terms of their own ideology, this displayed “fraternal support” for another Socialist people. They also did not enjoy the spectacle of their man Aleksey Ridiger, only six months after his enthronement, breaking ranks with them. Thus, by August 1991 Aleksy had already demonstrated he was not afraid to oppose state authority, including Gorbachev himself, the same man whose hide he was now trying to save. In his January condemnation of the Alpha Unit’s bloodshed in Vilnius, he used the highly charged language of John the Baptist and addressed soldiers of the Red Army as if face to face (“I want to remind you . . .”), speaking without the intermediary of the party.

Now, only eight months after the violence in Vilnius, he again spoke directly to soldiers and their officers. In his dramatic address, he warned that anyone who took up arms against innocent civilians was taking upon his soul a profound sin, which would “separate himself from the Church and from God.” The threat of excommunication has not deterred Western armies for some time. But the patriarch was not appealing to a Western army. Instead, as Ambassador Braithwaite had recognized earlier, the patriarch knew precisely how to appeal to the “very profound Russian instincts” of the Red Army.

In hindsight, Aleksy’s address to his “Brothers and Sisters!” was arguably the final nail in the coup’s coffin. The immediate context was tense and fluid. By 1:42 A.M. on August 21, the young men in the tanks ringing the Parliament Building had themselves become the targets of believers pressing the New Testament on them. This itself was new to the Soviet Union, because the possession of the Bible in the Russian language had been deliberately restricted. But the Russian Bible Society had recently been reestablished—fortunately, four thousand new copies of the New Testament in vernacular Russian were available. Two thousand were distributed to the defenders. Even more importantly, two thousand new copies were pressed upon the tankers.²⁰ Priests had been performing baptisms in Red Square. The Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers (Komitety soldatskikh materei), an important organization of more than fifty thousand mothers of serving Red Army officers and soldiers, had already issued a public plea calling on “all soldiers and seamen not to allow themselves to be turned into murderers and not to carry out criminal orders.”²¹

And the composition of the crowd was leavened with many mothers and grandmothers (the famous and omnipresent *babushki*). Young men, shouting, pushing, and shoving, did not dominate. Had they done so, possibly the equally young men in the tanks might have felt their own testosterone kick in. The grandmothers especially, seen everywhere in the Soviet Union with

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their ubiquitous *avoska*, or “perhaps” string bag to do the family shopping, were a steadying and calming force. The KGB had not thought old women could be dangerous; they toddled to the derelict churches, but they were seen as harmless relics of a dusty past. The secret police had underestimated the willingness of these elderly women, believers all their lives, to now martyr themselves for their faith. And the young men in the tanks were faced with the prospect of being ordered to gun their engines and squash someone who looked much like their own *babushka*.

When Aleksy’s *obrashchenie* was broadcast at 1:42 A.M., the young men in those tanks and armored personnel carriers covering the square in front of the Russian Parliament Building were themselves surrounded. Thousands of ordinary Muscovites had hastily thrown up barricades, which they had been energetically strengthening with pilfered material from construction sites around the city. In addition to the priests and grandmothers, there were members of the old Soviet elite. A year later, one middle-aged lady, the daughter of a famous Arctic explorer, reminisced in her elegant apartment about the exciting hours she had spent in front of the tanks wearing high heels.

And the crowd contained Afghan veterans as well. They put their frustration and anger at that failed campaign—and the shameful way they had been treated by the authorities—to use. These men, hardened to combat, would not scatter at the first gunning of the tanks’ engines. With a charming sense of chivalry, they now began urging the *babushki* to leave, for they had begun counting down to 2:00 A.M., the KGB’s favorite “zero hour” for assaults, when the body’s circadian rhythms cycle adrenalin and testosterone to their lowest level. The Lithuanian attack, as Aleksy knew, had occurred precisely at that time.

Inside the building, the Parliament’s defenders expected the attack within twenty minutes. Igor Glazin, former member of the Estonian Parliament, was with Yeltsin at that moment. He claims that in the wee hours of that critical August 21, Yeltsin told all present that he was releasing them from any commitment to stay. Those who remained would do so on a purely voluntary basis. Such was the cohesion among the Parliament members at this point that Glazin and the others—recalling the band of Gideon and the Spartans at Thermopylae—were firm that they would stand or perish. And outside in the crowd, the *babushki* astonished the Afghan veterans by declaring the same thing. The young tankers realized they would have to flatten real live Russians if they advanced. The deaths of the three young men—one crushed under tank treads, two shot—brought home to everyone that this could turn into a bloodbath and a savage civil war, like the one that followed the October Revolution of 1917.

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It is impossible today to discover if an order to advance was ever issued. If it was, no members of the junta will now admit to it. Such is the desire among KGB officers to distance themselves from the actions of the coup that President Vladimir Putin publicly avows that he resigned from his beloved KGB that very August 20, though he had wanted to join since he was a boy and was by then a successful lieutenant-colonel.

However such *ex post facto* statements are evaluated, what is undeniable is that less than ninety minutes after the patriarch's address was heard, Vladimir Kryuchkov placed a fateful call to Yeltsin. At 3:00 A.M. in the morning of August 21, Kryuchkov told Yeltsin "there would be no assault that night."²²

"That night"?

Not for all time.

Had Kryuchkov been able to issue an order that was obeyed by the tanks, they could have dispersed the crowd, blasted the Parliament Building, retaken the White House, and imprisoned or killed Yeltsin and his supporters in the resulting melee. Just two years earlier in 1989, China's market reforms did not prevent the Chinese Communist Party, headed by a similar group of aging reactionaries, from having its orders obeyed. There were delays, but the tanks did roll and fire on demonstrators in Tianenmen Square. Thousands died, but the party's septuagenarian ideologues still retain power in the People's Republic of China. There was certainly nothing sacrosanct about the Parliament Building, nor was it unthinkable to open fire on the deputies. Two years later in a startling reversal of roles, Yeltsin himself would order tanks to fire on a recalcitrant Russian Parliament, and they did so, leaving the building a burning, windowless shell with an enormous hole and many corpses in the hallways.²³ At that time, Aleksy made extensive but finally unsuccessful efforts to reconcile the two sides, hosting sessions in the Danilov Monastery, official headquarters of the patriarchate. Furthermore, Yeltsin did not hesitate to arrest his former colleague, Alexander Rutskoy, who had supported him during the attempted coup. But in the early hours of August 21, 1991, the KGB could not depend upon its order being carried out.

Though no one realized it yet, the "sword and shield" had failed to protect the party. Kryuchkov's coalition broke up with astonishing rapidity. One of the junta, Boris Pugo, minister of internal affairs, committed suicide that evening in his apartment, when Yeltsin sent police to arrest him. The others scrambled to get on planes and head down to Yalta to make their excuses to Gorbachev. Dmitry Yazov, Gorbachev's minister of defense and another of the coup's ringleaders, ordered the troops to withdraw just hours later. As a

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cold, drizzling dawn broke, the seemingly endless armored column turned around and left the city.

The patriarch himself lost no time in crediting the salvation of Russia to the Mother of God.²⁴ This statement had the virtue of modesty, while simultaneously recalling that he had ended his address with an appeal to her as the Protector of Moscow. By crediting Mary with the miraculous intervention that secured a virtually bloodless victory, the patriarch was reminding everyone that he had the ear of heaven. Once again the Theotokos had, in Orthodox language, “spread Her protecting veil” to save Moscow—and Aleksy himself.

Many Russians agreed with the patriarch that it was a miracle (*chudo*) and should be attributed to their faith. A much larger crowd than had manned the barricades and surrounded the tanks now headed to the nearby Lubyanka. There, in front of KGB headquarters, they pulled down the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka, forefather of the Soviet secret police. CNN televised the event live, worldwide. But no Western broadcast showed what happened afterward. On the empty plinth, the crowd put up a home-made Orthodox cross, with its distinctive sidebar. The police removed it, but in a uniquely Russian compromise they left behind the graffiti painted in white on the black granite—*Sim pobedishi* (figure 1.2) Easily understood by any educated Russian, the words were written in Old Church Slavonic. They are the equivalent of the Latin *In hoc vinces*—“By this sign, [shalt thou] conquer.” Constantine claimed to have seen these words in the heavens next to a celestial cross immediately before he won the crucial Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, the battle that led to his acclamation as sole emperor of the Romans.²⁵

Constantine’s vision ended what Christian historians call “The Great Persecution,” the years of Diocletian’s rule that saw believers fed to the lions in Roman stadiums across the Mediterranean world. Constantine’s victory over his rival Maxentius paved the way for Christianity to become the state faith of the Roman Empire. Orthodoxy traces its roots directly to Constantine and to the city of Constantinople, which he founded on the banks of the Bosphorus as the “queen of Christendom.” Orthodoxy not only sainted Constantine but elevated him to the special status of *Ravnoapostolny*, “Equal to the Apostles.” For the crowd in front of the Lubyanka in 1991, the world was changing just as profoundly as it had in 312. The sufferings of Orthodox believers exceeded in scope if not in intensity those of the early Christian martyrs. Though not fed to the lions, for seventy years they were sent to “strict regime” camps, their church’s priests and nuns were deported and killed, its property was pilfered,

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Figure 1.2 The crowd that toppled Feliks Dzerzhinsky's statue on August 21, 1991, erected a homemade Orthodox cross on the pedestal and painted *Sim pobedishi*, the Old Church Slavonic equivalent of "By This Sign, Conquer," on the plinth. Though the police immediately removed the cross, the graffiti still proclaimed the victory of Orthodoxy over the secret police in March 1992. (Photo credit: John Garrard)

and its shrines were desecrated. *Sim pobedishi* paralleled two victories by the righteous over the evildoers separated by 1,679 years.

Today (2007), Dzerzhinsky's plinth and its white paint graffiti are gone. The square in front of the Lubyanka contains grass and flowerbeds. But Orthodox believers remain convinced that divine help, summoned by the patriarch, played a decisive role in defeating the coup. Seen from their perspective, the very suddenness of its collapse is part and parcel of how miracles work. Miracles are not just the record of the past. They are live events in a constant present, a *déjà vu* without end and without apology. On August 21, 1991, the Theotokos was in residence, again protecting "Her" city.

Aleksy quickly sold the "divine intervention by the Mother of God" theory to the Russian Parliament itself—that group of 150 or so men and women who had barricaded themselves in the White House with Yeltsin. On Monday, August 26, he conducted a requiem for the three young casualties of

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the coup inside the Cathedral of the Assumption. It was followed by the first parliamentary session following the coup.²⁶ The opening of the Parliament inside the Cathedral of the Assumption sent a powerful signal. Yeltsin publicly expressed his gratitude to the patriarch.

The Orthodox calendar itself played into Aleksy's hands. He had been conducting the service commemorating the Feast of the Transfiguration inside the Cathedral of the Assumption as the tanks rolled into Red Square. But the Transfiguration is followed at once by an equally important celebration in the liturgical calendar, the Assumption of Mary. The bodily assumption of Mary into heaven after her Dormition—that is, her falling asleep—is an article of faith for Russian Orthodoxy. (Mary's death is not related in the New Testament itself, unlike the Ascension of Jesus.) Once assumed into heaven, Mary becomes, in the words of James Billington, the "ultimate security policy" for the Russians.²⁷ The Feast of the Assumption occurs at the end of August. Thus, from the Orthodox viewpoint, the entire coup and its defeat takes place in liturgical time. In a merging of the secular and divine clocks, which the Orthodox read as "no accident," the world changed between the Feast of the Transfiguration and the Feast of the Assumption. When Yeltsin and his parliamentarians attended the patriarch's requiem inside the Cathedral of the Assumption immediately before opening the first post-Communist parliamentary session in history, the machinery of Russia's government meshed with Orthodox gears.

If Aleksy's interventions were important in the failure of the coup, then some might discern an additional element of meaning in an otherwise enigmatic statement by the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin. He is on record as having denied that a true popular revolution, that is, a revolution from below, took place August 19–21, 1991: "Let's proceed from reality. Democracy in Russia was in fact issued from above."²⁸ Putin's words have generally been interpreted to mean quite simply that it was Gorbachev who put into place opportunities for people to take charge of their own political destiny without facing immediate and certain arrest and execution. Kremlinologists, more eager to suggest that all statements are opaque, might conjecture that Putin's remark was a rueful accolade from one former KGB agent (Putin) to another (Ridiger). But Russian believers would be more likely to interpret Putin's "from above" in a spiritual rather than a political sense. Putin has certainly been ostentatious in his own profession of Russian Orthodoxy and has let it be known that he maintains a priest as his spiritual guide.

Western political scientists and historians, overwhelmingly secular in their outlook, rarely saw the hand of God active in human affairs of the twentieth century. They consider the claims of Russian Orthodox believers ludicrous.

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For them the demise of the Soviet Union is a matter for roundtable discussions that focus on Marxism-Leninism, Gorbachev's policies, and the measurable impact of nascent capitalism, privatization, and commercialization on a lumbering Soviet economy. Indeed, in 2004 the *Slavic Review*, the premier journal of the field, devoted an entire issue to the discussion of the fall of the Soviet Union without once mentioning either the Russian Orthodox Church or the patriarch.²⁹ Right-wing Republicans claim that the collapse of the Soviet regime was nothing less than a victory over Communism won directly by Ronald Reagan—a view that Russians themselves find both risible and insulting.

No one would deny that Gorbachev's reforms, particularly the withdrawal of terror as the means of controlling the Russian and the East European populations, put into motion a chain of events that led people to think and to behave very differently than they had for the previous seventy years. But to deal with the question of the collapse of the August coup without mentioning the role played by the patriarch's interventions and the activities of priests and believers of the Orthodox Church around the Russian White House is to ignore facts on the ground.

The coup's failure set in motion the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin's announcement that Russia would withdraw from the USSR made that process a certainty. Newly emboldened, on August 24, only seventy-two hours after the tanks had pulled back, the Ukrainian Republic announced that it too would exercise its right to withdraw from the Soviet Union. Other republics quickly followed suit. Finally, on December 25, 1991 (Christmas Day in the West), the heads of all the republics met in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, to sign an agreement dissolving the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. They created in its place a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This polite surrender of imperial power to former colonies echoes the British switch from empire to a commonwealth in the face of similar realities after World War II.

In retrospect, the election of Aleksey Ridiger as patriarch of the ROC turned out to be one of the turning points that marked the beginning of the end for Soviet power. Gorbachev's permission for the church to celebrate the Millennium of the Baptism of Rus, given in April 1987 to Patriarch Pimen, set the stage. But when the crisis came, it was Aleksey who publicly threw the whole weight of his office and his church against the coup, putting not just his career but also his life on the line. Would Pimen have had the strength to do so, had he lived on? The point is that Aleksey did, and from the moment the tanks turned around, a new period dawned for the Russian Orthodox Church.

How, then, had the men who planned the coup of August 19–21, 1991, come to make such a mistake in signing off on Aleksey's election as patriarch?

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Kryuchkov and his junta were not buffoons. They were the nerve center of what had been the most successful secret police force in human history. Every day they sifted reports of what was happening inside a vast country. Their agents penetrated every Soviet enterprise. Their operation to seize Gorbachev in the Crimea went forward without a hitch. Yet they fatally underestimated the coalition of forces—the people, the army, and the church—that they would face in Moscow. That miscalculation says a great deal about the failings of the Soviet system itself.