



Russian Pilgrims: A Peasant Army Invades Jerusalem

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Christian Russian Pilgrims on the way to Jericho, Ottoman flags in the tents (Jericho), Palestine (1898-1917). *Source: Library of Congress.*

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a noticeable increase in Russians who visit Jerusalem, especially at Easter. Although many book as tourists, there are rising numbers who are coming as self-identified pilgrims. What is interesting to this historian of nineteenth century Jerusalem is that in many ways the present pilgrims are a continuation of the large waves of Russian pilgrims that began to descend upon the city during the later decades of the nineteenth century when they were described as an annual invasion of a peasant army. This influx of mainly elderly women dressed in black ended abruptly with the outbreak of World War I; in the wake of the Russian Revolution, pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not allowed again until the fall of Communism. In this piece I would like to briefly sketch who these nineteenth century Russian pilgrims were, why they came and what they did while visiting the Holy Places.

The Russian pilgrims of the nineteenth

century were predominately peasants –80 percent according to the statistics of the Orthodox Society that helped to promote and organize their travel. Most were illiterate. The bulk of pilgrims were elderly because the old felt free to go on a pilgrimage once their responsibilities towards family, village and Tsar had been fulfilled and they were able to turn their attention to God and preparing for death. For geo-political as well as religious reasons, the Russian government wanted to encourage these pilgrimages in order to give the Russians a presence in the Holy Land; thus, the state assisted in setting up societies that organized these journeys and subsidized them. Pilgrims wanting to go to Jerusalem could get inexpensive tickets on trains to port including one very cheap ticket which entitled the passenger to crouch under a seat.

The steamship journey to Jaffa was also subsidized and would include chaplains who conducted services. The pilgrim would buy a round trip ticket good for a year; the return ticket, as well as the money needed for homeward expenses, would be placed in the hands of the officials of the Orthodox Society and could be picked up when the pilgrim was ready to go home. In Jerusalem, itself, a complex of pilgrim hostels were created to accommodate these crowds, In their midst was built the Russian Cathedral to give a visible symbol to everyone coming to Jerusalem that the Russians and their faith were present and also to provide a place for the Russian pilgrims to hear the liturgy in their own liturgical and iconographic language. These buildings still stand in West Jerusalem and are slowly being re-occupied by the Russian Church.

Preparing for Death, Representing Jerusalem

This brings us to the major reason for the Russian pilgrims to visit the Holy Land: that is to prepare for death by visiting Jerusalem – especially at Easter when they could be present at the Life-Giving Tomb during the ceremony of the Holy Fire. It was felt that visiting the earthly Jerusalem would provide them with a foretaste of their future home, the heavenly Jerusalem, and a means of grace that would assure their passage. It was both a preparatory visit and a ticket to the New Jerusalem where death would be conquered and peace would reign. This idea of the importance of Jerusalem would have been communicated to the Russian faithful by their Divine Liturgy and their exposure to icons. The Divine Liturgy interested people in Jerusalem and the holy sites by its constant references to the altar in the church as the Tomb of Christ; the actions of Liturgy itself was often interpreted as re-presentations of the various acts performed in Jerusalem and its environs about two thousand years previously. So if every Divine Liturgy is a re-enactment of the passion in Jerusalem and every altar the tomb of Christ and every Church a Holy Sepulchre, why not go to the archetype, that very tomb where Jesus' body was buried and from which it arose? The icons also influenced people to visit the Holy Land because it was so frequently the backdrop to the sacred scenes portrayed. A quick survey of significant Russian icons for the various seasons shows, for example, the baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River, the

nativity in the manger in Bethlehem, the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, the crucifixion in Jerusalem and of course the resurrection from the Holy Tomb. Since the theology of icons made them windows into the sacred realities they pictured and a source of divine energy, so the Holy Land must be in some way an icon of that which took place there and a valuable window into the sacred mystery of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection. But even more importantly these places could be, like icons, a door into the realities as well: in this case the earthly Jerusalem could serve as a door into the heavenly one. Of course, the particular ways that the imagery of the Liturgy and the icons shaped the desire to visit the Holy Land differed from person to person but they all agreed upon the efficacy of going – their lives would be transformed and the opportunity to secure eternal life more firmly within their grasp.

Bread Crusts and Burial Shrouds

The Russian pilgrimage was mainly a communal affair that began not in Jaffa but at home where pilgrims would begin to prepare for the trip by hoarding away old crusts of bread which they would use as their staple food on the journey. Once the mould was scraped off, this bread could be put in water to give nourishment in the form of a soup or bread pudding. The pilgrim also collected money from friends and fellow villagers to purchase holy souvenirs or to solicit prayer from the monks in the Holy Land for the souls of their loved ones. Once in Jaffa, pilgrims would be met and roomed in a wing of the Greek convent before traveling on to Jerusalem. After the Jaffa to Jerusalem railroad was finished this was a much less arduous trip than the multiple day climb to Jerusalem by foot but either way they were met in Jerusalem by the dragoman of the Russian hostel. At the hostel they were greeted by those present like long lost loved ones. As one participant wrote: "It gave me the ideas that after death, when, after life's pilgrimage the Russians come to the judgment seat, there will be such a feeling of brotherhood and affection..." (Graham 1913, 85) The Easter pilgrimage accounted for three-fourths of the year's visitors and centered around the Holy Week ceremonies in Jerusalem but there were also edifying excursions to Bethlehem, Hebron – the location of the Tree of Mamre where Abraham hosted the three angels (an image of the Trinity and a pre-figuring of the Eucharistic meal in Orthodoxy), Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee, Mt. Tabor of Transfiguration fame and the Jordan River.

It was the vision of Russians marching to the Jordan with their burial shrouds bought in Jerusalem waving like flags that intrigued, and perhaps bemused, the Palestine's native inhabitants. Once at the river thousands lined up on the river bank wearing their white shrouds while the priest blessed the water by dipping crosses into the flowing stream. Once the preliminaries were over they jumped, slipped or slowly lowered themselves into the water, re-enacting their being entombed with Christ so that later when present at his re-presented resurrection in Jerusalem they could participate in his victory over death. It all symbolized Paul's assertion that those who are baptized into Christ's death will share in his resurrection, but like all Orthodox rites

it was not a mere remembrance but an effectual, sacramental symbol which convey effectually what it represented.

Olive Tree Relics and Death Caps

The central feature of the Easter pilgrimage was the “Holy and Life-Giving” Tomb of Christ in Jerusalem. The Holy Sepulchre with its village maze of chapels commemorating the various elements of Christ’s passion was the home of the two major sites of Christendom – the hill of Golgotha and the Tomb itself. Every pilgrim visited the Church but during Holy Week the rites and the place coincided. The Holy Week services began for the pilgrims on the Saturday before Palm Sunday when they gathered in Bethany to march into Jerusalem, picking flowers and waving palms bought from Arab merchants. The occasion was a festive one with stops at various churches along the way and devotions at Bethphage on the Mount of Olives where the ass’s colt ridden by Jesus was collected by the apostles. Many pilgrims went out the night before and slept there in order to be ready for the procession. The event ended with a grand service at the Holy Sepulchre conducted by the Patriarch himself, accompanied by bishops and monks in sumptuous vestments. The Palm Sunday service the next morning was equally impressive with a large olive tree decked out with flowers was held aloft as the procession circled three times around the Sepulchre. At the end of the service this tree was cut into bits and distributed to the pilgrims who would cherish it as a relic and take it home in great honor.

On the Monday of Holy Week those pilgrims who had not yet visited the Jordan and prepared for their Easter Communion did so. On Wednesday many went to the monastery of St. Constantine and St. Helena to watch the consecration of the Holy Oil. Holy Thursday services began an almost twenty-four hour a day regime for the dedicated pilgrim. In the morning in the courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre, the Patriarch performed the Washing of the Feet service. This act of humility commemorated Christ’s sufferings and the gospels were read in multiple languages. Following this service the Russians returned to the Russian Cathedral for a Communion in their own language.

Good Friday commenced with the service of Great Hours at 9:00 a.m. and High Vespers at 2:00 p.m. At this time most pilgrims began to take up their places in the Holy Sepulchre which they would guard tenaciously until the Holy Fire on Saturday afternoon. For this long vigil, they brought along stools and a small food supply. At 8:30 p.m. on Friday the procession and burial of the Holy Shroud commenced. Two by two the clerical participants appeared before the Patriarch for his blessing and put on their robes at which time all was ready for the march to Golgotha. There, on a table, would be a shroud with the embroidered picture of Jesus covered with fresh flowers. Over the shroud the Patriarch read the last chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. The shroud was then reverently picked up and brought down to the stone of unction where, after being processed around the stone three times, as placed on it and anointed

with oils and wrapped in linen. This was accompanied by prayer, psalms and a short sermon. Having prepared the 'body' the shroud was again lifted aloft, this time to the Sepulchre where it was laid to rest after processing three times around the tomb. The 'body' was then visited and kissed by dignitaries before being sealed into the tomb and finally around 3:00 a.m. the lights were extinguished. Jesus was in his tomb but the church filled with expectant pilgrims, was still vibrantly alive.

The Sacred Fire ceremony itself began the next afternoon at 2:00 p.m. The long wait and the preparatory procession all worked to create heightened expectations and excitement. The Russians brought with them to the Sacred Fire specially constructed lanterns with two chambers each containing a wick so that they could transport the light from the Holy Fire back home. As the Patriarch and the Armenian Vartabed (stripped of all robes so as not to be hiding any flame) broke the seal and entered the tomb the church became filled with a sudden and eerie silence. Would it happen, would the Fire appear, was Christ really risen? These interrelated questions seemed to hang in the air. Finally out of the tomb would come the lighted taper – all was well – the Easter celebrations could begin. At this point the “hundreds of pilgrims produced their black-caps filled with sweet scented cotton-wool, and they extinguished the candles in them. These death-caps embroidered with bright silver crosses they proposed to keep to their death-day and wear in the grave.” (Graham 1913, 290)

Following the Sacred or Holy Fire came the vigil which ended with the Easter service at midnight in the Sepulchre; then finally the Russians would return for a service at the Russian Cathedral in the compound at 1:00 a.m. Once that service was over the pilgrims went back to the hostel where a real break-fast was waiting for them and the Lenten discipline gave way to feasting, dancing and the return of alcohol which most had given up for the duration.

Christian Hajjis

Once the celebrating had subsided the pilgrims began to plan for the journey home. Last minute purchases were made and if possible, shipped. Graham recounts one woman who desired a nearly life-sized Madonna for her village. She persuaded the shopkeeper to give it to her on deposit and then sat with the 'doll' on a well-traveled route and begged for the money to make the purchase – in a few days the debt was paid off. Others picked up olive wood crosses and similar souvenirs and packed them into sacks to carry on the long trip home. But their hearts, if not their luggage, seemed light because they had been to Jerusalem over Easter and they were the inheritors of a great promise that out of death would come life. Many brought a mark of their new found heavenly status home with them in the form of a tattoo on the arm to demonstrate to all that they were pilgrims – *hajjis*. (This Islamic term was appropriated by Christians to refer to those who had made the Jerusalem pilgrimage.) The true rewards might be heavenly but the status of a returned pilgrim in the earthly Russian was an added benefit.

The modern Russian pilgrims are no longer illiterate peasants like those of the nineteenth century and they might approach their pilgrimage with a slightly more skeptical attitude, However, observing them crowd into the ceremony of the Holy Fire and seeking to touch the many relics of the Holy City, I feel they are after the same assurance and are motivated by the same theological vision that captured those earlier pilgrims in whose footsteps they follow.

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References

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