A Voice for Our Time

Radio Liberty Talks

VOLUME 1

ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN

Foreword by ROD DREHER

Introduction by SERGE SCHMEMANN

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Foreword

An unusual thing happened when I was reading Father Alexander Schmemann's radio talks. I expected to encounter relics of the Cold War, transcripts of one man's attempt to pierce the hideous night of Soviet totalitarianism with the light of the Gospel, and in so doing, be a beacon of hope to the oppressed Russian people. And relics they certainly are. These brief epistles, each line radiating Father Schmemann's keen pastoral intelligence, testify to the tireless efforts of Russian émigrés and their allies in the free world to keep alive the souls of those trapped in the wintry ice of atheist tyranny. At the risk of damning with faint praise, this volume is an invaluable part of the historical record.

Father Schmemann, who began delivering these talks the very month that Stalin died, addressed a people who had been brutalized by over three decades of state-ordered godlessness, the closing of churches, and the mass murder of clergy. In Moscow not long ago, a Russian scholar, now deceased, told me it is impossible to overstate how thoroughly the Bolsheviks cleansed the public's cultural memory of the Russia that existed before the Revolution. This was Father Schmemann's audience: people who had fading memories of Christianity, and people who had never been taught it, except in caricature as a punching bag for atheist propaganda.

And so, Schmemann spoke plainly, assuming nothing about his listeners. At first you may be taken aback by the simplicity of these talks, but then you grasp the pastoral care with which he constructed them. These are not the mini-lectures of a brilliant theologian (though he was) demonstrating his intellectual prowess and rhetorical chops; these are the words of an

apostle who wants to communicate the liberating power of the Gospel that sets captives free.

He also spoke to his listeners at a higher level. Schmemann told the Russian audience about how the light of the same Christ who saves them also shines through the novels of Dostoevsky, the poetry of Auden, and the literary testimony of Solzhenistyn. And the priest explained to a people who had been forced to forget the great feasts of the Church, which governed the year of their ancestors for nearly a thousand years, how and why they made time sacred.

For thirty years he committed these words to paper then spoke them into a microphone, not knowing the size of his congregation. In his posthumously published *Journals*, Schmemann recalled a March 6, 1975 visit to the Radio Liberty offices by a priest who had just returned from a visit to Russia, and told him (Schmemann) that he is one of the most popular foreigners in Russia. "Nice to hear that my work does reach someone there," notes Schmemann. As he wrote this in his personal diary, we can be confident that his modesty was genuine. Think of it, though: by then, Schmemann had been giving these radio commentaries for over two decades, and still could not be sure if they were making a difference. He had faith.

As I said, these talks are an important part of the history of the struggle against Communism and the Church's witness to the remnant gathered around the radio throughout Soviet Russia. If that were all they were, their publication would still be a milestone.

But at some point as I read them, it hit me: *He is talking to us too.*

We are approaching the thirtieth anniversary of the day the Soviet standard was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time, and the USSR ceased to exist. Western liberal democracy was triumphant. Yet now, social scientists see that 1991 was the year that Christianity began its long, slow decline in the United States—a decline that has accelerated with the generations coming of age after the Cold War. Studies show that those born in 1999 or later— Generation Z, we call them—are the first truly post-Christian generation in American history.

They, like the Millennial generation that precedes them, will have been raised in a materialistic culture focused on the everlasting now; if they think of the past at all, they condemn it as a cruel age of unremitting darkness. According to the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, shocking numbers of young Americans express favorable views of communism and socialism. After hearing a 26-year-old Californian—who, during college, had discarded the faith in which she was raised—speak rapturously about communism, I asked her, "What about the gulags?" She had no idea what I was talking about.

It is hard to blame these young people. The culture that has educated them, informed them, and shaped their worldview, is not neutral about Christianity and its legacy. Churches, Christian schools, and families are conspicuously failing to pass on the faith. In 1966, the cultural critic Philip Rieff wrote that when a civilization fails to pass on its core beliefs to the young, it begins to die. By that standard, we are in grave trouble. Christianity in Soviet Russia nearly died by murder at the hands of the Bolsheviks. If Christianity dies in America, history will judge it a suicide.

Into this materialistic, culturally illiterate, increasingly godless world, crippled by cultural amnesia and an elite class that has made a religion of neo-Marxist ideology, comes the voice of Father Alexander Schmemann. In the autumn of 2020, I published a bestselling book about the lessons that Western Christians grappling with the hostility of the times can learn by listening to believers who kept the faith in the twilight struggle against Soviet totalitarianism. What a joyful surprise to learn subsequently that one of the most compelling voices of them all is that of an émigré priest from the Russian diaspora: Alexander Schmemann, who became one of us.

He spoke our language in more ways than one, Father Schmemann did. For those with ears to hear, in these broadcast talks, he still does. Today, with people who escaped to the West from the Soviet bloc warning that something eerily like what they left behind is beginning to manifest here, it might be that we Americans will need this prophet and pastor as much as the Russians once did.

If so, here, in these pages, are the messages in a bottle Father Schmemann threw into the Cold War's tempestuous airwaves. They have come to us across the sea of time, washing ashore against the tide of the times, on a beach made desolate by what the poet calls the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of faith.

Read on; the news is very good indeed.

Rod Dreher

Introduction

One of my bright memories of my father, Father Alexander Schmemann, was accompanying him as a boy to the studios of Radio Liberty. The station was then called "Radio Liberation," and it was the short-wave voice of an organization called the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia. My father and other Russians in New York called it simply "*komitet*." The weekly visit to the *komitet* became a fixture of my father's life, and with time it became far more than a duty or a chore—it became a weekly visit to other dimensions of his life. For me, accompanying him was an adventure.

Our family moved from Paris to New York in June 1951, when my father, then only twenty-nine, was invited to teach at St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary. The seminary was then a few modest apartments "uptown," on 121st Street and Broadway, nestled around far larger academic institutions—Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary, the Julliard School of Music. The great Gothic tower of the Riverside Church—the tallest in the United States—was visible from our windows, and on Sundays its famous bells echoed through the neighborhood. Our seminary was barely noticeable in this collection of great institutions—it had only about fifteen students, of whom two or three lived with us in our apartment. The "*komitet*" was also a modest operation, but in a far different neighborhood: its New York studios were in the heart of Manhattan, at 45th Street and Broadway, in the diamond district run by Hasidic Jews. Father Alexander began taping his weekly broadcasts almost from the time the station was founded, shortly after Stalin's death, and he continued them for the rest of his life, more than thirty years.

The adventure began as we emerged from the subway and plunged into the awesome canyons of Manhattan with their bustling sidewalks, stalled traffic, ardent street debates, and steaming hot dog stands, so distant from our academic oasis uptown, so "New York." My father always wore the white collar and black shirt that are the uniform of the clergy in America, which earned him special respect in a country that was then, and remains to this day, a country of believers. "Hello, Father!" "Good morning, Father!" "How are you, Father!" the most unexpected people would say, and Father Alexander loved it: He loved the city as much as he loved the northern Quebec wilderness where we spent our summers, where the skyscrapers were replaced by stands of birch and pine, and the crowded rivers of New York by the clear waters of our Lac Labelle.

The dingy and crowded studios of Radio Liberty were an altogether different universe—the languages of the Soviet empire mingled with the thick cigarette smoke that wafted over a clutter of papers, telephones, recording tapes and overflowing ashtrays. "*Zdrastvuite, Otets Aleksandr*!"—the greetings continued, now in Russian. Soon he was in a sound-proof studio behind a huge mike, and I would hear his rich Russian voice over the loudspeaker in the control room, very different from his English voice, but far more familiar to me. His tone was a mix of sermon, lecture, and conversation, and he was speaking to people he knew intimately, even though at that time we had no idea who was listening, or whether anyone was listening.

Russians, Russia, existed for us then as projections of our own émigré world. We prayed for "our long-suffering country of Russia," we hated Stalin and the godless Communists, we imagined people living in fear and deprivation. But in the dark 50s we had no contacts with Russia, so when the first signs of life began to emerge from behind the iron curtain in the 1960s, we hungrily clutched at them.

When I finally came to live and work in Russia in 1980 as a correspondent for *The New York Times*, I found, of course, a very different world from the one in which I was raised. But I was also struck by how much was familiar—how many children's stories I also knew from my childhood, how many songs, intonations, expressions we shared.

My father was not born in Russia, and he never visited it. But he lived long enough to learn that the Russia with which he conversed all his life had been there all along, and had heard him. His broadcasts were always based on faith, and in the end it was affirmed. When I began working in Moscow, I remember Russians telling me how important it had been to receive confirmation through the *Voskrenye Besedy*, the Sunday Conversations, that Russia's great spiritual legacy was being sustained in the West. And I remember, too, my father's joy at discovering in the literature of the "thaw," and especially in Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," that Russia's great culture and faith had not been destroyed in the flames of the Gulag and the war.

I believe the broadcasts were as much an integral part of his sacred mission as his work in the New World. Yes, he dedicated the major part of his life and ministry to Orthodoxy in America, in the West, and he ardently loved America and everything it stood for. But this mission was never in conflict with his faith in Russia, with being Russian. He had been raised in the golden age of the Russian emigration of Paris, and had studied under the great Russian theologians—A. V. Kartashev, Archimandrite Cyprian Kern, V. V. Zenkovsky, Father Nicholas Afanassieff—and even from New York he remained deeply involved with the Russian Christian Student Movement and the *Vestnik* edited by his lifelong friend Nikita Struve. In New York, too, he was always close to the Russian intelligentsia, and especially to *Novyi Zhurnal*, published in those days by M. Karpovich and Roman Goul.

His broadcasts were never propaganda; they could not be. They were, literally, "*besedy*," conversations, in which he spoke as a Russian to Russians, sharing truths and knowledge that he knew, instinctively, they hungered for. The Russians in the Soviet Union were not Cold War enemies; they were his own people who had become tragically separated from their own history, culture, and faith. Father Alexander never saw Russia. He intended to visit me once I began working there, but he fell ill with cancer and died before he could make the trip. But Russia was always in him. He continued his broadcasts almost to his last day. He returned to his first language, Russian, for his great last work, *The Eucharist*. In the introduction, which

he wrote in the month before he died, he said of the work: "I wrote this thinking of Russia, with pain and at the same time with joy. We who live out here in freedom can discuss and think. Russia lives by confession and suffering. And this suffering, this faithfulness, is a gift of God, a source of divine help.

"And if even a portion of what I want to say reaches Russia, and if it proves in any way useful, I will consider, with thanks to God, that my work is done."

Serge Schmemann
November 1983