

## ИСТОРИОГРАФИЯ, ИСТОЧНИКОВЕДЕНИЕ И МЕТОДЫ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОГО ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

### Dimitri Obolensky after the Cold War: Reflections on Saint Vladimir and Orthodoxy

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The article is devoted to Sir Dmitri Dmitrievich Obolensky, Professor of Russian and Balkan history at Oxford University, who is known for his study of the “Byzantine Commonwealth” and its influence on the Eastern European Slavic peoples: Bulgarians, Serbs and Russians. As a well-known British scholarly historian and philologist and the son of a noble emigrant from Russian Empire, Prince Dimitri Alexandrovich Obolensky, Obolensky tried to remain in close intellectual contact with the Russian science throughout the entire period of the Cold War and until his death in 2001. Obolensky, as a very religious person, was interested not only in the processes of transformation of the Russian society after the end of the Cold War, but also in the Russian spiritual revival that took place in the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The article analyzes the changes in the academic and journalistic works by Obolensky in the context of both global processes — perestroika, the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratization, the growing influence of the Orthodox Church in Russia — and local issues — family drama, a decline in study of both Russian language and history in universities in Great Britain and in Europe. The personality of Dmitri Obolensky, his spiri-

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Эта статья была апробирована в виде доклада, который был представлен в дискуссионном клубе Оксфордского университета в весеннем семестре 2016 г., и я благодарен присутствующим на моем выступлении за их полезные комментарии, в частности Его Преподобию д-ру Робину Уорду, д-ру Рону Трумэну, Его Преподобию д-ру Питеру Гроувзу и проф. Аверил Камерон.

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tual and his intellectual heritage as well as the results of his philosophical studies and forecasts for the development of the Russian society expressed during the last decade of his life are of undoubted interest to the Russian reader.

*Keywords:* Sir Dmitry Dmitrievich Obolensky, Slavic Studies, Russia Studies, St Vladimir, Orthodoxy, Oxford.

## **Дмитрий Оболенский после холодной войны: размышления о святом Владимире и православии**

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Статья посвящена сэру Дмитрию Дмитриевичу Оболенскому, знаменитому профессору русской и балканской истории Оксфордского университета, известному благодаря своему исследованию «Византийское содружество наций» и его влияния на славянские народы Восточной и Юго-Восточной Европы: болгар, сербов и русских. Являясь известным британским историком и филологом, а также сыном высокогородного эмигранта из России князя Дмитрия Алексеевича Оболенского, он вплоть до своей смерти в 2001 г. старался оставаться в тесном интеллектуальном контакте с российской наукой на протяжении всего периода холодной войны. Делал все возможное для сохранения связей с интеллектуальными элитами государств соцлагеря и, когда была возможность, посещал и участвовал в научной жизни таких стран Восточного блока, как Болгария и Румыния. Будучи глубоко верующим человеком, Оболенский активно интересовался не только процессами трансформации российского общества после окончания холодной войны и крушения Советского Союза, но и духовным возрождением, происходившим в России после 1991 г. В статье проанализированы изменения представлений о происходящих процессах в академических и публицистических работах ученого на фоне бурной трансформации реалий и формирования новой картины мира через призму как глобальных процессов (перестройка, окончание холодной войны, распад Восточного блока, демократизация, рост влияния православной церкви и т. д.), так и локальных сюжетов (семейная драма, свертывания научных программ русистики и славистики в Соединенном Королевстве и в Европе в 1990-х гг.). Личность Дмитрия Оболенского, его духовное и интеллектуальное наследие, равно как и результаты его философских рассуждений и прогнозы развития российского общества, высказанные в последнее десятилетие его жизни, представляют несомненный интерес для российского читателя.

*Ключевые слова:* Сэр Дмитрий Дмитриевич Оболенский, славистика, русистика, Владимир Святой, православие, Оксфорд.

Dmitri Obolensky was Professor of Russian and Balkan History in Oxford, a Fellow of the British Academy, and for many years — a Student of Christ Church. Although he became a very distinguished English historian, he remained in close intellectual contact with Russian scholarship, often in exile, throughout the Cold War, and with Warsaw Pact nations such as Bulgaria and Romania, and visited them as often as he was allowed to do so. He died in 2001, and his most enduring work remains his study “The Byzantine Commonwealth” which was first published in 1971. Although Obolensky remained an active

and productive scholar to the end of his long, complex and eventful life, this book has naturally tended to embody his work for succeeding generations, and was the subject of a centenary conference on his legacy held in Oxford in September 2018<sup>1</sup>.

In these circumstances the scholarship of the last period of his intellectual and practical life, after the end of the Cold War and of the Soviet Union has not received very widespread attention. Obolensky's work, similarly to that of all historians with a long writing career existed in changing ideological and political contexts. Cold War history is now a flourishing industry, although the simplicities of a generation ago are very absent today. Some competent and respectable figures in modern history would argue now that the Cold War never really ended; others — that it did but it still remains very unclear who won. This was not the case in 1990–1992, a time of cosmic optimism for the future of ex-Soviet Eastern Europe where a rapid transition to a neo-liberal democratic order was widely expected. The change of climate affected scholarship and scholars as much as other professions and led to a revaluation by governments of the role of Russian studies in many contexts. Obolensky's writing in these years took place against an often uncertain background. His marriage was in difficulties and had finally ended in 1989; Slavonic Studies in Oxford were in rapid decline, with the end coming finally in 2000 of the publication by OUP of the internationally regarded "Oxford Slavonic Papers", and there was a precipitous decline in study of both Russian language and history in universities in Britain<sup>2</sup>. The most distinguished Oxford scholar working on the Soviet economy, Michael Kaser, left his post in 1996 and departed to Birmingham.

Obolensky found what was a time of great progress in religious and political freedom, highlighted by the Gorbachev-inspired celebrations of a thousand years of Christian Russia in 1988 in Moscow, which he had attended as a feted guest, depressing in his own world. As the historian of Slavonic Studies in Oxford, Gerald Stone has written in his document, "Slavonic Studies at Oxford — a Brief History", the subject had been in serious difficulties since long before the end of the Cold War. This had not always been the case. The British government's principal position after the end of World War II had been set out in the 1947 *Report of the Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies*, where in general the position of eastern European research and teaching was reasonably well safeguarded by the exigencies of the developing Cold War. Russian language teaching was being expanded in the higher education institutions and also in the British armed forces in the National Service framework. It is often forgotten nowadays that Obolensky was first employed in higher education as primarily a language teacher, although he does not appear to have done National Service work. The military threw up a number of talented individuals who later became university academics and schoolteachers, diplomats or intelligence operatives, and a cultural climate developed where Russian was seen as important. But as the Cold War wound down, this situation began to change.

As early as 1980, a government report on Russian Studies in British universities recommended the closure of Russian in five universities and phasing out in thirteen more. In Oxford, Anne Pennington's (1934–1981) Chair of Comparative Slavonic Philology was

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<sup>1</sup> Byzantine Spheres: The Byzantine Commonwealth Re-evaluated // Oxford Studies in Byzantium / eds J. Shepard, A. Cameron, P. Frankopan. Oxford (forthcoming publication).

<sup>2</sup> See: Stone G. Slavonic Studies at Oxford: A Brief History. URL: [https://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk%2Ffiles%2Fslavonic\\_studies.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1drSSpyXoayoH452sKPKzn](https://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk%2Ffiles%2Fslavonic_studies.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1drSSpyXoayoH452sKPKzn) (accessed: 19.06.2020).

unfilled after her death, and downgraded to a Lectureship in 1984<sup>3</sup>. These processes were not new. Stone shows how Slavonic Studies in Britain fluctuated with views of and interest in Russia right back to its origins in Oxford in the late sixteenth century, and by any standards the post-Cold War period was as bad a time as any<sup>4</sup>. A time of political victory against the Soviet Union was also a time of Russian scholarship in Britain in retreat.

I “was garaged at St Antony’s”, as the fast-car loving Dmitri liked to put it, surveying gloomily the ruins of Russian studies in many British universities. He did not find his retirement from College very congenial. Although nowadays we may look back upon him as something of an Oxford monument, Obolensky’s own path to his Chair was not entirely easy or straightforward. The field of Russian history was a scene of many different methodological approaches and ideological assumptions, most clearly exemplified by the split between those like Obolensky with their roots in political and diplomatic history, literature and religion, and those from the social sciences. He missed, deeply, in the last period of his life, the intellectual securities of Christ Church, and dialogue with the Christ Church historians. This was because in Christ Church he moved in an intellectual environment where his deep interest in religion and its relationship to political ideology and social practice was respected and understood, but he found the entrenched and largely Foreign Office-inspired liberal secularism and positivism of some Oxford historians and commentators both ill founded in knowledge and interpretation of Russian history and limiting the scope of serious intellectual enquiry. The position of the study of Byzantium was important in this context. Although distinguished figures like Cyril Mango were active and in post in the University, there was little organic relationship between their world and the emerging dilemmas involving the position of Orthodoxy in the new Eastern Europe. To use Averil Cameron’s term, there was an “Absence of Byzantium” in this wider intellectual culture, in contrast to Obolensky’s thinking, both through his own past and his deep knowledge of the inheritance of Byzantium throughout Eastern Europe and the wider region<sup>5</sup>. In that thought the dialogue between the Byzantine heritage in past and contemporary present in Europe was the key to understanding both<sup>6</sup>.

His dialogue with friends and colleagues took place principally on the role of religion, Orthodoxy in particular, in the post-Yugoslav Wars, how the wars might affect developments in Russia and the Ukraine, how the Byzantine heritage was affecting new state identities, and what might evolve for the Balkan and East European Orthodox churches in

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Pennington was important to Obolensky not only as a distinguished fellow scholar and ex-pupil in Oxford and close personal friend but also as a religious colleague, with her strong personal Anglicanism combined with much Orthodox practice, i.e. singing regularly in the Choir of the Orthodox church in Canterbury Road in Oxford, and numerous scholarly articles on the musical traditions of Orthodoxy. See her obituary written by Obolensky in “The Times”, London, June 3<sup>rd</sup> 1981, also ‘Memorial Address for Anne Pennington’, given by Obolensky at the Memorial Service in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1981, unpublished, in Obolensky archive, Christ Church, Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> See: Stone G. *The History of Slavonic Studies in Great Britain // Beitrage zur geschichte der Slavistik in nichtslavischen Landern*. Vienna, 1985. P.361–398. — His Oxford study is unpublished but posted on the Internet; Simmons J.S.G. *Slavonic Studies at Oxford: I. The Proposed Slavonic Chair at the Taylor Institution in 1844 // Oxford Slavonic Papers*. 1952. Vol. III. P.125–152. — Many of the issues that arose in the nineteenth century have repeated arisen ever since.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of the ‘Absence of Byzantium’ in recent historiography has been most actively developed in the writings of Averil Cameron. See: Cameron A. *Byzantium Matters*. Princeton, 2014. P.7.

<sup>6</sup> In, for instance, a work such as: Clark V. *Why Angels Fall. A Journey through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo*. New York, 2000.

the future. This had some practical scholarly output, in my case — his contribution to my Bulgaria book on “Eurasian Pastoral Nomads and the Origins of Bulgaria”<sup>7</sup>.

This last period of his work, though, was also particularly fruitful in terms of his life as a public intellectual, something many of his Oxford colleagues were unaware of as most of them were unaware of and outside the debates then developing in Orthodoxy, and also in respect of the forces seeking a renewal of Orthodoxy in Russia after the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. He also examined closely the future of Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom and the United States and elsewhere in Western Europe. His writings from this period are not well known — one of the most important papers, “Church and Society in Russia in the Age of Perestroika” which was first published in Greece in 1998, and others in journals with a naturally very small audience — and this is a pity because they contain perceptive analyses of the situation in Russia around the end of the Cold War and are of much general wider interest, especially in the light of the conflict in the Ukraine and the recent development of the Russian Church under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin’s governments.

The intellectual atmosphere in the period immediately after the end of the Soviet Union, after 1990, was the period of the “end of history” put forward by Francis Fukuyama (born 1952) and others, of the “New World Order” of US President George Bush (1924–2018), of the growth of the Internet, and all in all the triumph, as it seemed, of scientific positivism within globalisation. This was reflected in Oxford, as elsewhere, where the liberal democratic future and globalisation under US and European Union leadership seemed a certain outcome to the end of the Cold War. Also influential was Samuel P. Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisations” volume, which had appeared in 1996<sup>8</sup>, a book Obolensky thought was deeply misguided, particularly in the way it was used in the media to explain aspects of the ex-Yugoslav wars. Under Lord Dahrendorf as Head of House at St Antony’s — who had only recently retired as an EU Commissioner before taking up the Oxford post — this cosmic optimism was taking on many of the characteristics the sociologists identify as a civic religion, with a belief system, and a final teleological conclusion that a European federal state might ultimately extend to include Russia. As American scholar Steven Walt has observed recently,

“When Clinton took office in 1993, the United States was on favourable terms with the world’s other major powers including China and Russia. Democracy was spreading, Iraq was being disarmed, and Iran had no nuclear enrichment capacity. The Oslo Accords seemed to herald an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Washington seemed well positioned to guide that process. The European Union was adding new members, and moving towards a common currency, and the US economy was performing well. The wind was at the country’s back. Life was good”<sup>9</sup>.

Against this background, how did Obolensky envisage the actual situation of Orthodoxy in Russia? How could its future be envisaged, and what was the conceptual and theoretical framework needed not only to debate it in academia but to convey something

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<sup>7</sup> Pettifer J. Bulgaria. London, 1998; Obolensky D. Pastoral Nomadism and the Origins of Bulgaria, London and New York, 1998. P. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Huntington S. The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order. New York, 1996. — For a later view on the role of the Vatican in US foreign policy after the Cold War, see: Massimo F. The Vatican and the White House // Survival. 2010. Vol. 52, no. 3. P. 51–66.

<sup>9</sup> Walt S. The End of Hubris // Foreign Affairs. Vol. 98, no. 3. Washington, 2019. P. 26.

of what was involved to the world in general? The prevailing view in the liberal consensus outside circles influenced by Huntington was that religion was unlikely to play an important role in the post-communist transition<sup>10</sup>. It is often hardly ever mentioned by the dominant figures in ideological discourse of the time. This lacuna seems all the more odd to us now given the undisputed centrality of the Roman Catholic Church to the downfall of communism in Poland, and the emerging role of different religious identities in the ex-Yugoslav wars, and above all, later on, the rise of Islamic politics after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It is, for instance, very hard to imagine the emergence of Croatia as an independent state from socialist Yugoslavia without Vatican and general Roman Catholic influences and support, particularly in Germany, Italy and the United States.

Dimitri Obolensky's origins and youth were important. He had grown up in a classic intellectual and noble but impoverished White Russian family in Paris<sup>11</sup>. Orthodoxy was as much part of him as a young man as his love of tennis which resulted in Cambridge Blue. He was a practising Orthodox Christian throughout his life and in the late-1980s was initially deeply excited by the possibilities for religious revival throughout Eastern Europe. This is borne out by his work for the Keston Institute as a Vice-President, appropriately recorded in Michael Bourdeaux's warm portrait in his "Guardian" newspaper obituary<sup>12</sup>.

He did not, though, link this with the inevitable triumph of a liberal economic or political order in Russia. He knew from his work with the Keston organisation and his own numerous contacts with exiled Russian scholars the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian church better than many in the West and almost anyone outside the world of Orthodoxy in Oxford, and in particular he saw many dangers for church stability in the focus on Kiev and Saint Vladimir in the Russian church revival<sup>13</sup>. It was after all, as long ago as 1948, that Stalin had permitted the publication of the first scholarly study of Russian Church history since the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, "The Culture of Kievan Rus" by Academician R. D. Grecov. There are many common themes in that book that are echoed in the attitude of the Moscow government to the Church there today<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> An exception was the developing work in Greece of Paschalis Kitromilides, who had studied at Harvard while Huntington was in the ascendant but as a young scholar his work was not yet well known in this period outside Greece. For a recent evaluation, see: *The False Continuity of Nations: Contributions of Paschalis Kitromilides to the Study of Orthodox Commonwealth and Nationalism in the Balkans* / ed. by S. Markovich. Belgrade, 2018. — For the general climate of the period at the end of the Cold War, see: *The Byzantine Legacy in Eastern Europe* / ed. by L. Clucas. Boulder, 1988. — Obolensky told me in 1995 that he had been invited to contribute to the volume but declined to do so (*Pettifer J. Diary. 1995* // Personal archive of James Pettifer).

<sup>11</sup> For background, see the autobiographical collection: *Obolensky D., Willetts H. T., Trevor-Roper H. R. Bread of exile: a Russian family*. London, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> The writer makes many salient points but perhaps over-estimates the optimism about what the Keston movement achieved in the post-Cold War era, invaluable though it undoubtedly was during the Cold War.

<sup>13</sup> For the twentieth century history of Orthodoxy in Oxford, see: *Zernov N., Zernov M. A History of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius. A Historical Memoir*. Oxford, 1979, — and on the specificity of the Serbian relations: *Radice R. Anglo-Serbian Church and Cultural Relations in the Interwar Period* // *British Serbian Relations from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* / ed. by S. Markovich. Belgrade, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> For wider background and the climate of Orthodox activity in Oxford in Obolensky's lifetime, see other books and writings of Nicholas Zernov, particularly on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church and also the writings of his successor as Spalding Lecturer in the University, Father (later Metropolitan) Kalistos Ware.



It sets out very clearly the narrative role the Kiev Rus was to play in forming Russian nationalism, then and now, with perhaps the most important section in Grecov's text a gripping account of the efforts of the Russian church to remove the oppressive "Greek" Metropolitan in Kiev and institute their own order and hierarchy of purely "Russian saints". The centrality of the evaluation of the Kiev inheritance to the future in the post-Cold War period is also illuminated in the more recent work of the Polish-American scholar J. Pelenski. His work on the Kiev issue, "The Contest for the Legacy of Kievan Rus" is one of the rather few scholarly works published in the post-Cold War period (1998) that addresses the issue of Russian clerical nationalism, the politics particularly, after the absorption of most of the Kiev lands into Crown Poland in 1569. As Pelenski makes clear, under the Soviet Union the contested heritage of Rus was seen as legitimately divided between three peoples, the Ukrainians, the Poles and the Russians, and this position remained in force, at least in theory until 1990. The practice, after 1948, was rather different. Pelenski writes, of course, from a particular ideological standpoint of his own, with strong sympathy for Polish nationalism, seeing this as blocking the way for modern Russian clerical nationalism.

Dmitri Obolensky's own interests in this period were mainly in practical renewal in the Church. He understood the modern politics of religion very well indeed, and followed the doings of the Moscow authorities responsible for "supervising" religious institutions in minute detail both before and after 1990. How deeply was he influenced by the works of twentieth century Russian Orthodox theology? He was widely read in the mystical theology of Georges Florovsky and the revival of Orthodox theology in the twentieth century but he was a very practical man, and found Florovsky's preoccupation with returning the identity of the church to the Patristic period unrealistic in the modern world to the same degree as the loosely associated view of some Russian Orthodox idealists that the Church could somehow enable the restoration of a social order in post-Cold War Russia that would reproduce — at least in part — the Tsarist social order. He was, in his way very much a conventional conservative Englishman in his central cultural identity, but one with an often radical bent, and his interests also focussed near the end of his life on the possibility of a new liturgy and practice that was both Orthodox and fully English. He was intellectually and spiritually much closer to the exiled Russian priest and theologian John Meyendorff (1926–1992), and like Meyendorff anxious to advance the practical unity of Orthodoxy as it was then in exile, in particular in the United States where many different churches only existed as outcomes of the activity of different immigrant groups. Meyendorff died in 1992, an event which deeply affected Obolensky, and as he wrote in his obituary of him, "The Death of John Meyendorff was a severe blow to the Orthodox church in America which he had served for over thirty years <...> from his base at St Vladimir's he began, together with Alexander Schmemmann, who was then Dean, to seek solutions to two problems which had long afflicted the Orthodox church in America. The first arose from the multitude of jurisdictions created by immigrants from Eastern Europe; these, more often than not, were organised on ethnic grounds. The second problem was the complex and highly contentious, relationship established by the communities of Russian and Ukrainian origin with the Moscow Patriarchate"<sup>15</sup>.

The concern with the renewal of the liturgy in English was particularly reflected in Britain in his relationship with the Glastonbury liturgical workshop in the mid-nineteen

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<sup>15</sup> See: *Obolensky D. John Meyendorff (1926–92) // Sobornost. Vol. 15 (2). Oxford, 1993. P. 44.*

nineties which he saw embarking on the same quest for an English-language liturgy as was being inspired by the work of St Vladimir's Seminary in New York City<sup>16</sup>. I think with his capacious but also often critical and doubting intellect he often found mainstream faith sometimes difficult, and he was distant from what became a kind of Orthodox fundamentalism. He did not necessarily see the revival of Orthodoxy as a force for economic transformation towards free market capitalism. His views on this are set out in his paper "Church and Society in Russia in the Age of Perestroika", which originated in a University sermon given in Oxford in 1993 but was not published until 1998 in Greece<sup>17</sup>. Some aspects of religious life in the United States troubled him in respect of the period of what has to be termed mass conversion to Orthodoxy of thousands of US and UK evangelicals in the late 90s period, as set out in Michael Harper's well known book "A Faith Fulfilled"<sup>18</sup>. This was linked to wider issues based on his view of the credibility of the Patriarchate of Antioch that are beyond the scope of this paper. It would, though be fair to say that in a world of reviving Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe, — he felt a possibly long period of consolidation and dialogue was needed within Orthodoxy, and it did not require the implantation of the often deeply conflicted vision of the US Evangelicals, torn between the characteristically American vision of liberal progress in the post-Cold War world, and an anti-political view of an imminent apocalypse<sup>19</sup>. Further aspects of these issues are explored in Andrew Sharp's influential book, "Orthodox Christians and Islam in the Post-Modern Age"<sup>20</sup>.

Conversion to Orthodoxy Obolensky saw as a complex process. In his theology and religious practice, Russian Orthodoxy was a religion of cultural inheritance, an inherited gift from God and conversion to it was a difficult, complex, often mystical process. At the heart of this was his continuing preoccupation with the possibility of a new liturgy in English that would be accepted by all Orthodox believers in the English-speaking countries and help overcome the differences in cultural tradition between the Greek and Russian language churches. At that time this issue was seen mostly in terms of cultural tradition. The issues that now have developed of quite intense international competition between the Patriarchate in Istanbul and the Russian Patriarchate in Moscow were then not substantially in the public domain.

Yet clouds were already gathering and militating against his worthy vision of a renewal of national Orthodox traditions within a spreading international Orthodox commonwealth. In parts of Eastern Europe, as the post-1990 period evolved, Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism very soon became deeply opposed bulwarks of nationalist political projects, as in the post-Yugoslav wars from 1991 to 2001; religion was already forming new nationalist identities, in both Serbia and Croatia. Some of these issues are very much

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<sup>16</sup> An important Obolensky paper from this dialogue was: *Obolensky D. The Legacy of Sts. Cyril and Methodius // The Legacy of Saint Vladimir, Byzantium: Russia: America / eds J. Bzeck, J. Meyendorff, E. Silk. New York, 1990.* — In it he is candid about the interaction of Greek and Russian church cultures.

<sup>17</sup> *Obolensky D. Church and Society in Russia in the Age of Perestroika // The Orthodox Church in a Changing World / eds. P. Kitromilides, T. Veremis. Athens, 1998. P. 39.*

<sup>18</sup> *Harper M. A Faith Fulfilled Why are Christians across Great Britain embracing Orthodoxy? Ben Lomond CA, 1999.* An earlier version of the text was published in Britain in 1997: *Harper M. The True Light: A Pilgrimage to Orthodoxy. Oxford, 1997.*

<sup>19</sup> For background on the recent issues: *Gavrilyuk P. Diaspora and the American Orthodoxy' // Public Orthodoxy, Fordham, New York. June 2015. URL: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2015/09/19/diaspora-and-american-orthodoxy/> (accessed: 19.06.2020).*

<sup>20</sup> *Sharp A. Orthodox Christians and Islam in the Postmodern Age. Leiden, 2012.*



alive today, as, for instance, in the conflict in Ukraine, the clerical-nationalist government in Poland or the current efforts of the government in Serbia to downgrade the Cyrillic alphabet's use in public life and emphasise the Latin alphabet instead, at the behest of the European Union. In these years when the ex-Yugoslav wars were raging, Obolensky was profoundly interested in the relationship between Serbia and Russia and the political role of possible pan-Orthodox links. He considered that the British media and "chattering classes" generally very much over-estimated the closeness of this Russian-Serbian relationship, although it for a while became more or less part of the conventional wisdom, and along with often gross misreading of Rebecca West, and nostalgia for Titoism, shaped the basis for much official sympathy with the survival of the Yugoslav state in the Milosevic period.

Yet while the ex-Yugoslav wars were at their height and dominated the newspapers every day, his mind was never merely headline-reflective, and always focussed on the bigger issues in Russia, and above all, the emerging problems with religion and society in the Ukraine. Although generally a strong defender of the ex-Soviet leader against his critics, Obolensky had had major private reservations about the administrative actions taken by Gorbachev to reinstitute the traditional role of the "Greek Catholics" in western Ukraine, and as early as 1998, he contributed to a published text that contained a penetrating analysis of the chauvinist and nationalist forces that were stirring in Kiev, and the responses from Moscow to protect what the Moscow Patriarchate has always seen as its central tradition there, both in the churches and outside them<sup>21</sup>.

In his opinion, a rational evaluation of the inheritance of Saint Vladimir of Kiev would be the key to the future relationship of the Ukrainian and Russian churches. He spent more and more time in Paris and the United States, and also Greece for long periods in the summer, as Jonathan Shepard describes in his British Academy obituary<sup>22</sup>. The Hellenism and Orthodoxy (in many cases by conversion) of the British/American ambience around Philip Sherrard on the island of Evia, and staying at Patrick Leigh Fermour's house in the Mani (a constructed shrine to the Byzantine architectural tradition) were important influences late in his life. Always attuned to local political developments in the Balkans as well as in Russia, these intellectual groups saw Greek Orthodoxy as the developing core of a new "commonwealth" based on Orthodoxy in Albania, Serbia and their immediate northern neighbours. This was the conventional political wisdom of the time, also, seeing the more advanced Greece, the only member of both the European Union and NATO in the region, and then the only Orthodox country in the EU, as a focus of a new Pan Orthodoxy<sup>23</sup>. I do not think, in Aristotelian terms, he rejected the Academy, he was too much a

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<sup>21</sup> See: *The Orthodox Church in a Changing World* / eds P. Kitromilides, T. Veremis. Athens, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> *Shepard J. Dimitri Dimitrievich Obolensky 1918–2001* // *Proceedings of the British Academy*. Vol. 124. Biographical memoirs of Fellows, III. London, 2004. P. 241–266.

<sup>23</sup> The conferences organised by Costas Carras and his associates on Halkidiki were also important at that time in these processes. There are complex issues involved in analysing what was and was not achieved, nowadays many Orthodox believers would ascribe their limitations to the perceived 'ruination' of the churches in the communist and ex-communist countries, compared to the allegedly flourishing and healthy church in Greece. This approach alienated many clergy and religious from the ex-communist 'Slavonic' countries it was meant to impress. In its way, the Carras 'project' was part of the extreme optimism of the early 1990s period where it was envisaged that Greek Orthodoxy would embrace the entire southern Balkans.

lifelong scholar to do that, but he did feel the Academies, not only the British, were often slow to recognise the evolving realities of Europe, east and west.

Obolensky's health was also beginning to fail, with heart trouble, and he liked to describe himself, as "an old tree with a few branches falling off but a strong trunk"<sup>24</sup>. This did not slow his intellectual production, with an outstanding Runciman lecture one of the last landmarks. He has also left us evidence of his opinions on Orthodoxy and nationalism in one of the most important of his last papers, in a book entitled "The Legacy of St Vladimir" that was published in the United States. He wrote in it, in a paper entitled "The Legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius", that "Religion was, equally, a powerful stimulant of national consciousness. The sense of a common religious consciousness uniting the citizens of the realm, together with awareness that one's country was part of the wider community of Christian peoples, enabled the medieval writers of Eastern Europe to express their concepts of national self-determination in a Christian form. The Metropolitan Ilarian believed in the mid-eleventh century that the status of Rus in the world was defined and assured by the Christianity which it had received from Byzantium".

Thus, "the Absence of Byzantium" is a very serious handicap to understanding, not merely of the obvious areas of academic enquiry into the past, recent or distant, but in trying to understand the likely role of Orthodoxy in the new religious and political landscape in East Europe after 1990. He had been invited to contribute to a volume on the Byzantine inheritance in east Europe as long ago as 1984 but there was clearly, after 1990, much more that needed to be explored<sup>25</sup>.

Obolensky did not interest himself with these matters only as issues of historiography, but was passionately interested in collecting data and analysing the evolving realities on the ground. We frequently discussed the conflicts in Yugoslavia, in his rooms in Observatory Street. An issue that preoccupied him was the question of the refoundation of Byzantine churches in the new post-1990 Eastern Europe. The concept of "refoundation" is of course very current in debates about Balkan Orthodox churches now, twenty five years later. A church such as the Macedonian Orthodox Church, with its Archbishops in Skopje and Ohrid, is seen in Greece and Serbia as schismatic and illegitimate and is not recognised by the World Council of Churches, but sees itself as legitimate as a refoundation in the central Byzantine tradition. The intellectual debates — fights might be a more appropriate word as they have involved the arrest and imprisonment of dissident clergy and monks in very recent years in Skopje — are often based on differences of opinion about whether a particular shrine is a legitimate descendant of the Byzantine heritage or tradition, or not. And these disputes nearly always involve struggle for control of pre-existing church and monastic properties, as they always did in much earlier periods.

These disputes are of course focussed very intensively on the city of Ohrid with its centrality to the definition and inheritance of both Bulgarian and Macedonian and Greek Orthodoxy. In nearby Montenegro they are based on fierce differences of opinion about the status and legitimacy of the new, post-communist (if Montenegro actually is fully post-communist) Montenegrin Orthodox church that does not recognise the authority of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate at Pec (Peje in Albanian). Balkan Orthodoxy is searching for legitimate relationships with Byzantium but of course this was always Dmitri Obolensky's ideological home territory. It was also a shared territory with his Oxford colleague

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<sup>24</sup> *Pettifer J. Diary. 1994 // Personal archive of James Pettifer.*

<sup>25</sup> *The Byzantine Legacy in Eastern Europe / ed. by L. Clucas. Boulder, 1988.*

Anne Pennington who had a deep commitment to what was then the Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Macedonia where she spent long periods in the summer vacations perfecting her already excellent Macedonian (a term both she and Obolensky were happy to use) and collecting peasant costumes and folk artefacts and popular Macedonian verse and poetry. Both Obolensky and Pennington saw folk and oral traditions in literature as central to their research. His original enquiries into the Bogomils that led to his first book were analysing whether it was a “legitimate” religion in the medieval Balkans, given its elusive and popular character<sup>26</sup>.

The possibility of transnationality in reviving Orthodoxy was always in his mind, although whether his dominant concept of a Byzantine “Commonwealth” survived the strains and pain of the ex-Yugoslav wars can only be a matter of speculation. As an example, in 1995–1996, Obolensky had become absorbed by what was happening at the shrine of Shen Gjin Vladimir in Elbasan in central Albania. Here there was a very long-established Orthodox church with Byzantine origins, built partly on the place of an ancient Roman religious site, near the city of Elbasan, ancient *Scampa*. It had been closed and pillaged in the anti-religious campaigns after 1967 under the one-party Enverist state in Albania, and it was my melancholy duty, as founder-author of “Blue Guide Albania” to record what had been happening there<sup>27</sup>. The shrine was and of course still is dedicated to Saint Vladimir, who in this context Obolensky regarded as essentially a medieval Serbian rather than Russian saint. The work was the very opposite of Rose Macaulay’s “Pleasures of Ruins”, more the tragedies of ruins. It was practical antiquarianism, to describe what remained, cast a tape measure over the ruins as she once wrote.

Antiquarianism is very near academic history in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Russia, and has an important role to play in scholarly research. Obolensky observed in 1995 that antiquarianism was a very valuable antidote to entrenched orthodoxies in academic opinion which emanated from Academies that were too close to communist or similar governments. But Academies can also become trapped by government-inspired consensus in non-Soviet societies. A new orthodoxy of “liberal” opinion was emerging about the post-Cold War international order in many countries. Although none of us involved in the debates of the 1990s explicitly realised it, a dominant “Western” Christianity was emerging as also part of the post-Cold War consensus which in terms of international politics would be dominated by the Vatican given its traditional international “reach” and substantial diplomatic and intelligence service. Here Obolensky was clearly thinking of his field and antiquarian research in his frequent travels, often with Hugh Trevor Roper, to liaise with British Association for Central Europe counterparts, as the recently discov-

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<sup>26</sup> *Obolensky D.* The Bogomils. Cambridge, 1950. — There are interesting issues deserving future scholarly attention in the relationship between the final version of this work, as published in 1950, and the original draft text, which was completed in 1943 and never published in its original form. In that version, entitled ‘A History of the Bogomils in Bulgaria’ (typed MS copy deposited in the Taylorian Library in University of Oxford, 2006) Obolensky puts forward a view of Bogomils close to that of the Bulgarian Orthodox church and uses almost exclusively Bulgarian sources to support his views. In contemporary Bulgaria there has been a major revival of interest in the Bogomils connected to the burgeoning cult around the popular mystic and medium ‘Baba (Granny) Vanga’ centred in the Petrich region in south-west Bulgaria.

<sup>27</sup> *Pettifer J.* Blue Guide Albania and Kosovo. London, New York, 2008. P.345. — For Obolensky’s view of the conversion of Albania in the Byzantine period, see unpublished paper in the Christ Church Obolensky archive; St Clement de Ohrid et L’Albanie, probably written in 1984.

ered Trevor Roper diaries and logs of trips illustrate<sup>28</sup>. He was passionately concerned in both the late Cold War years and in the immediate aftermath with tracing the intellectual responses of prominent contemporaries to the new political realities. We all, I think, have dreams of attending dinner parties with people who we will never actually meet. One of mine would be with Dmitri, Hugh Trevor Roper and Professor and Mrs Ostrogorski at their dinner in Belgrad in 1973. Another developing interest in the last years was a reevaluation of the role of Arnold Toynbee in British historiography and intellectual life, which resulted in his paper “Toynbee and Byzantium”<sup>29</sup>.

Many of the countries of Eastern Europe where Orthodoxy is now doing well do not always have much of a developed academic tradition to situate and debate their own history, and in this context antiquarian research still has a value. Dimitri was certainly interested in the practical situation with the semi-derelict building at Elbasan and what was being done about it, particularly in terms of the identities and role of the different competing Patriarchates. The Elbasan church and ruined monastery was then being contested by local Albanian Orthodox Christians who had repossessed the building for their own autocephalous church against pressure from Greek-influenced activists, on a very openly political basis. He was deeply interested in whether the original dedication, to Saint John Vladimir, the only church in Albania dedicated to a Serbian saint, would survive the refoundation, whoever won final control, the Albanian followers of the 1932 “*tomos*” church, or those looking to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul, another example of the centrality of this concept to his thinking at the time.

In conclusion, we must ask the question — why do these issues that preoccupied him then still trouble us now? At one level, the answer is clearly political, in that whatever view of Russia and its Church is taken under Putin’s current leadership, it is certainly not the kind of state (or Orthodox church) that the liberal Europeans consensus of the 1990s academic and governmental institutions here and elsewhere hoped to see emerging from the end of the Soviet Union. It is a tough, often coercive society with problems of legality and state functioning, with a renewed military ethos and, as some claim, a return to geostrategic expansionist ambitions. Most Russian citizens do not see the history this way. They and the increasing number of foreign defenders of Russia’s development claim that many of these tendencies have come about as a result of the aggressive ambitions of ever-expanding and ruthlessly led NATO to destabilise Russia and replace the government.

It is, nonetheless, a state with a vigorous and revived Orthodox Church presence with a strong and genuine popular religious revival, although often linked to direct government patronage and financial support from the government, and powerful figures close to the government. Many people would nevertheless agree with the view expressed in the Garrard’s 2008 book “*Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent Faith and Power in the New Russia*” that with the collapse of values after the end of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox church has provided a sense of belonging in a society, a positive value system based on rejection

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<sup>28</sup> For material, see: *Pettifer J., Curthoys J. Catalogue of the papers of Professor Sir Dmitri Obolensky // Christ Church, Oxford, 2018; and publications of the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies, University of Cambridge.*

<sup>29</sup> *Obolensky D. Toynbee and Byzantium // Aseos / eds I. Hutter, I. Sevchenko. Berlin, 1998. P.243. — Obolensky’s discussion of what he saw as Toynbee’s mistaken understanding of ‘Moscow as the Third Rome’ is particularly relevant to current controversies concerning the real or alleged appropriation of Byzantium and its heritage by the competing Patriarchates.*

of empty secularism and the cosmopolitan technocratic agenda, and a focus of optimism about the future.

Elsewhere Orthodox religious revival has brought division. In the Ukraine religious division has accompanied political division and brought armed conflict, and remains unresolved. We have not yet achieved a public language to discuss — let alone analyse in depth — many relevant issues, for instance the Vatican's political orientation vis a vis US foreign policy linked to the power of the Vatican in some US state agencies, and its view of the future of the church in the ex-Soviet states. And there are other "absences". A new reflection on Obolensky's writings should also include some note of the other lacunae. In neither his published papers from the 1990s, or my own notes of our discussions, is there any very substantial mention of Islam. He assumed it would revive somewhat in the ex-Soviet Union, but that was as far as his interest went. He knew Russians would return to the Church in large numbers, when they were easily able to do so, without discrimination or persecution, but the world of the so-called "stans", the southern and Caucasus ex-Soviet republics with substantial Islamic populations were distant from his mature knowledge and interests.

With his sense of irony in history, Obolensky would have deplored many current developments although few would have surprised him, the nature of Church-State relationships in Russia in particular. The religious background to most elements of the current conflict in the Ukraine are prefigured with almost uncanny, prophetic accuracy in the papers published in the Kitromilides/Veremis book referred to earlier, over thirty years ago. He would have seen the developments in Russia, the Balkans and Eastern Europe as really unanswerable arguments for the urgent renewal of the study in the universities and our wider society generally of the history, languages, literature and theologies of the Slavonic and Balkan worlds.

It is also the case that the difficulties in the academic tradition in Britain and elsewhere has been paralleled by a Russian religious revival of what was in the 1990s something of unimaginable scale. This has taken place both in terms of institutional church development and popular adherence. The message of hope quoted in the words of an orthodox layman in Russia in his 1998 paper has been borne out, of a Church and society where after Stalinism and the following years prior to Gorbachev "the Church's Calvary and Resurrection is past. It moves now to a time of Pentecost, a time of inspiration by the Holy Spirit and preaching of Good News in the fields and City Squares"<sup>30</sup>.

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