



Russian Orthodox voice against anti-Semitism dies

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MOSCOW (JTA) December 5, 2008 -- Russian Jewish leaders on Friday mourned the death of Alexy II, the Russian Orthodox patriarch who became one of the first major religious Christian voices to call for an end to anti-Semitism in Russia.

Alexy II died Friday at his residence outside Moscow at the age of 79. Church officials did not release a cause of death, but he was known to have heart problems.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Alexy II led a spiritual revival of his church, assuming the role of patriarch as the officially atheistic Soviet Union collapsed. He rebuilt a national religion from the ground up, developing Russian Orthodoxy as a quasi-national religion with deep nationalistic sentiment.

With the Russian Orthodox Church's history of pogroms and forced baptism of Jews in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Jews worried about its renewed ascendancy.

But while Alexy II pushed for compulsory Russian Orthodox education in Russia, he also became an early clarion voice calling for an end to historical virulent anti-Semitism among Russian Orthodox believers.

In 1991, as the Soviet Union fell apart, Alexy II traveled to the United States and spoke before a group of rabbis where he vowed to fight anti-Semitism in Russia. He addressed the Jews as "brothers."

The speech was condemned as a "Judaic heresy" by Orthodox priests in Russia who often included anti-Semitic diatribes in their sermons. Alexy II's name was omitted from liturgical readings referring to the head of the church and some even denounced him as a secret Jew, according to Yuri Tabak, a historian and a religious expert at the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights.

Alexy II -- who was born Alexy Mikhailovich Ridiger on Feb. 23, 1929 in Tallinn, Estonia, an area that at the time was also a Jewish religious center -- successfully pushed for passage of a 1997 law on religious organizations that officially recognized four "traditional religions" in Russia: Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism.

Originally, the law intended to recognize "world religions," which would have left out Judaism, because it is the religion of just one people, said Zinovy Kogan, a spokesman for the Russian Jewish Congress.

As the law worked its way through the legislative process, the Jewish community took Alexy aside

and asked him to change the formulation of the law to "traditional religions" and include Judaism, Kogan said.

"We connected with him and told him that we felt it wasn't fair, that Judaism appeared on the Earth even before Russia, and they agreed," Kogan said. "We changed it to "traditional religions" and that's how Judaism appeared in the preamble" of the law.

Since then, the leaders of those four religious denominations often have appeared together at official events.

"It's very important to say that he didn't divide the Jewish world," Kogan said. "It was all the same to him; it didn't matter if they were Orthodox, Reform or Chabad. He stood with all of them."

Most recently, cooperation at the leadership level has meant a formal and public relationship between Alexy II and the Russian rabbi with closest ties to the Kremlin, chief Chabad Rabbi Berel Lazar.

Lazar was not available for an interview Friday but released a statement shortly before the start of Shabbat praising Alexy II. "I must say that the Patriarch Alexy always showed respect for other traditional religions of Russia," Lazar said. "Every time I saw him he welcomed me, saying, "Shalom.""

Religious leaders continue to try to work on Russian Orthodox-Jewish relations.

Mikhail Chlenov, general secretary of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, attended a meeting in Brussels on Thursday where the central topic was relations between Russian-speaking Jews and the Russian Orthodox Church.

"One of the tasks that we see is the need to expand the basis for dialogue with Orthodox believers. They are going forward, but they have slowed in comparison with our work with other religions," he said. "Nevertheless, we see a bright future."

(Source: Jewish Telegraphic Agency; jta.org)