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Seeking Sobornost' at the All-Russian Council of 1917–1918

After the February Revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church sought to reconstitute itself to allow broader participation of its clergy and laity in order to fulfill the aspirations of a Church reform movement that had begun around 1900. At the same time, the Church sought to avoid losing its traditional institutional authority in the eyes of believers. To accomplish this, broader participation had to be grounded in *sobornost'* — a church ethos of traditional Orthodox catholicity or conciliarism — while avoiding political, secular, and revolutionary influences. Drawing on many church voices from 1917–1918, this paper sketches the efforts and ultimate success that the Russian Church achieved in reestablishing *sobornost'* as its organizational and spiritual foundation. Specifically, it reveals how a revitalized diocesan church press, freed from pre-revolutionary censorship, expressed the widespread hopes that a conciliar church could be established through active participation of the clergy and laity, and ultimately through the convening of the long-anticipated All-Russian Church Council. Revolution in the church threatened the authority of the Holy Synod and the Pre-conciliar Committee that planned the Church Council. However, a significant yet relatively unknown episode — the August 1917 elections to the Council's Presidium — as well as the writings of Sobor members themselves demonstrate how the Council succeeded in institutionalizing *sobornost'* at the Council. Although this quality of *sobornost'* expressed “unity in multiplicity,” it was neither quantitative nor geographical, and did not reflect class, estate, or political distinctions. Instead, it expressed a wholeness and communion of ideas that still allowed for vigorous debate.

KEYWORDS: Russian Orthodox Church, All-Russian Church Council of 1917–1918, *sobornost'*, Russian Revolution of 1917, religion, church reform, Provisional Government.

Seek, and ye shall find
Matthew 7:7, KJV

Introduction: Broadening Participation while Maintaining Authority

In the wake of the February Revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church undertook a number of reforms to allow broader participation of its clergy and laity, even as it tried to avoid a breakdown of its traditional institutional authority. These two needs brought hope and anxiety. On the one hand, a “restructuring” (*perestroika*) [*P. K. Ia, 1*] might enliven the Church, thereby fulfilling the aspirations of a Church reform movement that had begun around 1900. On the other hand, reforming too radically might cause the Church to lose authority in the eyes of the believers. The very freedom that gave the Russian Church the opportunity to carry out long-anticipated reforms also unleashed forces that threatened to weaken it.

Many in the Church hoped to “recreate conciliar administration” (*vozsozdat' sobornoe upravlenie*) — to institutionalize the widely cherished idea of *sobornost'* (conciliarity, catholicity) — by which the various parts of the Church, as a single spiritual body, would function more vibrantly and jointly to fulfill the Christian mission [*Khomiakov D, 6*]. In a conciliar Church (*sobornaia tserkov'*), the episcopate would retain the highest authority but share decision-making power with the parish clergy and allow the laity to participate actively. Bishops, priests, and lay believers would thus cooperate closely in a relationship of spiritual responsiveness and unity. Broader participation, however, needed to be grounded in a church ethos of traditional Orthodox catholicity, not a political, secular, or revolutionary discourse. Drawing on many church voices from 1917–1918, this paper sketches the efforts and ultimate success that the Russian Church achieved in reestablishing *sobornost'* as its organizational and spiritual foundation. Specifically, a revitalized diocesan church press, freed from pre-revolutionary censorship, revealed the widespread hopes that a conciliar church could be established through active participation of the clergy and laity, and ultimately through the convening of the long-anticipated All-Russian Church Council (Sobor)¹, which was considered to be the highest authority in the Russian Church.

1. This paper uses the terms “Council” and “Sobor” interchangeably. The most recent Russian Local

(*pomestnyi*) Church Council had taken place in 1681–1682, before the Petrine era of Tsar Peter the Great.

These constructive hopes were accompanied by actual revolution in the church, including the removal of many bishops and priests from their positions — and the subsequent popular election of eleven bishops [Rogoznyi, 201]². The Provisional Government’s Chief Procurator, Vladimir Lvov, changed the membership of the Holy Synod — the Church’s highest governing body at the time — in an effort to influence the Church’s reform agenda. Throughout the spring and summer, members of the Synod, as well as the Preconciliar Committee that planned the Church Council, feared that these central church bodies would lose authority as they sought to contain and channel demands by parish clergy and parishioners for more authority and power in church affairs. As others have noted, the Church Council ultimately achieved a “canonical restoration” on the basis of *sobornost’* through its reforms of central, diocesan, and parish administration³ and its management of clergy grievances [Kosar]. This paper demonstrates how the Council successfully institutionalized *sobornost’* (or more accurately, recreated conciliar administration) at the Council itself, through a significant yet relatively unknown episode — the August 1917 elections to the Council’s Presidium (*sobornyi soviet*) — and through the writings of Sobor members on how the Council functioned. The Presidium, consisting of thirteen members, was the Council’s central internal committee responsible for determining the Sobor’s daily agenda and coordinating Council activity. As the Council member N. N. Medvedkov, an assistant church school supervisor from Smolensk, noted, “the Presidium not only pushes paper, but directs the entire activity of the Sobor” [Dokumenty i materialy, 107; Deianiia, 182].

A Revitalized Church Press Calls for Broader Participation in Church Life

The pent-up aspirations and frustrations of believers emerged immediately after the February Revolution. The diocesan journals (*eparkhial’nye vedomosti*) were a valuable medium for expressing Orthodox opinion in 1917. First established in the 1860s, the jour-

2. Rogoznyi notes that in all eleven of the dioceses that elected bishops, the previous bishops had been dismissed for one reason or another. The diocesan elections occurred on the following dates: Chernigov (May 3), Petrograd (May 21), Moscow (June 24), Tula (July 22), Kursk (August 9), Vladimir (August 9),

Ryazan (June 22, August 9), Kharkov (August 11), Orel (August 12), Saratov (August 14), and Ekaterinburg (May 25, August 8, October 26) [Rogoznyi, 201].

3. On the “canonical restoration”, see: [Beglov 2017, 37]. On *sobornost’*, see: [Solov’ov; Beglov 2016].

nals eventually appeared in virtually every diocese. Most consisted of an “official section” of Synodal and diocesan decrees and various announcements, such as clerical transfers and school schedules, and an “unofficial section” that included a variety of other materials and articles on current church topics. Until 1917, the consistory secretary usually compiled the official section, with seminary rectors and sometimes teachers editing the unofficial sections. “Very seldom” were priests in charge of the unofficial sections [*Ufimtsev, 206*]⁴. As an archpriest complained in May 1917, these were not editors but “Synodal copyists-bureaucrats” that transmitted the decrees and policies of Petrograd [*Ufimtsev, 206*], producing diocesan papers that were uninspired reprints [*A. K., 309*]. The new editor of the Kaluga diocesan journal observed that the old order had used “every opportunity” to suppress “self-determination” among the clergy [*Arkhangel'skii, 8*]. According to one writer in Kishinev, an “all-powerful censorship” had forced editors to conceal their thoughts, resulting in a diocesan organ “not worthy of its designation” [*Smelov 1917a, 461*]. The editors of diocesan journals in 1917 therefore set out to abjure “the faint-hearted and sycophantic language hitherto used by the clergy” [*Po voprosu, 209*].

In 1917, these unofficial sections became a powerful voice of Orthodoxy, expressing hope for reforms, but also fear of chaos. Although these journals served a particular diocese, copies were sent to other dioceses, and some articles were republished in other diocesan journals. The “new conditions” [*Ot redaktora, 212*] after February 1917 enabled diocesan assemblies to convene and develop agendas for reform; amidst these changes, it was the parish clergy, not the bishops and laity, who had the most influence on reform of the diocesan press.

For example, in May, a Ekaterinburg diocesan council dissolved the diocesan journal in order to establish a new organ with new editors. In April, an extraordinary clergy-laity assembly in Kishinev established a new journal to be published in Russian, with supplements in Moldavian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz for areas where these languages were dominant [*Smelov 1917b, 443*], so that “the general voice of the diocese” could be heard [*Smelov 1917a, 463*]⁵. In Penza, an executive committee of clergy abolished preliminary

4. In Kishinev diocese, for example, editors were usually seminary teachers. See: [*Smelov 1917 a, 462*].

5. On diocesan congresses reforming the journals, see also: [*Iz eparkhial'noi, 419*].

ensorship and made the editor responsible for its content [*Po voprosu*, 209], after which an extraordinary diocesan assembly of clergy and laity established an editorial committee to be elected by a professional union of Penza clergy [*Ot redaktsionnogo*, 301], subject to confirmation by the bishop [*Izvestiia i zametki*, 376]. Meanwhile, in September a clergy-laity congress in Kazan took editorial control of the diocesan journal away from the Kazan Ecclesiastical Academy and made it an “independent organ of the clergy and Orthodox laity of Kazan diocese” [*Lebedev*, 520]. The editor of the diocesan paper in Ekaterinburg summarized this widespread movement: “The clergy everywhere recognizes that it needs to have its own separate, independent organ” which can “freely discuss all questions stirring church society”⁶ [*Ufimtsev*, 205].

Many of the reformed diocesan journals expressed relief over the collapse of the old regime and joyous exuberance over the new freedoms and opportunities. “Greetings to you, O free speech in a free government!” proclaimed the priest I. Dobronravov in Penza’s journal, which he called the “free organ of the Penza clergy” [*Dobronravov*, 376]. One author praised February for bringing “spiritual emancipation” (*dukhovnoe raskreposhchenie*)⁷ [*Po voprosu*, 209]. “The old ways have passed,” declared another writer, “and God grant that they do not return”. He noted how the clergy had emerged from its “inertia and tepidness” (*kosnost’ i teplokhladnost’*) and called on it to work together [*Maslovskii*, 405]. The Astrakhan journal called the press an “awesome weapon” (*strashnaia sila*) and urged Church members to give it moral and material support [*Podderzhite tserkovnuiu*, 140].

The Vladimir journal urged the clergy to contribute information on parish developments, difficulties, and activities:

Fathers and brothers! Remember that only the active participation of all diocesan forces can make our church organ interesting and edifying [*K podpischikam*, 3].

The Smolensk journal appealed to clergy to unify, share their problems, and realize that “now especially” they cannot depend on help from anyone else [*Smolenskie vedomosti*, 137]. The journal would serve as a “cement” binding the clergy together as one family [*Maslovskii*, 404].

6. On the clergy revitalizing church life through the diocesan press, see also: [*Izvestiia Ekaterinburgskoi*, 135].

7. The quote appears to have been taken directly from the opening of the article in the Saratov journal about its own press reforms. See: [*A. K.*, 308].

However, the press organs were not merely tools to benefit parish priests but had to serve larger tasks. One article in the Tver diocesan paper, for example, admonished priests and deacons not to focus on narrow “priestly questions” (*popovskie voprosy*), but to dedicate themselves to establishing a new order:

Russia expects from us a different kind of activity. She expects us to help establish a new order. She is wanting in the cultured, intelligent forces that are so needed in the present organizational work. We will show that we are not against the existing trend but, on the contrary, welcome it, join it, and are ready in every possible way to contribute to its development and strengthening [*P. M. B.*, 94].

The Penza diocesan journal hoped for “lively, continual, and untiring participation of the entire clergy, from priest to reader” [*Po voprosu*, 210]. A new editor in Kishinev stated that both the clergy and the laity were the proprietors of the journal, which should reflect both clerical and lay positions [*Smelov 1917b*, 444]. The Kaluga journal declared that collective efforts could restore the bond between pastor and flock and that the “diocesan organ could do much for the transformation of the life of the clergy and the parish” [*Arkhangel'skii*, 8].

The belief that the clergy and the laity could use the press to revive religious life led many to insist that the diocesan papers address the needs at the nucleus of the Church — the parish. “Our press organ will be nothing but an echo of life itself,” declared a Penza writer [*Maslovskii*, 408]. One priest urged his fellow churchmen to immediately transform the diocesan journal “into an organ of life, not a mirror of diocesan authorities, as it was earlier” [*Titov*, 136]. The Kishinev journal urged readers to contribute pieces and turn the paper into “a resonant gathering of the varied sounds” of diocesan life [*Shchuka*, 442]. The Kursk journal hoped that readers would find in its pages a “living exchange of thoughts, intentions, plans, [and] opinions” [*Kurskii vestnik*, 4].

Such sentiments pervaded the diocesan press and helped shape the broader movement to convene an All-Russian Church Council. References to a council (*sobor*) and conciliarity (*sobornost'*) were synonymous, since a council was the very embodiment of *sobornost'*. An extraordinary clergy-laity congress of Don diocese, for example, in May resolved to establish a new weekly journal bearing the motto of “the renewal (*obnovlenie*) of the Church on the principles of Orthodox Christian freedom and *sobornost'*” [*Glebov*, 237]. In March, the Tver journal vowed to play an integral role in the movement to convene

a Church council by publishing the decrees of small meetings of clergy (*chastichnye soveshchaniia dukhovenstva*) as background material for the upcoming diocesan congress, “the decisions of which would then become material for the forthcoming All-Russian Local Council” [*P.M.B.*, 94]. Throughout 1917 and 1918 the diocesan journals published programs and protocols of diocesan congresses, the diaries of delegates to the Moscow Church Council, and the deliberations and decisions of the Council itself.

Church Revolution: Members of the Holy Synod are Replaced

When the Provisional Government was first formed, the Holy Synod initially remained in place and continued to function as the Church’s highest administrative authority, its members having been recommended by previous chief procurators and appointed by the tsar. The Provisional Government retained the office of chief procurator as the lay official in charge of Church affairs. A. V. Kartashev, the Provisional Government’s final procurator, pointed out the uncertainty that reigned after the February Revolution, when imperial laws ceased to operate and the authority of all state institutions came into question. The tsarist government had existed “by the grace of God” (*Bozh’ei milost’iu*), whereas the Provisional Government ruled “by the will of the people” (*voleiu naroda*) — or, as Kartashev sardonically put it, “more accurately, by the will of historical chance” (*voleiu istoricheskogo sluchaiia*) [*Kartashev*, 76].

Even though the Synod (eight bishops and two priests) issued a decree on March 9 calling on the faithful to support the Provisional Government [*Ukaz*, 70], Chief Procurator Lvov removed all of its members on April 14. He then reconstituted a new “Provisional” Synod with four bishops and four priests (only Archbishop Sergii (Stragorodskii) of Finland remained from the previous composition). The members of the “Imperial” Synod strongly protested their dismissal [*Golubtsov*, 13–16; *Browder, Kerensky*, 803–804]⁸. Lvov tasked the new “Provisional Synod” with convening the All-Russian Church Council before

8. Archbishop Sergei of Finland, elected in early August as Archbishop of Vladimir and subsequently named Patriarch in 1943, was the only member of the “Imperial” Synod to remain in the new “Provisional” Synod. The terms “Imperial” and “Provisional” were in fact used, but the most common references to these two bodies were to the “old composition” (*staryi sostav*) and “new composition” (*novyi sostav*) of the

Synod, with the sense that the Synod itself, as the highest governing body in the Church, never in fact ceased to exist, but that its members merely changed from time to time. This study uses the more rarely used terms “Imperial” and “Provisional” for the sake of simplicity, and also to emphasize the analogous nature of these bodies to the Imperial and Provisional Governments.

the Constituent Assembly⁹ (whose convening was initially scheduled for September 30)¹⁰.

Lvov and the new Synod cooperated from its first session on April 25. Significantly, he transformed the physical space for the meeting. Previously, the Imperial Synod had met at an oblong table with the chief procurator and his assistants sitting at a small table on the side as “humble observers” (*skromnye nabliudateli*), when they “in fact [had] ruled over the hierarchs’ decisions”. Now, the new Provisional Synod convened around a semi-circular table, its members seated around the outside, and the chief procurator with assistants sitting across from them on the inside of the table. This more “friendly” arrangement reflected the parallel conceptions and “analogous tasks” (*analogichnye zadachi*) of Church and state: the Provisional Government functioned until the Constituent Assembly could assume power, just as the Provisional Synod was the highest administrative organ until the All-Russian Church Council convened [*Kartashev*, 81]. A liberal-minded writer referred to the Provisional Synod as “essentially a kind of temporary revolutionary government of the Church” [*Mozhaiskii*, 130].

The new Synod worried about its authority. One of its members, the priest N. A. Liubimov, expressed concern that the All-Russian Clergy-Laity Congress (gathering in Moscow in May and June) would not recognize the Synod [*Liubimov*, 91]. In August, a conservative writer feared that the Church Council would degenerate into a meeting controlled by the clergy and laity — to the detriment of the bishops’ canonical authority. He bemoaned what he deemed the absurd situation of the Provisional Synod of four bishops and four priests, “often with two bishops absent, blessing (!) the bishops... of the Russian Church” and claiming the power of higher Church administration [*K tserkovnomu Soboru*, 1].

Distrust pervaded the Synod itself. When Lvov suggested on May 30 that the current Synod give way to a new Synod of twelve members (four bishops, four clergy, and four laymen all elected by the All-Russian Clergy-Laity Congress, which had included no bishops), the entire Synod — with the exception of Archbishop Sergii of Finland, the lone holdover from the Imperial Synod — vigorously protested. Liubimov penned a scathing critique of Archbishop Sergii’s mild reaction

9. RGIA, coll. 796, aids. 445, fol. 232, pp. 108–108 back. See: [*X.*; *Liubimov*, 91, 117; *Andronik*].

10. The Constituent Assembly did not open until 5/18 January 1918, after which the Bolsheviks dissolved it by force.

and emphasized that the other members sought to defend the rights and authority of the Synod, not their own personal interests:

Only Archbishop Sergii alone, as always, wanting to gain advantage, and to maintain an innocence, began to talk nonsense about the fact that he entirely understands and appreciates the desire of the chief procurator, that it is unseemly for us ostensibly to defend the current composition of the Synod, for we ourselves belong to it, because that means that we are defending our own personal rights.

Oh! I thought upon hearing these words of the bishop, and how crafty you are, Father [*batiushka*]: during the dispersal of the old Synod you managed to be the sole member to remain in the new one, and undoubtedly amidst our dispersal, you will become part of the next composition of the Synod. What skill — to adapt oneself to any circumstances! Honor and glory to you, O cunningly clever [*khitro-umnyi*] archpastor! [*Liubimov, 92*] ¹¹.

On August 12, three days before the Council opened, a Moscow newspaper pondered why the bishops on the Provisional Synod could not comprehend what it considered the manifest illegitimacy of the new Synod:

Perhaps [those bishops] cannot feel it because they lack the ability to realize their personal aims within the sphere of overall Church principles and to base themselves and their behavior on general Church principles, not just personal ones [*E. F., 1*].

Notwithstanding this distrust and suspicion, the diocesan press remained silent on the dissolution of the Imperial Synod and appointment of the Provisional Synod. One layman expressed incredulity that “at the congresses [being held by clergy and laity in the dioceses] and in the decrees of Church organizations, simply no attention is paid” to the Imperial Synod’s protest against being dispersed by Lvov [*R. P., 1*]. This silence was a telling indicator of how the clergy and laity accepted the revolution in higher Church administration. After all, the driving motive for revolution in the church [*Rogoznyi; Beglov 2017*] was redistribution of power [*Beglov 2017, 37*], which

11. Archbishop Arsenii of Novgorod, who chaired many of the Council’s plenary sessions, kept a diary during the Sobor. Referencing a situation related to Georgian bishops’ declaration of autocephaly immediately after the February Revolution and Archbish-

op Sergii’s subsequent actions toward a Georgian delegation as the ranking member of the Provisional Synod, Archbishop Arsenii made note of Archbishop Sergii’s “opportunism, by which he holds on through all church currents” [*Stadnitskii, 101*].

was happening on several levels: between the Synod and chief procurator; the clergy and episcopacy; the parish priests and lower clergy of deacons and readers; and the parishioners and system of diocesan and parish administration [Beglov 2017, 34–36]. The underlying question was: could the Synod maintain the Church's authority and authenticity in the eyes of the believers as it moved toward the convening of the Church Council?

The Preconciliar Committee: Balancing Representation and Authority

On April 29, the Synod established the Preconciliar Committee (*predsobornyi soviet*) to prepare for the Council and draft its statute (*ustav*); needing to act quickly, the Committee drew heavily on materials drafted by the preconciliar commissions of 1906–1907 and 1912–1916¹². On June 11 it convened in Petrograd, consisting of the Synod, the chief procurator and his deputy, seven diocesan bishops, eight delegates from the All-Russian Congress of Clergy and Laity (four priests and four laymen), and delegates representing church schools, the ecclesiastical academies, monastics, the Georgian Church, and the *edinovertsy*. The Synod had expanded this composition on May 25 to include seventeen other individuals, primarily professors from universities and deputies from the last State Duma [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 5–6]. On June 12, the Synod also invited nine staff members of the chief procurator's and the Synod's chancelleries to serve on the Committee.

These decisions to modify the Committee's composition show that preparations for the Council required constant adjustment and debate to increase participation and maintain its authority and authenticity among believers. For example, the Synod rejected a proposal by the All-Russian Clergy-Laity Congress to double the number of its representatives on the Committee (from eight to sixteen — half clergy, half laity), but agreed to consider the additional eight as potential substitutes if the original eight could not attend [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 9–10]. The Synod refused to increase clergy-laity representation, as that would have diluted episcopal power and perhaps undermined the Council's authority. As the Preconciliar Committee began its work on June 12, Archbishop Arsenii of Novgorod spoke directly to this

12. See, for example, the work of the Section on Ecclesiastical Justice: [RGIA, coll. 796, 108–111].

issue, declaring that its task did not “consist in the scholarly preparation of draft reforms for the Council, in chancellery work, or even in the gathering of factual material”. Rather, he insisted that the Committee’s main goal was to foster a mood “among the believers in which one could be sure that the people would view the Council as authoritative” [*Liubimov*, 115–116].

The Synod endorsed the Preconciliar Committee’s Regulations on Convening the Council, which stipulated that “the Council consists of bishops, clergy, and laity” [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 12]. Council delegates included the Synod and all bishops, excluding suffragans. Each diocese sent five representatives — two clergy (a priest and either a suffragan bishop, priest, deacon, or reader [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 16]) and three laymen, chosen through successive elections on the parish, deanery, and diocesan levels¹³. The Council’s composition struck a compromise between inclusivity and hierarchy. Laymen outnumbered clerical members (bishops, priests, deacons, and readers) by 299 to 265. However, bishops chaired the sections that developed proposals on specific issues and, through the Episcopal Conference, could veto any plenary decision to prevent it from becoming an official Council decree.

Institutionalizing *Sobornost’* at the Sobor: The Case of the Presidium

The Council balanced hierarchical and conciliar (*sobornye*) principles throughout its reforms of central, diocesan, and parish administration, broadening participation while maintaining a “dogmatic and canonical filter” in decision-making [*Beglov 2017*, 43]. However, the question of whether the Sobor would be “*sobornyi*” (catholic, conciliar) pertained not only to the results achieved, but also to the methods by which the Council achieved results. In seeking to embody *sobornost’* in its deliberations and decisions, the Council drew a fundamental distinction between secular democracy and spiritual *sobornost’*; it sought to identify delegates not as representatives of individual classes, estates (*sosloviia*)¹⁴, parties, or locales, but rather as Orthodox believers devoted to the Church.

13. See, for example: [*Pravila; P. O. D.*].

14. The Tsarist system of representation had been constructed along estate lines; the self-governing institution of the *zemstvo* (1864) and the interrevolutionary State Duma (electoral laws of 1906 and

1907) divided the population into separate *curiae* based on estate, with some accommodation for property and occupation. While most parties in 1917 demanded a franchise with a “four-tailed” suffrage (equal, free, direct, secret), the objective was less to

This issue, in fact, came immediately to the Sobor's attention. During its initial meetings, the Council formed a thirteen-man Presidium (*sobornyi soviet*), which bore the responsibility for setting the daily agenda, assigning tasks to the Council's sections, and providing overall administration of the Council. Procedural rules predetermined ten members, namely, those who had just been elected as the plenum's chairmen and secretaries [*Stadnitskii*, 61]¹⁵. These individuals were all highly educated, consisting of senior bishops, priests, and laymen — professors, deputies in the former State Duma, and laymen in the Synodal Chancellery. The Sobor itself had to elect the three other members of the Presidium, one each from the episcopacy, secular clergy, and laity. On August 21–22 the Council elected Metropolitan Platon of Tiflis to represent the bishops; Archpriest A. P. Rozhdestvenskii, a Petrograd Ecclesiastical Academy professor, to represent the secular clergy; and Professor P. P. Kudriavtsev, a Kiev Ecclesiastical Academy professor, to represent the laity. The former two were members of the Synod, and all three had served on the Preconciliar Committee¹⁶.

One candidate, A. I. Iudin, a farmer (*khlebopashets*) and tanner (*kozhevnik*) who had an elementary education and represented Olo-nets diocese, lost his bid to become the lay representative by only 12 votes (out of a total 433 ballots). By legal status, Iudin was a peasant, and this close outcome sparked a debate about the principle of electoral representation¹⁷, and challenged the Council to decide how it was to implement *sobornost'* in concrete organizational terms — to consider the distinction between *sobornost'* and democracy when promoting popular participation and representation. Reacting to Iudin's failed bid, forty-one Council members filed a petition to increase the Presidium's composition by two, adding one representative each from the peasantry and the rural clergy. Per the Council's statute, the Presidium forwarded the petition to the Statutory Section for detailed

ensure egalitarianism than the representation of all social groups as such. The new Soviet Constitution of 1918, ironically, returned to discriminatory franchise, with voting privileges restricted to the “toiling masses” and denied to the “exploiting classes” (its members juridically categorized as *lishentsy*, “disenfranchised”).

15. The Council's Statute, Section V, N. 56, outlines the thirteen members: the Council Chairman, six Deputy Chairmen, the Council Secretary and his Assistant Secretaries, and three members to be elected [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 42]. On 19 August 1917, the Council elected V. P. Shein as Secretary, and P. V. Gur'ev and

V. N. Beneshevich as Assistant Secretaries [*Deianiia*, 72–73].

16. Archbishop Arsenii was disturbed by the presence of agitation, particularly before votes took place. He blamed former Chief Procurator Lvov for playing a large role in it; according to Arsenii, Lvov wanted a position on the Presidium. Arsenii credited the bishops' unity and unanimity in the face of such agitation. See: [*Stadnitskii*, 61–63].

17. On the election as catalyst for the debate, see the minutes of the Statutory Section's September 4 meeting in [*GARF, coll. 3431, aids. 1, fol. 203, p. 6*].

examination¹⁸. On September 4, the section narrowly rejected the proposal to elect the additional representatives, 16 to 14. On September 13 the Council heard the section's report and, after a brief debate, narrowly rejected the proposal, by 188 to 171 [*Deianiia*, 180–188]¹⁹.

Advocates of additional rural representatives invoked several arguments. N. I. Shelutinskii, a layman from Grodno, declared that the Presidium needed rural members to overcome the “gap” that had been revealed in the composition of the Presidium, which currently consisted exclusively of delegates who represented scholarship (*nauka*) and the city (*gorod*) [*GARF*, coll. 3431, aids. 1, fol. 203, p. 5, back]. Archpriest A. V. Suvorov from Tambov advocated expanding the Presidium, not because rural representatives could serve as a “counterweight” to the other members, but because they could provide vital information about the real conditions and needs of rural life. Given the enormous disparity between the countryside and the city, and the cultural gap between these elites and the mass of believers in rural Russia, it was essential for the Presidium to have the counsel of delegates familiar with popular Orthodoxy in the village [*GARF*, coll. 3431, aids. 1, fol. 203, p. 5, back]. T. G. Surinov, an electrical technician from Kursk, argued that the current Presidium represented only the upper strata of society, not the very heart of the people. Surinov then added a transparently political suggestion that the two additional representations — one from the laity, one from the clergy, but both from the countryside — could ally to form a “coalition” and thereby enhance their presence and role. He warned that failure to adopt the proposal would invite popular discontent and complaints that the Council had denied the lower strata representation on the Presidium [*GARF*, coll. 3431, aids. 1, fol. 203, p. 5 back; *Dokumenty i materialy*, 90, 103].

The majority, however, rejected such arguments. Some insisted that the Presidium had no need for such inclusive representation, since it did not deal with the substance of issues, but merely handled the Council's administrative and financial matters. V. I. Zelentsov, a lay missionary from Riazan, stated that, among the peasants, there were no people who were “suited to the subtle work” that the Presidium carried out. That comment, however, elicited a reprimand from Archbishop Arsenii of Novgorod, who, chairing the Council's plenary session, ruled that Zelentsov's comment had cast aspersions on many

18. Each of the various sections was charged with examining specific issues and then submitting its recommendations for consideration at a plenary meeting of the Council. Only plenary decisions that

were subsequently confirmed by the Sobor's Episcopal Conference were deemed to be official judgments of the Council.

19. Also see: [*Stadnitskii*, 78].

Sobor delegates and indeed the “185–million population” of Orthodox faithful in the countryside [*Deianiia*, 184–187]. In any event, opponents held that the Presidium did not require such rural delegates and that the latter could not contribute substantively to its work.

Some Council delegates invoked doctrinal arguments to justify their opposition to the proposal. In their view, the Church did not consist of people from different secular ranks, but simply of believers. “From the Church’s point of view”, declared I. N. Speranskii, a reader from Novgorod, “there is no difference between urban and rural, noble and peasant — there are only Orthodox Christians from various ranks and positions”. Moreover, once the Sobor embarked on the principle of status-based representation, it would know no definable limits. In Speranskii’s words, “if we allow rural representatives, then why not deacons, readers, and the petty townspeople (*meshchane*), and so forth [*GARF*, coll. 3431, aids. 1, fol. 203, p. 5 back]?” The Sobor recognized three status groups (bishops, clergy, and laity), but that distinction derived from their position in the Church, not in the secular world. Hence, some argued, only this distinction had doctrinal validity; class and estate (*soslovie*) should not determine the composition of church organizations and the role of individual members [*Deianiia*, 181–182]. When A. V. Florovskii (a Novorossiisk University professor and specialist on the social composition of Catherine II’s Legislative Commission of 1767–1768)²⁰ presented the negative recommendation of the Statutory Section to the Sobor’s plenum, he admonished his fellow delegates to avoid undermining the mutual trust among bishops, clergy, and laity. His research on the Legislative Commission undoubtedly inspired that comment; with its broad representation (including virtually every social category except serfs), the Catherinean assembly had dissolved into acrimonious conflict and recrimination. Moreover, granting peasants representation on the basis of social status could become infectious, inducing other classes to demand their own representatives as well. While the Council did need to hear the unmediated voice of the peasantry, the presence of peasant delegates at the plenary sessions provided ample opportunity for rural believers to express their views [*Deianiia*, 186].

Some proponents of adding representatives studiously avoided invoking class and estate terminology. L. K. Artamonov, an infantry

20. See [*Florovsky 1915*]. It was a massive study; it had been preceded by two shorter studies, one on the statute that determined composition [*Florovsky 1913*] and another about the acrimonious discussions of the serf question at the commission [*Florovsky 1910*].

general representing the General Staff, favored expanding the Presidium, but not on the basis of estate distinctions; rather, the two rural members could serve as representatives of the “people’s conscience” (*narodnaia sovest’*) [*Deianiia*, 185]. N. N. Medvedkov contended that rural priests and peasants could best represent the needs of a church that was predominantly rural. Nevertheless, even Medvedkov (a lay educator who passionately advocated enlarging the Presidium) emphasized that the additional members would not represent the particular classes like the petty townspeople and peasantry, but rather the people (*narod*) in a collective sense. He argued that these representatives from the people (*narod*) could provide vital assistance in implementing the decisions of the Presidium and, more generally, the Council as a whole [*Deianiia*, 183].

The debates over representation focused on principles, not individual personalities, partly because the Council endeavored to suppress personal attacks and the passions of political meetings [*Stadnitskii*, 93, 95, 143, 161]. One Council member, S. P. Rudnev, a layman from a family of landed gentry in Simbirsk [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 107], provided a glimpse in his memoirs of the underlying harmony that unified the Council. Rudnev described Iudin, whose failed candidacy for the Presidium sparked the debates, as a “delegate who stood out among the peasants, who was measured, a sincere believer, and devoted to the Church” [*Rudnev*, 189]. In fact, Rudnev praised Iudin along with another peasant, P. I. Utkin, who “subsequently imprinted his devotion through his martyr’s death: he was killed, almost buried alive in the ground” [*Rudnev*, 189]²¹.

Thus, the Sobor rejected the democratic principle of proportionate representation based on social class or estate status. Although a minority did invoke such ideas, they did so to obtain counsel or ensure support for Council decisions — not to accord proportional weight to the various social elements of the Church. The spirit of *sobornost’* recognized only three categories of delegates (bishops, clergy, and laity), denied representation for specific secular categories, and sought to avoid internal political and social fissures and factions. What underlay *sobornost’* was not inclusivity and proportionality in representation, but spiritual unity. Broader participation was to be grounded in a church ethos, not a political and revolutionary discourse.

21. For more on the activity of Iudin and Utkin at the Sobor, see [*Dokumenty*. V. 2; *Dokumenty*. V. 3]. These indexed volumes on the Sobor are a unique and valuable resource for historical research. References to Iudin’s and Utkin’s activity are in the index.

Sobornost' at the Sobor

In the highly politicized atmosphere of 1917, contemporary outside observers of the Sobor tended to perceive its delegates through the lens of party labels or factions. That conception informed several early Western scholarly accounts of the Church in 1917, which refer to “parties” on the left and right, as if the Sobor were a political, parliamentary institution²². Even some individuals involved in the reform activity of 1917 divided the delegates into distinct “liberal” and “conservative” groups [Kartashev, 91]²³. However, other observers expressed greater caution about applying such political categories. While they too invoked contemporary political labels, they nonetheless recognized that these failed to characterize the various opinions and positions of Council delegates²⁴. More astute observers such as A. V. Kartashev emphasized the complexity of views and the difficulty of simply dividing them into “liberal” and “conservative” without nuance. He described the majority of delegates as “conservative” in both religious and political terms and inclined to support Archbishop Antonii (Khrapovitskii) of Volhynia; discerned a “center”, aligned behind Prince E. N. Trubetskoi and Professor S. N. Bulgakov, who were conservative in church matters but liberal in political issues; and a smaller “left wing”, led by academy professors (such as B. V. Titlinov of the Petrograd Ecclesiastical Academy) who adamantly opposed episcopal power and sought to expand the role of the clergy and laity²⁵. Nevertheless, these were general orientations and did not lead to the formation of formal “factions” or precipitate a schism²⁶.

Most Council members rejected in principle the formation of such divisions. In Kartashev’s view, the moral obligation of serving on the

22. M. Spinka published some of the first serious western scholarship on the subject, yet his works wrongly depict the tendencies as belonging to “parties” of conservatism, a “moderate center”, and a “radical left” — see: [Spinka 1927, 83–84, 89] as well as [Spinka 1956, 10–13].

23. Metropolitan Evlogii (Georgievskii), a Council member, for example, refers to “left-wing secular professors”, and “liberal” priests — see: [Georgievskii, 275].

24. For instance, J. S. Curtiss refers to “liberals” and “conservatives” in an almost simplistic fashion, yet astutely recognizes that some churchmen, whom he placed in the “center”, were “liberal in church matters” and “conservative politically”, that is, their views could not be easily categorized — see: [Curtiss, 14–17, 21–25, 35–37].

25. Most of the biographical information on the Council delegates is drawn from [*Dokumenty i materialy*, 60–96].

26. Archbishop Arsenii of Novgorod noted in his diary a clear exception at the end of August, when closed sessions argued over the Sobor’s reaction to current events, in particular the Kornilov uprising. In those heated sessions devoted to the political situation, a “plentiful flow of passionate speeches” turned the Sobor into a “political meeting” in which the archbishop “somehow held back the passions and noise”. Sobor members protested the “powerless” chair of the meeting, Archbishop Tikhon (Belavin), whose “mildness” helped enable the disorder. See: [*Stadnitskii*, 69–70].

Sobor caused delegates to be highly conscious of their spiritual duties and therefore to conduct debates, even “heated” ones, “in an atmosphere of tolerance and composure” [Kartashev, 91]. No less important was the Church’s traditional supra-party and supra-class identity and role, which may have been influenced by the traditional political culture of the village that adhered to unanimity in its decision-making, a deeply rooted value that even pervaded the thinking of revolutionary and oppositionist parties²⁷. The idea of *sobornost’* that had dominated discourse in the last decades of tsarist rule also tended to laud unity and exclude a conflictive, competitive model of interaction and decision-making.

Prominent Council figures admonished delegates to eschew divisions and factionalism that, they feared, would erode the Council’s capacity to be “sobornyi” — that is, to act collectively and harmoniously. On August 22, one week after the Council opened, Archbishop Kirill of Tambov voiced his concern that the joy of “agreement and unity of spirit” that had prevailed during the first several days was in danger of degenerating into suspicion and distrust — above all, because secular newspaper accounts were disseminating the notion that bishops belonged to a right-wing Sobor faction. “I have seen no parties, neither Red Hundredist nor Black Hundredist”, at the Council, declared the archbishop [Deianiia, 87–88]. A priest delegate from Kaluga commented that a “foul scum” (*pakostnaia nakip’*) opposed the Sobor and threatened to “harm the visage of the Council in the consciousness of Church people”. He complained that various newspapers were giving extreme accounts of the assembly in order to defend their own biases and interests. One of the most outrageous publications was a small leaflet *Groza*, which, amidst an anti-Semitic tirade, denounced the Council as “a disorderly mob” (*bezchinnoe sborishche*) and as a “counterfeit assembly of unbelievers and even criminals”²⁸. Leftist and liberal newspapers were no less caustic. For example, the Moscow daily *Novoe Vremia* claimed that Black Hundredists had gathered at the Council²⁹. The Synod-funded *Vserossiiskii tserkovno-obshchestvennyi vestnik* had earlier been entrusted to the radical Petrograd Academy

27. On the “unanimous principle” of the commune, see [Mironov]. Even the intelligentsia tended to presuppose unanimity and to eschew party lines; see [Haimson].

28. See: *Groza*, 1917, October 3, n. 2, p. 1. The motto of this daily, which was in its ninth year of publication, was to “speak the truth and defend Orthodoxy”.

29. According to Archbishop Arsenii, the former procurator Lvov himself agitated in the Moscow seminary against the bishops, calling the Council “Black Hundredist”. See: [Stadnitskii, 62].

professor Titlinov, who denounced the Sobor as a reactionary organ that symbolized the “twilight of the Church’s liberation movement”³⁰. The Kaluga priest expressed a view widespread among the delegates, who feared that such accounts misrepresented the real tenor of relations at the Sobor and deliberately ignored the spirit of cooperation and tolerance that actually prevailed [*Beliaev*, 7–8].

Nikolai Fioletov, a professor representing Perm University, contested news accounts that two opposing parties had taken shape at the Sobor. According to such reports, a “reactionary” clerical party headed by the bishops sought to defend episcopal absolutism, to ensure the predominance of personal autocratic-patriarchal power, and to exclude the laity from active involvement in the Council and church life. To that archconservative “episcopal party” the press juxtaposed a “progressive, renovationist” party led by representatives from the universities and ecclesiastical academies, who sought to realize *sobornost'* in its broadest sense — namely, as an equal representation of bishops, priests, and laity at every level of Church governance — and to exclude the personal monocratic (*edinolichnoe*) principle. In reality, argued Fioletov, the Council had no groups with such self-serving agendas, and therefore the press portrayal was “excessively simplified and excessively exaggerated”. It was not only a matter of misinformation; such accounts, in liberal and conservative newspapers alike, had the regrettable effect of aggravating tensions at the Council. In reality, declared Fioletov, the Council had only two “tendencies”, which in varying degrees emphasized different aspects of a common vision as they sought to formulate the Church’s internal structure and its relation to the government and secular society [*Fioletov*].

The Sobor’s physical environment played a constructive role in developing a consensus of opinion. Most of the lay members lived in the dormitories of the Moscow Seminary [*Stadnitskii*, 120], adjacent to the newly constructed Diocesan House on the north side of Moscow. When the Council was not in session, the delegate housing became a second Sobor, with its main hall, classrooms, dormitory rooms, and corridors alive with passionate debate, producing a “constant noise” from over 300 voices as they exchanged opinions and debated issues, sometimes carrying on their quarrels and dissension into the late hours of the night. An Astrakhan delegate initially found this an uncomfortable atmosphere, but later was glad that he had not made

30. *Vserossiiskii tserkovno-obshchestvennyi vestnik*, 1917, October 14, n. 126.

the “mistake” of seeking to find a quiet life in separate accommodations in the city. The Council’s internal activity was “bursting with energy”, and this “joint life” was an “essential part of the conciliar work”, which he thought could “result in Council decrees that are more thought out, broad, and free from class and party interests”³¹ [*Pis’ma*, 458–463]. Delegates eagerly attended a series of evening lectures by Council members [*Stadnitskii*, 74, 366]. The lectures stirred exchanges of opinion that helped the members become acquainted with one another, challenged them to consider different points of view, and, in the words of the same Astrakhan representative, were “in practice like getting a first rate education no worse than an academy or university” [*Pis’ma*, 465].

In this environment, loosely defined, informal “movements” (*techeniia*) emerged at the Sobor. They were neither formal “factions” nor a simple dichotomy of “liberals and conservatives”; rather, they were amorphous, fluid alignments that shifted on particular issues and, significantly, drew upon supporters from a broad variety of delegates — bishops, professors, priests, and laity. The first “current” emerged among professors from secular and ecclesiastical schools, but it attracted support from other delegates as well. Collectively, they became known as the “group for Church rebirth” (*gruppa tserkovnogo vozrozhdeniia*), their principal objective being to expand the role of priests in Church administration. The movement had academics as its core, but it also included highly educated city clergy (but few rural priests) as well as some members of the Preconciliar Committee [*Chel’tsov*]. The formation of “renewalists” (*vozrozhdentsy*) precipitated a “group for conciliar unity” (*gruppa sobornogo edineniia*), a current that called for strict adherence to the canons and supported a restoration of the Patriarchate. Its delegates were more diverse than the “renewalists”. One observer estimated that, of 564 delegates, a maximum of 240 members supported the renewalist ideas, while 280 supported the “conciliar unity” vision of reform [*Grechev*, 22]³². These were hardly the only currents at the Sobor, as each was generated by the immediate issues on the agenda and, no doubt, by the rapidly changing social and political environment [*Marin*, 924; *Vasil’ev*, 534–536]. In short, one must analyze the debates in terms of “currents” or “orientations”,

31. See also: [*Sosuntsov*, 567].

32. Grechev admitted that membership estimates fluctuated and, like the Sobor delegates themselves, he was uncertain about which tendency would prevail at the Council.

recognizing that these were complex, not dichotomous, and that adherents changed significantly in numbers and composition.

Council members not only emphasized the nonpolitical substance of such currents, but also argued that they played a positive, constructive role. One delegate, a military officer from Polotsk, noted that “unavoidable and natural... groupings of separate tendencies” were taking shape at the Sobor, yet he was not concerned about internal division. “Everyone carefully guards the Council against party principles”, he wrote, “wanting to decide all questions in a spirit of unity and Christian love” [*Polonskii*, 1075]. Another delegate claimed that groupings, debates, and discussions “might seem like disintegration”, but in fact amounted to a “perfect form of creation that results from the most diverse opinions, as their highest synthesis [and] union” [*Pis'ma*, 464]. A young layman from Tobol'sk also rejected the need to fear “ideological differentiation”; rather, what might seem superficially to be party-mindedness (*partiinnost'*) replete with “passion, intolerance, and hostility” in fact constituted a vital precondition for “systematic, collective, creative work” [*Vasil'ev*, 534]. A priest from Saratov diocese likewise emphasized how the Sobor's work differed fundamentally from secular politics:

Nothing is more unpopular at the Sobor than the smallest hint of party mindedness [*partiinnost'*]. People are so sick of party principles in politics that at the Council the very thought of the possibility of party struggle is met with a sharp protest from all sides, and equally from the organized groups [*Marin*, 924].

He observed how the labeling of one group is divisive in and of itself:

It is necessary to avoid every possible 'progressive' and 'democratic' flag, which inevitably introduces discord, since it throws on all those who are not in those groups the shadow of backwardness, if not of Black Hundredism” [*Marin*, 924].

Conclusion

In 1917 the Russian Church had the onerous task of institutionalizing a concept, *sobornost'*, that is not in its essence institutional. In his “Letter to the Editor of *L'Union Chrétienne*” defending the use of the word “*sobornaia*” to translate the Greek word “catholic” in the Nicene Creed, A. S. Khomiakov described the words “*sobor*” and “*sobornyi*” as “unity in multiplicity” [*Khomiakov A*, 321, 326–327]. The catholic

Church (*Tserkov' sobornaia*), he wrote, is one “in which all the peoples have disappeared and in which there are no Greeks, no barbarians, no difference of status, no slaveowners, no slaves” [*Riasanovsky, 183–184*]. The 1917–1918 Council achieved this vision of *sobornost'* as “conciliarity”, the participation of clergy and laity with bishops, without regard to political, estate, or class distinctions. In other words, as the Council member P. I. Astrov and other delegates noted in 1917, *sobornost'* is not the same as “*obshchestvennost'*” (the public, the community) [*Stadnitskii, 77, 79*].

At the same time, *sobornost'* as “catholicity”, according to Fr. Georges Florovsky, “is not a quantitative or a geographical conception”, and should be understood as “the inner wholeness and integrity of the Church’s life” [*Florovsky, 56*]. Members of the Council sought to preserve this “inner quality” in their deliberations and amidst the turmoil of 1917. Referring to Acts 4:32, Florovskii noted that “the gauge of catholic [*sobornyi*] union is that ‘the multitude of them that believed be of one heart and of one soul’”. *Sobornost'* as catholicity is “the communion of ideas, not facts”, in which “the Church will remain catholic even unto the end of time... when the Church once more will dwindle to a ‘small flock’” [*Florovsky, 58*].

To conclude, this image of *sobornost'* took on deeper meaning as the Council’s reforms were quickly subsumed by the onslaught of revolutionary violence and Bolshevik policies. It also points to how, starting in 1918, the persecuted Russian Church would continue to find new ways to be “*sobornaia*”, without the existence of a Sobor and many of the institutions it had maintained until the onset of Soviet power.

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Abbreviations

GARF	The State Archive of the Russian Federation
RGIA	Russian State Historical Archive

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