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## THE FIRST RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS MISSIONS TO ETHIOPIA

### Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyze the first attempts to forge a relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The paper considers religious and political preconditions for the rapprochement of the two empires. It is noted that in Russia since the 14th century, the perception of Ethiopians as exemplary Christians had existed, but Russian-Ethiopian contacts for a long time had remained sporadic. However, by the middle of the 19th century, the Russian Empire had become a major power with enormous foreign policy ambitions: it had also developed its own interests in the Horn of Africa region. In the second half of the 19th century, the interest in Abyssinia, its history and religion on the part of the Russian public, including the academic circles, increased noticeably. In the 1880s, the first religious missions were sent to Ethiopia, and contacts between the two churches were established. The development of relations between the two countries in various spheres was also greatly facilitated by the opening of the Embassy of the Russian Empire in Addis Ababa in 1897.

**Keywords:** Russian Empire, Ethiopia, Russian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, religious missions, Menelik II

### Introduction

From the moment of the baptism of Rus in 988, regular contacts of Russians with the East and with holy places began; there were also encounters with Ethiopians. For instance, circa 1370, the Smolensk Archimandrite Agrefeny witnessed the service of the Abyssinians in the Jerusalem Church of the Holy Sepulcher and recounted this in his story about “walking to the Holy Land”.<sup>2</sup> Another Russian who met Ethiopian Christians in Jerusalem and Sinai in 1583 and then in 1593-1594 and who left the story of his journey was the clerk and merchant Trifon Ko-

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2 “Walking of Archimandrite Agrefeny of the monastery of the Most Holy Mother of God (circa 1370)”, in: *Orthodox Palestine Collection*, Archimandrite Leonid (ed.), Vol. XVI, No. 3/43, St. Petersburg, 1896, pp. 5-6.

robeinikov. His "travel notes" entitled *The Journey of the Moscow merchant Trifon Korobeinikov and his comrades to Jerusalem, Egypt and Mount Sinai in 1583* were published in 1783 and reprinted in 1826 and again in 1889.<sup>3</sup> Published records by several other pilgrims, e.g. Vasily Pozdnyakov, who visited Egypt and Jerusalem in the 1550s, also contain the mention of meetings with Ethiopians.<sup>4</sup> Neither Vasily Pozdnyakov nor Trifon Korobeinikov were clergymen or literate in theological matters, but their works for the first time highlight the idea of the unity of faith between the Russians and Africa's Christians.

In the second half of the 17th century, the first attempt was made to establish diplomatic contacts between Russia and Ethiopia. It is noteworthy that the initiator of the establishment of ties between the two countries was the famous Saxon scientist Job (Hiob) Ludolf, the author of the historical and geographical work *History of Abyssinia* and the chief adviser to the Duke of Saxe-Gotha Ernest I the Pious, who made an appeal to the Russian Tsar in order to involve Ethiopia in military actions against the Ottoman Empire. The main argument in favor of establishing Russian-Ethiopian diplomatic relations was the similarity of religion, manners and customs of the two countries. The initiative of the Saxons was not devoid of sense, since the Russian government was also looking for ways to establish relations with Ethiopia and to forge an anti-Turkish coalition. The Ethiopian monarchs were also interested in finding a strong ally in the person of Russia in the fight against Porte, which was threatening not only the Russians, but also Abyssinia; in addition, the Ethiopian Church hoped for the support of Russian Orthodoxy in repulsing religious expansion both from Turkey and its vassals, as well as from Portugal, which, having established itself in the 16th century in the Horn of Africa, sought with the help of the Jesuits to plant Catholicism in Ethiopia and thereby subordinate it to its religious and political influence.

The rapprochement between Russia and Ethiopia was hampered by a number of objective circumstances, especially the geographical and political isolation of Ethiopia, the coastal provinces of which had been seized by Turkey. Episodic contacts with the outside world through the Patriarch of Alexandria, who until the beginning of the 20th century was the supreme head of the Ethiopian Monophysites, for a long time served as the only means of international relations of Abyssinia. In addition, the sudden death of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich (1629-1676), who was interested in this project, prevented the implementation of large-scale plans for the religious and political rapprochement of the two countries.

In the mean time, the perception of the Ethiopians as exemplary Christians had spread in Russia (Christianity became the state religion in Ethiopia in the 4th century CE), but the Russian-Ethiopian contacts were irregular and mostly indirect. However, by the middle of the 19th century, the Russian Empire had be-

3 "Trifon Korobeinikov's walking", in: *Orthodox Palestine Collection*, Chryzant Loparev (ed.), No. 27, Moscow, 1889.

4 Michail Yakushev, Russian followers Vasily Barsky and Kir Bronnikov on Mount Athos, *Russia and the Christian East*, 2016, available at: <https://ros-vos.net/holy-land/vos-ros/4/7/>, (date accessed: 11.11.2020)

come a major international power with enormous foreign policy ambitions and had also developed its own interests in the Horn of Africa.

### **The first steps towards the unification of the two Churches**

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) began to strive for unification with “brothers in faith” in the 1840s in the wake of the loud military victories of Russia over Turkey in the first third of the 19th century. The ROC began to lay claim to the role of the patron of all Eastern Christianity. In 1847, the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem (ROEMJ) was established, and it was from this time that closer interaction between Russia and Abyssinia began, initially encompassing the religious sphere. The first head of the ROEMJ, Archimandrite Porphyrius (Uspensky) (1804-1885), was interested in the possibility of establishing religious unity between the ROC and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), which is mentioned in “the Codex Sinaiticus” published in St. Petersburg in 1847, which he authored and which is stored in the Saint Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai<sup>5</sup>. Porphyrius managed to establish contacts with Abyssinian monks living in Jerusalem. He collected information about their country, about the structure of its church and state life. Thanks to his cares, some Abyssinian churches obtained Russian church utensils. Porphyrius planned an expedition to Abyssinia, but failed to carry out his plan.<sup>6</sup>

As the British and French began to take decisive steps to spread their influence in Ethiopia in the 1860s, Porphyrius felt it necessary for the Most Holy Governing Synod of the ROC to pay special attention to the position of the Ethiopian Church in order to intensify the rapprochement of the two churches. He believed that the ROC in this issue took precedence over Western churches because of the greater proximity of its dogma to the dogma of the EOTC, and that in the context of establishing the ultimate dogmatic unity with Ecumenical Orthodoxy the ancient worship of the EOTC could remain untouched as it did not contain any non-Orthodox views at its core.

In late 1860 – early 1861, on behalf of the Most Holy Synod, Archimandrite Porphyrius made active efforts to bring the ROC and the Coptic Church closer together. Since the EOTC had long been canonically dependent on the Coptic Church, the activities of Porphyrius indirectly affected the Ethiopian Christians. However, the Most Holy Synod was in no hurry to unite the two churches, considering the resolution of this issue premature. Among the Orthodox clergy in Russia, the attitude towards a possible unification with the “African” churches was ambiguous. An adversary of unification was, for example, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, one of the most influential hierarchs of the ROC. Even Archimandrite Antonin (Kapustin), the head of the ROEMJ in 1865-1894, who maintained

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5 Archimandrite Porphyrius (Uspensky), *Codex Sinaiticus*, Printing house of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, 1847.

6 *Materials for the biography of Archimandrite Porphyrius Uspensky*, Vol. I, Official documents, St. Petersburg, 1910, p. 385.

warm relations with the Monophysites, was skeptical about the unification of the churches: although the Abyssinians called themselves Orthodox, there were noticeable differences between their ceremonies and Russian church rituals.<sup>7</sup>

The systematic study of the Ethiopian Church began in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the works that appeared during the period are *Christianity in Abyssinia* by the priest Pavel Matveevsky<sup>8</sup>, *Several pages from the ecclesiastical history of Ethiopia. On the issue of uniting the Abyssinians with the Orthodox Church* by V.V. Bolotov<sup>9</sup>, *Country of Ethiopians (Abyssinia)* by E.E. Dolganev<sup>10</sup>, and others. Despite the fact that as, for example, Dolganev noted, “the church-administrative structure of Abyssinia does not fit any form and definition of our church-canonical system”<sup>11</sup>, the ideas of unification were based on the understanding that of all the “pre-Chalcedonian” Churches (the group of ancient churches of Eastern Christianity that did not recognize the decision of the Chalcedonian (451 CE) and all subsequent Ecumenical Councils), the Ethiopian Church is closest to Russian Orthodoxy in terms of doctrine, worship and structure. Its main heterodox in the dogma of the hypostatic union of two natures in Christ has lost its original meaning and acuteness over the centuries. Representatives of this Church claimed that they professed the Orthodox faith in the matter of uniting the Divine and human nature in one hypostasis of Christ.<sup>12</sup> In 1855, Negus Tewodros II acceded to the Ethiopian throne. He ruled until 1868 and laid the foundation for the unification of the country, which for a long time was fragmented. The Church of Abyssinia was to play one of the main roles in the centralization of the state. Tewodros actively used Christian slogans in military campaigns against Muslims on the Red Sea coast and during expeditions to Sudan.

One of the successors of Tewodros – Yohannes IV (1871-1889) – allocated funds for the construction in Jerusalem of a new Abyssinian church – the Temple of the Virgin Mary, which eventually became the center of the monastic complex. Meanwhile, the EOTC sought to break with its almost 1,500-year long dependence on the Coptic patriarch. In Jerusalem, relations between Copts and Abyssinians also developed unfriendly: as early as 1838, they seized an Ethiopian monastery, whose inhabitants had died of the plague, and destroyed all documents issued by the Sublime Porte that confirmed the rights of the previous owners.

The famous Russian traveler Alexander Bulatovich, who arrived in Addis Aba-

7 Alexey Dmitrievsky, *Archimandrite Porphyrius Uspensky as the initiator and organizer of the first Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem*, B. Kirschbauma, St. Petersburg, 1906, p. 104.

8 Pavel Matveevsky, *Christianity in Abyssinia*, Strannik, St. Petersburg, 1867.

9 Vasily Bolotov, *Several pages from the ecclesiastical history of Ethiopia. On the question of uniting the Abyssinians with the Orthodox Church. Theological disputes in the Ethiopian Church*, F.G. Eleonskogo and Co., St. Petersburg, 1888.

10 Ephrem Dolganev, *The Country of Ethiopians (Abyssinia)*, Bogelman, St. Petersburg, 1896.

11 Ibidem, p. 65.

12 Boris Nelyubov, *Ancient Eastern Churches. Ethiopian Church*, *Alpha and Omega*, No. 16, 1998, available at: <https://www.pravmir.ru/drevnie-vostochnye-tserkvi-2>, (date accessed: 12.11.2020).

ba in 1886 as part of the Russian mission, in his book *With the Armies of Menelik II* noted that the attitude of the local population and the clergy to the priests sent from Alexandria was often negative because of the personal qualities and inclinations of the latter.<sup>13</sup> The conflict with the Copts took on a protracted nature and ended only in 1959, when the Ethiopian Church gained full independence. Attempts to dissociate themselves from the Alexandrian Patriarchate were undertaken at the end of the 19th century, but the Copts responded with a decisive action in Jerusalem, where they blocked the Abyssinian monks from access to the holy places. Since Ethiopia still did not have a diplomatic mission in Palestine at that time and therefore could not defend its interests there, it had to recognize the supremacy of the Coptic patriarchy. By the way, Bulatovich, a firm supporter of the unification of churches and the Russian-Abyssinian rapprochement, also believed that the primary attention of Russia should have been paid to the position of Ethiopians in the Holy City. Having already been tonsured as a monk at Mount Athos under the name of Father Antony, in 1911 Bulatovich made the last attempt at church unification of Ethiopia and Russia, but his plans were not destined to be realized.

The interest of the Russian government and Russian society in Abyssinia revived noticeably after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Ethiopia and Somalia found themselves on the most important strategic routes from Europe to India and the Far East, gaining more and more importance in the Red Sea region. However, even in the 1870s, Russian diplomats were extremely cautious about developing contacts with Abyssinia. Attempts by Africa's Christians themselves to establish relations with Russia were also unsuccessful. When Negus (Emperor) Yohannes IV, the predecessor of Menelik II, who was at war with Muslim Egypt, sent Emperor Alexander II two letters (in 1872 and 1878) with a request for help, there was no response, although one of the messages was attached to a precious cross as a clear hint of religious closeness with Russia and a call for Christian solidarity<sup>14</sup>. The passivity of Russian diplomacy was primarily due to its unwillingness to irritate Western powers. However, pages of Russian magazines and newspapers, mass publications and travel notes of the first Russian travelers began to be filled with references to the religious closeness of Russians and Abyssinians, to the "strong gravitation" of the Abyssinians toward Orthodox Russia, to the need to help "a small nation of the same faith" in the fight against external enemies, etc.

In 1888 at a meeting at the Saint Petersburg Theological Academy, the well-known orientalist V.V. Bolotov (1853-1900) read a lecture on the ecclesiastical history of Ethiopia, in which he raised the question of organizing an Orthodox mission to Abyssinia. Considering the experience of Catholic and Protestant mis-

13 Alexander Bulatovich, *With the Armies of Menelik II*, Nauka, Moscow, 1971, p. 130.

14 Andrey Khrenkov, *Russia and Ethiopia: the development of bilateral ties (from the first contacts to 1917)*, Institute for African Studies, Moscow, 1992, pp. 10-12, 19-21.

sions in Ethiopia, which ended in failure, Bolotov recognized the success of such mission as doubtful, primarily because the Abyssinians were serious about their faith, were not so close to Orthodoxy and still had to go through a path of development in order to be ready for acceptance of the true Orthodox faith.<sup>15</sup> However, Bolotov's reports and articles had little impact on Russian public opinion, which was still dominated by the belief in Russia's spiritual kinship with "black co-religionists".

In the 1860-1870s, an important role in arousing public interest in the Abyssinians was played by people who, to one degree or another, were the initiators and staunch supporters of increasing Russian assistance to the Slavs, especially the Bulgarians and Serbs, and the formation of a kind of "Orthodox brotherhood", also in order to hamper the reorientation of the Balkan elites towards Western countries. However, this did not work, which was considered at that time a failure of Russian foreign policy, and Russia turned to the search for other "allies", including Abyssinia.

It must be said that public and government circles in Russia were guided not only by religious-idealistic motives: projects were put forward to create a Russian-African trading company; to institute a Russian Bank in the capital of Abyssinia; Russian entrepreneurs made attempts to organize gold mining; but all these undertakings had no result. This was due to the geographical remoteness of Abyssinia from Russia, the low competitiveness of goods and the weakness of private capital, whose owners refused to operate in Africa without government guarantees. Ultimately, it was spiritual and ideological considerations that turned out to be the most important factor in bringing the two countries closer together. This was already noticeable during the preparation of the African expedition of 1888-1889 by the "free Cossack" N.I. Ashinov (1856-1902) and hieromonk Paisiy (1834-1906).

### **The first religious missions to Ethiopia**

Initially, the expedition was prepared with the aim of establishing a Russian trading post on the Horn of Africa, but for this it was necessary to enlist the support of the government and personally Emperor Alexander III. The idea of the expedition was supported by the Ober-Procurator of the Most Holy Synod K.P. Pobedonostsev, who was seduced by the idea of the conversion of the multi-million population of Ethiopia under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church. Recognizing that the establishment of ties with Abyssinia could be of great importance for Russia, on 16 July 1888 Pobedonostsev wrote to Alexander III: "It is indisputable that these people (Abyssinians – *the author's note*)..., from ancient times retained in Eastern Christianity, with its Negus, have long had sympathy for Russia and sought response and spiritual assistance from us. I believe it would

<sup>15</sup> Vasily Bolotov, *Several pages...*

be useful and prudent not to repel them in such a case".<sup>16</sup> The reason for such sentiments of Pobedonostsev, who directed all the affairs of the ROC, may be explained by the emergence of new – nationalist and Russification – tendencies in the domestic, including church, policies of the autocracy. The tsarist authorities and the top clergy of the ROC began to attach serious importance to missionary work, that is, the spread of Orthodoxy among other peoples. Much effort was spent on converting peoples of Siberia, Far East and North Caucasus to the "true faith", but the results were very modest. That is why the discussion of millions of potential Orthodox Africans, who were under the risk of being brought into Catholicism, inevitably had to awaken jealousy in the soul of the Ober-Procurator. Emperor Alexander III hesitated for a long time, but ultimately approved the expedition, not able to resist the temptation to establish Russia's presence on the coast of the Red Sea.<sup>17</sup>

In 1888, preparations for a spiritual mission to Abyssinia were in full swing. Upon the suggestion of Ashinov, Father Paisiy, the rector of St. Panteleimon's courtyard in Istanbul, was hastily ordained to the rank of Archimandrite and appointed to head the mission. St. Petersburg Metropolitan Isidor (Nikolsky) blessed the plan of Cossack ataman Ashinov to establish the Orthodox spiritual mission in Abyssinia. With the blessing of the Most Holy Synod, Archimandrite Paisiy issued an appeal to the Russians with a request to donate funds for the construction of the Church of John the Baptist on the territory of the future mission: "...In a decent place for a shrine, in compliance with all the rules adopted by the Orthodox Church, we received the blessing of the Most Holy Synod to start building a church in the name of St. Prophet Forerunner and Baptist John. Help, Orthodox Russian people, this holy cause!"<sup>18</sup>

Ashinov and Paisiy received the permission to collect donations in Russia "for a good cause – the establishment of a Cossack commercial station in the desert on the African coast and the construction of a monastery with a church, a choir, a literacy school for native children and a workshop where natives could learn crafts: carpentry and turning, blacksmithing and construction, mill mechanics and other professions inseparable from the simple life of the Abyssinians". Metropolitan Isidor also gave Ashinov a letter to Yohannes IV, in which he "glorified the high patronage provided by the Abyssinian monarch to the one, evangelical and apostolic faith and the holy Orthodox Church of Christ".<sup>19</sup> The news of the upcoming expedition, largely due to its religious nature, caused a noticeable response in Russian society. In a short time, the organizers managed to collect a large amount of donations.

By the beginning of December 1888, preparations for the expedition had

16 *Letters from Pobedonostsev to Alexander III*, Vol. II, Novaya Moskva, Moscow, 1926, pp. 187-188.

17 Valerian Panaev, V.A. Panaev's memories, *Russian antiquity*, No. 11, 1906, p. 439.

18 Archimandrite Tikhon (Zatekin), Archimandrite Paisiy and the Russian Spiritual Mission to Abyssinia in the 19th century, *Nizhny Novgorod Antiquity*, Vol. 27-28, 2011, pp. 27-28.

19 Russian State Historical Archives (RSHA), fund 796, inventory 205, case 518, section I, folio 4-5.

been completed. It consisted of two parts. The spiritual mission numbered about 40 people. Besides Archimandrite Paisiy, it included hieromonks Antonin and Aristarchus, Archdeacon Juvenal, three Athonite monks, a choir of singers and novices. The mission took with it a large amount of Orthodox literature, icons and liturgical utensils for the planned Russian church. A detachment of about 100 Cossacks under the command of Ashinov himself was supposed to guard the mission all along its path.

At the end of 1888, the members of the mission gathered in Odessa. On December 10, in a festive atmosphere, in the presence of a large number of citizens and the Odessa mayor, a solemn prayer service was served on the shore before the travelers departed. In January 1889, via Alexandria and Port Said, the expedition reached the Tadjur Bay on the Austrian steamer *Amfitrida* and landed on the shores of the Red Sea near the port of Obock in the territory of the local Danakil tribe. The Tadjur Bay at the time had already been recognized as a territory under the protection of France, so Ashinov assumed that due to friendly relations with Russia the French would not impede the construction of a Russian settlement on the African coast.

The village, which the tribal leader named Magomet Leita yielded to the Russians, was not completely deserted: it had an old dilapidated Sagallo castle, built by the Egyptians, who had been claiming the entire coast of the Horn of Africa until the 1860s. After the departure of the Egyptian troops, the fortress was not used in any way and could turn out to be an ideal place to house the Russian spiritual mission.

On January 1889, at the ruins of the fortress, Archimandrite Paisiy served the first Divine Liturgy, and then a thanksgiving service with the proclamation of many years to the Russian Emperor. The flag of the Russian Empire was hoisted over the fortress. The founding of the village under the name of New Moscow was announced. On the sloping roof of the fort, a church with a wooden cross was built of canvas, consecrated by Paisiy in the name of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. Every day, in the morning and in the evening, a service was held in the house church according to the monastery charter.<sup>20</sup>

Ashinov probably intended to firmly establish himself in Sagallo, and his subordinates took it quite calmly. Most of the Cossacks, perhaps, did not even think about going to distant Abyssinia, but from the very beginning planned to settle on the shore of a warm sea. However, what was happening could not go unnoticed. The landing of the Russians on the African coast marked the beginning of a major confusion in international relations. The interests of the great powers in the Horn of Africa intertwined too tightly, and the appearance of another rival benefited no one, not even the French with their sympathy for Russia. Feverish diplomatic correspondence started between the capitals of the major European powers. Italy was the first to show concern. When the use of an Austrian vessel

20 Leonid Nikolaev, *The Abyssinian mission of Archimandrite Paisiy and N.I. Ashinov*, I. Zhelikhovsky, Odessa, 1889, pp. 36-37.

by the Cossacks became known, the Italian Ambassador in Vienna, Count di Villa Castelnuovo, expressed an official protest, presenting it as manifestly unfriendly step against a partner in the 1882 Triple Alliance. The Vienna cabinet was forced to apologize to the Italians, and the director of the Austrian shipping company that owned the *Amfitrida* was removed from his post.<sup>21</sup>

In St. Petersburg, the Italian Ambassador Marchetti demanded an explanation from the Russian Foreign Minister N. Girs about the expedition to Africa. The French government behaved inconsistently. Knowing full well of Ashinov's intention to enter their zone of influence, it did nothing to prevent the landing of the Russians in the Tadjur Bay. According to some reports, at the time of the unloading of the expedition there was a French gunboat *Meteor* nearby, but its crew only watched what was happening. Moreover, the colonial authorities at Obock at first did not react in any way to the occupation of the Sagallo fortress by Ashinov's men, although this area had been acquired by them from the local tribal leader back in 1882. Most likely, the French government, as well as the French authorities at Obock, seriously believed that the real goal of the Russian expedition was indeed Abyssinia. The French had nothing against a religious mission, even if it was accompanied by a large guard. Therefore, the short-term stay of the Russians on their territory on the way to Abyssinia did not seem dangerous to them.<sup>22</sup>

A week after the Cossacks moved to the fortress, the French decided to remind Ashinov that he was in the foreign territory. A military cruiser was sent to New Moscow from Obock, and Ashinov and his people were asked to leave Sagallo as soon as possible, to which the ataman said that he would take into account only the opinion of the real owner of this land – the tribal leader Magomet Leita.<sup>23</sup>

On 25 January 1889, French Foreign Minister René Goblet asked the Russian Ambassador in Paris E. Von Kotzebue about Russia's attitude to this expedition. The cautious N. Girs himself did not dare to answer the urgent request of the ambassador and left it to the discretion of Alexander III, on whose order it was telegraphed to Paris: "The imperial government does not take any part in the enterprises of Ashinov, who acts on his own risk, we know nothing about the conclusion by the aforesaid person of an agreement with the local tribal chief, and if Sagallo is within the French protectorate, then, as a matter of course, Ashinov must obey the existing rules in this area".<sup>24</sup>

After receiving the necessary explanations, the French government decided to demonstrate its military strength to those in the fortress. Sagallo was approached by three French military vessels, which formed a line of battle, openly demonstrating hostile intent. Then Ashinov was asked to pull down the Russian

21 Jesman Czeslaw, *The Russians in Ethiopia: an Essay in Futility*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1958., p. 10.

22 Vladimir Fedorov, *Abyssinia*, Suworina, St. Petersburg, 1889., p. 74.

23 Leonid Nikolaev, *The Abyssinian mission...*, p. 42.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 43.

flag, thereby giving up all claims to the territory. Ashinov responded: "We are Russian citizens, and to lower the flag before anyone else would be humiliating".<sup>25</sup>

On February 2, after learning from the French about Ashinov's behavior, the Russian envoy in Paris sent a telegram to Saint Petersburg: "Ashinov continues to resist. The French government does not want to use force, but will have to do so, regretting that the religious mission was complicated by a military adventure... If he surrenders his surplus weapons and recognizes the French authority in Sagallo, he will be left alone." N. Girs informed the French ambassador in St. Petersburg that Russia would find it natural and legal if France took steps to prove to Ashinov its rights to the territory occupied by the Russian detachment.<sup>26</sup> Fearing that the situation would interfere with the process of the Russian-French rapprochement and the formation of a bilateral military-political alliance, Alexander III easily sacrificed his subjects to big politics.

On February 1889, French warships fired at the Sagallo fortress, killing 6 people. Ashinov raised the white flag, New Moscow ceased to exist, and the campaign to organize the first Russian Orthodox mission in the Horn of Africa ended in failure. In the spring of 1889, the members of the expedition returned to Russia.

Ashinov's expedition, despite its failure, was of great importance for the development of Russian-Ethiopian relations and aroused both in the Russian government and society the interest in establishing links with the faraway African country. The Russian Empire did not abandon its plans to establish allied, including religious, relations with Ethiopia.

In 1889, Ras Sahle Maryam ascended the throne of Ethiopia, proclaiming himself Negus Menelik II. From the very beginning of his reign, Menelik II began to pursue a balanced policy aimed at preserving the political independence of Ethiopia and developing its economy. Menelik II was friendly to the Russian Empire, counting on its support in opposing the British and Italian colonialists. It was during his reign that the rapid development of Russian-Ethiopian military-political, cultural and religious ties took place.

In 1991, an expedition led by the V.F. Mashkov arrived in Abyssinia. It was supposed to determine the status of the distant country in international relations. The program of the expedition was jointly developed by the Naval Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Most Holy Synod and the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. The Most Holy Synod sent two clergymen to the "country of black Christians", which testifies to the importance that the authorities attached to the religious component of the Russian-Abyssinian ties. However, the priests of the expedition did not reach Abyssinia, forced for various reasons to return to Russia from Obock.

In March 1895, a Russian expedition headed by count N. Leontiev arrived in

25 Ibidem.

26 Oleg Gokov, "The Russian military intelligence in Africa (second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries)", available at: [http://ricolor.org/history/voen/form/3\\_7\\_12](http://ricolor.org/history/voen/form/3_7_12), (date accessed: 14.11.2020).

Ethiopia. Despite the fact that the expedition was organized by him largely at his own expense, he and his companions, among them Archimandrite Ephrem (Dr. M. Tsvetaev), did not act as private persons. Father Ephrem's trip was sanctioned by the St. Petersburg Metropolitan Pallady (Rayev) and the prosecutor of the Moscow Synodal office Prince A.A. Shirinsky-Shikhmatov. Throughout the journey, the Abyssinians, according to Ephrem, willingly accepted his blessings and touched the icons; the local clergy greeted him in a brotherly manner. The Archimandrite even claimed that he had a chance to serve a prayer service in one of the Abyssinian cathedrals.<sup>27</sup> Ephrem noted with satisfaction that "the Abyssinians are a very religious, kind and hardworking people, who are characterized by ancient piety and adherence to Orthodoxy"; they strictly observe fasts and rituals and, "consider themselves to be of the same faith as the Russians, Greeks and other Orthodox peoples"; shun Catholics and Protestants as heretics; "in their life, routines, morals, laws and education, religious influence is visible everywhere".<sup>28</sup>

The expedition stayed in Ethiopia for only six months. After visiting the courtyard of Menelik II and collecting valuable information about the situation in the Horn of Africa, Leontiev took the message of the Negus to St. Petersburg. At this time, an open conflict between Ethiopia and Italy was already brewing and preparations for armed clashes were underway. Therefore, the Negus needed to enlist the support of European countries in the upcoming war. Menelik sent an "Abyssinian embassy" to Russia along with Leontiev. The Abyssinian delegation sent to Russia in 1895 and accompanied by Leontiev included Gebre Egziabher, the rector of the cathedral in Harar. On 17 June 1895, the embassy arrived in Odessa. Hundreds of Odessa citizens arranged a welcoming meeting for the ambassadors that went far beyond the usual officialdom. The people, officials and even the Emperor and the Empress received blessings from Gebre Egziabher. The Abyssinian priest, in turn, received bishop honors in Russian Orthodox churches. In all Russian cities, the mission was welcomed by city authorities and Orthodox clergy. A meeting of the embassy with Pobedonostsev and the higher clergy of Russia was organized, during which the unification of churches was discussed as a matter of the near future. Metropolitan Pallady, whose opinion carried a special weight, told the Abyssinians that "the churches are divided by theses of faith, but the Orthodox theses are almost the same as the theses of the Abyssinian church, and the difference in rituals is not significant".<sup>29</sup>

Having completed their activities in Russia, the Abyssinians, according to Father Ephrem, returned home with a "settled question of the unity of the churches". He himself, having been elevated to the rank of Archimandrite after his trip to Africa, wrote that in 1895 the issues of his consecration as a bishop and his appointment as the head of the Orthodox mission to Abyssinia had already been

27 Archimandrite Ephrem (Tsvetaev), *Trip to Abyssinia*, University Printing House, Moscow, 1901, pp. 38-46.

28 Ibidem, p. 64.

29 The Extraordinary Abyssinian Embassy, *Niva*, No. 29, 1895, p. 123.

resolved.<sup>30</sup> However, the prospect of the rapprochement and even unification of the two churches, which seemed so close in the mid-1890s, remained unrealized. Perhaps, the fatigue of the elderly Ober-Procurator Pobedonostsev, who for a long time supported the idea of the confessional rapprochement between Russia and Abyssinia but from the mid-1890s gradually began to retire, had an effect. In addition, Metropolitan Pallady, who had shown a noticeable interest in establishing closer ties with Abyssinia, died at the end of 1898.

Anyhow, by 1895, fairly strong friendly relations had developed between Ethiopia and Russia. After 1895, the number of Russian citizens, both travelers and specialists, increased noticeably in Abyssinia. The war between Italy and Abyssinia, which began in 1895, evoked deep sympathy in Russian society, and Russian volunteers rushed to the Horn of Africa, wishing to provide assistance to the friendly African country.

A special Orthodox mission to Abyssinia was never sent; however, the medical unit of the Russian Red Cross Society (RRCS) that was sent to Abyssinia to help the wounded in the battle of Adwa on 2 March 1896, during which Menelik II had inflicted a crushing defeat on the Italian army, included hieromonk Alexander (Golovin), who managed the camp church. According to the head of the RRCS unit Major General N. Shvedov, the Abyssinians willingly attended the Orthodox service and admired its beauty.<sup>31</sup>

Lieutenant Baron N. Shedevr, one of the participants of Leontiev's expedition, who lived for a long time in Abyssinia and the Near East, played an important role in the return of the holy places to the Abyssinians – once their land plots and buildings at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and in other places in Palestine. Having acquired in antiquity and in the Middle Ages vast possessions in the Holy Land, the Abyssinians gradually lost them by the beginning of the 20th century and could no longer restore their rights on their own. In the archives of the Ottoman Empire, N. Shedevr discovered documents confirming the ownership by Africa's Christians of a number of holy places in Jerusalem. Owing to his efforts, in 1906 the main object of their claims – the Dei res-Sultan ancient monastery – was taken from the Copts who had occupied it and handed over to the Abyssinians on the orders of the Sultan.<sup>32</sup>

In 1897, a year after the end of Ethiopia's successful war, a Russian extraordinary mission arrived in Abyssinia, which included diplomats and the military and was headed by P. Vlasov (1850-1904). The arrival of the mission in Ethiopia marked the beginning of official diplomatic relations between the two countries. The mission arrived in Addis Ababa on 4 February 1898. At the very first audience at the imperial palace, Vlasov raised the issue of the situation of Ethiopian pilgrims in Palestine and promised to help. In his report (dated May 1898) to the

30 Archimandrite Ephrem (Tsvetaev), *Trip to Abyssinia*, University Printing House, Moscow, 1901, p. 46.

31 *Russian-Ethiopian relations in the 19th – early 20th centuries: Collection of documents*, Nauka, Moscow, 1998, pp. 200, 219.

32 Andrey Khrenkov, On the history of Russian-Ethiopian religious contacts, *Countries and Peoples of the East*, Nauka, Moscow, No. 27, 1991, pp. 194-198.

Russian Foreign Minister regarding the nature and prospects of Russian-Ethiopian relations, Vlasov, in particular, noted that "Russia, as the patron of Orthodoxy in the East, could develop interests in Ethiopia on the basis of religion; but bearing in mind the fanaticism of Ethiopia's clergy in terms of the rituals, it will take a lot of time and a lot of labor and sacrifices to unite the Russian and Ethiopian churches. In addition to a serious and comprehensive study of the dogmatic and ritual sides of the Ethiopian Church and the preparation of missionary preachers from among the Abyssinian youth in Jerusalem, and not in Russia, it will be necessary to build a church in the capital of Ethiopia and furnish it with grandeur ... in order to attract the Abyssinians with the harmony and majesty of the service..."<sup>33</sup>.

## Conclusion

Why Abyssinia? In answering this question, it should be borne in mind that there has long been a special attitude towards this African state in Russia. Ethiopia is a country of the ancient Christian religion, which has managed to defend its independence for many centuries, surrounded by hostile, primarily Muslim, neighbors. In the position of the proud people that heroically defended their national and spiritual independence, the Russian public saw direct parallels with the history of Russia. Sympathy for a distant country and its people was strengthened by an entrenched idea (which was, in fact, quite far from the truth) in the Russian public consciousness about the extreme similarity of the Orthodox and Ethiopian Monophysite churches.

The First and then the Second World Wars temporarily interrupted the relations between the churches of the two countries. Only in 1948, due to the restoration of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, contacts renewed. In 1972, the Most Holy Synod in Moscow and the Leningrad Theological Academy decided to introduce a new discipline "Ancient Eastern Churches", through which the students would be able to learn about the history, doctrine, and the contemporary situation of Ethiopian and other "pre-Chalcedonian" churches. Ethiopian graduates of Russian theological academies were awarded academic degrees. Currently, relations between the ROC and the Ethiopian Church are carried out through correspondence, during various inter-Christian meetings, and at mixed commissions for dialogue with Ancient Eastern Churches.

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33 Archive of the foreign policy of the Russian Empire (AFPPE), Politarchive, inventory 482, case 142, folio 208, 234-238.

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## ПРВЕ РУСКЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНЕ МИСИЈЕ У ЕТИОПИЈИ

### Сажетак

Циљ овог чланка јесте анализа првих покушаја да се успоставе односи између Руске православне цркве и Етиопске православне Тавахедо цркве. У чланку се бавимо верским и политичким предусловима за приближавање два царства. Истиче се да је у Русији од 14. века постојала перцепција Етиопљања као примерних хришћана, али да је Руско-етиопски контакт остао спорадичан дуго времена. Средином 19. века Руско царство постаје светска сила са великим спољно-политичким амбицијама, које су укључивале и регион Рога Африке. У другом половини 19. века, интерес руске јавности за Абисинију, њену историју и религију је значајно порастао. Зато је 1880-тих послата прва релиозна мисија у Етиопију и успостављен је контакт између две Цркве- Развој односа између две земље додатно је ојачан отварањем руског дипломатског представништа у Адис Абеби 1897. године.

**Кључне речи:** Руско царство, Етиопија, Руска православна црква, Етиопска православна Тавахедо црква, верске мисије, Менелик II

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