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MIDDLE EAST

USSR

SATELLITES.

BIG GATHERING OF ORTHODOX PRELATES AT DAMASCUS.

SOURCE ATHENS : Greek-Rumanian contact in BEIRUT.  
DATE OF OBSERVATION : July 1954.  
EVALUATION COMMENT : Attention Religious Editors All Desks.

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The Golden Jubilee of the Patriarch Alexander of ANTIOCH at DAMASCUS on July 4-5-6, which was attended by many high Orthodox clergymen from both the free world and the Iron Curtain, went off without the Soviet politico-ecclesiastical manoeuvring which had been expected. It had been widely predicted that the Soviets would attempt to convert the ceremonial gathering into the Pan-Orthodox Synod for which MOSCOW Patriarch Alexei has been pressing for some years, in opposition to the wishes of the Ecumenical Patriarch of PHANAR (ISTANBUL). But such was not the case, according to a contact of the ATHENS Bureau who was present at the event; he reported that the attitude of the Soviet delegation was "completely correct" and that its members seemed determined to avoid any appearance of "politicking." The representatives of the MOSCOW Patriarchate were said to have been conciliatory toward the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (a U.S. citizen), with whom the Patriarch Alexei has been engaged in bitter rivalry for control of the Orthodox churches; the MOSCOW clergymen respectfully requested that Alexei's best wishes be conveyed to ATHENAGORAS.

Correct Behavior of Soviet Clergymen.

Our source was unable to conjecture whether the Soviets changed their plans because they deemed that the time was not yet ripe for a showdown in the struggle for control of the Orthodox churches, or whether the "correct-

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ness" of the MOSCOW clergymen represented just another facet of the Soviet peace offensive. In any event, our source reported, the attitude of the Soviet delegation made a favorable impression on those attending the Jubilee and he gave it as his opinion that the Soviets won a propaganda victory simply by adopting "the politics of no politics." Our source said that he gained the distinct impression that the MOSCOW group was acting under orders to demonstrate publicly that Soviet churchmen were concerned exclusively with ecclesiastical matters, to the exclusion of politics. The effect upon the guests from the free world, who were expecting something entirely different, "could not have been other than favorable," he said.

#### Ecclesiastical Representatives from USSR and Satellites.

The delegation from MOSCOW consisted to the Metropolitan Piterim of MINSK, the Metropolitan Nikon of ODESSA, Bishop Nektarios of KISHINOV, Arch-priest Mihail ZERNOV and Vladimir I. TALIJIN, professor of theology of the Academy of MOSCOW. The Metropolitan Nikolas KROUTISKI (generally considered to be the Kremlin's man behind Patriarch Alexei) was invited but was unable to attend. The MOSCOW delegation also represented the Orthodox churches of Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The only other delegation from behind the Iron Curtain was from the Patriarchate of Rumania; it consisted of the Metropolitan of Moldavia, Sebastian RUSAN; the Bishop of HUSI and ROMAN, Theophile, and the Archpriest Alexandru IONESCU. It was originally expected that Patriarch Justinian would come to DAMASCUS in person, but he was unable to attend. The Rumanians arrived late - on 6 July, the final day of the fete; they excused their tardiness by saying that their journey had been "hindered by the Turks." They also brought the greetings of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

The ANTIOCH Patriarchate had sent an invitation to "Patriarch Cyril", of the Bulgarian church, thus in effect recognizing the unilateral action of the Bulgarian church last year in elevating itself to a Patriarchate. That action is considered illegal by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Greek churches, and some embarrassing scenes had been looked for in the event of a confrontation at DAMASCUS of Greek and Bulgarian churchmen. These scenes were avoided by the non-attendance of the Bulgarians.

Other Orthodox churches in the Soviet sphere which were invited but which sent no delegations were those of

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Finland and Albania. Free world churches represented were those of PHANAR, JERUSALEM, Cyprus, Greece, the Arab Orthodox diocese of NEW YORK and the Arab Orthodox community of Brazil.

Patriarch Alexander of ANTIOCH -- a Diplomat.

As is known, both the clergy and laity of the Patriarchate of ANTIOCH -- which encompasses Syria and the Lebanon -- are split into pro-Soviet and pro-West factions, with the 85-year-old Patriarch Alexander doing his utmost to steer a dextrous course between the two extremes. Alexander has made several trips to MOSCOW since the end of the war and has frequently lent support to Soviet policy; for instance, he signed the STOCKHOLM "Peace Manifesto." It is known that he has received substantial funds from the Soviets to defray the expenses of his Patriarchate, but at the same time he has attempted to retain his contacts with the West. Thus, on 23 June last he awarded the Grand Cross of Saints Peter and Paul to Greek Premier Alexander PAPA-GOS. The fact that the Greeks feel that Alexander is not irretrievably mortgaged to MOSCOW is shown by the message of congratulations which King Paul of Greece sent to the Patriarch on the occasion of his Golden Jubilee.

The Ambitions of Archimandrite SAMAHA.

The Patriarchate of ANTIOCH is the only Orthodox Church in the non-Soviet world which maintains a permanent representative at the MOSCOW Patriarchate; he is the 40-year-old Archimandrite Basi SAMAHA, an ambitious and sinister priest who is known as the "man of confidence" of the MOSCOW Patriarch Alexei. Our source, who has exceptional channels of information, reported that SAMAHA returned to DAMASCUS two weeks in advance of the Jubilee, bringing with him \$ 30,000 as a "gift" from Alexei to Alexander. The money is to be used to finish the still-uncompleted sumptuous Patriarchal palace at DAMASCUS, much of the construction of which had already been financed with Soviet funds.

Our source said that SAMAHA also brought with him a personal letter to Alexander from Alexei, in which the latter expressed the hope that SAMAHA would soon be promoted to the rank of Bishop. Alexander is known to favor SAMAHA's elevation, but the promotion has been held up by the pro-West faction of the patriarchal synod which fears the effect which will be produced in the West by such an obvious evidence of MOSCOW's influence in the affairs of the Patriarchate.

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SAMAHA took an active part in the organization of the Golden Jubilee and his hand was visible on several occasions. Thus, he arranged for the MOSCOW delegation to stay at the Hotel Omayad - the biggest and most modern hotel in DAMASCUS - while the other delegations were quartered at the Hotel Semiramis, which is definitely inferior to the Omayad. This discrimination in favor of the Russians caused some criticism among the other guests. Similarly, when the visiting delegations were arriving at the Patriarchate on the opening day of the fete, prolonged applause broke out from a clique which SAMAHA had hired to infiltrate the spectators and shouts of "peace, peace" were heard. Applause from pro-Soviet priests, adherents of SAMAHA, also broke out when the Metropolitan of ODESSA read out a message from the Archbishop Eleftherios of Czechoslovakia, in which the latter said that he was "praying for peace." Some of the non-Soviet guests were also affronted because the addresses of the MOSCOW delegates were translated word by word, whereas the addresses of the non-Soviet delegates were translated only in summary.

Our source attributes such importance to SAMAHA, as the key Soviet agent within the Patriarchate of ANTIOCH, that he included in his report the following biographical details on the priest: SAMAHA was born in the village of DEIR SONER, the Lebanon, and was originally a Roman Catholic. He was converted to Orthodoxy at some date unknown to our source and was appointed a deacon in 1948 by the Patriarch Alexander. In that same year he was sent to MOSCOW by Alexander to serve as the permanent representative of the ANTIOCH patriarchate. SAMAHA enrolled in the theological academy in MOSCOW and was graduated four years later; he was thereupon ordained a priest and archimandrite by Alexander.

"SAMAHA is a man of majestic presence," said the source, "and his temperament is impregnated with Russian mysticism. He loves disputation, although he is very reserved in his statements. When he is engaged in discussion it is easy to note the influence of the Communist dialectic upon his arguments."

SAMAHA displays his Russophilia in many ways; although the ANTIOCH clergy in general wears the Greek style of sacerdotal dress, SAMAHA favors the Russian style with the Cross worn outside on the breast. He is a tireless champion of Communism and talks endlessly on his visits

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home of the full and happy life of the Soviet people. He boasts of "living like a king" in MOSCOW, where he is reported to spend large sums, live in a big house and own a ZIS automobile - privileges reserved for the elite in Soviet Russia. He also boasts of having close relations with the "highest official persons." SAMAHA is not popular among the clergy of ANTI-IOCH, our source said; he is reputed to give himself up to debauches in his private life and is spoken of mockingly by his priestly colleagues as the "RASPUTIN of ANTI-IOCH."

The source said that it is believed that the Soviets are grooming SAMAHA as the eventual successor of the venerable Patriarch Alexander.

To return to the Jubilee, our source said that there was no trace of propaganda in the address of the Archbishop Piterim of MINSK when he delivered the greetings of Patriarch Alexei and the Russian Synod. However, the Metropolitan Sebastian of Moldavia, who spoke on behalf of Rumania, went out of his way in his address to praise Patriarch Alexander as being "known throughout the entire world as a member of the Partisans of Peace." Alexander himself, when he spoke in acknowledgement of the tributes, underlined his "neutralist" policy by saying that he made no distinction between the Orthodox churches but loved them all equally.

#### Private Conversations.

Our source was able to make contact with the three Rumanian guests and speak to them privately. It was his opinion that all three enjoy the full confidence of the Communist regime. The Metropolitan Sebastian of Moldavia is the personal friend of president PETRE GROZA; he is considered the most influential of all the Metropolitans and is deemed a likely successor to Patriarch Justinian. The source said that the Bishop of HUSI and ROMAN, Theophile, was "very circumspect" and appeared to be afraid to talk. He was "converted" to Orthodoxy four years ago, along with over a million other Uniate Catholics in Rumania.

The third member of the Rumanian delegation, the Archpriest Alexandru IONESCU, was more communicative; he is a Deputy, as well as an important official of the Patriarchate. Our source asked IONESCU if ANA PAUKER would ultimately be able to rehabilitate herself in the Communist Party. The priest

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replied that "from the moment that she deviated from Communist principles she exposed herself to punishment." IONESCU said that GHEORGHIU-DEJ continues to be the most powerful political figure in the country. When asked by the source if Iuliu MANIU was dead, IONESCU said that he had not heard of such a thing. IONESCU said that thievery and immorality are severely punished in Rumania and that "virtue" has never been at such a high level. The church is not persecuted, he said; on the contrary, the clergy are paid their salaries regularly. The Patriarch Justinian is an "influential personage," he said, and the churches are always crowded. When the source asked if the students are permitted to go to church, IONESCU replied that the clergy "does not mix in matters of public instruction."

IONESCU showed his surprise in seeing the abundance of goods in the Lebanon and Syria; the source asked him of goods are lacking in Rumania and he replied that "things are better from day to day." IONESCU was also surprised when the source told him that in the free world there are about 20 publications in the Rumanian language in which the sufferings of the captive peoples behind the iron Curtain are described. The priest asked the source curiously why he had left Rumania and the source replied that "the manners of the comrades were not to my taste." With a wry smile, IONESCU replied: "The manners of the comrades are hard at times, but they will improve in the end."

CORRESPONDENT'S COMMENT: Extended coverage of the Golden Jubilee at DAMASCUS was requested by Talbot HOOD in a memorandum to this correspondent dated May 26 1954. The source of the above report is E.C. MORAITAKIS, son of Father Constantine MORAITAKIS, a Greek Orthodox priest who was expelled from Rumania in 1949.

End.