'He Backed the *Logos* to Defeat the Chaos': The Death of Pavel Florensky (1882-1937)

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After nearly fifty two years of uncertainty and in response to the persistent questions and efforts of family and friends, the circumstances of the death of Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky, one of the outstanding intellects of our century, have finally been cleared up by the KGB.*

On 24 November 1989, Florensky's family received from the Registry Office of the Kalinin District of the City of Moscow the information, released by the KGB, that Pavel A. Florensky, priest and professor, had been executed by firing squad on 8 December 1937 in the Leningrad District, following a secret death sentence passed by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

Previous to this, the date of death officially given by state representatives had been 15 December 1943. This was the date supplied to the members of Florensky's family by the Registry Office of the Nevsky District of the City of Leningrad on 3 November 1958 during the Khrushchev 'thaw'. The context was the flood of rehabilitations at that time, which included Pavel A. Florenksy, (twice!) on 6 May 1958 and 6 March 1959. This declared Florensky innocent not only of the charges on which he had been condemned by the GPU (i.e. predecessor of the KGB) in 1933 but also of those on *which the verdict of one of the notorious troikas in his case had rested in 1937.* (See the reproductions and translations of the rehabilitation notices received by Florensky's family at that time.)

In the death certificate issued in the Khrushchev era, we still find under the rubrics 'cause of death' and 'place of death' the laconic and ambiguous statement; *net svedeny* — 'no information'! In the years

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that followed, this statement and fuelled a host of speculations and myths concerning the manner and place of Father Pavel Florensky's death.

During the Khrushchev 'spring' many people rediscovered the work of this polymath priest, symbolising as he did the revolutionary combination of a critical Russian mind with Russian Orthodox churchmanship, the union of mathematics, physics, logic, linguistics, psychology, parapsychology and aesthetics with theology and the philosophy of religion. He thus became a not inconsiderable factor in the process of intellectual liberation in the Soviet Union, whether it be in the scientific academies of Leningrad or Tbilisi, the universities of Moscow or Tartu, or in the church's theological seminaries in Zagorsk, Odessa or now, once again, even in Tobolsk in Siberia. In the sixties, the new Soviet structuralist school in the respected University of Tartu/Dorpat (Estonia) published certain of Florensky's works as part of their *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Studies of Sign Systems). The spirit of the 'professor priest' Pavel Florensky, one of the countless victims of Stalin's reign of terror, became increasingly a unifying interdisciplinary force amongst the substantial independent group within the Soviet intelligentsia. It also forged new bonds between the Soviet intellectual world and international science, for the Florensky factor was also rediscovered abroad and — in Italy, for example — his work was discussed at many international scientific conferences.

Faced with these developments, the KGB was obviously shy of making public the whole ghastly truth about Pavel Florensky's death, the fact that he had been illegally murdered by the secret police and where and when. It thus involuntarily bore witness to him as in the strictest sense a *martyr* namely, as a Christian who had testified to his faith by his death.

Around the KGB's silent mendacity there developed a whole cloud of assumptions and myths which contributed to a hagiographic process and gave Father Pavel an aura in Soviet society which foreshadowed a new type of saint in the Russian Orthodox Church's calendar — that of the believing scientist who refuses to abandon his holistic view of human existence as the basis of his thought and life, his conviction that science, faith and life are one and indivisible, who despite the deadly pressures of Stalinist tyranny remains faithful to this conviction even to his martyr's death. And like the majority of legends in the lives of the saints and martyrs, the stories told about Father Pavel Florensky can, of course, convey true and important historical facts. In one point, however, the traditions in his case diverge considerably: the real circumstances in which he met his death.

The story that Florensky had been shot during the Second World War in one of the Kolyma camps in Northern Siberia was given currency by no less an authority than Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The philosopher and theologian N. O. Lossky, an emigré in Paris who had long known Florensky personally, spread another version which gained wide currency, to the effect that Florenksy had been killed accidentally by a falling tree or piece of timber in *Podmoskov'skoye*, i.e. in the outskirts of Moscow. According to B. Čirkov, Florensky had been shot in the FIAK camp, 50 kilometers to the North of Vorkuta, in the Kholmen settlement on the Varga-Sor River. B. D. Sitkinov speaks more vaguely of Florensky's having been shot after his release from the Siberian camps. Other suggestions were that he was executed on the 'priests' island' of the Solovki camp in the White Sea near Archangelsk or, alternatively, murdered by a criminal in the Solovki camp. Another version suggests that he sank and drowned with one of the Solovki barges in the White Sea during the liquidation of the camp in 1939. This was a method used by the camp authorities along with mass executions by firing squad in order to clear the camp as quickly and as cheaply as possible. (Way back in the nineties of the last century, the Armenian Russian marine artist K. A. Yazovsky used his paintings to criticise the sinking of boatloads of Armenian victims on the southern shore of the Black Sea near Trabzon as an act of Turkish barbarism — happily of a kind of which Russia, for all its failures and sins, had never seemed capable. . .) According to V. P. Pavlovskaya, the sister of one of Florensky's fellow-prisoners, Father Pavel had died of exhaustion in the Solovki camp after a life of self-sacrifice on behalf of the camp's inmates.

After the unsatisfactory information received concerning the circumstances of Florensky's death by his widow, children and relatives in 1958-59 and in view of the mounting number of contradictory statements appearing in Soviet and international publications, in June 1989 a further examination of the legal proceedings against Father Pavel Florensky and the latter's death was undertaken at the family's request. As a result of this enquiry, the family received from the Registry Office of the Kalinin District of the City of Moscow on 24 November 1989 a completely new and now obviously no longer false or incomplete death certificate for Pavel A. Florensky. It stated:

> Citizen Pavel Alexandrovitz Florensky died on 8 December 1937 aged 55 years . . .
> Cause of death: Shooting by firing squad.
> Place of death: Leningrad District.

The incontrovertible and surest evidence leading directly to the date and possibly also to the precise place of the State's act of murder is provided by *CERTIFICATE* 694, dated 8 December 1937, from the KGB Archives, bearing the signature of the Commandant of the Leningrad District of the NKVD. (See pp. 354-55.)

What emerges from this key document is that the *troika* made its secret decision on 25 November 1937 and recorded it in Dossier Minute No. 199. The sentence (*'VMN'* = *'Vyshaya mera nakazaniya'* = 'Supreme penalty') was carried out on Father Pavel on 8 December 1937. The *CERTIFICATE* of which we publish a photocopy was made out on the same day.

Further information received by the members of the family in correspondence from the KGB make it quite clear that — corresponding to the double rehabilitation of Florensky at the end of the fifties — his deportation to the Gulag Archipelago, his condemnation to death and his execution by firing squad — were completely unwarranted and that Father Pavel was innocent of any crime. From the facts now revealed and from previous enquiries (in which I lean heavily on the researches of Abbot (Igumen) Andronik Trubachev, a grandson of Pavel Florensky), the following revised picture emerges of the *via dolorosa* of the 'professor priest' known and respected by scientists the world over.[1]

Florensky and the Bolsheviks

After the October Revolution, as one of the outstanding intellectuals of the church, as a polymath and professor at the Moscow Theological Academy, editor of the *Bogoslovsky vestnik* (*Theological Messenger*), as an active and critical participant in the intellectual and social life of Russia after the 1905 revolution, Father Pavel Florensky, despite his loyal attitude, was in danger of being attacked and removed as an opponent of the Soviet government. By virtue of his obvious qualities, however, he made valuable contributions in the world outside the church as an expert in a wide variety of fields, as for example in the GOELRO plan for the electrification of Soviet Russia, and this protected him from his most implacable foes, at least for a time. These opponents, especially the ultra-leftists and the most active of the 'militant atheists' were constantly affronted by this 'professor priest' who refused to discard his priestly office and garb but appeared in his

[1] In particular, I draw on published and unpublished works of Igumen Andronik; for example, on his article 'Ot legenda k faktam' in the *Literaturnaya gazeta* No. 5/31, January 1990 and on his comprehensive essay *Svedeniya o tserkovnom sluzheni svyashchennika Pavla Florenskogo* [Account of the church ministry of Priest Pavel Florensky] which, so far as I know, has not yet been published.

'*podryasnik*' (the full-length clerical cassock) at his lectures at the workers' colleges and at his meetings with Kuibyshev, Trotsky, Bukharin etc. Besides this, his opponents certainly knew that, in addition to his official activities, Father Pavel also co-operated in various ways between 1918 and 1926 in the unofficial theological educational work of the Russian Orthodox Church after the closure of the Moscow Theological Academy.

From 1918 onwards up until and even after his arrest in 1933, he was the target of a systematic campaign. His ideological enemies, wittingly or unwittingly the puppets of the secret police, were quite well aware that in his publications (e.g. as early as 1927 in the 'Granat Encyclopediya') in the controversy between the '*law of entropy*' (i.e. of general levelling down, of death and chaos), on the one hand, and the '*law of ectropy*' (i.e. of life, culture and the Logos) on the other, Florensky spoke basically of nothing but the struggle of *Christ the Logos* against the *Antichrist* who wants to reduce the world to the chaos of entropy.

After the appearance of his work on mathematical philosophy, *Imaginary Quantities in Geometry* (Moscow 1922), which demonstrably inspired the creative work of such contemporaries as the writer Mikhail Bulgakov, the ideological campaign against Florensky attained one of its first peaks in journals such as *Pod znamenem marksizma* (*Under the Marxist Banner*). Florensky was crudely accused of 'a return to Ptolemy' and 'absurdity' and ridicule was poured by his critics on 'the unbridled obscurantism (to be found) in the work of an erudite theologian and leading mathematician'.[2]

With the hardening of the ideological and political situation in the developing Stalinist system came Father Pavel's first banishment in the summer of 1928 to Nizhny Novgorod, which even to this day enjoys the unhappy fame of having been, under its Soviet name of Gorky (recently renamed Nizhny Novgorod) the exile of other great men. It is an irony of fate that it was due to the efforts of E. P. Peshkova, the wife of Maxim Gorky, well-known for her courageous attempts to help intellectuals harassed by the state that Father Pavel was able to return from this first banishment after only three months.

After another hate campaign in 1932 when he was taken to task by V. G. Fridman for his 'idealistic arguments' and 'religious artificialities', Florensky once again found himself close to the destructive whirlpool of the Gulag Archipelago. According to Fridman, his 'priestcraft' (*Popovshchina*) would mean that proofs of faith are advanced on the basis of mathematics and physics.

[2]See reviews by V. Ter-Oganesjan in *Pod znamenem marksizma* in 1922 and by S. Gorodetsky in *Krasnaya niva* in 1923.

'Bourgeois' science would seem not only incapable of unmasking and opposing religion but in Florensky's case it also achieves a second perversion: 'In a great many cases [primarily, of course, in Florensky's case] it actually becomes the accomplice of religion.'

In their activity as reviewers, Florensky's opponents here themselves became accomplices of the secret police. For not much separates someone who with his 'bourgeois' science becomes an accomplice in the spread of religion and someone having the fatal characteristics of a 'counter-revolutionary'. Once the 'class character' of certain views has been unmasked, the next step in the 'argument' is the identification of the said author as a 'class enemy' who must be eliminated in the interests of a healthy society. And in the case of Florensky and his pupils (e.g. A. F. Losev) this conclusion is clearly inescapable in V. G. Fridman's view.[3] Reviews are thus transformed into potential sentences to imprisonment and death in the truest sense.

In 1933 E. Kol'man put the finishing touches to this propaganda campaign by inserting into his polemical accusations charges which, in the climate of that time, were bound to end in legal penalties:

> P. A. Florenksy is not just any ordinary unimportant priest but on the contrary an utterly committed warrior for Black Hundred Orthodoxy, an advocate of a confident idealism, an unenlightened mystic.

The most important thing, in Kol'man's view, was that Soviet editors into whose journals Florensky had 'wormed his way' even in 1933 with his article on physics in the service of mathematics 'should not relax but rather increase their revolutionary alertness, since this was precisely what was required to foil attempts to fill the consciousness of the classless socialist society with idealist rubbish'.[4]

Such charges, now including the bitter accusation that Florensky's ideological leanings were towards the counter-revolutionary Black Hundreds are shown to be utter nonsense by Florensky's biography. During his theological studies, the young physicist and mathematician, along with other friends such as the Russian German philosopher Vladimir Ern (who also came from Transcaucasia), was a member of a Russian Orthodox 'Brotherhood of Struggle' (*'Bratstvo bor'by'*) which aimed to support the interests of the striking workers,

[3] See his book *Teoriya otnositel'nosti i antireligioznaya propaganda* [*The Relativity Theory and Anti-Religious Propaganda*], (Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists of the USSR, State Anti-Religious Press: Moscow, 1932).

[4] See E. Kol'man's article 'In Opposition to the Recent Discoveries of Bourgeois Obscurantism', in *Bol'shevik* 1933, No. 12.

many of whom lost their lives in the hail of bullets fired by the Tsarist army on Bloody Sunday 1905.

Florensky would hardly have sided today with the blackshirted *Pamyat* — people who with appalling consistency continue the extremist and anti-Semitic traditions of the 'Black Hundreds' and thereby deliberately misuse the Orthodox tradition just as did their predecessors. Florensky would certainly have sided with the 'intelligentsia' in the USSR today which, like his spiritual 'descendant' Sergei S. Averintsev — literary scholar, philologist, theologian, translator and poet as well as a deputy in the Congress of People's Deputies — is active in the political and intellectual resistance to these resurgent incorrigibles.

These false accusations were undoubtedly part of the cunning campaign against Florensky which culminated in the issue of a warrant for his arrest on 25 February 1933. 'Without sufficient grounds' (to quote a letter from the KGB Office for Moscow and the Moscow District dated 11 January 1990, No.6/K1-1267, about the Florensky case), Father Pavel was charged with 'counter-revolutionary agitation and propaganda and the organisation of counter-revolutionary activity', i.e. of those crimes specified in the notorious Section 58-10-11 of the Soviet Penal Code which spelt disaster and death for countless innocent people in the Stalinist 'reign of terror'. The pens of the overzealous and small minded party-liner reviewers had done their work . . . The arrest was confirmed by Radzivilovski who signed the case summary which stated, *inter alia*, that 'P. A. Florensky, b. 1882, professor-priest' was 'by political view an extreme rightwing monarchist'.

During his interrogation, Florensky was held in the Butyrka Prison in Moscow. The interrogation was conducted by Shchupeyto, OGPU officer for the Moscow District. (Incidentally, this was the same Shchupeyto who on 4 June 1939 was condemned to the 'supreme penalty' by the NKVD Military Tribunal for the falsification of interrogation records and the use of torture at interrogations.) Together with Florensky, a whole group of professors and scientists were arrested, allegedly members of an illegal political 'organisation' supposedly directed by P. A. Florensky, P. B. Gidul'yanov and academicians N. P. Lusin and S. A. Chpygian. It now charged that: in the political sphere they sought the creation of a republican form of government based on the Orthodox Church; and that in the church political sphere, the creation of a union of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. The verdict of the Moscow OGPU *troika* on 26 July 1933 condemned Florensky to 10 years internment in the 'ITL' (Corrective Labour Camp), according to information in the already cited KGB letter of 11 January 1990. Since the charges were — as the

KGB now admits — completely without substance legally and politically, it is now quite clear, too, that the real and barely concealed purpose was to break Father Pavel's 'ideological resistance'. Florenksy's whole life was based on '*Tserkovnost*' ('attachment to the Church' is a quite inadequate translation of the Russian word since, from his early theological works onwards and then in his superb book *Stolp i utverzhdeniye istiny* [Pillar and Ground of the Truth], Moscow 1914, '*Tserkovnost*' had been a central systematic concept for the 'incarnation' of faith in life, meaning at the same time the transfiguration of life in faith: the heaven which needs the earth and the earth which is open to the heaven).

Father Pavel was deported to Siberia along the old staging route of the banished and eventually found himself in the East Siberian *Svobodny* Camp, north of Blagoveshchensk on the Chinese border. From 1 December 1933, Father Pavel worked in the 'Research Section' of the BAMLAG (Bajkal-Amur Camp System). From 10 February 1934 he worked at the Skovorodina Experimental Station doing research on the permanently frozen soil there (Skovorodina is north-west of Svobodny and also on the frontier between Russia and China).

In July and early August 1934, his wife Anna Mikhailovna Florenskaya and the three young children Olga, Mikhail and Maria were allowed to visit him in the camp. This visit had been made possible by, once again, Gorky's wife, E. P. Peshkova. But the purpose here was not simply a family reunion. The Czechoslovak government (doubtless in response to requests from the colony of Russian intellectuals exiled there) had offered to negotiate with the Russian government for Father Pavel's release and removal to Czechoslovakia. In order that negotiations might begin, however, a positive reaction on Father Pavel's part was needed. But Florensky categorically rejected the whole idea and begged that all efforts in this direction should cease. Echoing the Apostle Paul's words, he said that a man had to learn to be content with his lot. Paul's actual words in Philippians 4 were

> . . . I have learned to be content whatever my circumstances. I know both how to be abased and how to abound, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and want, prosperity and poverty. I am able to face anything through Christ Jesus, who gives me strength. — All the same, it was kind of you to share the burden of my troubles.

Anna Mikhailovna also conveyed to her husband the urgent question posed by some of the spiritual children he had cared for pastorally before his arrest (he had always been drawn to the pastoral

ministry): Should they remain in the USSR or, if the opportunity arose, emigrate? Father Pavel replied that those who felt they had the strength to endure should stay but that those who were not sure of such strength would do better to emigrate. He confided to his daughter Olga that he had never abandoned his priestly office even though he would certainly never again be allowed to serve as a parish priest. He also gave Olga to understand that he had been tortured during his interrogation.

The fact that Pavel Florensky had not abandoned his priestly office must already have been especially galling to the 'organs' even before his arrest and imprisonment. Later on, after the visit to East Siberia, when Anna Mikhailovna submitted a request to the City of Moscow legal authorities that her husband's prison sentence should be reduced and that he be allowed to return to his family, the request was refused on the grounds that 'P. A. Florensky had in the past been a professor of theology and minister of religion who had not abandoned his priestly office in the period prior to his arrest' (citation from the already mentioned letter of the Moscow KGB dated 11 January 1990).

Even during the period of the family visit to Father Pavel in the East Siberian *Svobodny* Camp in the summer of 1934, he had been placed in 'solitary confinement'. On 1 September, he was placed under strict surveillance on the journey to the distant Solovki Island in the White Sea near Archangelsk. From 15 November 1934 he worked in the camp's iodine production unit. At first he lived in the community barracks in the kremlin. In 1935 he was moved to the *Filippova pustyn* (Philip's Hermitage), about a kilometre and a half away from the main monastery.

In May 1937 the reorganisation of the Solovki Camp into the 'Solovki Special Purposes Prison' (STON = *Solovetskaya tyur'ma osobogo naznacheniya*) began. Father Pavel was again placed in the community barracks in the 'kremlin'. He lived with a few fishermen engaged in catching Solovki herrings under the strictest supervision. The herrings were then sent at once in containers by air to Moscow. Father Pavel himself told a fellow-prisoner, I. L. Kagan, that these fishermen were not allowed, on pain of imprisonment, to eat any of the herrings they caught or to give anyone else any of them. At the end of June 1937 began the night time operation of assembling and transporting the prisoners to the Sekirnaya Mount (*Axe Mount*) for mass execution by firing squad. On one of the nights between 17 and 19 June — as the above-mentioned I. L. Kagan reported in a letter to academician D. S. Likhachev — Father P. A. Florensky also disappeared from the camp.

Father Pavel's relatives today suppose that prior to this he had been placed in 'solitary confinement', because his family received a last letter from him dated 19 June 1937. After that he must have once more returned to the community barracks, since former prisoner A. G. Favorsky, in a letter to A. V. Melnik, a women colleague in the Solovki Museum, testifies that P. A. Florensky 'the mathematics professor and chemist' lived with him in a building at the Fishgate of the Monastery in the autumn of 1937.

Not long after that, unbeknown to Father Pavel, a meeting took place on 25 November 1937 in Leningrad, 600 kilometres south of the Solovki Islands, a meeting of the secret *troika* of the NKVD Leningrad District office. In the course of this meeting preparations were made to put an end to the activities of the 'professor-priest'. He was condemned to death. In the 11 January 1990 letter from the Moscow KGB, the family was also informed of the terms in which the Leningrad *troika* formulated the grounds for this sentence, a mechanical repetition of countless previous judgements of the same kind: 'for spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda'. On Wednesday 8 December 1937, the death sentence was carried out. On the same day, the Commandant of the Leningrad office of the NKVD signed the death certificate.

But the NKVD were sadly mistaken if they thought they could silence Father Pavel by a firing squad. He was not forgotten nor was he reduced to silence. On the contrary, he is remembered in Russia and throughout the whole world. His works have either been or are now being translated into a whole range of languages. His murderers vanished into abysmal oblivion and silence and are only remembered when their victim is commemorated.

Sergei N. Bulgakov, who began as a 'legal Marxist' and Professor of Political Economy in pre-revolutionary Russia, turned to theology and to the priesthood just like Florensky and after the revolution emigrated to Paris. From Paris and the St Sergius Institute there he ended up making Russian Orthodox theology known in the ecumencial movement and reaped great fame in the West as a Russian theologian. In conclusion we reproduce here his view of the figure of Pavel Florensky:

> Born in Caucasia, Father Pavel discovered for himself the promised land in the Trinity-Lavra of St Sergius. He loved every corner of it and every single plant there, he loved its summer and its winter, its spring and its autumn. I cannot find words to describe the sense of attachment to his native land that burned within Father Pavel, that devotion to Russia which is strong and

firm in all circumstances for all its failures and sins, but also in every experience of its chosenness.

It was no accident, therefore, that he did not go abroad where a brilliant future surely awaited him and undoubtedly, too, world renown, all of which seemed not to exist at all for him.

He realised what was in store for him, of course. How could he possibly not have known! It was heralded inescapably by the fate of people in the homeland, from the greatest to the least . . . One could say that life offered him a choice between two possibilities: the choice between Solovki and Paris. And he made his choice: his homeland even though this meant Solovki. He wanted to share his people's destiny to the very end. Father Pavel's deepest being made it impossible for him, excluded even the desire to be an emigrant in the sense of separation from his homeland, whether voluntary or involuntary. He himself and his destiny signify Russia's renown and greatness — but also, at the same time, one of Russia's worst crimes.

(On the next page we print a copy of Father Pavel Florensky's original death certificate, followed by the English translation.)