

V. Shchukin

FLIGHT AS DUTY

On July 19, 1915, a priest named V. Shchukin entered the Russian Orthodox cathedral near downtown Riga, a city of (1913 census) almost 500,000 people near the Baltic coast on the Dvina river. Although the population of the city was now fewer than 250,000, the church was full of worshippers. The room was otherwise empty: no icons, no podium, no candles. The altar was bare and the walls uncharacteristically blank. If you have ever been in a Russian Orthodox church, you know how unusual this is. They are usually quite ornate and the main cathedral in Riga, which had been built in the late 19th century to demonstrate Russian presence in the downtown of this predominantly German and Latvian city, was no exception.

Instead of beginning with the usual liturgy, the priest spoke to the congregation. A month later, his sermon was later printed in the journal of the Riga archdiocese under the title of

Flight as Duty

Today we are experiencing the sad anniversary of the current and unprecedentedly violent war. This terrible world war has brought much unhappiness, poverty, suffering and death. This anniversary is bringing us another misfortune: the need to flee. The enemy has drawn near our city and threatens to destroy it and desecrate our holy places and violence to our citizens. That is why, in accordance with the instructions given by the civilian and military authorities, the clergy of Riga and the archbishop left the city this morning and take the relics of the church with them. That is why you now see a half-empty church lacking what is needed for a proper liturgy. What is the orphaned congregation to do? There is nothing to do but flee, run from this doomed city, wherever you can. Yes, brothers, in these violent and threatening days, flight remains the only thing that can save us and our only right duty. We can see that that is the case in the Holy Gospel. There we can find the most clear teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ on fleeing from enemies, given by Him concerning the Roman-Hebrew war. [He then quotes Matt. 24:16-20 about how the Jews fled to the mountains.]

That means that there are those kinds of terrible circumstances and those kinds of merciless enemies, before which flight is the only reasonable and saving action. [...]

The most important thing about those circumstances was that Jerusalem had already been judged by God to total and complete destruction. It drew this wrath by having shed the innocent blood of the Messiah [...] the unavoidable day of destruction had come. That is why all the innocent and useful had to flee from Jerusalem, "fleeing into the mountains". Yes, they fled, because that was their only salvation, they fled because in Jerusalem not one stay on another. There, where God has foreseen total downfall, there is no hope for salvation and maintaining. One must flee from that place and run without looking back.

Can we have any doubt that our city too has been subject to judgement to total downfall and destruction at the hands of the enemy? What sins have been committed here! False faiths and wicked faiths have pressured and pushed Holy Orthodoxy. Drunkenness, debauchery,

hooliganry ruled unchecked. Heartlessness and violence were everywhere to a high degree. Here among the most wealthy, the poor and homeless frequently froze to death on the streets or died of hunger. The testaments and sermons of Christ were ignored...Can we wonder, after all of this, that our city has been condemned to the hands of the savage enemy? And if that is the case, then it is now necessary to flee quickly and certainly and to seek salvation only in flight.

There was, long ago, another circumstance that required the followers of Christ and the Jews to flee from Jerusalem at the time of the Roman-Hebrew War – that was the extreme violence and mercilessness of the enemies, the Romans.

The Romans of that time, a time of total religious, moral and political downfall, could not help but be totally violent and merciless to the Jews whom they so hated.

They did not consider the latter to be people. No miracle could have mitigated their hate for the Jews. Not in the name of God, not in the name of man, not under any circumstance could they be brought from destroying Jerusalem.

They did not spare the Apostles, not the best of people. [...] Only total destruction by fire and sword could be expected of them. From those kinds of enemies one can only flee.

[...]

They fled and in doing so they preserved in their own selves the most valuable treasures of their fatherland, the missionaries and carriers of precious Christianity, which had been born in Jerusalem, but which now could not be allowed to die under the rubble. [Had they chosen to stay, they would have been martyred and suffered terribly, but it would have been a worthless sacrifice because their religion would have died with them.] That is why for them, flight was a holy, saving duty.

For us today the need to flee is no less pressing in light of the mercilessness of the attacking enemy. It is even more pressing in that for the violent Romans, they were not in territory that was valuable and holy for them. If the ancient Romans were true pagans, today's Germans are deformed Christians. If the Romans were lacking morals, the Germans have consciously thrown off moral guidance. For those who throw off of Christianity only Satanic pride and the resulting cruelty remains.

[...]

Demons are the only thing more terrible than Germans at war.

That is the kind of enemy we are facing. [Expect no mercy. There is no state of being or holiness or any principle in the name of which the attacking Germans will be moved to sympathy.]

Shooting parents, raping women and daughters, destroying churches in which the old and young are hiding, robbing everyone down to their last shirt, recruiting soldiers from among foreign nationalities, forced labour, allowing people to starve – such are the things of which the Germans are capable of inflicting on the citizens of enemy countries.

[More accounts of German wickedness, more appeals to flee, flee, flee!]

In this flight there is no betrayal, neither of your country nor of your government, nor of your local community nor your family nor your property!

To stay and be taken by the enemy means only to subject yourself to unnecessary suffering and death.

Let every one of us save himself for the fatherland, for society. Let nobody contribute to the success of the enemy by staying in occupied areas. The enemy will find a use for anyone they get their hands on.

[...] That is why those who flee are not the traitors, but those who stay behind. [After more along these lines, he calls for the people to carry everything they can and destroy the rest, leaving nothing of the city for the use of the Germans.]

In the areas he captures, the enemy must find nothing but emptiness and ruins. If he does not find it when he comes, he will leave it that way when he retreats. [...] It is undoubtedly difficult to turn one's own city and town into rubble, to turn one's home region into a desert. But therein lies the very difficulty of our duty to the fatherland we are losing, if only temporarily.

[The sermon goes on in the same tone for another page.]

Translation: Mark R. Hatlie