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Relations between the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church during the Second World War, 1941–1945

My lecture will deal with creation and development of the official relations between the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church during the Second World War. I look at the events mainly from the British point of view, asking who took the first steps, how the attempts were handled within the Church of England and what the motives were of those who promoted friendship between the churches.

The position of the Russian Orthodox Church changed on the eve of and during the war when the Soviet government allowed it to establish relations with churches abroad. One of the first churches that the Russian Church contact was established with was the Church of England. The relations between the churches were also important in supporting the alliance between Britain and the Soviet Union.

The main events concerning the relations between the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church were the visit of an English church delegation to Moscow in 1943, discussion about translating a book published by the Moscow Patriarchate, and the return visit to England by the Russian delegation in 1945. The decisions concerning the relations were made in a small circle in the Church of England. The Ministry of Information and the Foreign Office were deeply involved, although they wanted to give the impression in public that the visits were a purely religious affair. In its actions the Church of England supported the British government's aims concerning the alliance, but at the same time it had its own agenda. Its leaders wanted to support Christians in the Soviet Union by establishing contacts with them in an attempt to guarantee that the concessions which Stalin had made to the Orthodox Church would become permanent. That meant that the English church leaders chose to be quiet in public about some difficult matters concerning, for instance, the fate of the Baltic States, because they thought that it would make the situation worse for the victims. However, they tried to influence politicians privately.