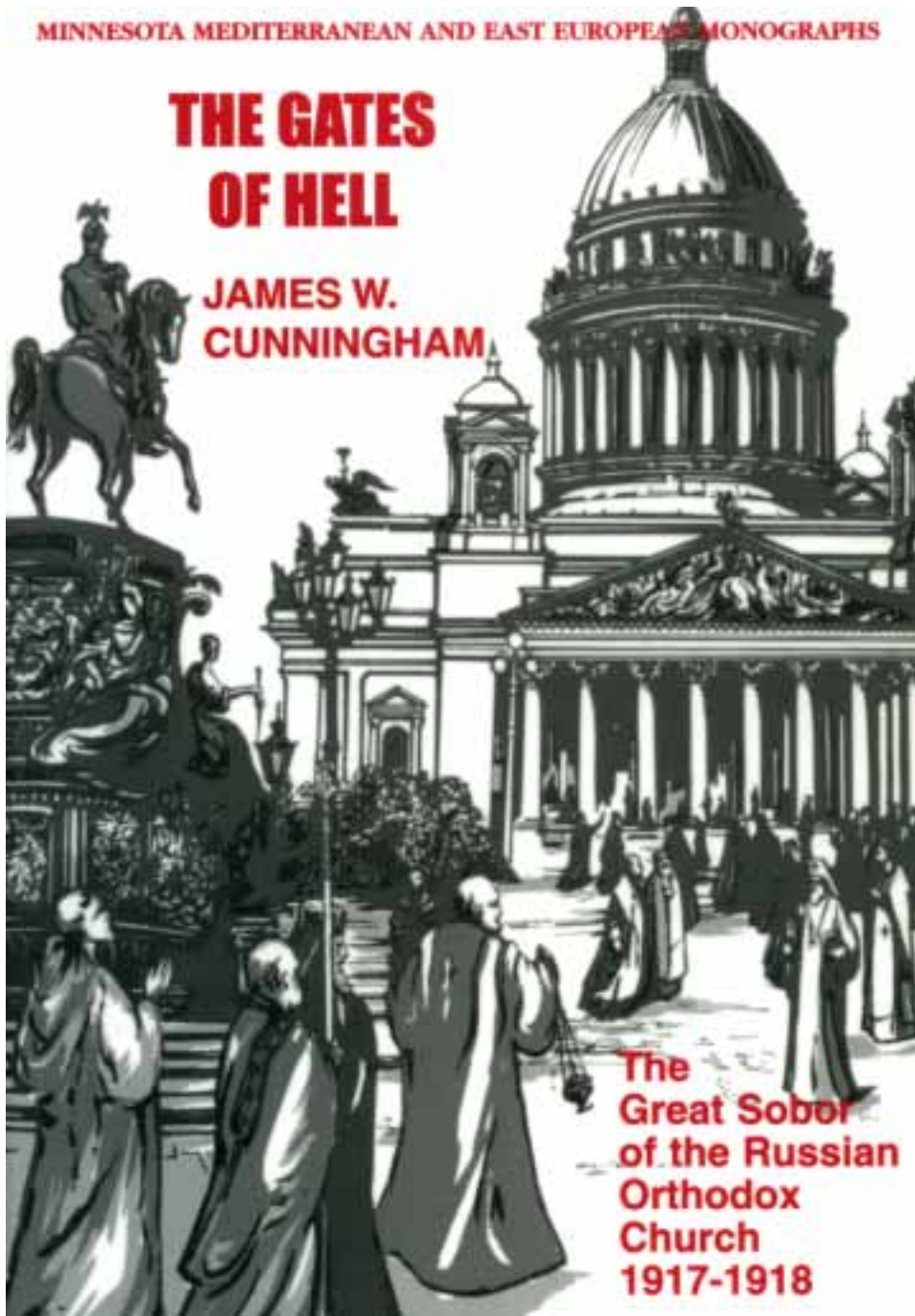


MINNESOTA MEDITERRANEAN AND EAST EUROPEAN MONOGRAPHS

# THE GATES OF HELL

JAMES W.  
CUNNINGHAM



The  
Great Sobor  
of the Russian  
Orthodox  
Church  
1917-1918

In 1917 the Russian Orthodox Church convened its first national sobor (convention) in over 200 years. In one of the opening speeches Nikolai Liubimov, protopresbyter of the Uspenskii Cathedral, quoted Jesus: “I establish my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.” Russia was at war, and the tsar had abdicated. The Provisional Government was determined to separate the church from the state. While willing to separate the church from control by the government, the sobor was determined to continue providing the educational system and other services in exchange for legal protection and support.

As the sobor was drafting its position on the role of the church in society, the Provisional Government took over the schools and expropriated church property. Their conflicting positions on the role of the church in the new society were developed in the shadow of World War I, the abdication of the tsar, the establishment of the Provisional Government, and finally the Bolshevik Revolution. As it continued to draft its constitution for a restructured church, it became increasingly obvious that the sobor would not be able to implement the reforms. When the sobor adjourned in July 1918, the Russian Orthodox Church was a persecuted institution without property or a legal role in society, figuratively, standing at the “gates of hell.”

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James W. Cunningham (1937–1994) lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, with his wife, Mary, and son, Andy. A professor of history at the College of St. Catherine, he was best known as a student of the Russian Church and the author of *A Vanquished Hope: The Movement for Church Renewal in Russia, 1905–1906* (1981).

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