

# One Hundred Years of Adventism in Russia and the Soviet Union

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The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Russia is now one hundred years old. Today there are about 30,000-40,000 members of officially registered Adventist communities in the USSR as well as an unknown number who belong to unregistered bodies such as the True and Free Seventh-Day Adventists.<sup>1</sup> The story of the Adventist Church's beginnings in the Russian Empire has some interesting parallels with the present. Seventh-Day Adventists have never had an easy life in Russia. The state authorities were hostile to the Adventist Church before 1917 as well as after — though for different reasons. The late Vladimir Shelkov, leader of the True and Free Adventists, often referred to the pre-revolutionary period as one of persecution by “state Orthodoxy” (“*gospravoslaviye*”), drawing a parallel with later persecution by Soviet “state atheism” (“*gosateizm*”).

Seventh-Day Adventist ideas reached the Russian Empire in the 1880s, some twenty years after the evangelical churches, mainly Baptists, made their first converts in Russia. The first Adventist converts, like the first Baptists, were not Russians by nationality but Germans — settlers in the Volga River basin and Ukraine, who were already non-Orthodox in their religion but were tolerated by the State as long as they kept their religious beliefs within the German community. Adventists were regarded at first as a “German sect” like the Mennonites, but ran into trouble with the state authorities as soon as they began to attract Russians, members of the Orthodox state Church. Laws passed in 1842 by Tsar Nicholas I to discourage Old Believers and Molokans — native Russian “sects” — were now applied to the new Western sectarians. Proselytising among members of the Russian Orthodox Church was punished by fines or exile to some remote region of the Empire. “Sectarian” meeting houses were sometimes boarded up and production of “sectarian” literature forbidden or severely restricted.

In the early period of Adventist growth in Russia, however, most Adventist literature was imported from the USA or Germany. The first Adventist publications were sent to relatives and friends by Russian

German emigrants to the USA who had become Adventists there. Copies of *Die Stimme der Wahrheit* (Voice of Truth), an American Adventist magazine for German immigrants, first reached German settlements on the Volga in 1879. In 1881, the main Adventist newspaper in the USA, the *Review and Herald*, first received a request from Moscow for a catalogue of Adventist literature.<sup>2</sup> In 1882, Gerhard Perk, a young Mennonite working as a bookseller for the British and Foreign Bible Society, was shown an Adventist pamphlet by a neighbour in Wiesenfeld, a German village in Ukraine. The neighbour had kept it hidden, as he considered it a dangerous publication and feared it might lead to trouble. Perk borrowed the pamphlet, *The Third Angel's Message*, read it in the secrecy of his own hayloft and then wrote to the publishers in the USA for more literature. He began to correspond with Adventist headquarters at Battle Creek, Michigan, and also with German Adventists. When he finally became convinced that Adventists were right in their beliefs, he undertook to sell Adventist publications to German settlers in Russia, as he had hitherto sold the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Perk was to be one of the leading lights of the Adventist movement in the Russian Empire.

Not only literature came from the United States: former emigrants returned to their homes in Russia to bring the Adventist message to others. Among these were individuals like Philip Reisinger, who arrived in the Crimea in 1883 with a huge trunkful of Adventist literature, and very little else, having sold his boots to pay for the last stage of his journey. The first few groups of Seventh-Day Adventists among the Germans of the Volga were established by another re-immigrant from Kansas, Konrad Laubhan, who returned to his former home, the village of Shcherbakovka, in 1886.

In the same year, perhaps the most important date in the establishment of the Adventist Church in Russia, a well-known Adventist preacher, Ludwig R. Conradi, arrived in Odessa. Conradi had been sent from America to work in Switzerland and Germany, on the authority of the Seventh-Day Adventist General Conference. However, he received so many appeals from Gerhard Perk to visit Adventist sympathisers in Russia that finally he agreed to come to the Crimea to meet Perk. Conradi and Perk then set off on a "missionary journey" round the Crimea, southern Ukraine, the Volga region and the northern Caucasus, visiting groups of German Sabbath keepers, preaching, baptising and encouraging converts.

It was not long before Conradi experienced for himself difficulties Adventists were to encounter in Russian conditions.<sup>4</sup> At Berdebulat he decided to hold a baptism service for converts, thus officially establishing the first Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Russia. The new congregation consisted of 19 members, including one who was later to be a great pioneer for the Adventist cause in Siberia — G. Tertz. Most of these

converts were former Baptists and Mennonites, who had already undergone baptism by immersion as adults and so joined the Adventist Church by professing their faith. However, two men were baptised in the Black Sea by Conradi during the open-air service, which was watched by Russian villagers standing on the rooftops of houses by the shore.

Immediately after the baptism, while Russia's first Adventists were taking part in a communion service, a police officer appeared and took Conradi and Perk to the local police-station, where they were interrogated. The chief of police accused them of publicly teaching a Jewish heresy, conducting a non-Orthodox baptism in public and proselytising Russians. It turned out that one of the Sabbath-keepers who had attended the service and asked for baptism, though he had not been one of those baptised on this occasion, was a Russian by nationality. After this man had volunteered a statement to the police that he had left the Orthodox Church eleven years ago and that Conradi had not baptised him, the two Adventists were allowed to return to their fellow-believers and continued the interrupted service. However, next day they were arrested again and imprisoned in the local jail for forty days. They were allowed to share a cell as Conradi knew no Russian and Gerhard Perk had to interpret for him. Although the cell was bare and verminous, they were allowed to keep their German Bibles and, after paying the jailers, were also allowed to wear their own clothes and eat food brought to them by the local Adventist brethren instead of prison broth.

Finally, after an Adventist representative from Switzerland had arrived in the Crimea to plead their cause and the American Ambassador in St Petersburg had assured the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs that Seventh-Day Adventists were a recognised Christian denomination, Conradi and Perk were released and allowed to continue their journey. From the Crimea they travelled up the river Dnepr to Gerhard Perk's old home in Wiesenfeld, visiting his Adventist converts there, and then went on by train to the German settlements on the Volga — first to Saratov, where meetings had to be restricted because of hostility from the local Lutheran clergy, and then to meet Konrad Laubhan and his followers in Shcherbakovka.

Conradi then left for Switzerland, but his visit had been a great success — both in the evangelistic sense and in reminding the small groups of Adventists in Russia that they were part of a world-wide movement. The church which Conradi had founded in Berdebulat in the Crimea began to grow — and spread almost immediately to Bessarabia (now Moldavia), where two of the Berdebulat congregation travelled to preach the Adventist message a few weeks after Conradi's visit. Two other members of the Crimean church visited their former homes on the river Don, set up Bible study groups and gained twenty converts in less than a year. By 1889 scattered Adventist communities existed as far as Western Ukraine and

the part of Poland then under Russian rule.<sup>5</sup>

Russians were already being attracted to Adventist meetings. The unknown Russian sympathiser on whose account Conradi and Perk were imprisoned was soon followed by many more. A typical early Russian convert was Teofil Babiyeiko,<sup>6</sup> from Tarashcha in South Ukraine. Originally a member of the Orthodox Church, he was a psalm-reader and was therefore allowed to take the church Bible home with him. In the evenings, he used to gather his neighbours together to listen to readings from the Bible, but after this had been going on for some time, he became troubled by the fact that many Orthodox doctrines were not mentioned in the Bible and asked the priest about this. The priest, however, refused to discuss the subject and asked him to return the Bible. Babiyeiko then journeyed to Kiev, the nearest large town, and bought a Bible of his own. In 1877 he left the Orthodox Church, together with a group of like-minded friends; they called themselves a "community of Bible believers". In 1883 they decided to build themselves a church and sent Babiyeiko, as their leader, to obtain building permission from the governor's office in Kiev. Babiyeiko did not return — he was arrested and exiled to Stavropol' in the northern Caucasus. There he again began to study the Bible and independently came to two conclusions very similar to Adventist beliefs: that the seventh day of the week, Saturday, should be observed as the Sabbath; and that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to this earth was to be expected in the near future.

It was early in 1886 or 1887, however, that Babiyeiko first came into contact with Seventh-Day Adventists. Adventist ideas had already penetrated Mennonite and Baptist communities in the northern Caucasus — by 1886 there were small Adventist groups of believers in the German settlements of Alexanderfeld, Wohldemfurst and Eigenheim. In 1887 Konrad Laubhan, who had been ordained as an Adventist minister after studying abroad for a year at the mission college in Basel, was sent to instruct the new Adventist groups in the Caucasus and soon established a church of 34 members. One of the new members was Teofil Babiyeiko, whom Laubhan had met while visiting his German employer. After discovering that they shared certain basic beliefs, Laubhan instructed Babiyeiko further concerning Seventh-Day Adventism and ended by receiving him into the Adventist Church. Over the next two years, thirteen of Babiyeiko's Russian friends also became Adventists. An Adventist group consisting entirely of Russians, rather than Germans, grew up in Stavropol'. Other Russian groups started to meet in the surrounding villages of Mikhailovka and Pelageyevka.

Russian converts soon came to outnumber Adventists of German origin: by 1914 they formed the overwhelming majority of Adventists in the Russian Empire. Like Babiyeiko, many were disillusioned with the Russian Orthodox Church (in 1912, 64% of Adventists in Russia were

former members of the Orthodox Church).<sup>7</sup> The Adventists, like the Baptists, offered a new approach to religion — Bible study on a popular level, services in Russian instead of Old Church Slavonic, spontaneous prayer in church and a sense of personal spiritual experience, as well as a close church fellowship that was able to help in cases of material hardship.

The particular attractions of Seventh-Day Adventism, as distinct from the evangelical churches in general, are more difficult to define. Certain Adventist doctrines had precedents among the native Russian sects: for example, the Molokans and Dukhobors were opposed to bearing arms and, like the Baptists, were also against alcohol and tobacco. Opposition to tobacco, whether it was smoked or sniffed, dated back to the time of Peter the Great, when it was first imported from the West. According to a Russian proverb current among the Old Believers, “he who sniffs tobacco is the brother of the dog”. However, it was perhaps the Adventist observance of the Sabbath which had the most interesting historical precedent in Russia. There was already a Russian sect of “*subbotniki*” (Sabbath-keepers), which dated back to the 14th century. They were Judaisers, who rejected the New Testament and replaced baptism by circumcision. Nowadays they are almost extinct as a religious group but the name “*subbotniki*” began to be used of Adventists as well. To this day, the Soviet press refers to Adventists not only as “*adventisty*” but also as “*subbotniki*”.

The first Seventh-Day Adventist literature in Russian was produced in 1888, but had to be printed in Basel and sent to Russia by post or smuggled across the Russian border. Because of the regulations against proselytising Russian Orthodox believers, pamphlets in Russian were far more difficult to send through the post than the earlier pamphlets in German. It was impossible to obtain permission from the Russian government to print Adventist literature within the borders of the Russian Empire. Other Protestant denominations with Russian members had the same difficulties. The Procurator of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, had an extreme dislike of “sectarians” and passed a number of decrees restricting their activities during his period of office (1880-1905).

Supplies of Adventist literature in Russian were at first organised from Switzerland and Germany by Gerhard Perk, who had to leave Russia in 1887 because of his religious activities. German Protestant pastors had complained to the police about his selling Adventist books and tracts and he would undoubtedly have been arrested if he had not emigrated. The first Adventist pamphlet in Russian, *Which Day do you Keep and Why?*, was sent to Russia in parcels from Basel, but almost all of them were confiscated by the censor. When the Adventist printers moved to Hamburg in 1889, sending literature to Russia became easier.<sup>8</sup> Basel was known to Russian state officials as a centre for Russian revolutionaries

abroad and was consequently kept under closer scrutiny.

Just before the turn of the century, some Adventist publications were at last produced inside the Russian Empire — though not as yet in Russian. In the Baltic provinces of Latvia and Estonia, where the population was largely non-Russian, religious censorship was slacker. Even the Russians in this area were often Old Believers or sectarians who had moved there because of the greater tolerance shown to them. The landowning aristocracy in both Latvia and Estonia were German Lutherans and although they had little liking for “egalitarian sects” such as the Baptists or the Moravian Brethren, as Protestants they were more inured to religious dispute than the Russian Orthodox and therefore allowed more “sectarian” literature to be printed. In 1895 Gerhard Perk moved to Riga and began to lead Bible study groups there, also asking for permission to sell Adventist pamphlets in Latvia and Estonia. The local authorities agreed to his request and in 1896 Adventist pamphlets, translated into Latvian and Estonian, were legally being sold in the two provinces. However, it was only in 1899 that permission was given to publish Adventist literature in Riga, in the Latvian and Estonian languages, but not in Russian.<sup>9</sup> By this time, the Adventists were firmly established in the Baltic provinces, with a church of twenty members in Riga (founded in 1896) and groups of Adventist sympathisers in Tallinn. Adventist Bible study groups, led by Gerhard Perk’s brother Johann, had also been meeting in Vilnius, in Catholic Lithuania, since 1896.

In November 1890, the first General Meeting of Seventh-Day Adventists in the Russian Empire was held — in Eigenheim, one of the Adventist centres in the Caucasus. One hundred delegates attended, representing the 356 members the Adventist Church had gained in Russia over ten years, as well as the wider group of sympathisers who had not yet become members. In Eigenheim itself, Sabbath meetings were regularly being attended by about two hundred people. The General Meeting had a guest of honour from abroad — L. R. Conradi, who was viewing the fruits of his earlier work before setting off on another long trip round Adventist groups in the Caucasus and Ukraine.

Something of a stir was caused at the meeting by the presence of delegates from the Russian Adventist congregation in Stavropol’, including Teofil Babiyenko and his sister. The German-Russian Adventists were pleased at having the native Russian converts among them, but a little apprehensive at the thought of the trouble they might cause with the authorities. However, by the end of the General Meeting a decision had been taken to ordain Babiyenko as a church elder — the first of Russian descent.

About a year after his ordination, Babiyenko and seven other members of the Stavropol’ church were arrested because of their evangelistic activities in Russian villages and exiled to the settlement of

Herusy on the other side of the Caucasus Mountains. The German convert in whose home they had held their meetings was exiled to Siberia for five years. Herusy, however, was the terminus of a stage-coach route and Babienco succeeded in spreading his message to many of the coachmen and travellers. Within three years he had a congregation of two hundred at Sabbath meetings.

Babienco's sister, who preserved the Adventist community in Stavropol' by using her savings to buy a house where Adventist meetings could be held on the Sabbath, was soon herself condemned to exile. In a farewell letter to her family she described her interview with the police:

On 24 August I was summoned to the police station and asked whether I preferred to go to an island for one year and nine months or to be exiled to a place where no Russian is spoken. I was allowed three hours to consider it. Left alone in the room, I prayed for guidance . . . Finally I chose the second proposition, yet it will be hard to leave my relatives and all the dear members of the church, especially since I do not know for how long. My trust is in the Lord. I am grateful to God that they have not imprisoned me before. However, my heart is often depressed when I think of my future. Today I received the order to be ready by 17 September . . . God willing, I shall let you know how we prosper among the foreign people. Pray for us.<sup>10</sup>

The Tsarist government's practice of exiling religious "sectarians" to the Caucasus, Siberia and Central Asia merely gave them the opportunity to preach their message in the farthest regions of the Empire. As Adventists began to share the fate of earlier religious exiles, such as the Dukhobors and the Stundists, they too began to establish church groups in Siberia and Turkestan. A joke current among the exiles was that the government had paid for their missionary journeys.<sup>11</sup> The most frequent offences leading to exile were evangelisation and distribution of Adventist literature.

There was no possibility of establishing a training college for Adventist clergy inside Russia, so students from Russia were educated in Germany — at first at the Adventist college in Hamburg, then in Friedensau Mission School, where a special Russian Department was set up in 1899.<sup>12</sup>

Courses for Adventist students from Russia first began in Hamburg in 1889. Two of the first students to be ordained as Adventist ministers after completing the course were Jacob Klein and Heinrich J. Loeb sack. Both were Germans from Russia. Klein was a protégé of L. R. Conradi; he had become a convert after emigrating to the USA, but when he was ordained in 1889 he returned to his former home in Frank, a German settlement on the Volga, and established a church there. Loeb sack, who had worked in

Russia all his life, was ordained in 1890. He had to take over Jacob Klein's church in Frank almost as soon as he returned from Germany, as Klein had been forced to leave the area after the local Orthodox priest had lodged a complaint against him. When his home was searched by the police, they found a copy of *Which Day do you Keep and Why?* and charged him with trying to convert the Russian Orthodox. Moving to southern Russia was the only way Klein could avoid imprisonment in Frank.

The Friedensau Mission School was able to take more students from the Russian Empire: in 1903 there were 13, about half being Russian, the rest Germans, Latvians and Estonians. There were also qualified teachers from Russia — Hertha Bartel from St Petersburg and Teodor Itzmann, a Russian Jewish convert from Riga. The establishment of a missionary school in Russia itself was often discussed, especially after 1905, but none of these plans ever materialised.

For the first ten years of Adventist activity in the Russian Empire, almost all members of the Adventist Church lived in villages and rural areas around German settlements in the Volga and Don river basins, the Caucasus and the Crimea. The establishment of Adventist churches in large towns, beginning with Riga in 1895, was a new development. In 1898 an Adventist church was established in the capital of the Russian empire — St Petersburg. Its founder was Gerhard Perk, who had moved from Riga in 1897 to set up Bible study groups in the capital city. "By God's grace," he wrote in a letter to fellow Adventists in Riga, "I have managed to make a start in the capital city of this great land — it is the will of God that 17 souls have come to accept the truth."<sup>13</sup> By 1901 there were two Adventist churches in St Petersburg — one German, the other Russian. In 1914 there were four.

The number of Adventists in the Russian Empire was steadily growing, though they were still a very small flock. In 1900 there were 28 Adventist churches and 1,037 members. After 1905 Adventists increased in number far more rapidly, due to the fateful events of that year. As a result of the strikes and armed revolts of 1905, Tsar Nicholas II was forced to grant a Constitution as well as certain civil and religious freedoms. On 17 April 1905 the Tsar promised full religious toleration and full civil rights to all schismatics and sectarians and legally permitted a change of faith from Orthodoxy to another religious creed. His manifesto of 17 October, which promised a constitution, also promised freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and association. In addition, the man many sectarians saw as their chief enemy — K. P. Pobedonostsev — resigned as Procurator of the Holy Synod in October. In 1906 the Seventh-Day Adventists were officially recognised as a Church by the Russian authorities. The Adventist Conference in October 1905 addressed a letter of thanks to Tsar Nicholas II, stating that they were praying for the



government.<sup>14</sup>

The most useful gain of 1905 for the Adventists was the right to publish literature and propagate their teachings. The demand for Adventist publications had increased during the Russo-Japanese War, possibly because of their pacifist content. In 1905 Ellen White's *Steps to Christ*, one of the founding works of Adventism, was published in Russian, as well as Latvian and Estonian, in the Finnish city of Helsinki (then part of the Russian Empire). The Adventist publishing house in Hamburg began publishing Sabbath school quarterlies in Russian and in 1908 produced a monthly Adventist paper in Russian, *Maslina* (Olive Tree), which continued until the First World War. These were sent to Adventists in the Russian Empire, as were Russian translations of Adventist books. By 1914 there were Adventist publishing houses in Kiev and Saratov; though the Riga publishing house had been closed down in 1910, a private printing house in the city continued to produce Adventist literature. In 1914 an eight-page monthly *Blagaya vest'* (Good News) was launched in St Petersburg, with I. A. L'vov as editor.<sup>15</sup>

In 1907, the Adventist church in Russia was given the status of a separate Union Conference, with J. T. Boettcher as its first president. It now had 2,566 members and 41 churches. In 1909 J. T. Boettcher became the first Adventist to address an Orthodox Congress, attended by a thousand priests, in Kiev. Hearing that the Congress had put forward some anti-Adventist resolutions, he obtained permission to speak and spent over an hour explaining the fundamental principles of Adventism to an attentive audience.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Adventist public speakers were not always so politely received. After freedom of assembly and speech had been promised by the Tsar in 1905, an evangelical meeting which created an unfavourable precedent was held in Aleksandrovsk, a town in southern Russia. The local clergy, mostly Orthodox, incited the crowd against the Adventist speakers; the meeting ended in a riot and was used as an excuse by the local authorities for banning further Adventist public meetings. In spite of the Tsar's edict on religious toleration, it was possible for local authorities to obstruct Adventist meetings, and even services, because of the many legal restrictions attached to the edict — for example, former Orthodox believers attending such meetings were supposed to have an official letter of dismissal from their priest. To add to their troubles, the Adventists became an object of attack for the "Black Hundreds" terrorist organisation, an anti-Semitic group dedicated to the preservation of Russia and Orthodoxy: J. Ebel, an early Adventist minister in Siberia, was assassinated by members of this organisation.

Nevertheless, on balance the situation was better for Adventists in Russia after 1905 than before. The Adventist Church was expanding rapidly into new areas — in 1908-1909 the first Adventist churches were

established in Georgia and Armenia, in the Russian settlement of Harbin in north-east China (in 1909) and in Russian-ruled Central Asia. By 1914 there were six Adventist churches in Turkestan, four of them in Tashkent and the surrounding area. Adventist exiles in Siberia, who first arrived in the 1890s, often settled there hoping to enjoy greater freedom of worship far from the central government. The first minister in Siberia as a whole had arrived only in 1908: he was K. A. Reifschneider, a German from Pyatigorsk in the Caucasus, who made the town of Omsk his base and from there travelled about two thousand miles by sleigh all over Siberia to visit Adventist groups.<sup>17</sup>

In 1908 the first Adventist minister of Russian descent — E. Gnedin — was ordained in Aleksandrovsk, after studying at the Friedensau college in Germany. Two years later, he was serving in an Adventist community in Manchuria, where he baptised 26 converts in the first two months after his arrival.<sup>18</sup>

Between 1907 and 1914, the number of Adventists in the Russian Empire more than doubled: on the eve of the First World War there were 5,880 members of the Adventist Church. The number of churches had risen to 240, ranging from the Baltic coast to the borders of China, though most of them still lacked ministers — of whom there were only 40. In 1911 the Russian Union Conference of Adventists became completely self-sustaining, but one of its most important expenses was the contribution sent each year to the Russian Department at the Friedensau Mission School.

In 1913, in order to keep pace with the rapid growth of the Adventist Church in the Russian Empire, it was divided into two administrative areas, the Eastern and Western Union Conferences. The Eastern Union Conference had its headquarters in St Petersburg, with O. E. Reinke as president, while the Western Union Conference was centred on Riga, with J. T. Boettcher as president.<sup>19</sup>

The outbreak of the First World War created difficulties for the Adventist Church in Russia — largely because so many of its adherents were of German origin. In the first year of the war, most German-speaking Adventists in the Baltic provinces, Western Ukraine and Poland were deported to the interior of Russia, as were most citizens of German extraction in the “front-line” areas. However, the Adventists were often regarded by the Russian government not only as a “German sect” but also as a “revolutionary sect”. This resulted in the exile of a number of Adventist ministers and elders to Siberia in the early years of the war, because of their evangelistic activities. J. T. Boettcher was forced to leave Russia in 1916 and O. E. Reinke took charge of Adventist work in Russia as a whole. The “*Nadezhda*” (Hope) publishing house in Saratov was closed down soon after the outbreak of war; the “*Patmos*” publishing house in Kiev continued for a while, but was then forced to

close down for lack of paper.

It was during the First World War that internal dissension began in the Russian Adventist Church over the question of bearing arms and how far refusal to do so was a religious obligation. This argument had already led to a split in the Adventist movement in Germany and was to end in Russia in the creation of the True and Free Adventist Church in the early 1920s. Most Adventists conscripted into the Russian army (about 500) were apparently allowed to serve in medical and non-combatant units. About 70, however, received sentences of two to sixteen years imprisonment for refusing to bear arms or trying to persuade fellow soldiers to do the same.<sup>20</sup> Some, like A. Birulya, were regularly flogged for refusing to work on Saturdays in the disciplinary battalion to which they had been sentenced.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, some Adventist soldiers succeeded in converting other soldiers and even organising Adventist prayer groups in army units or prisoner of war camps.

In 1917 the structure of society in what was to become the Soviet Union began to change completely. The Adventists, like other religious groups, found themselves faced with a wholly new situation.

Despite the anti-religious ideology of the Bolshevik party, the first years of Soviet power (1919-24) were some of the most successful for Adventist missionary activity. Although some of the largest Adventist communities of the former Russian Empire — those in the Baltic States — were no longer part of the Soviet Union, the Adventist Church doubled its membership to 12,697 by 1926.<sup>22</sup> The Adventist movement in the Soviet Union was wholly reorganised from the centre by its new leader, J. Loeb sack, after his appointment in 1920. The 430 Adventist congregations were united in five regional unions and one All-Union Council. A congress of delegates from all Adventist churches was held in Moscow almost every year, and called for further evangelisation and youth work. Three Adventist newspapers — *Golos istiny* (Voice of Truth), *Blagovestik* (Good News) and the German language *Adventsbote* were published.<sup>23</sup>

The Soviet regime in the early 1920s was still somewhat more favourably disposed towards the Protestant “sects” than towards the Orthodox Church. Their main asset in the eyes of the Soviet government was their opposition to the former state Church — the Russian Orthodox Church — which was then being forcibly disestablished.

Even before the 1917 revolution, the Social Democrats and Bolsheviks had tried to win over religious sectarians to their cause, as they had realised that many of the Protestant sects were opposed to Tsarist legislation (for example, conscription into the army) and were being persecuted by both the Tsarist authorities and the Orthodox Church. V. I. Lenin himself had attacked the absence of freedom of religion in the Russian Empire and the “shameless” censorship suffered by

sectarians.<sup>24</sup> He had called for an amnesty for imprisoned sectarians as well as political prisoners. In 1903 Lenin supported the Social Democrat decision to launch a newspaper directed at sectarians — “in many ways among the most democratic movements in Russia”.<sup>25</sup> The aim was to involve religious sects, especially the poorer peasants, in political protest and to wean them away from the principle of non-resistance and non-involvement in “the things of this world”. The new publication, *Rassvet* (Dawn), appeared in 1904 and during its short-lived existence was edited by Vladimir Bonch-Bruyevich, a future Bolshevik who was to become deeply involved in deciding the Party’s religious policy after the Revolution. Bonch-Bruyevich’s leading article “To the Sectarians” in the first number of *Rassvet* sympathised in every detail with the sectarians’ lack of liberty:

In Russia only those are not . . . persecuted who are willing to bow to any pressure, to give in and endure anything forced on them by the people who have seized power. . . .

Why are sectarians and schismatics particularly persecuted? They are persecuted because sectarians have always insisted on the same thing . . .

They said, “We want to pray and express our religion in our own way, as our conscience dictates, to preach at our meetings and in other places what ever comes into our minds. Finally, we want to write, copy, print . . . and disseminate our writings and booklets anywhere we like.”

This is what the Russian Tsar, the Russian government and the Russian priests won’t permit!

At this point Bonch-Bruyevich tried to prod the sectarians towards the right solution:

We often read of some sectarians saying “All men are brothers.” . . . In reality we see exactly the opposite. We see that all men are far from being brothers . . . It is time for sectarians to stop relying once and for all on the kindness of Tsarist government wolves . . . and rely instead on their own forces and on their true allies, the downtrodden workers of factories and towns.

Only if all anti-Tsarist forces were to unite, said *Rassvet*, could a time come “when everyone will have the right to believe what he wants, preach what he wants, publish and distribute all over the country whatever he wants.”<sup>26</sup>

The paper’s failure was due at least in part to a vigorous campaign against it conducted by the Tolstoyans. In their own journal *Svobodnoye slovo* (“Free Word”) they denounced *Rassvet* as a cynical attempt to gain

support from sectarians while not sharing their basic world outlook. The Social Democrat attitude towards the sectarians was admittedly opportunistic: even those like Bonch-Bruyevich, who were openly sympathetic to the Protestant sects, calling them the “most enlightened” elements of the peasantry and stressing the “commune” of early Christianity, were opposed to the sectarians’ basic beliefs, such as non-resistance and Biblical authority. “We must try to lower the Bible in people’s consciousness to the status of a common book”<sup>27</sup> wrote Bonch-Bruyevich.

After the reforms of 1905 and the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks showed little interest in the sectarians until 1917, partly because the various non-Orthodox groups now had hopes of legitimate advancement and were becoming much less interested in links with the revolutionaries.

In 1917 and during the Civil War the main preoccupation of the Seventh-Day Adventists seems to have been trying to keep out of both camps. They supported the Provisional Government in February, publishing a special issue of *Blagaya vest’* in its honour, an action later recalled to their discredit by the Bolsheviks.<sup>28</sup> Like many other religious groups they at first saw the October Revolution as the triumph of Antichrist and the Civil War as an apocalyptic “time of suffering and expectation of misery”.

In 1918-19, the Bolsheviks again tried to gain the support of sectarian groups such as the Adventists, Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Mennonites and others by allowing them partial or complete exemption from military service. This was sparked off in spring 1918 by the return to Petrograd of religious conscientious objectors who had been imprisoned by Tsarist courts. They now appealed to the Soviet government for exemption from military service on religious grounds. “After an all-round discussion of this appeal with a delegation of these original and very convinced people,” says Bonch-Bruyevich, “Vladimir Il’ich (Lenin) promised to set up a commission to look into the question and draw up a special decree concerning it.”<sup>29</sup> Exemption from military service on religious grounds was already allowed in practice in many cases (there were 300-400 such instances in 1918) if the men concerned were vouched for by denominational leaders. In October 1918 an order (No. 130) of the Revolutionary Military Soviet was passed to this effect and on 4 January 1919 a Decree issued by the Soviet of People’s Commissars confirmed it.

V. I. Lenin gave three reasons for adopting this Decree: “to calm and satisfy those who have already suffered terrible tortures and persecution from the Tsarist government”, especially since the numbers involved were very small; to avoid the possibility of a “foreign element” in the Red Army disturbing other soldiers (the conscientious objectors were wont to preach in the ranks); and his conviction that “this decree will be short-

lived”,<sup>30</sup> as both religion and pacifism would decline under Bolshevik rule. It was emphasised, however, that the pacifist principles of the religious sects involved were at variance with communist convictions and that the concession was temporary.

It was the 1919 Decree on exemption from military service which created the general Adventist esteem for Lenin still apparent today among both the official and unofficial wings of the Adventist movement in the USSR. In addition, the last years of Lenin’s life coincided with that period of the 1920s when various religious freedoms still existed — for Adventists, perhaps to a greater extent than under Tsarism — for example, the opportunity to evangelise openly and hold private religious classes.

In October 1921 sectarian groups, including Seventh-Day Adventists, were allowed to apply collectively for land in order to form communes. After being awarded land, these religious collective farmers were even given financial grants by the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture. The Seventh-Day Adventists had several collective farms in Ukraine, one called the “Commune of Brotherly Love”.<sup>31</sup> The idea of allowing such communes to be farmed by religious sects came from certain Party members, headed by Bonch-Bruyevich and M. Kalinin, who regarded the sectarians as primitive socialists in their ideology and “exemplary toilers”<sup>32</sup> in practice. It was a Bolshevik joke to refer to this group as “the Party bloc with religious tendencies”<sup>33</sup> but, unlike Gor’ky, Lunacharsky and the “God-builders”, Bonch-Bruyevich and Kalinin had no mystical tendencies whatever: their interest in cooperation with the sectarians was purely practical. At the thirteenth Congress of the Communist Party in 1924, Kalinin referred to the widespread activity of sectarians, calling on the Party leadership to “ensure that the considerable economic and cultural potential of the sectarians is directed into the channels of Soviet labour.”<sup>34</sup>

From 1921 to 1928 the Seventh-Day Adventist Church prospered as never before. By 1928 they had 13,405 members in 600 congregations.<sup>35</sup> In 1926 a “sectarian Bible” was published in 30,000 copies, the cost being shared amongst the Adventists, the Baptists and other evangelicals. Adventist representatives from Russia were finding it increasingly hard, however, to keep in touch with the worldwide Adventist Church. In 1923 Soviet Adventists could not obtain permission from the Soviet government to attend the European Division Council in Zürich.<sup>36</sup>

The Fifth All-Union Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists in 1924 addressed a rather carefully worded declaration of loyalty to the Central Committee. The growing differences among Adventists which were to emerge fully four years later in 1928 were probably already making themselves felt:

Making use of the freedom of conscience and religious belief

granted by Soviet authorities, we on our part consider ourselves bound to carry out all state duties. Therefore, recognising the Soviet government as lawful and established by God, we give it honour and respect and pay our taxes according to the Holy Scriptures. We recognise military service and each SDA member serves in accordance with the dictates of his conscience. SDA members must carry out honestly and sincerely the duties they have agreed to assume.<sup>37</sup>

However, the period of Bolshevik tolerance towards sectarians was beginning to come to an end. The religious collective farms, despite their admitted agricultural successes, were disliked by the Party leadership and were abolished in 1928. The reasons for this were the Soviet State's inability to see the religious communes in other than political terms and the failure of the communes themselves to develop politically along the right lines, although they were not anti-Soviet. Some in fact were embarrassingly pro-Soviet. The communes' leaders were not the "progressive" "poor peasants" hoped for by the Bolsheviks but rather the "bourgeois-*kulak*" middle peasants they disliked. The religious collective farmers were retaining their "narrow world view" despite educational campaigns and paid more attention to the religious leaders of their own denomination than to the central government, thus showing their potential disloyalty. They were still organising boycotts of military service.<sup>38</sup> In addition many of the sects, particularly the Adventists and Tolstoyans, had grown in numbers during the 1920s rather than declining.

In 1928, as the Soviet authorities also began to put more pressure on the Adventist leaders to restrict evangelisation and teaching of children, to register their congregations and to encourage service in the army, the final split occurred between the official Adventist Church and the Reform Adventists, who later became the "True and Free" Adventists. The latter, led by G. Ostval'd and P. Manzhura, refused to register their congregations or to compromise on the question of army service. [The later Soviet period, and particularly the history of the "True and Free" Adventists, has been covered in more detail in my earlier article "V. A. Shelkov and the True and Free Seventh-Day Adventists of the USSR" in *RCL* Vol. 8 No. 3. I will conclude this present article with a summary of the later fortunes of the Adventist Church as a whole in the USSR.]

The Laws on Religious Cults passed in 1929 restricted religious activity in every sphere, limiting specifically permitted activity to the holding of religious services in registered premises. Adventist publications were banned. Many Adventist church leaders were arrested and served long sentences in Stalin's labour camps. Adventist churches were closed and membership fell to 14,000. The Second World War led to more arrests of Adventists because of their German links and their pacifist inclinations.

In the 1950s, the Adventist Church recovered somewhat — its surviving leaders were amnestied, membership increased again, largely as a consequence of the return of the Baltic States to the USSR, and new congregations were again allowed to register. However, just as the Adventists were beginning to return to a more normal religious life, they were struck by another disaster — Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign of 1959-64. Once again, Adventist congregations were deregistered, while 180 leading Adventists, headed by P. Matsanov, left the official Church rather than accept the new restrictive regulations imposed by the State.

The publicity received by Soviet Adventists in the 1970s was due largely to the efforts of the unofficial True and Free Adventist Church, especially the documentation of Soviet state persecution sent by them to the Madrid Conference in 1978\*. The death in prison of the True and Free Adventist leader V. A. Shelkov in 1980 and the long sentences imposed on his probable successor R. Galetsky formed part of the general suppression of dissent under Brezhnev's administration. As a result of this clampdown and the reluctance of the worldwide Adventist leadership to support the True and Free Adventists, as a breakaway movement from the official Adventist Church, the True and Free Adventists withdrew almost completely from the open religious "dissent" movement and returned to the underground existence they had led before 1974.

The official Seventh-Day Adventist Church, however, made a number of gains. Denials by official Adventist leaders of the accusations of religious persecution made by the True and Free Adventists resulted in certain concessions from the Soviet authorities to the official Adventist Church, especially since the official Adventist leaders were openly opposed to the "True and Free" group on theological as well as pragmatic grounds, and made this clear to western Adventist leaders. The official Adventist Church was allowed to publish a hymn book in 1980 and a New Testament in 1982, as well as a yearbook since 1979.

Although the latter appears only once a year, it has the same format as the Orthodox and Baptist monthly journals and indeed is often referred to by the Adventists as their "journal". As well as publishing the usual sermons on peace by Adventist leaders, it includes articles by Ellen White, the founder of the Adventist Church, and attacks on the theological position taken up by the True and Free Adventists (often without mentioning them by name). It is also a valuable source of information on Adventist gains and officially permitted activities, announcing for example the recent restoration of certain Adventist churches and the opening of some new churches in the 1980s, notably in L'vov and Frunze.

\*The third in the series of Conferences on Security and Cooperation in Europe — *Ed.*



However, in the wake of the Shelkov trial and the attendant furore in the West, the official Adventist leadership in the USSR had preferred to avoid rather than seek publicity for its activities. Invitations for western Adventist leaders in recent years to visit fellow Adventists in the USSR have sufficed to keep up contacts with the worldwide Church and to produce generally favourable reports on their visits by those invited. In addition, opportunities were thus created, though not on a regular basis, for a few Soviet Adventists to study theology outside the USSR — two in England, the rest in East Germany. Taking into account both the present availability of contacts with Adventists abroad and the concessions granted to them at home in the last ten years (which will however undoubtedly run parallel to state suppression of the True and Free Adventists), the official Seventh-Day Adventists in the USSR sometimes see their present position as the best they have known since the 1920s.

<sup>1</sup> See statements by M. Kulakov in *Spectrum*, Vol. 8 (1978) No. 3, pp. 28-29; and A. Ginzburg in *La Sierra Today*, Winter 1979.

<sup>2</sup> *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopaedia*, Washington DC, 1976, pp. 1518, 1534.

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Spalding, *Origin and History of the Seventh-Day Adventists*, Washington DC, 1962, Vol. 2, pp. 227-28.

<sup>4</sup> L. R. Conradi, "A visit to Russia", *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-Day Adventists*, Basel, 1886, pp. 250-71.

<sup>5</sup> *Review and Herald*, 10 June 1890, p. 362.

<sup>6</sup> *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopaedia*, pp. 113-14.

<sup>7</sup> A. V. Belov, *Adventizm*, Moscow, 1968, pp. 43-44.

<sup>8</sup> E. G. Howell, *The Great Advent Movement*, Washington DC, 1935, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopaedia*, p. 1535.

<sup>10</sup> *Review and Herald*, 6 December 1892.

<sup>11</sup> M. E. Olsen, *History of Origin and Progress of Seventh-Day Adventists*, Washington DC, 1925, pp. 478-79.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> A. V. Belov, *Adventizm*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopaedia*, p. 1535.

<sup>16</sup> M. E. Olsen, *History of Origin and Progress of Seventh-Day Adventists*, p. 605.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 607.

<sup>18</sup> W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, London, 1961, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopaedia*, p. 1523.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1524.

<sup>21</sup> *A Recurrence of Misanthropy (Retsidiv chelovekonenavistnichestva)*, samizdat, 1977 or 1978, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> A. Belov, *Adventizm*, pp. 54, 58.

<sup>23</sup> W. K. Ising, "The Printed Page in Russia", *Missionary Worker*, 3 April 1925; W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, p. 325.

<sup>24</sup> *Iskra*, 1 March 1903, pp. 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniya*, Vol. 6, p. 431.

<sup>26</sup> V. D. Bonch-Bruyevich, *Izbrannyye Sochineniya*, Vol. 1, pp. 190-98.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>28</sup> *Yezhegodnik Muzeya Istorii Religii i Ateizma*, Vol. 6 (1962), p. 143.

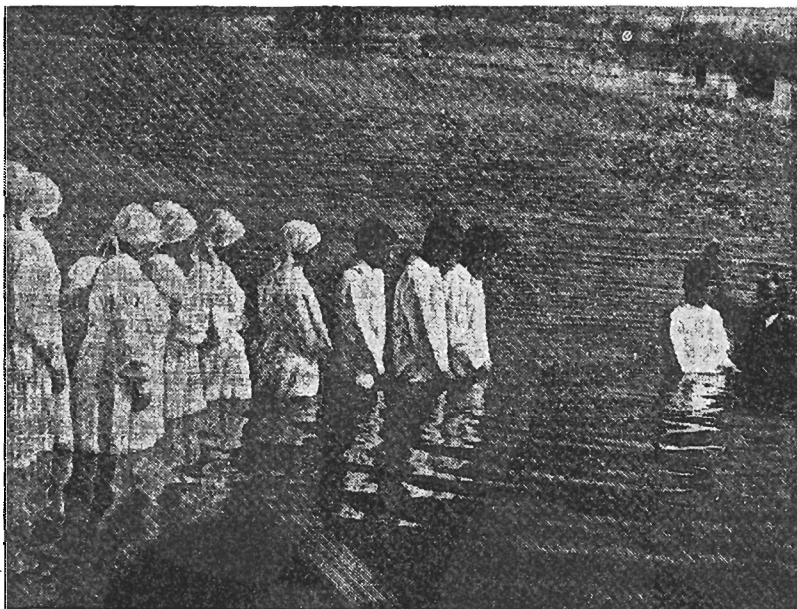
<sup>29</sup> A. I. Klibanov, *Religioznoye sektantstvo i sovremennost'*, Moscow, 1969, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 194-95.

<sup>31</sup> W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, p. 291.

<sup>32</sup> *Pravda*, No. 108, 1924.

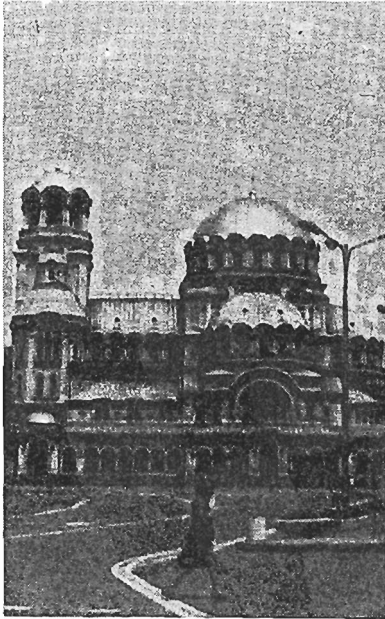
<sup>33</sup> *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, Moscow, Vol. 4 (1967), p. 362.



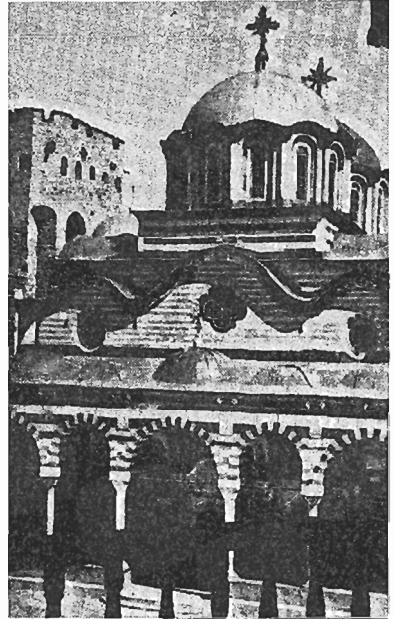
*Above: the baptism of new members of the Kiev Seventh-Day Adventist Church, in the Dnepr River. See article on pp. 256-73. (Photo courtesy Nastolny Kalendar, Moscow).*

*Below: Pastor Mikhail P. Kulakov, Chairman of the Republican Council of the Seventh-Day Adventists in the RSFSR, and acting head of the Adventists in the Soviet Union. (Photo courtesy Keston College).*





The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia. See article on the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on pp. 281-92.



The towers of Khreljo Church in the Bulgarian Orthodox monastery at Rila.

*Below: a view of the Rila monastery. (All photos courtesy Keston College).*



<sup>34</sup> W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, p. 288.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>36</sup> *Missionary Worker*, 27 July 1923.

<sup>37</sup> *Yezhogodnik Muzeya Istorii Religii i Ateizma*, Vol. 6 (1962), pp. 144-45.

<sup>38</sup> *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, Vol. 4 (1967), pp. 360-61.

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