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The many Samizdat* documents which are reaching the West reveal the extent of religious persecution in the Soviet Union. They also show that the peaceful forms of protest against this are becoming an important part of the civil rights movement.

The Soviet Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to practise his religion and states that anyone who prevents him from doing so is liable to punishment. Samizdat sources, however, not only provide evidence of religious persecution but also show that Soviet laws are so framed as to enable the authorities to imprison believers for nothing more than the normal practice of their faith.

Most Samizdat documents on religious matters to reach the West come from Russian Orthodox and Baptist sources although some protests have been made by Catholics, Uniates, Jews and Muslims. Religious protesters have tended to be preoccupied with their own denominational affairs. Only a few individuals, notably the religious writer A.E. Levitin (pseudonym Krasnov), have signed other non-religious protest documents; but it seems probable that, like national dissidents they will become increasingly a part of the civil rights movement in the Soviet Union.

Modification of the Constitution is one of the believers' chief demands because it prevents real freedom of worship. Since May, 1929, when the Constitution was amended to bring it into line with the still-valid law of April 8, 1929, "Concerning Religious Associations", "freedom of religious propaganda" has been excluded. Believers do not have the right to teach religion to children or to adults (other than in officially recognised seminars). Soviet believers have also appealed for their Constitutional rights; petitioned the officially approved religious authorities to allow a democratically elected hierarchy; appealed for the registration of illegal sects (such as the dissident Baptists), for the reinstatement of dismissed churchmen and against the closure of churches.

Imprisonment of believers

Believers are frequently charged under Article 142 of the Russian Federation Criminal Code (or its equivalent in other Republican Codes) - "violation of the laws

*Literally "Self-publication" - i.e. handwritten or typed documents circulated clandestinely to circumvent official censorship.

on separation of Church from State and school from Church" - for which the maximum punishment is three years' deprivation of freedom. They may also be charged under Article 227 for encouraging religious activities "harmful to the health of citizens" or inciting people "to refuse to participate in social activity or to fulfil their civic obligations". Since 1961 this has carried a maximum sentence of five years' deprivation of liberty or exile. Some Samizdat documents report sentences of five years under Article 142 plus five years under Article 227; or five years under Article 142 plus five years' exile. Both sentences are illegal. The longest known sentences on believers were those of 15, 13 and ten years' imprisonment given to leaders of the All-Russian Social-Christian Union for the Liberation of the People in Leningrad in 1967 and 1968. This group had produced a political programme for democratic reform.

In prison, believers are often subjected to additional discrimination. In My Testimony (published in the West but circulated clandestinely in the Soviet Union) Anatoli Marchenko gives some indication of the large numbers of religious prisoners: -

"Religious prisoners are the ones who have been arrested and tried precisely because of their religion. And what variety there is! Muslims from the Caucasus and Central Asia, Orthodox Christians, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelists, Sabbatarians and many others ... Here, in the cells I was thrown together with a large number of them. Almost every cell had its Evangelist, Sabbatarian, or Jehovah's Witness, and in some cells there were several together. The prison authorities humiliated them in every possible way. I had seen that on my very first day. Many believers had a rule that they must wear beards, yet they were all forcibly shaven while wearing handcuffs".

According to a protest letter sent to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1969 by the imprisoned writers Daniel, Ginzburg and Galanskov, believers are prohibited from receiving any religious literature and may not even have a Bible while in prison.

One result of putting so many believers in prisons and labour camps has been that they have sometimes formed religious groups there. Mikhail Sado, serving a long sentence in one of the strict régime prison camps for criticising Khrushchev, founded the All-Russian Social-Christian Alliance, according to a Samizdat document written and distributed by Alexander Petrov-Agatov, himself a prisoner.

Churches closed down

Many churches have been forcibly closed and others are used for storage, workshops, etc. In his essay Along the Oka (published openly only in the West), Solzhenitsyn said the secret of the peaceful influence of the Russian countryside was in the churches:

"But when you get into the village you find that not the living but the dead greet you from afar. The crosses have been knocked off the roof or twisted out of place long ago. The dome has been stripped,

and there are gaping holes between its rusty ribs ... The murals over the altar have been washed by the rains of decades and obscene inscriptions are scrawled over them. On the porch there are barrels of lubricating oil and a tractor is turning towards them. Or else a lorry has backed in at the church doorway to pick up some sacks. In one church there is the shudder of lathes. Another is locked up and silent".

Protests by believers against such treatment are only known to have succeeded on one occasion - after a Catholic Church in Belorussia had been turned into a grain-store. According to the Chronicle of Current Events No. 16 (October, 1970), local peasants said "they could not live without the church" and refused to work for several days or to send their children to school. Eventually the chairman of the collective concerned ordered the removal of the grain. The church was repaired and the ritual plate restored.

Dissident Baptists

A great deal of documentation about persecution of their members has been provided by the Evangelical Christian Baptists or Initiativniki, who broke away from the Baptist Church in 1965 and have never received official recognition. They have at least two regular Samizdat publications - including a monthly, Bratsky Listok, and a quarterly, Vestnik Spaseniya.

The Initiativniki, who had objected to the compromises made by the leaders of the Baptist Church to placate the Communist region, are particularly active, and some 500 of them have been imprisoned since 1961. The repressive measures taken against them were described in an appeal to the party leadership, by 1,453 women in March, 1969. They said their children were victimised and beaten up at school and sometimes forcibly removed from the parents by the KGB (secret police) and placed in children's homes. They had addressed thousands of petitions to the authorities begging for an end to persecution but it became even harsher:

"Fines beyond our means, beatings-up, dismissal from jobs and institutes, confiscation of flats, arrests of fathers, husbands and, improbable as it may seem, mothers - this is the reply we have received so far from you to all our complaints..."

Russian Orthodox Church

Less is known about the treatment of rank-and-file members of the Orthodox Church but the cases of three leading dissidents have been reported in the Chronicle. A.E. Levitin, who was arrested in September, 1969 and subsequently released, but whose trial was reported to be imminent by the London Times of January 18, 1971, has signed a number of protests about the abuse of civil rights in the Soviet Union and about the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He was a member of the Action Group for the Defence of Human Rights in the Soviet Union. After his arrest, a number of documents were circulated attesting to the excellence of his character and the legality of his actions. A letter from seven Christians, addressed to the World Council of Churches in September, 1969, said:

"Anatoly Emmanuilevich was doing his duty as a Christian and none of his activities ... infringed Soviet laws ..."

Boris Talantov, a lay member of the Orthodox Church, who wrote a series of protest letters about the lack of religious freedom in the Soviet Union, was tried in September, 1969, for allegedly publishing "anti-Soviet propaganda". Chronicle No. 10 (October, 1969) reported that he was given a two-year sentence in a labour camp.

Neither the charge against the Orthodox priest Pavel Adelheim, arrested in December, 1969, nor his sentence is known, but his character was smeared by Pravda Vostoka (the Uzbek Republican newspaper) which accused him of sadism towards his wife and children. According to Chronicle No. 13 (April, 1970) however, his initiative and energy had enabled believers in Kazan to build a new, stone church. He was

"... a young, well-educated priest and a good preacher, enjoyed great love and authority among his parishioners. His ecclesiastical activity was beyond reproach from the viewpoint of civil law".

Ukrainian Uniate Church

Increased activity of the Uniates, who acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope (but have been illegal since 1945); has been matched by increased persecution. According to Chronicles Nos. 7 and 8 (April and June, 1969), priests have been detained and beaten up by the police. On October 18, 1968, the homes of ten were searched and religious objects confiscated. In January, 1969, Bishop Velichkovski, who is about 70-years-old and in poor health, was arrested and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for infringing regulations. (Bishop Velichkovski had been sentenced to ten year's hard labour when the Uniate Church was forcibly integrated with the Orthodox Church in 1946).

Further information has come from a Samizdat essay of January, 1970, Chronicle of Resistance, by Valentin Moroz, a Ukrainian historian. He condemned the appropriation of religious works of art from a Uniate church in the Kiev area, which belonged to a strongly nationalistic minority, the Hutsuls. Arguing that religion and national culture had become inseparable in Eastern Europe, he said:

"One must inevitably conclude that a fight against the Church is a fight against the culture. The anti-religious struggle is, in fact, a kulturkampf. It is more convenient to destroy the foundations of a nation as a whole under the guise of a struggle against religion ..."

According to the Chronicle No. 17 of December, 1970, Moroz has since received a 14-year sentence for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda". The penalty consists of nine years in a special régime labour camp and five years' exile.

The Catholic Church

Evidence of the persecution of the Catholic Church, particularly in Lithuania, emerged in a declaration dated August, 1969, and signed by 40 priests of the Archdiocese of Vilnius. They said the Church had been undermined since Lithuania was taken over by the Soviet Union in 1940. Only two bishops, both nearly 80, remained, and neither was permitted to reside in the capital, Vilnius. Two younger bishops had been deported. In 1940 there had been 12 bishops, four seminaries and about 1,500 priests.

Only one seminary now existed and restrictions on the dwindling number of priests made their work difficult. They were not allowed to assist a neighbouring priest; they could not take part in meetings or retreats, and bishops were not always permitted to visit parishes or confer the sacrament of confirmation.

Not one Catechism had been published in Lithuania since the Soviet takeover, and permission had never been given for the publication in 1968 of a Missal which was to have carried a brief exposition of the truths of the Faith. Priests were forbidden to prepare children for their First Communion and two who did so, Frs. Gylos and Zdebskis, were sentenced to three years' forced labour,

Sectarians

Few Sectarian protest documents have come to light other than those of the Evangelical Christian Baptists, but Chronicle No. 14 (June, 1970) reported the case of a woman Adventist from Belorussia who was detained in December, 1969, and illegally searched. Her money was confiscated without a receipt. In April, 1970, her house was searched and religious literature confiscated. Chronicle No. 15 (August, 1970) noted that ten-year sentences had been passed on two women members of the schismatic True Orthodox Church and sentences of ten years and seven years plus five years' exile on two Jehovah's Witnesses.

Judaism

The first issue of the clandestine Jewish journal Exodus in April, 1970, described how the synagogue had become the centre of Jewish spiritual life in the Soviet Union. But it had been unable fully to answer the people's needs and questions, partly because "the active hostility of the State towards all religions in the country is strongest perhaps against Judaism, the 'religion of the enemy from within'", and fearing repercussions, the synagogues had been meekly agreeing to all the authorities' demands. It was also partly due to "advanced assimilation" which had caused linguistic and cultural alienation between the synagogues and the Jews (many of whom cannot speak Hebrew and are not permitted to receive instruction in it from the Rabbis or study with them the Jewish observances and traditions). Some, seeking religion, have been turning to the Orthodox Church - "one more step on the road to assimilation".

Islam

As in the case of the Uniate Church and Judaism, Islam has close ties with nationalist aspirations. Clandestine Islamic documents have not reached the West, but their existence was revealed by the Soviet party organ Pravda on March 29, 1970, when it spoke of one called Extracts from the Decision of the Congress. This had been compiled by Murids in the Chechen-Ingush Republic at a secret congress held in the Nazranov district. The document instructed "every person of Ingush nationality to comply strictly with the 'ten commandments' or else break 'all contacts with other people'". Following the Soviet custom of attacking religion by smears or exaggeration, Pravda accused the Murids, who have fought for national and religious freedom since the mid-19th century, of favouring "the kidnapping of young girls, kalym (bride-money) and blood feuds" - customs virtually obsolete among Soviet Muslims.

Some very limited successes from these protests have been reported. The officially recognised Baptist Church, has gained a small measure of independence in the appointment of its churchmen - for example, since 1966 its Moscow headquarters has been staffed solely by Church members. And a few churches have been saved from closure or conversion into atheist museums.

The continuing existence of the Evangelical Christian Baptist despite increasing persecution may also be regarded as a success. Indeed, the activities of believers and the circulation of clandestine publications have not been reduced by retaliation; rather, the religious issue has been brought before a wider audience and more Soviet citizens, especially young intellectuals, are now taking an interest in religion.

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